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"They transformed paradise and put up a parking lot" | Photo by Ilan Kelman

Transforming transformation

Ilan Kelman

A transformation is haunting Europe. The transformation of a discourse.

Sustainability research is being driven by a purportedly new approach which demands "transformation": Transformation in our lives and livelihoods; transformation in societal processes and functions. The transformation ethos emerges from those who have focused almost exclusively on climate change, meaning that their thoughts and work are framed by a single issue.

Does that matter? Not necessarily, if the approach is indeed useful and constructive. With transformation, these criteria are not being met.

As with much other jargon, "transformation" definitions are rampant --and they are sometimes almost mutually exclusive! Vagueness manifests with the birth of phrases such as "Transformational Change" and "Transformative Change". Given that in English, "transformation" and "change" are synonyms, we might as well use "Changeable transformation" or "Changeative transformation". What about transmutation instead?

Meanwhile, the word and concept do not always translate readily into other cultures. Words such as "transition" and "transformation" might not be differentiated. It is certainly clear that not all transition, transformation, or change is good, useful, or needed.

In fact, as with many other supposedly “new” ideas, the “transformation” approach simply re-hashes ideas which have long existed. Little evaluation or critique is provided regarding reasons for successes and failures of the older approaches.

So is "transformation" useful for "sustainability"? As part of a buzzword-fest encompassing Sustainable Holistic Integrated Transformation, it might be. But it does not seem direct, robust, or useable enough to charge forward with a discourse which has not been fully examined.

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