

## Opening Week of the Research Center for the History of Transformation (RECET)

**Veranstalter:** Research Center for the History of Transformation (RECET)

**Datum, Ort:** 20.04.2021–23.04.2021, digital

**Bericht von:** Anna Calori, Imre Kertész Kolleg, University of Jena

From April 20th to 23rd 2021, the newly established Research Center for the History of Transformation held its opening week. During the course of four evenings, the Research Center hosted five online keynotes and two roundtables, attracting a numerous audience of junior and senior scholars alike.

The purpose of the opening week was to launch the Research Center – founded with the Wittgenstein-prize awarded to Philipp Ther and supported by the University of Vienna and the Austrian Science Fund (FWF). The conference outlined RECET's theoretical and methodological approaches to the interdisciplinary study of social, economic, and cultural transformations. The opening week was also an occasion for RECET to showcase its programmatic initiatives and the research foci of its sub-groups. Finally, it was a chance for a wide community of scholars to gather and reflect on the significance of „transformations“ as a historical and analytical category.

The opening week's interventions contributed to three thematic threads: first, a reflection on the very concept of transformation and its situatedness within specific historical contexts; second, the spatial and temporal trajectories of capitalism, and its ever-morphing ability to survive rupture moments and crises; third, the methodological tools available to scholars across disciplines to analyse transformations.

The conference opened on Tuesday, April 20th with introductory remarks by RECET's Director PHILIPP THER (Vienna), Co-Director CLAUDIA KRAFT (Vienna), and Scientific Director JANNIS PANAGIOTIDIS (Vienna). While taking 1989 as a pivot and starting point of RECET's scientific endeavour, the Center strives to move beyond the chronological and geographical constraints that have traditionally delineated the contours of the contemporary history of transformation in

Central and South-Eastern Europe. Indeed, RECET aims to look at a plurality of historical rupture moments (1989, but also 1918) in a *longue-durée* perspective, focusing on the longer trajectory of overlapping transformations. Further, by following the paradigm of comparative area studies, RECET aims to look at other regions – such as East Asia – where comparable transformations occurred in the timeframe considered by the Center. The Center relies on interdisciplinary approaches that aim to study not only historical experiences, but also patterns of social appropriation, through the tools made available by cultural and social anthropology, sociology, and literary studies.

JÜRGEN KOCKA (Freie Universität Berlin) opened the first keynote session with a lecture on the transformation of capitalism, stemming from Joseph Schumpeter's understanding of the process of creative destruction as an essential factor in the transformation of capitalism. Kocka outlined the basic transformations of capitalism, from its inception in mercantile 16th century Europe to the present day: the changing nature of work, and the changing relationship between market and state. Illustrating the former, Kocka pointed at the significance of waged labour as a key pillar of industrial capitalism. Reflecting on the transformation of digitalization and de-industrialisation, Kocka highlighted how labour has lost its key socializing power. In the future, the importance of work as a basis of building identities will be further reduced, replaced by more particularistic forms of identification.

The second part of the keynote focused on the analysis of the intellectual history of ideological debates over the optimal relation between market and states. Kocka delineated the recent history of capitalism, from the 19th century to the present day, into different phases of the „market vs state“ dichotomy, and pointed out the complexity and contradictions of neoliberalism as a construct of ideas and their critiques, rather than its historical reality. Through this long excursus on the mutating character of labour and market-state relation in capitalism, Kocka concluded that capitalism needs to be socially and politically embedded not just to be compatible with

---

norms of our civilization, but in order to survive.

The conclusion of Kocka's keynote tied in nicely with the starting point of the following lecture by PETER BALDWIN (UCLA/NYU). The lecture focused on the most challenging transformation of our current times: the Covid-19 pandemic and its consequences for public health and the economy. Baldwin proposed to assess countries' different responses to the pandemic by distinguishing between public health and medical responses to the emergency. Many European nations focused on precautionary principles in the public health response, by imposing strict lockdown and distancing measures. Others, such as the US and the UK, opted for a medical response, i.e. by focusing on the development of medical technology – in this case, vaccines. This shows a different attitude towards risk-taking: the precautionary principle is clear about avoiding risk, but unclear on how to balance different risks between them. Examining the role of democratic decision-making, Baldwin problematized the question of citizens' compliance to restrictive policies, and the breach of their civil liberties to do so. In particular, he highlighted the difficulty that multicultural democracies face with the combination of compulsory policies, and persuasion. As he concluded, it appears that modern democracies cannot fully rely on the compliance of a perceived culturally homogeneous citizenry. Though convincing in its analysis of different responses, the talk fell short on defining exactly what it meant as „multicultural democracies“.

In the third keynote lecture, ADAM TOOZE (Columbia University) discussed the role of financial crises in transformation. After a brief opening on the history of financial crises, Tooze challenged the rather common narrative that reduces the history of market finance as an issue of market psychology, as an emotional and irrational reaction of the markets to external factors. Drawing upon principles of critical macro-finance, which links the domains of macroeconomics and financial economics, he questioned the assumption that financial crises are characterised by recognizable and repeatable patterns. Rather, financial crises differ in nature and scope, and

these differences shape economic transformation. Tooze then provided a critical review of recent scholarship that views financialization – rather than financial crisis – as the main force that has driven major transformations in the second half of the 20th century. Financialization sped up the end of industrial capitalism in the 1970s. Tooze critically assessed this understanding, by questioning whether it is helpful to characterize an entire epoch in terms of one limited dimension of capitalist development, i.e. financialization. Further, he problematized a Eurocentric view of the period of de-industrialization as signalling a global shift away from industrial capitalism, when it actually started a new era of industrialism in developing countries. The keynote concluded with a reflection on the possible financial outcomes of low carbon emission policies.

Reflecting on transformation and the erosion of democracy, ANNA GRZYMALA-BUSSE (Stanford University) tackled the question of the post-1989 democratic transformations of Eastern Europe, and the current erosion of the liberal democracies that were established in the region after the collapse of socialist regimes. As she argued, the end of state-socialism saw the promise of a „return to Europe“ and of a liberal consensus that, when disappointed by the very liberal parties that emerged from the ashes of communism, created the illiberal reaction visible today in most of the former socialist Eastern Europe. Signalling a turn away from social democrats and liberal democrats, illiberal parties in the region have turned their criticism towards liberal elites, and are targeting formal institutions, informal norms of tolerance, and politics of identity. As Grzymala-Busse argued, illiberal trends in the region are a result of voters' disappointment with liberal parties.

Much like in Jürgen Kocka's excursus on the long history of capitalism, the talk by Grzymala-Busse also could have addressed with more depth elements of class and gender, and how they intersect within the history of capitalist and liberal transformation.

The opening week concluded with LARRY WOLFF's (New York University) lecture on Woodrow Wilson's legacy in the geographical transformation of Eastern Europe after the

First World War. The lecture illustrated the role of the American president as a transformative figure in Eastern Europe. Although never having set foot in the region, Wilson's role was crucial in dividing Europe across West and East, and in shaping East European nation-states that emerged after the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Wolff highlighted continuity in thinking about segregation, from the US to the European context, which shaped Wilson's understanding of the Eastern-European peoples as needing to be freed from the yoke of empires, much like the (formerly) enslaved peoples of the US had to be freed from slavery. Wilson then purported an idea of Eastern Europe as necessarily divided into homogeneous nation-states. These ideas, Wolff highlighted, were influenced by prominent East European emigrants to the US, who featured in Wilson's intellectual milieu. The narrative of Eastern European peoples' „enslavement“ would then resurface during the Second World War and the Cold War.

The opening week featured also two roundtable events, which saw a variety of speakers involved in debating two themes that lie at the core of RECET's mission: first, the transformations in East Asia as a first avenue of comparison for RECET's research framework; second, a sociological perspective on the term „transformation“ in itself after 1989.

The first roundtable on capitalism in East Asia debated two sets of questions. First, how to explain the coexistence of capitalist economy with one party rule in China, and how long such „government oriented market economy“ will survive. The second set of questions revolved around the definition of the East Asian type of capitalism, what role entrepreneurial and collectivist experiences play in its formation, and whether it is possible to talk about varieties of East Asian capitalism.

Panelists DORIS FISCHER (Universität Würzburg), CHAOCHAO LIN (Fudan University), and PÁL NYIRI (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam) reflected on the learning curve of East Asian capitalism. The Chinese political elite has been very adept in policy learning: officials have looked at how issues such as climate change and innovation are organized in

different countries, and developed solutions and approaches. The collapse of the Soviet Union was a wakeup call for the Chinese communist party to focus on improving the country's living standards. Panelists also reflected on the relationship between state and capital in China, and illustrated that this is not based on nominal ownership, but on its control. Further, they highlighted how Chinese economic and political officials perceive market economy as neutral, which can be used as both capitalist but also with predominance of state owned enterprises.

The second roundtable focused on two sets of questions: first, the very definition of the term transformation, how to break up its teleological understanding that was prevalent after 1989, and how to operationalize it. Second, how history and the social sciences can combine different sources and approaches in the study of transformations. Panelists MARTA BUCHOLC (University of Warsaw), CLAUS OFFE (Humboldt-Universität), and JOANNA WAWRZYŃIAK (University of Warsaw) brought their different perspectives on what defines „transformation“ as a historical and social change, in which however the degree of contingency and choice is in itself debatable: which actors shape transformations, and to which degree of agency? Combining macro- and micro-perspectives is essential to the analysis of transformations, and yet may reveal itself particularly tricky in terms of methodological resources. As panelists argued, it is necessary to feature the production of memories and experiences of change into the analysis of transformation as a historical and social phenomenon.

The Opening Week was productive in its programmatic intent of outlining the ambiguity of „transformations“ as both a historical process and analytical category. It showed the non-linearity of transformations, from a chronological and geographical point of view. Panelists only touched upon transformations as being influenced also from below, and upon the agency of non-institutional actors in shaping transformations. Together with questions of gender and ethnicity in transformation, those remain key points that future RECET research will need to investigate. to discuss at the end future formats of such gather-

---

ings. It is clear that it without the online format the conference could never have reached its global outreach, yet some participants expressed in the final discussion their desire for onsite meetings. It will be a technical challenge to combine the best of the two academic worlds and formats.

**Conference overview:**

Jürgen Kocka (Freie Universität Berlin): Transformations of Capitalism

Peter Baldwin (UCLA/NYU): Transformations through Covid-19

Adam Tooze (Columbia University): Transformation and Financial Crises

Anna Grzymala-Busse (Stanford University): Transformation and Erosion of Democracy

Larry Wolff (New York University): The Transformation of East Central Europe after 1918 and Woodrow Wilson

*Roundtable „Capitalism in East Asia“*

Doris Fischer (Universität Würzburg)

Chaochao Lin (Fudan University)

Pál Nyíri (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam)

*Roundtable „Transformations of the term: The post-1989 transformation in sociological perspective“*

Marta Bucholc (University of Warsaw/Université Saint-Louis-Bruxelles)

Claus Offe (Humboldt-Universität/Hertie School of Governance, Berlin)

Joanna Wawrzyniak (University of Warsaw)

Tagungsbericht *Opening Week of the Research Center for the History of Transformation (RE-CET)*. 20.04.2021–23.04.2021, digital, in: H-Soz-Kult 03.06.2021.