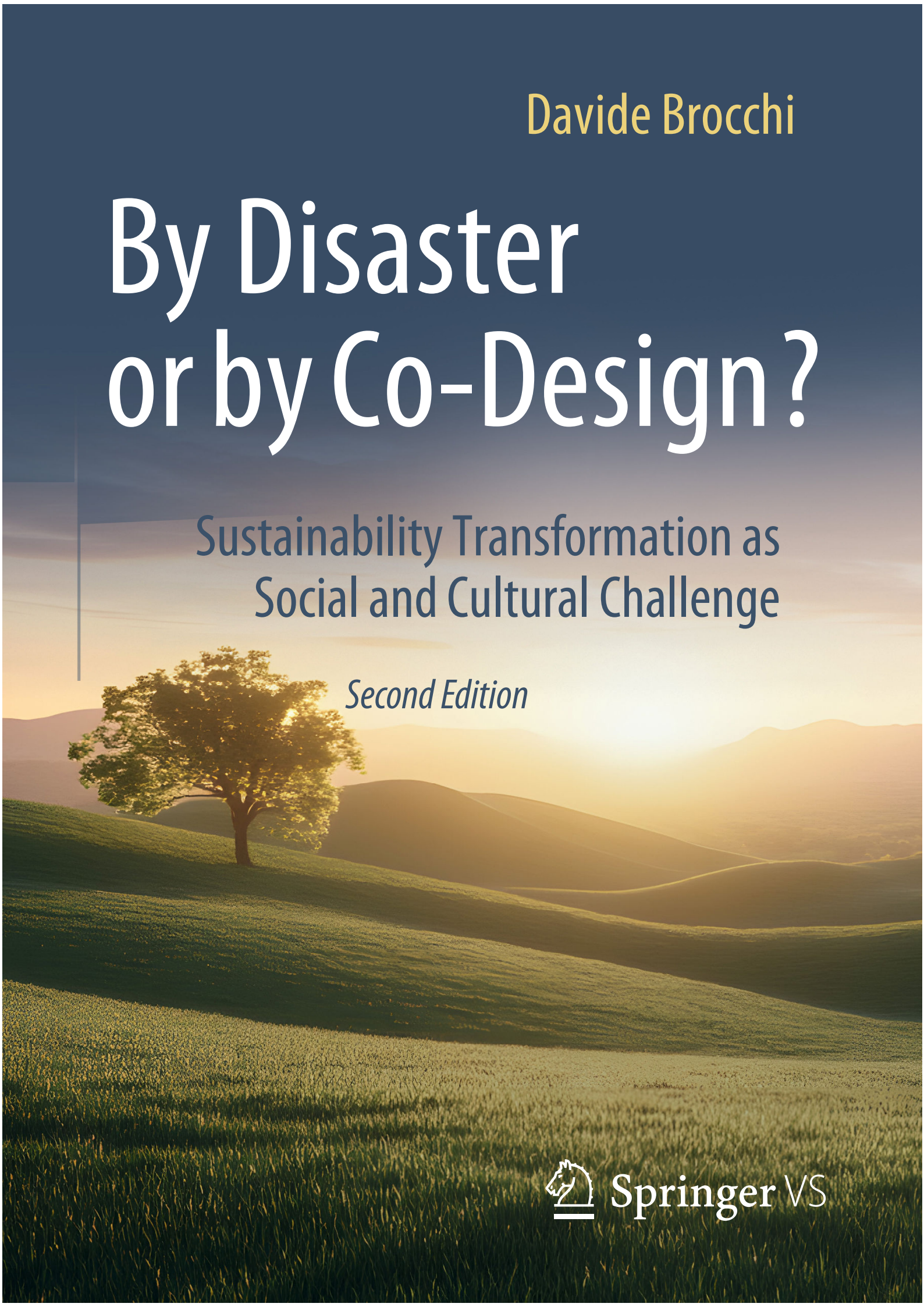
Davide Brocchi

# By Disaster or by Co-Design?

## Sustainability Transformation as Social and Cultural Challenge

*Second Edition*



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# Abbreviations and Acronyms

| | |
|---|---|
| AI | Artificial intelligence |
| BUND | Federation for Environment and Nature Conservation Germany (*Bund für Umwelt und Naturschutz Deutschland*) |
| Difu | German Institute for Urban Studies (*Deutsches Institut für Urbanistik*) |
| DNK | German Sustainability Code (*Deutscher Nachhaltigkeitskodex*) |
| ESD | Education for Sustainable Development |
| GDP | Gross domestic product |
| ICC | International Chamber of Commerce |
| ISOE | Institute for Social-Ecological Research in Frankfurt Main (*Institut für sozial-ökologische Forschung*) |
| KWI | Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities in Essen (*Kulturwissenschaftliches Institut*) |
| NATO | North Atlantic Treaty Organisation |
| NGO | Non-governmental organisation |
| NSA | National Security Agency |
| RNE | German Council for Sustainable Development (*Rat für Nachhaltige Entwicklung*) |
| SDGs | Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations |
| SIPRI | Stockholm International Peace Research Institute |

| | |
|---|---|
| SRU | German Advisory Council on the Environment (*Sachverständigenrat für Umweltfragen*) |
| UBA | German Federal Environment Agency (*Umweltbundesamt*) |
| UN | United Nations |
| UNESCO | United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation |
| WBGU | German Advisory Council on Global Change (*Wissenschaftlicher Beirat der Bundesregierung Globale Umweltveränderungen*) |
| WTO | World Trade Organisation |

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# 1

# Which Transformation?

Progress and crisis are not opposites—as the present day reminds us. In human history, the downward spiral of some civilisations began at the peak of their development (Diamond 2005). How is it that societies remain so firmly attached to a development path, even when it becomes evident that this path is leading them towards collapse? This book looks for the answer in *culture* which, along with the environment, is the second hidden power of the Anthropocene.[1] Culture is the *blueprint of society* that is normalised, institutionalised, and materialised through societal development (cf. Welzer 2017). As the *DNA of society*, culture holds the social system together despite the division of labour, while at the same time regulating its exchange with the environment. When the relationship between system and environment is disturbed, it is primarily due to culture.

In recent decades, one crisis has followed another: the climate crisis, the financial crisis, the crisis of democracy, the Covid-19 crisis, the war

[1] The term "Anthropocene" signifies the human epoch (Crutzen and Stoermer 2000). This geological epoch is dated from the commencement of significant human impact on the earth up to the present day. This impact affects the earth's geology, landscape, ecosystems, and climate.

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in Ukraine, etc. The diagnosis of social scientists is correspondingly clear: "global crisis" (Hamm 2006), "metacrisis" (Leggewie and Welzer 2009), "multiple crisis" (Brand 2009) and "*polycrisis*"[2] (Morin and Kern 1999; Homer-Dixon et al. 2021). Whether radical change is imminent or not—whether we want it or not—these questions are no longer relevant: we are already in the midst of it. The only question is whether this change will happen through emergencies and extreme conflicts, or through a conscious cooperative shift in society. In other words: *by disaster or by co-design*. This is reflected in the book's title, which is an adapted quote from the president of the Global Footprint Network, Mathis Wackernagel (2014). The same thesis is put forward by US biogeographer Jared Diamond in his book *Collapse—How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*:

> Thus, because we are rapidly advancing along this non-sustainable course, the world's environmental problems will get resolved, in one way or another, within the lifetimes of the children and young adults alive today. The only question is whether they will become resolved in pleasant ways of our own choice, or in unpleasant ways not of our choice, such as warfare, genocide, starvation, disease epidemics, and collapses of societies. While all of those grim phenomena have been endemic to humanity throughout our history, their frequency increases with environmental degradation, population pressure, and the resulting poverty and political instability. (Diamond 2005, p. 507)

If we want to shape social change rather than passively endure it, we choose sustainability. Sustainability is a necessity because it is the *counter*-programme to any development that leads social systems into a dead end. At the same time, sustainability is an opportunity because it stands *for* a good life that does not come at the expense of others, including future generations and nature (Brocchi 2021, p. 2). The debate on a societal shift towards sustainability has been taking place in recent decades under the term "transformation" (Leggewie and Welzer 2009; Grießhammer

[2] The term "polycrisis" was introduced by the French philosopher Edgar Morin. By this he meant a complex of crises that are interwoven and overlapping. Thus, the central problem of the present is not a single threat, but the "complex inter-solidarity of problems, antagonisms, crises, uncontrollable processes and the general crisis of the planet" (Morin and Kern 1999, p. 74).

and Brohmann 2015). This transformation is the central theme of this book.

In its flagship report of 2011, the German Advisory Council on Global Change (WBGU) called for a "social contract for a Great Transformation". Since then, the term "Great Transformation […] has entered the zeitgeist, no discussion can do without it" (Sachs 2013, p. 18). By "Great Transformation" the WBGU was referring to the "worldwide remodelling of economy and society towards sustainability" (WBGU 2011, p. 5). To keep human-induced global warming as far below 2 degrees as possible and to avert the most catastrophic impacts of climate change, the Great Transformation should take place before 2050 and start immediately (IPCC 2022). This is a very ambitious goal, as it implies a radical change of the energy regime of our society. Even in 2023, fossil fuels (oil, coal, gas) still covered 80.7% of the world's energy needs (IEA 2024). The situation is little different in Germany, where 77.3% of energy demand is met by fossil fuels (UBA 2025). Overall, our way of life is still largely dependent on climate-damaging and unsustainable energy sources. We must now move away from them quickly.

The WBGU focuses the transformation on the climate crisis. However, although this has the highest priority, it is only one aspect of the current polycrisis. The various crises feed off each other and have common systemic causes. And if a crisis is systemic, it can only be overcome in a systemic way. Similarly, in political science, "transformation" is understood as *system change*, i.e. a "transition from one system of order to a fundamentally different system" (Merkel 1999, p. 15). In any transformation towards sustainability, the ecological, economic, social, and cultural dimensions are seen as deeply interrelated rather than separate. Sustainability is therefore characterised by a multidimensional rather than a unidimensional (economy-centred) understanding of societal development.

In order to raise public awareness of the magnitude and depth of the sustainability transformation—a process that is expected to take place in the first half of the twenty-first century—the WBGU compares it with the first two great transformations in human history. The first was the Neolithic Revolution, which began around 12,000 years ago.

At that time, agriculture and animal husbandry were well developed in Mesopotamia, and farming was gradually spreading throughout the world. This innovation led to a surplus in food production. People became sedentary and the first cities were built. Whereas before, everyone had to hunt and gather for their own sustenance, now a part of the population could free itself from this task and devote itself to other activities. This allowed a political and religious elite to emerge. Not only kings, priests, and soldiers could live off agriculture, but also artists and philosophers. However complex the social order has become in the intervening millennia, it is still essentially based on the hoe and the plough.

The second great transformation began only a few centuries ago and led to the emergence of capitalist-industrial societies. This development was described in 1944 by social anthropologist Karl Polanyi in his book *The Great Transformation*, which is why Polanyi is regarded as the pioneer, or even the "father", of this concept (Sachs 2013). Essential to this transformation was the market economy, which "implies a change in the motive of action on the part of the members of society; for the motive of subsistence that of gain must be substituted. All transactions are turned into money transactions, and these in turn require that a medium of exchange be introduced into every articulation of industrial life" (Polanyi 2001 [1944], pp. 43–44). This transformation was also characterised by the privatisation of common land, which began in England with the enclosure of open fields in the Middle Ages, increased significantly in the seventeenth century, and reached its peak in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. At that time, it was the local aristocracy that converted arable land into pasture, as wool production proved far more profitable than crop cultivation. Just as people today invest in "real estate gold", so too were sheep a way to "turn sand into gold" (ibid., p. 36). The enclosure of open fields deprived smallholders of land, forcing many subsistence farmers into wage labour in emerging urban industries, particularly textiles. These new "proletarians" earned meagre wages; despite long working hours, they remained in poverty, while the bourgeoisie marketed the goods and accumulated growing profits. Polanyi showed that although the steam engine enabled the Industrial Revolution, its true catalyst lay in the rise of the market economy and commercial logic—a view later echoed by Fernand Braudel

(1997). Because coal and oil had a much higher energy density than traditional energy sources such as wood, wind, and water, they could power large machines. Industrial mass production largely replaced craftsmanship, while at the same time revolutionising the transport system. The foundations were laid for today's mass consumption and global market.

Since successive great transformations have built upon one another, their history is often narrated as a linear story of *progress*. In both the Neolithic and the Industrial Revolution, the change in the energy regime corresponded to a change in the societal regime. This commonality of great transformations also applies today to sustainable ones, which involve much more than wind turbines and electric cars. In the pages that follow, I will argue that another commonality is that all great transformations have been preceded—and accompanied—by a *cultural revolution*, because culture is the foundation of both the energy regime and the societal regime. Accordingly, a sustainability transformation also requires cultural change and probably a "new cosmology" (Latour and Schultz 2022). However, there is one characteristic that distinguishes this latest transformation from the Neolithic and the Industrial Revolution: these were largely "the uncontrolled results of evolutionary change" (WBGU 2011, p. 5), whereas the sustainable transformation is guided by a diagnosed urgency and a shared vision.

If the WBGU understands the sustainability transformation to be a "task for the future" (Sachs 2013, p. 19), then enabling such a transformation presupposes an investigation into the root causes of developments to date. For example, what is the connection between the "progress" of recent centuries and the current systemic crisis? This question was already addressed by Polanyi in his work written during the Second World War, which sought to identify the reasons for the failure of European civilisation. After all, the malice and imperialism of a single "Führer" alone could not explain how such a development had occurred—from the First World War, through the financial crisis of 1929 and the Great Depression, to the crisis of nascent democracies, the rise of fascism and, ultimately, the Second World War. The causes of the greatest catastrophes of the twentieth century had to lie much deeper. Polanyi found them in

a "double movement": "in the dominance of the market and in the inadequate response of the society to this" (ibid., p. 20). He thought "that the idea of a self-adjusting market implied a stark Utopia. Such an institution could not exist for any length of time without annihilating the human and natural substance of society" (Polanyi 2001 [1944], p. xxiv). Since society has continued to cling to this "stark Utopia" after 1945, even universalising it within the framework of neoliberal globalisation, Polanyi's diagnosis is still valid today. This is shown by the parallels of recent decades with the developments of his time: market deregulation followed by financial crises, democratic erosion, authoritarian tendencies, international polarisation, and armed conflicts. Polanyi also anticipated risks to the natural basis of society, which can be seen as an early warning of ecological crises. Against this background, should we really still "dare more progress", as the last German government coalition wanted to do (SPD et al. 2021)?

The capitalist-industrial transformation that is currently leading the world towards a possible collapse has its origins in *Western* societies. This is the geographical focus of the following chapters. These societies have benefited the most from the dominant development to date. Three further reasons for limiting our perspective to the West are outlined below:

> Firstly, because societies of this type face different development tasks than, for example, the so-called emerging countries – the fight against poverty and hunger or the establishment of basic supply infrastructures are not the main focus here, but rather the preservation of an achieved level of civilisation. Secondly, a majority of citizens in such societies – owing to their relatively comfortable living conditions in many respects – possess agency in shaping their professional and personal circumstances. This scope for self-determination, which we can define, and which underpins our collective living standards, informs how necessary transformations might be structured. Thirdly, and fundamentally, these spheres of agency – combined with both historical and current levels of environmental resource use – entail a responsibility to drive sustainability transformations. (Sommer and Welzer 2014, p. 15; own translation)

This study adds a further important reason: if culture is the second hidden power in the Anthropocene, then this applies today above all to Western "high culture".

In this book, "culture" is understood in both a broad and a narrow sense. While the broad concept of culture refers to a transversal, all-encompassing dimension of society, including aspects such as language, values, worldviews, beliefs, rituals, and customs, the narrow concept of culture is limited to one societal subsystem among others. In Germany, only the arts are usually included in the cultural sector, and the scope of cultural policy is correspondingly limited. UNESCO's understanding of culture is therefore better suited to the broader horizon of societal transformations; in addition to the arts, it also includes education, science, and the media in the cultural sector.

In the broadest sense, culture is the mental programme that underlies every societal development (Hofstede and Hofstede 2009; Kramer 2001). Thus, the current polycrisis also has cultural causes. The Western cultural programme that has developed in capitalist-industrial society is that of *modernisation*. Modernisation theories can be understood "as the sociological equivalent of economic growth theory" (Eblinghaus and Stickler 1996, p. 20). They are based on the view that human history is a linear continuum of stages of development: from simple, traditional forms of society to modern, more complex forms of society (Parsons 1969). What progress describes, modernisation prescribes for every society. By seeing itself as the pinnacle of human development, Western society makes itself the model for the whole world.

If cultures (in the broadest sense) are distinguished by the way in which people are "mentally programmed" (Hofstede and Hofstede 2009, p. 3), then the question arises as to how this "mental programming" takes place in society.[3] How do values, worldviews and beliefs get into

[3] The cultural scientist Geert Hofstede uses a metaphor to explain the relevance and impact of culture in society: culture is the "software of the mind". If culture is the "mental programme", then education and socialisation are the way people are "mentally programmed". Hofstede's metaphor was probably inspired by the international IT company IBM, for which he conducted a large culture-comparative study among its employees. Close to Hofstede's understanding of culture is this definition by the philosopher Ludger Heidbrink (2007, p. 116): "Culture can be understood as a control programme that contributes to the successful self-organisation of differentiated societal subsystems."

people's heads? The cultural sector (education, science, arts, and media) plays a central role here. It influences our perception of the world, our choices and our behaviour. In other words, the cultural sector always has a social responsibility. The question is for *which* society and *which* type of development—and whether these are more or less sustainable.

While missionaries and soldiers imposed Western culture on other continents during colonisation, in the context of globalisation it is education, the media, advertising, and even Hollywood films and pop music that have contributed to the "Westernisation of the world" (Latouche 1994). Even if China, India, or Brazil set their own accents in cultural production, their elites are oriented towards the Western cultural programme, so that the capitalist-industrial path of development has been followed in these countries as well. Cultural globalisation is also a globalisation of certain media (Donges et al. 1999), i.e. television and the internet, which have established themselves in all countries. If today's globalised society is in a polycrisis, it is probably also the result of this *monoculture*. Every monoculture is vulnerable and prone to crisis. What applies to ecological monocultures also applies to economic, mental, and media monocultures. Accordingly, *diversity* is an important foundation of sustainability (UNESCO 2001, p. 2).

For these reasons, the Great Transformation has cultural-political relevance. This leads to the aims and questions of this study.

## 1.1 Research Aims and Questions

There is certainly no shortage of literature on transformation, sustainability, and culture. Yet much of it reflects a reductive understanding of these key concepts: transformation is often portrayed as a kind of repair and optimisation of "social machines"; sustainability is commonly reduced to climate action and electric vehicles; and culture is frequently confined to the realm of artistic production. Such reductionist thinking is more likely to uphold the status quo than to enable transformative change *by co-design*. This book therefore seeks to broaden the mental horizons of these discourses, for only then can we see how deeply interconnected they are. Only by expanding our mental horizons can

we relativise the political maxim "there is no alternative" (cf. Margaret Thatcher in Berlinski 2011; Angela Merkel in Kurbjuweit 2014)—and make the impossible possible.

Albert Einstein once remarked that problems can never be solved with the same mindset that created them. While technological innovation may promise solutions without questioning the very frameworks that generate the problems, this book will critically examine those frameworks as well. Whereas a narrowly understood sustainability tends to problematise the environment, this study focuses on the internal social and cultural conditions of systems and how these shape their relationship with the environment. Since "environment" is defined here in systems-theoretical terms, it encompasses not only the ecological (climate, biodiversity, etc.), but also the social (the Global South, marginalised groups, future generations, etc.), the cultural (other perspectives and cultures), and the inner environment (the unconscious, human biology, etc.). The current polycrisis reflects conflicts with all these environments. Because the root causes lie in the same systemic logic, overcoming that logic will require uniting all environmental forces.

In this book, sustainability is not reduced to a set of goals or a predefined strategy but is understood as a sociological concept referring to the quality and form of the relationships between the societal system and its environments, and between perception and reality. For example, during the 2008 financial crisis, banks were considered "systemically relevant" and were swiftly rescued, whereas the climate crisis still awaits comparable recognition. If such discrepancies between perception and reality reflect the self-referential tendencies of mental and social systems (cf. Luhmann 2004), then sustainability is what counteracts these tendencies and expands the mental horizon within which societal decisions are made. In this context, culture is not something inherently good that simply deserves greater public funding; rather, culture is also part of the problem. This is exemplified by the fact that, at most German universities, economics continues to be taught as though the international financial crisis 2008 had never occurred (Backhaus 2011), and as if unlimited growth were still possible on a finite planet. While a narrow understanding of culture often confines it to galleries, museums,

and theatres, this book also examines its manifestations within the headquarters of institutions, the boards of companies, and on the streets.

Against this backdrop, three metaquestions form the common thread running through the following chapters:

1. **How can peaceful coexistence be achieved amid diversity on a finite planet?**

This question arises at the international level as much as it does at the family dinner table. On a finite planet, an expansive mode of living based on constant growth and mass consumption inevitably leads to conflict. Resources are also limited at the local level—for example, land in a city. When it comes to the use of streets, car drivers, cyclists, and pedestrians compete with one another for the same space. Peaceful coexistence could be achieved by widening the street and assigning each group its own lane. Yet this would come at the expense of other groups and interests. Another option would be to reserve the street for cars alone, excluding cyclists and pedestrians. In most cases, however, the dominance of a privileged group fosters resistance among those left behind. The alternative to this path of conflict is dialogue: drivers, cyclists, and pedestrians could meet as equals to negotiate how the street might serve everyone. This would likely require common rules and mechanisms of fair redistribution, with drivers giving up certain privileges to accommodate the needs of others.

This example serves as a metaphor for many challenges and possible solutions in our society. If imperial interests can lead to wars on a finite planet, then an alternative might lie in dialogue and a common agreement on rules for coexistence. Although the complexity of social systems increases from the micro to the macro level, human beings are always involved, and their communication follows similar principles (Watzlawick et al. 1967). Whether actors trust or mistrust one another is likely to make a significant difference in how their problems are addressed. Thus, the following chapters will demonstrate why sustainability begins with a transformation of social relationships.

In a competition between private interests, a peaceful resolution may take the form of a compromise. However, a compromise does not necessarily equate to consensus, nor does it always represent the

most sustainable solution. By contrast, entirely different approaches to problem-solving can emerge through collective creativity and a shared commitment to the common good. For instance, individuals might begin to perceive themselves not primarily as drivers, cyclists, and pedestrians, but as commoners of the same urban space and co-inhabitants of the same city. Such a shift in perspective could lead to the recognition that expanding public transport infrastructure would serve the common good, thereby reducing reliance on private cars. Whereas a private car primarily benefits its owner, buses and trains are accessible to all and produce far lower emissions. Societies that prioritise sharing over private ownership tend to consume fewer natural resources.

Key dimensions of coexistence are equality and inequality, inclusion and exclusion, and justice and injustice. In a context marked by social inequality, the privileges of some come at the expense of others. When a company faces a crisis, it may choose to lay off a third of its workforce in order to safeguard the jobs and salaries of the remaining employees. Alternatively, it could reduce all salaries to preserve every job. Yet a third option might offer the possibility of maintaining all jobs without cutting wages: economic growth. The company could increase its production and marketing efforts or invest in arms manufacturing—a business that is currently crisis-proof and highly profitable. This path could foster a sense of unity between the company's management and its workforce, and lead to short-term economic gains for those involved. However, this would come at the expense of others, since to enable this growing production, the Global South would be required to supply the additional resources—potentially to produce weapons destined for killing and destruction. This example illustrates how solidarity within a system can take the form of complicity in the "structural violence" (Galtung 1969) against other groups. If Western societies have achieved certain civilisational accomplishments, it could partly be because they have succeeded in externalising their internal domination strategies and conflicts.

Social conflicts over particular issues are often proxies for underlying relational disturbances. People may rebel when they feel they have been treated unfairly. A peaceful coexistence can be achieved either by social actors jointly agreeing on a solution—or by a more or less legitimate authority making a binding decision for all. Traffic policy on

a street may be determined locally by the neighbourhood itself or by the city authority. In a company, decisions may be made by a workers' cooperative or by the board of directors. Thus, the question of coexistence also includes that of governance: who makes decisions for whom? Who determines development in a society for whom? Democratic societies generally respond differently to their problems than authoritarian ones. Whether in questions of coexistence or governance, culture plays a crucial role. Every culture also defines the artificial boundary between inclusion and exclusion—who belongs and who does not, who benefits and who remains outside. This dimension, however, does not concern only human relationships. While Indigenous peoples often consider non-human beings (other species, forests, mountains, etc.) as having equal rights and the Earth as an extended family, Western culture tends to exclude the environment and to treat it as a mere object. Yet even nature itself can rebel. Against this background, the next chapters will show that the form of coexistence that led us into the polycrisis cannot be the one that leads us out of it.

2. **How can human beings cope with complexity, despite their cognitive and physical limitations?**

In systems theory, complexity is often conceptualised through the term "environment" (Krieger 1998, p. 16). From this perspective, the challenge of coping with complexity equates to the challenge of coping with the environment—and vice versa. The programme of modernisation is aimed at mastering both complexity and the environment through technological progress and centralised governance. The current polycrisis reveals the failure of this strategy, which rested on an anthropocentric illusion: how can a human being who, as Freud (1917, p. 252) put it, "is not even master in his own house… in his own mind", presume to master the environment? A central thesis of this book is that sustainability requires acknowledging and respecting not only the limits of our planet but also those inherent to human nature.

Whether people act on the international stage or engage locally, they confront their own human limits in similar ways—through feeling overwhelmed or overburdened. From a systems-theoretical perspective,

culture can be understood as a collective strategy to reduce complexity to a form and scale that humans can comprehend and manage (Brocchi 2015). Thus, we share a mental map to orient ourselves in a complex world—although "a map is not the territory it represents" (Korzybski 2005 [1933], p. 58). Because greater diversity increases social complexity, people tend to remain within familiar social circles and exclude those perceived as "strangers". Similarly, hierarchical structures can relieve individuals of the burden of decision-making. Yet those in power are subject to the same human limitations as everyone else. What may distinguish them is their ability to conceal these limitations behind their status and to simplify complexity on a broader scale, thereby maintaining the capacity for action through access to symbolic and organisational resources.

The process of neoliberal globalisation has led to the polycrisis because it has modernised the world into an artificial monoculture, for example an economic one. From a systems perspective, standardised monocultures may appear highly efficient—yet from an environmental perspective, they imply immense structural violence and are particularly vulnerable to crises. Today, we are confronted with the paradox that the very strategies aimed at reducing complexity have led to an excess of it. As human beings, we are already exhausted by the internal growth logic of the industrial system and its acceleration (Rosa 2005; Ehrenberg 2010)—and now we face the heavy burden of mounting ecological and social disorder, prompting the question: "Can we still do justice to the world we live in?" (Selke 2022, p. 29). It is in this situation of extreme overwhelm and overload that we are witnessing a form of regression: authoritarian developments, restrictive migration policies, demands for further economic growth, and so forth. The alternative to this is a sustainable transformation.

### 3. How can we transform the same society and culture that have shaped us?

The past few decades have repeatedly shown that even experiencing severe crises firsthand does not necessarily lead to the required change *by*

*co-design*. Despite the financial crisis of 2008, speculation on the financial markets continues to this day. Even after catastrophic floods or severe droughts, most people in the affected regions have so far preferred to return to the old "normality" rather than engage in co-designing the post-fossil transition (cf. Böcker 2018). A culture internalised over decades, if not centuries, cannot be changed overnight. Cultural change is undoubtedly the most profound form of transformation, yet it often requires time—time we may no longer have in the face of today's urgent poly-crisis. Nevertheless, we must take culture into account if we are to avoid going around in circles.

The power of culture lies not only in the fact that it operates from the unconscious—the most influential apparatus of the psyche (Ruch and Zimbardo 1974, p. 366; Wehling 2019, p. 48)—but also in the fact that it is materialised in infrastructures, thereby shaping everyday behaviour across generations. How, then, is sustainability possible within unsustainable infrastructures? On the one hand, this book seeks to show how an ossified culture can be made fluid again. On the other hand, humans are not automatons, but creative living beings capable of deviating from prescribed paths. Anyone who desires another world must first be able to imagine it. Yet even "visions of alternative development" are mainly formulated by actors socialised within the very order that is to be changed. Those seeking genuine solutions should therefore subject these visions to critical reflection, in order to avoid reproducing the problem within the proposed solution. This book pursues precisely this aim: to offer a cultural critique of the sustainability debate—for not everything that is labelled "sustainable" truly is, and not everything that has a sustainable impact is necessarily labelled as such.

A scholarly work such as this one could imply the expectation that more knowledge will lead to more sustainable behaviour. Precisely this belief underpins the cultural programme of modernisation: the more knowledge a society accumulates, the more advanced it is deemed to be. Consequently, problem-solving capacity is attributed to "experts", typically located in Western industrialised nations (Eblinghaus and Stickler 1996, p. 117). This raises the question: does sustainability truly require a new elite to educate the masses? Should the West now teach the rest of the world how to live more sustainably? This book considers a mental

modernisation through top-down education as part of the problem and not of the solution. If educational elites do not necessarily live more sustainably than the general population, it is because sustainability depends not only on the quantity but also on the quality of education and knowledge. Moreover, even when the quality is high, people do not always act on what they know (Welzer 2019). If people fly to international climate conferences (which rarely lead to meaningful change), it is because habitus matters far more than words. A sustainability discourse that relies on moral exhortation risks soothing the conscience without changing behaviour. In this regard, the study of psychology could be more crucial than that of ethics. Since human beings are more emotional than rational, the arts can offer a different kind of access to our inner world than science does.

Transformation cannot be learned from books alone, because it is "a matter of practice" (ibid.). It cannot be researched from an ivory tower: the researching subject must put themself at stake and interact with the research object on an equal footing—as "action researcher" (Lewin 1948, pp. 278–298) or "co-designer" (Singer-Brodowski and Schneidewind 2019). Researchers can only grasp the real importance of psychosocial factors by taking part in the transformation process themselves. There is no universal path to sustainability, primarily because every social system has its own intrinsic logic and distinctive character (*Eigenart*). Similarly, there is no linear route to sustainability, because sustainable transformation must be steered through areas of tension—for example, between "social capital" and "economic capital": how can unpaid solidarity exist in highly economised contexts? Can art or science be truly free if they depend on money? To gain practical insights into such questions, this study examines two case studies with cultural policy relevance in greater detail:

- *Regional cultural policy in the Upper Middle Rhine Valley* (a rural region in Germany between the cities of Koblenz and Bingen). In this region, the author served as a process facilitator for the programme "TRAFO – Models for Culture in Transition" run by

the German Federal Cultural Foundation (*Kulturstiftung des Bundes*).[4] As part of this work, he conducted 16 interviews with local cultural actors on regional development and wrote the study *Wandel durch Kultur—Kultur im Wandel. Neue Entwicklungspfade für die Region Oberes Mittelrheintal* (Change Through Culture—Culture in Transition. New Development Paths for the Upper Middle Rhine Valley) (Brocchi 2019).

- *Sustainability in socioculture*. At the Institute for Cultural Policy at the University of Hildesheim, the research project "Developing a Culture of Sustainability" was initiated in 2018 by Dr Christian Müller-Espey and Professor Dr Wolfgang Schneider and completed in 2020 by Kristina Gruber and the author. The question was how sustainability can be more firmly anchored in German sociocultural centres. The main goal of the project was to develop a *Sustainability Code for Socioculture*. For this, the *Corporate Sustainability Code*—initiated and promoted by the German Council for Sustainable Development in 2011—served as a template.

An analysis of the similarities between these two case studies shows that the dominant cultural programme of modernisation is also reflected in cultural policy. However, only a cultural policy that goes beyond modernisation can be truly sustainable. If cultural diversity makes society more resilient, then rural regions and sociocultural centres can provide a "potential space" (Winnicott 1971) for this.

This book aims to bridge the gap between separate spheres of cultural research. In Germany, research and debate are oriented towards either a broad or a narrow understanding of culture. The Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities (KWI) in Essen, for example, has made important contributions to "cultures of responsibility" (e.g., Heidbrink 2007) and "climate cultures" (e.g., Welzer et al. 2010) through its research programmes of the same name, but these have received little attention within cultural policy institutions. Conversely, in 2002, in the run-up to the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, there were various cultural policy initiatives in Germany, such as the

[4] Homepage: https://www.kulturstiftung-des-bundes.de/en (accessed: 21.1.2026).

*Tutzing Manifesto for Strengthening the Cultural-aesthetic Dimension of Sustainability*. However, these have received little attention in cultural anthropological research and at the KWI. The following chapters interweave these perspectives, drawing on transdisciplinary approaches such as "cultural ecology" (Finke 2003). The new momentum injected into sustainability debates by the transformative turn since 2009 could offer the foundation for a *transformative cultural policy*.

## 1.2 Content Structure

The current polycrisis is not an unexpected natural disaster, but rather the result of a certain model of societal development and of deliberate choices—choices made "within the framework of private and/or state organisations […] based on a calculus in which dangers are regarded as the inevitable downside of progress" (Beck 2008, p. 17). Without overcoming this unsustainability, sustainability cannot succeed. While the first part of this book examines the root causes of the change *by disaster*, the second part focuses on the alternative option of a change *by co-design*. A sustainability transformation is a task for the present (*Gegenwartsaufgabe*), because as long as it remains a task for the future (*Zukunftsaufgabe*), the present will be left in the hands of unsustainable forces.

***Part I. Change* by Disaster: *Investigating the Causes (Chaps. 2–4)*** Here, the relationship between progress and polycrisis is explored. Neither the Neolithic nor the Industrial Revolution could have occurred without a prior cultural revolution. The first of these was the "Cognitive Revolution" around 70,000 years ago, marked by the emergence of early cultures and representing a turning point in human development. Later came the invention of alphabets and the rise of early media (Harari 2015). Culture and media provided the foundations for the formation of societies. Thousands of years later, the invention of the printing press and the Scientific Revolution laid the groundwork for the Industrial Revolution, which radically changed our relationship with nature. The development logic of capitalist-industrial societies consists

of three interrelated dynamics in the system–environment relationship: the internalisation of order (Catton 1980; Heinberg 2005), the externalisation of disorder (Lessenich 2017), and an expansive dynamic. In this context, islands of prosperity seek to shield themselves from growing environmental disorder—climate change, waste, poverty, conflicts, and so on—through "borders as sorting machines" (Mau 2021). How can people accept or endure this development, even when they are its victims? In democracies, social order rests more on cultural power than on the threat of violence.

The "grand narrative" (Lyotard 1999) of progress is one of ever-increasing prosperity for all. However, this narrative is increasingly proving to be an illusion. Chapter 3 (Transformation as Polycrisis) focuses on a dynamic already predicted by Karl Polanyi. Contrary to what the idea of progress would have us believe, the future is not a linear, predictable continuation of the past, because tipping points are looming. The longer society clings to its "culture as usual", the more likely hard breaks in development become. Severe societal crises are often the result of an "anaesthetic state" (Welsch 2003) or an inability to learn.

The crisis of society is also a crisis of its cultural policy. Chapter 4 describes why cultural policy itself is trapped in the logic of the system—and therefore unable to respond to the logic of the environment. Nevertheless, cultural policy does address societal crises, especially when they impact its own domain of responsibility.

***Part II. A Task for the Present: Change* by Co-Design *(Chaps. 5–7)***

Crises can also be opportunities: this is the hope behind the possibility of "transformation as system change" (Chap. 5). Achieving change *by co-design* first requires an ideological "decontamination" of the current sustainability debate from the cultural paradigm of modernisation. In its broader sense, sustainability serves as an umbrella term for "visions of alternative development" (Tarozzi 1990). On the one hand, the term stands for *crisis resilience*, on the other for a *good life* that does not come at others' expense. In both cases, sustainability means more cooperation than competition, more common good than private gain. After all, why should we pursue continuous economic growth when we could instead share more and redistribute fairly? A sustainable transformation can only

succeed today as a systemic change. It involves a process of democratisation and the reintegration of the economy into society. The transformation can be driven from the local level—through commons, *extended agoras,* and new alliances. Sustainability and modernisation differ not only in terms of objectives and actors, but also in the way transformation is designed.

However, there can be no great transformation towards sustainability without a cultural change (Chap. 6). Since 2000, there have been several attempts in Germany to connect the discourses on sustainability and culture. These can be categorised into two distinct strands, each reflecting a different conceptualisation of culture: culture as a societal sector and culture as a cross-cutting dimension of society. The approaches of cultural ecology have the potential to bridge these different perspectives and to link culture and sustainability within a unified theory. In practice, opportunities for societal self-reflection and intercultural dialogue can contribute to cultural change. Likewise, media change, cultural movements, transformative playgrounds, and novel rituals can foster a collective mind shift.

How does cultural policy relate to transformation? This is the focus of Chap. 7. The examination of the two case studies—the cultural region of the Upper Middle Rhine Valley and the implementation of sustainability in German sociocultural centres—enables deeper analysis. This, in turn, reveals the tensions and ambivalences that inevitably arise when we attempt to achieve sustainability within an unsustainable framework. The findings of this research as a whole, together with recommendations, flow into an overview of the key elements of a transformative cultural policy. The book concludes with a brief summary of the issues raised (Chap. 8).

## 1.3 Perspective and Methodology

It is not easy to examine transformation objectively, as it is always a deeply personal matter. Our own biographies are themselves stories of lived transformation. Anyone over the age of fifty today grew up in a society markedly different from the present one. This is true for the

author of this book as well. In my childhood in the Italian countryside near Rimini, transformation was a daily presence around the family dinner table, shared across three generations. My grandparents had lived through the greatest catastrophe of the twentieth century: the Second World War marked them for life. They never stopped wishing one thing for us grandchildren: that we might be spared the experience of war, because "war is the worst thing of all"—and yet it is man-made.

They practised a form of subsistence farming as smallholders, meeting most of the family's food needs through what they produced themselves. By today's standards, my grandparents and parents would probably be classified as belonging to an "educationally deprived milieu"—yet they possessed invaluable knowledge and a wide range of practical skills passed down through generations. They did not know the word "sustainability", and yet chemical-free cultivation was the most natural thing in the world to them. This was due not only to tradition but also to relationships: if producers know their consumers personally, it changes the character of the economy—and reciprocity, responsibility, and quality become more important than profit. We never had much money at home, but we didn't really need it. Things were made by hand, repaired, reused—and, above all, shared. Among relatives and neighbours, knowledge, tools, and often the food itself was shared. People helped one another, whether with the harvest or the building of a new home. My grandfather Giuseppe was a role model for me. He never attained high status, and yet in 1982 an extraordinarily long procession followed his coffin: almost all the villagers came to pay their final respects. Who nowadays, in the age of Facebook and WhatsApp, could hope for such broad and heartfelt participation after their passing?

Of course, that world was far from perfect. Back then, I also had to learn that living together in diversity can be a major challenge—even within a family. That period nonetheless profoundly shaped me and, in doing so, the perspective of this book. For me, sustainability cannot simply be a matter of innovation and the future, because I have seen aspects of it in the past—and they were destroyed by so-called progress. As early as the 1970s and 1980s, I witnessed the ecological and social side effects of this "progress": the industrialisation of farming, pollution, the erosion of social cohesion. This transformation affected

not only the landscape but also people's health. It was precisely those experiences that led me to become active in the Italian environmental movement—which, at that time, was simultaneously a cultural movement. After the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War, I was among the many who hoped for a new era and a global socio-ecological transformation, which could have been financed by a peace dividend. Yet this hope was bitterly disappointed, as international organisations such as the G7 pushed through their neoliberal globalisation agenda. It was precisely that experience of transformation that prevents me from accepting today's society as "without alternatives" or as an "irreversible fate". Those who have lived through this history and spent decades advocating for more sustainable alternatives cannot simply carry on as before. It is crucial that we understand the deep structures and powerful mechanisms that have consistently enabled unsustainable development to prevail over sustainable alternatives—even today, in the face of profound crises and escalating risks.

Since the cultural dimension plays a central role in social development, a key methodological question arises: how can culture be studied when it operates largely at an unconscious level? To understand the mind of an architect, one must first examine the architect's buildings. In a similar vein, the first part of this book explores patterns in societal development—its products, symbols, practices, and rituals—to infer the underlying cultural programme. The second part investigates practical alternatives as expressions of cultural diversity and collective creativity. The author has been engaged for many years in local transformation processes, and insights from these experiences are woven into this research.

I have experienced the power of culture, mostly unconsciously—first as a latent "colonisation of the imagination" (Latouche 2013). In the 1970s, the modernisation of the countryside was anticipated and accompanied by a cultural shift: the devaluation of my grandparents' traditional way of life as "backward". I myself internalised this culture of modernisation and, at some point, began to feel ashamed of my rural, working-class origins. In a way, the migration from the countryside to the city of Bologna in 1989—from an "educationally deprived background" to university—represented a greater inner leap than the migration from

Italy to Germany three years later. Today I am a sociologist living in Cologne, far removed from my own roots, although these still resonate in this book.

Every transformation can take the form of assimilation into the hegemonic culture—or of migration: a movement from the familiar to the unknown, often fraught with uncertainty. It is also the perspective of the migrant and border-crosser that shapes this book. Migrants rarely possess a fixed homeland; instead, they inhabit thresholds, navigating between worlds. Such a vantage point informs the methodological orientation of this study, which is profoundly interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary—an approach essential for addressing the complexity of the questions posed here. Like the ethnologist's gaze, the migrant's perspective interrogates societal norms and conventions, revealing that no single normality can claim universal validity when viewed from outside. From this standpoint, all social phenomena appear culturally relative and therefore transformable. This research draws on theories and methods from the social sciences, humanities, and natural sciences, employing philosophy, systems theory, and cultural ecology as integrative frameworks that bridge disciplinary divides and foster systemic thinking.

I wrote this book as an independent researcher—a position that offers considerable intellectual freedom: open, critical, and unbound by institutional constraints. Yet independence also means working without the infrastructure and resources typically available through academic affiliation. Despite these limitations, this work represents an interim synthesis of a long-standing research process and aims to contribute to a discourse of growing relevance.

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