

Navigating Change

Conference convened on the occasion of the 75th anniversary of the Dept. of Anthropology and Development Studies, Radboud University, in 2023

What generates change, who is making change, and how do we understand change? These are urgent questions in light of contemporary global problems, such as wars, mounting political violence that is frequently fuelled by racism and xenophobia; the rise of new, economically and politically disenfranchised groups; as well as the intensifying environmental crisis following global warming. These messy and multidimensional problems trigger complex questions about the direction of the future. These questions also speak to the ontology of change itself, and, by implication, to the conceptual and analytical models that are used to understand the dynamics of change and its wider consequences.

The main goal of this jubilee conference is to enhance our **understanding of how global problems challenge and transform common conceptions and practices of change**. The rise in xenophobia and racism, for instance, has also provoked efforts to create more inclusive forms of change by forging new solidarities across different boundaries and intersections of social inequality. Various kinds of disenfranchisement have likewise inspired the emergence of grassroots organizations that vie with the state for alternative visions of the future. The climate crisis, finally, also prompts us to reconsider how change unfolds in relation to more-than-human actors and has sparked new forms of relationality that highlight a radical form of planetary interdependency.

Questions about change are also intertwined with responsible scholarship in other ways. Reconsidering the epistemology of change and its ontology urges us to reflect on the kind of change that we, as critically engaged academics, aim to achieve with our work. Whose representations of change matter and are accordingly made prominent in the development of our research agendas? To what extent are our research questions guided by demands for change in societies? The CAOS Department especially encourages contributions that unpack how structures of power and privilege shape dominant representations of change. However, we not only welcome contributions that consider change as the construction of something new, but also those that focus on the un-doing or un-learning of practices that are considered as harmful. This also opens up the question of how we seek to collaborate with others – our interlocutors, fellow scholars, funding agencies, and other change-making actors, such as activists, NGOs, and social movements. To facilitate critical rethinking of the process of how change is navigated in action, the conference will address these overarching questions in the three different domains in which the Department is specialised.

1. Change as Undoing

Although change is generally conceived of as the development of something new, it also involves the un-doing or unlearning of dispositions, relations, and institutions. A variety of activist movements and intellectual interventions explicitly call for change through de-construction (defund the police; penal abolition; de-growth; de-consumption) or via ‘unthinking’ or ‘unlearning’. Such movements are embedded in broader academic, activist, and indigenous

critiques of capitalist and liberalist notions of change-as-progress. Thinking with and alongside these movements, this panel poses two questions that are urgent to the critical times of accumulated crises in which we live: how may we conceptualize change as un-doing or de-construction? And what does it take to no longer do, to stop? Undoing may span from intimate work on the embodied self or on one's being with others, to complex, coordinated work on bureaucratic technologies, institutional practices, or global circulations of models, people, discourses or goods. Drawing on notions of vitalism and affective forces, and taking seriously activists' practices of (self-)care and regeneration, we suggest that the work of undoing may also be usefully considered in terms of the depletion and/or renewal of energies that it takes, and the resisting forces it bumps into. We welcome papers that theoretically and/or ethnographically address these questions by way of concrete social instances of change-as-undoing around the globe. We also explicitly invite presentations in other formats, as well as engaged or activist contributions.

2. Changing Institutions from Below

This stream starts from the change initiatives of people, organised both individually and collectively. In studying people's practices, perceptions and the impacts of their change initiatives, a grassroots perspective is used to understand the changing relationships between people and institutions. It focuses on how people perceive of, experience, and deal with changing institutions. Apart from state actors, such institutions also encompass non-state actors, such as commercial, non-profit, and supranational actors, often collaborating in hybrid partnerships. All these institutions can fulfil different roles vis-à-vis organised people, resulting in encounters that may be participatory and harmonious, but can equally be contentious or antagonistic. The central question of this panel is how various *encounters* between organised people and institutions gain shape in various political-economic and socio-cultural contexts and how these give rise to change. Next to studying change processes, as engaged researchers, we are also concerned with the impact of these initiatives for change.

We are interested in ethnographic, quantitative and mixed methods studies that provide a grassroots perspective on the encounter between people and institutions and their dynamics in different policy frames, interventions, and bureaucracies. We welcome papers on the interconnections between organised people, state and non-state governance actors across the fields of social work, neighbourhood improvement, cultural expression, poverty and debt, gender, migration, civil society, and international cooperation. Papers for this panel may include contributions to recent debates on neoliberalism and its alternatives, the role of the state and civil society in international and local development, resistance, shifting governance and policy assemblages, and (global) citizenship. We particularly welcome reflections on the question how institutions accommodate or resist utopian socioeconomic visions, such as those emerging from the Sustainable Development Goals, or otherwise envision more equal and inclusive societies.

3. Environmental Change: From Crisis to Care

Unsustainable and exploitative forms of production and consumption have induced an accelerated change of the climate, widespread contamination and degradation of soils and waters, and an unprecedented loss of biodiversity. In this context, calls for 'change' are becoming ever more commonplace. However, *what kind* of change remains a heavily contested issue.

Rushed by a sense of crisis after decades of inaction, decision-makers often privilege technocratic fixes that ignore power relations and structural ills. At the other end of the spectrum, there are grassroots movements calling for radical change pointing to the disproportionate burden borne by marginalized, racialized and gendered bodies. In this panel, we would like to explore what happens to our understanding of change if not crisis but care is placed at the center of analysis. Recognizing that the ethics, practices and politics of care traverse human and other-than-human life worlds, a focus on care opens up the embodied, affective and material messiness of what it means to live together with human, animate and inanimate beings – now and in the future. To that end, we invite scholars and activists to address (one of) the following sets of questions. First, how does care come to the fore in processes of socio-ecological change? How are relations of care political and entwined with issues of social-environmental justice? Finally, if we take heed from debates on intersectional justice, ecofeminism and decoloniality, what changes should be made to our research practices?