

# Transitions

*Thematic Paper for the 42th Congress of the German Sociological Association at the University Duisburg-Essen, Campus Duisburg, September 22 - 26, 2025*

## The congress theme: "Transitions"

At the 42nd Congress of the German Sociological Association, we will be debating processes of social change under the heading of "Transitions". Sociology as a scientific discipline was established in times of sometimes rapid and fundamental social upheaval. Since then, it has critically and reflectively accompanied various far-reaching social changes and accordingly has numerous terms at its disposal to describe such phenomena: *social change, transformation, process, development, evolution* or even *revolution*. The concept of "transitions" as the guiding concept for this congress is intended to focus primarily on the *processes and dynamics* of social, institutional and individual changes in their various qualities. The focus is thus more strongly on the processes of transition with their moments of "in-between", contingency and openness as well as the possible regularity, regulation and directionality of further developments than in concepts of social change. Social transitions describe states of becoming; they are both a not-more and a not-yet and can be observed at all levels of the social and in all areas of society. The focus of the congress is therefore less on phenomena of constancy and longevity than on the social in emergence, in change and in transition - society in and as transitions.

## Facets and qualities of transitions

Social phenomena of transition are extremely numerous and heterogeneous. Their diversity interests sociological research and theorising in various ways:

1. With regard to the *scale and scope* of phenomena of social change, transitions are of sociological interest on both a large and small scale. They encompass processes that take place in parallel or follow one another, that reach to different extents and are intertwined in many ways. Transitions are an expression of change and they alter social coexistence and its structures at different levels and across different fields. They relate to social events in both the political and administrative spheres, in the everyday and the structural, in the religious and the economic, in subjective experience and in technical objects and artefacts - and in different ways that often give rise to new inequalities. Digitalisation, for example, is such a profound and comprehensive transition process that seeks to encompass all areas of society.

Global phenomena such as climate change make questions about how to deal with them socially relevant, for example in the transition to sustainable ways of living and doing business - a challenge facing all societies worldwide. The climate crisis demonstrates clearly that sociological research must be designed from multiple perspectives: The respective constellations at the various levels in which transitions take place and are analysed require the full range of sociological analytical tools. To cite another example: Intertwined armed conflicts can be observed on a *supranational level* as elements of a transition to a new geopolitical world order and thus become a topic for sociology. Such processes of change are

also reflected at the level of *national* society, where they can trigger further transition processes in the political field, among others. Conversely, the dynamics of national society unfold effects at supranational and global level and at the same time cause further development dynamics, e.g. in families, when war-related absences of individual family members result in new distributions of tasks and responsibilities.

In addition to global issues, national societies and economies are confronted with other transitions that are often specifically problematised at this level, such as the demographic transitions of the so-called baby boomer generation into the post-employment phase of life, which represent a challenge for the German (post-)migration society, and not only with regard to the shortage of skilled workers. These processes of rapid change in society as a whole correspond to changes at other levels of society: Organisations, institutions and infrastructures (e.g. bureaucracies or communication media and their types of use) each exhibit specific transitions. At the same time, transitions become relevant at the microsocial level of *interactions and individual life*, for example when changes of greater scope lead to changes in social practices and the forms of social relationships. However, there are also typical and genuinely structural transitions at this micro level: The socially and culturally institutionalised transition to parenthood or the transition between gender categories are often incisive transitional phenomena that are just as effective in the private and highly personal sphere and must be sought out and investigated sociologically there, just as they are conversely in co-constitutive or relativising contexts with phenomena on a larger scale. This opens up a broad field of possible theoretical and empirical problems, including the question of how transitions at different levels (be it individual-biographical, organisational, institutional, field-specific or societal) can be conceived and examined in their diverse relations and dynamic interactions.

2. With regard to the *form and logic* of transitions, questions of orderliness and planning (as well as plannability) on the one hand and the openness, contingency and dynamics of transitions on the other become relevant. Using the term 'transition' as a guiding concept for analysing ongoing (i.e. historically not yet completed) developments, we invite you to focus primarily on the dynamics and contingency of corresponding processes and to view sociality as open in principle, i.e. to think of social changes without recourse to teleological ideas or inevitability. This in no way implies sociological arbitrariness, as patterns and (repeatable) forms can also reveal themselves in the unplanned. Nevertheless, transitions can also be planned and organised, so that they are also the subject of social efforts to order and regulate. As transitions do not usually arise *ex nihilo*, they continue historically evolved structures - but also change them or even break with them. Transitions are potentially conflictual or at least conflict-ridden processes that need to be discussed in terms of power and domination.

Sociologically, the focus on transitions allows unforeseen chains of events to be reconstructed, expected dynamics to be empirically examined and attempts to model the future to be made. The focus on transitions should be directed towards recording uncertain and unstable transitions as well as efforts to anticipate and explicitly shape such changes (or to make sense of them in retrospect). In contrast to teleologically based concepts of process (e.g. modernisation) and the directionality of the concept of transformation, we also want to use the concept of transitions to broaden our view of the open, unintended and transitional.

At the same time, this perspective should encourage us to reflect on the inner logic of various transitions and their links. For example, the dynamics and form of transitions should be analysed: How do transitions take place practically and materially? What questions of distribution, resources and power are involved? What ideas of the new or the old are

(performatively) implied? What values and judgements of 'worse' or 'better' states and imaginations of a 'before' and 'after' go hand in hand with transitions? How is the transition interpreted in everyday life, how is it practically dealt with, how is it institutionally managed? How do differences emerge that can be systemically reconstructed in terms of scale and scope? The perspective on transitions allows a comparative sociological look at empirical cases of such changes, at their possibly undirected and ambivalent dynamics as well as at their own rhythms, (ir)regularities and sequences.

3. The different qualities of transitions also result from the (institutional and everyday) *qualifications, framings, interpretations and problematisations* of corresponding phenomena. They are always commented on and categorised on a discursive level and thus also brought forward as social phenomena. Transitions are sometimes negotiated politically and culturally on a highly emotional level. Such descriptions and evaluations of transitions are part of the phenomenon and at the same time a meta-level that requires sociological investigation. The historical and comparative description of social changes, the endeavour for systematic understanding, the interpretation of concrete processes such as seemingly diffuse developments and the sober analyses of social change have always been part of the discipline.

The same applies to the methodological reflection of the terms, concepts and methods used in order to enable the desired distance to the affective, subjective perception of society. For example, the rhetoric of crisis and transition itself could be made the subject of historicising perspectives: How was a social transition period addressed in past times and how is it currently being addressed, to what extent can it be located at a local, national or global level or as a connection between them, which discourses and disciplines are leading the way and which collective imaginations become visible at these levels? In this context, it is also important to keep in mind which statements on desirable social changes and which normative criticisms can be justified by sociology as a scientific discipline or are expected of it: To what extent are forms of just organisation of transitions (prominent, for example, in the context of the climate crisis) sociologically justifiable, and what other questions of "transitional justice" come into view if sociology does not want to withdraw solely to the description and investigation of different design intentions? Are the current descriptions of social crises essentially rhetoric fuelled by the discipline (as has already been discussed several times at sociology conferences)? And what power do these and other forms of knowledge that we possess unfold?

## **Concepts and methods of sociological analyses of transitions**

In addition to dealing with concrete phenomena of transitions, the congress will also provide a framework for the question of how sociology can use its instruments to analyse social transitions conceptually and empirically with the help of a wide variety of research methods.

1. If we first look at the conceivability and intelligibility of transitions, at the *concepts and terms*, we can see that the discipline began in the 19th century with the dominance or plausibility of evolutionist and teleological theories that sought to conceive of a linear or directed sequence of societies, for example in stage or phase models of social development. The work of two founders of the discipline, Herbert Spencer and Auguste Comte, had an enormous impact, as did Karl Marx, Ferdinand Tönnies, Emile Durkheim, Max Weber and later Talcott Parsons,

who, each in their own way, searched for 'laws' of change or stability despite superficial changes in society, for example in the sense of (ultimately continuous and directed, albeit unplanned) modernisation - each understood as civilisation, rationalisation or differentiation, or as a consequence of class struggles. These perspectives amount to diagnosing or postulating distinct social states between which a transition takes place, whereby the transition itself is often only of secondary interest.

Process perspectives in the narrower sense, on the other hand, focus on the permanence and thus the indeterminacy, contingency or unpredictability of social change. Social conditions or orders are analysed here as (necessary) social narratives. This is laid out, for example, in sociological theories of postmodernism and late modernism, which understand current social developments as continuations or extensions of earlier phases of social development, but emphasise their openness and ambivalence. In addition, pragmatist and French difference-theoretical traditions of thought should be remembered: for these, only processes of constant and unpredictable change are real, and for this very reason it is socially necessary to institute orders and identities imaginarily. How can contingencies and ambivalences of processes of transition, of social relations in transition, be described in these and other traditions of thought? What concepts are available for this from other disciplines - such as history, philosophy, education, cultural studies, natural and life sciences? Different concepts have different ideas about the qualities of transition phases. The concepts of social tipping points or social ruptures emphasise the limited controllability of transitions and their suddenness. In contrast, concepts such as rites of passage emphasise the orderliness and social regulation of biographical transitions and their consequences. Other terms, such as liminality or threshold state, also describe an indeterminate status of individuals or collectives in which social classifications do not yet or no longer apply.

2. In addition to the discussion of appropriate conceptual-theoretical instruments, the question also arises as to the empirical observability of transitions, suitable *methods of data generation* and the associated methodological instruments of empirical social research: Which methods are generally suitable for recording changes - e.g. historical comparisons, biographical and life course research, discourse analyses, research into historical semantics, the collection of process and panel data, time series or cohort analyses? What limits do these methods and data have in each case, and what artefacts are produced with them? What further and new developments would be necessary here and how can they be approached? How do methodological descriptions of distinct states relate to descriptions and narratives of social change and transitions? And what new methods does big data offer with regard to these questions? How can sociological methods of recording transitions benefit from inter- and transdisciplinary approaches? At this point, we would like to expressly encourage you to also take note of and present the methods and methodological discussions of neighbouring disciplines.

## **Transitions as complex objects of investigation**

For the Duisburg Sociology Congress, we invite you to analyse a wide variety of social and societal phenomena as 'transitions', whereby transition phenomena exist in two respects: The focus is on courses, transitions and processes as objects of investigation, but also on the dynamics of change *in* the objects of investigation themselves (which also include terms, concepts and discourses). And last but not least, it must be addressed how such processes

of change can be conceptualised as transitions in terms of concepts and social theory and how they can be empirically investigated.

From the multitude of possible empirical phenomena, only one example will be considered below, which clearly shows that transitions in very different realms and scales must be analysed in close interdependence: The climate crisis is a global phenomenon that can itself be considered a transition, for example in the sense of changing human-nature relationships, changing living conditions, changing discourses on consumption and sustainability, but also in the analysis of the occurrence of climatic events and their influenceability.

On the other hand, the global and regional consequences of climate change can be interpreted sociologically as social transitions, e.g. by developing new understandings of global exploitation, new forms of social inequality or new forms and modes of individual difference. Subsequently, conflicts over resources can be understood as a transition to a new geopolitical order. These are systematically linked to newly virulent questions of border regimes, migration and attempts at nation-state solutions. The discursive interpretations negotiated therein can be observed sociologically, as can the political changes on a geopolitical, intra-societal and familial level or the institutional changes in the sciences, their social relevance and challenges. They can be technical changes that lead to societies in transition or are interpreted as such in (especially sociological) discourses. Just as numerous social levels come into view on the basis of climate transitions, which in turn show breaks, transitions and new developments, further processes should be thought of and analysed as social transitions in a new way: Starting from political transitions, for example, the social, economic and also scientific decolonisation processes - and the processes of (neo-)colonisation - or transitions of economically generated inequalities and the associated transitions in orders of justification, individual desire or administrative enclosures. We should also consider the transitions of gender orders and the associated changes in political affiliations and demarcations, concepts of identity - and much more.

Last but not least, the question arises as to whether and how sociology participates in transitions, promotes or slows them down and is itself subject to transitions. Sociology plays a role not only as a contribution to society's self-description in the selection of problems and the form of problem understanding, but also as an actor and moderator that actively participates in processes of change and offers interpretations that find their way into the social communication budget. We need to examine and discuss where and how this is the case, be it in sociological counselling, in the accompaniment of citizens' forums or in the systemic design of large group processes. Thanks to its knowledge of the difference and divergence of actors' perspectives, sociology can play a mediating or exacerbating role in transitions. Where and how does it utilise this knowledge? Where does it have its own blind spots (insofar as it can observe them, e.g. as a critical theory)? Moreover, it cannot be ruled out that sociology itself changes in the course of its involvement in transitions. With their involvement, an objective distance can be lost and methodological problems can arise that need to be reflected upon. Sociology itself thus becomes an actor and must learn to apply the findings of an actor theory to itself. But what conclusions can be drawn from a development of this kind in terms of the sociology of science and the theory of science?

## **Duisburg as the venue for the 2025 Sociology Congress**

We invite you to Duisburg! The development of the city of Duisburg is characterised by ascents, descents and transitions, and during the week of the Sociology Congress we invite you to explore these traces of past and present transitions in the city and to reflect on them sociologically. Duisburg, that is the "Tatort" detective Schimanski, 'change through culture - culture through change' in the Capital of Culture year RUHR.2010, the catastrophe of the Love Parade in the same year, the ongoing migration, the largest inland port in Europe, Duisburg as the terminus of goods trains from China on the 'new Silk Road', but also the transformation of districts such as Marxloh from nightlife areas to problem districts to economic centres.

Duisburg is a city of transitions that is influenced by ecological events, in which external influences become internal transitions and in which social, cultural and ecological transitions take place of their own accord. A look at history shows that Duisburg is around 700 years older than previously assumed. Historically, the traces go back to the Romans. In the Middle Ages, the city on the Rhine was an important urban trading centre and experienced a period of economic prosperity. Duisburg was located at the end of the Hellweg, attracted merchants and trade flourished. A natural event ended this phase around 1,000 A.D. After a severe flood, the course of the river changed. The Duisburg meander of the Rhine was cut off and the city lay inland, separated from shipping and trade routes along the Rhine. The important trading town became a small farming town. It was not until the 19th century that a connection to the Rhine was re-established. The harbour was expanded and with the raw material sources nearby and the regained access to the Rhine as a transport route, Duisburg regained its importance.

Following the development and expansion of the iron and steel industry from the end of the 19th century and immigration from many regions, the unemployment rate during the Great Depression was the highest in the Weimar Republic. The massive armaments production during the Second World War was followed by the large-scale destruction of residential buildings by Allied bombing. A further upswing with coal and steel brought a need for labour, labour migration and above-average economic strength. However, this was followed by a crisis and economic decline with the closure of mines and steelworks, combined with enormous losses in purchasing power and great poverty from the 1970s at the latest. The vehement resistance of steelworkers and urban society to the closure of the Krupp steelworks in Rheinhausen in 1987/88 lasted for over six months. The last colliery in Duisburg was closed in 2008. At the same time, the city is still home to Europe's largest steelworks, which aims to become climate-friendly with the transition to 'green' technology. Duisburg's Ruhrort district is the first urban neighbourhood in the world to be developed in an environmentally neutral way.

The rise and fall of the city can also be traced historically using the example of the university. Long after Gerhard Mercator had sought refuge in Duisburg in 1544 and created his world maps as a respected scholar, the "Old University" of Duisburg was opened in 1655, with a faculty of theology, law, medicine and philosophy. Duisburg became the scientific centre of the Lower Rhine region. However, at the end of the 18th century, with the left bank of the Rhine ceded to France and the right bank occupied, the university lost students and, as a result, its reputation. The university was dissolved in 1818 (the university seal and large parts of the library went to Bonn). In 1972, the Gesamthochschule Duisburg was re-established (Gerhard Mercator University from 1994), including the subject of sociology. In 2003, the

Duisburg and Essen universities merged to form one of the youngest universities in Germany.

The city of Duisburg is therefore a model for turning points and transitions, with far-reaching effects for the city and its inhabitants. How does sociology view these transitions? We look forward to stimulating lectures and lively discussions at the Duisburg campus of the UDE!