

Times of Transformation – Times of Faith: The Potential of “Change Agents”

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During the most tense moments of the Tahrir-events news channels like CNN broadcasted for hours “Breaking News” giving the spectators all around the globe a feeling of immediate participation and presence in a revolutionary process. Cameras located on the top of high buildings seemed to transmit an overview on what was going on and on the acting groups or individuals... Nevertheless, those who patiently followed these emissions remained more and more with a sentiment of boaring unease in view of chaotic movements, explosions and cries while constantly repeated comments tried in vain to give more than hypothetical explications for those – every day new – declared “historical” events...

Could that be an image for the helplessness we may experience as global and “omnipresent” spectators trying to understand the transformation-processes in Arab countries or elsewhere? What means “transformation”, are there or which are the steering actors, the effective “change agents” of it? Is there any historical linearity and finality in the processes we observe? This contribution – of course – does not pretend to answer this, in last consequence, philosophical – or even theological – question, but tries to make more transparent some of the concepts frequently used in policy-design or development planning, concerning f. ex. the Arab world, and to confront them with religious convictions which may inspire Christian or Muslim actors who intervene in – or step back from – current transformations.

1. Change Agents as catalysts of transformation processes

1.1 Transformations inside “The Great Transformation”

“Transformation” (or “transition”) in (comparative) political theories usually means the systemic change from authoritarian (in Eastern Europe: socialist) to democratic regimes and societies (cf. WBGU Glossary, 395).¹ Political transformation appears hereby intimately interlinked with economic, social and cultural change.² In a globalised world, the interaction between local/national

¹ The WBGU is an important scientific advisory board of the German government (“German Advisory Council on Global Change”) proposing a global ‘master plan’ for sustainable transformation in reaction to the challenges of climate change. Its “Flagship Report” of 2011 combines the analysis and projections of some of the most outstanding Think Tanks in Germany and may serve us therefore as *key-example for a comprehensive theory and at the same time narrative* describing the role of change agents inside a global transformation in its most serious and complex form.

² General remark: It may be (linguistically) interesting to study the use of the term “change”. When it appears in our contexts it includes – in a wider sense than “transformation” – often the (hidden) connotation of (targeted) “development”, traditionally understood as compensation of “deficits” (in certain categories of countries), currently even synonymous with “sustainable” development.

and global processes and structures is also always conditioning systemic change. Transformations of wide range, including the whole mankind or even the Earth system, are referred to by WBGU as “great transformations” (cf. 81-85) following the term of the Hungarian economist Karl Polanyi who spoke (1944) of the Industrial Revolution as “The Great Transformation”. Only the Neolithic Revolution before and the current danger of irreversible changes to the Earth system due to global warming etc. appear analytically on a comparable deep level of transformation (cf. WBGU, 81).

The challenge of the epoch we face actually is therefore to convert the planetary transformation (1) which the Industrial Revolution caused mainly via *technological* innovations – starting ca. 1800 (scientists speak since around 2000 of an “*Anthropocene*” with mankind acting like a “geological” factor) – into a transformation (2) towards sustainability (key factor: limitation of global warming to a maximum of 2° C above pre-industrial level through “decarbonisation” which then implicates also radical social and value-/lifestyle-changes).³ The Think Tank we follow here insists that a “Great Transformation” like the present-one – underway and urgently needed at the same time –, is not a *linear* process, but a result of “interlinked dynamics” (83); however: “projection models” which allow us to “learn from the future” (84) play a key-role in this design of a master-plan for a sustainable new era of humankind.

At this turning point of the global drama “change agents” should appear on the stage. WBGU focuses much more on these actors – normally *individuals*/personalities – than f. ex. on the importance of civil societies and their NGOs. Let us therefore take a glance on the origins and the ‘functionality’ of this concept.

1.2 “Change agents”: success-story of a concept

As starting point of this story Everett M. Rogers and his work “Diffusion of innovations” (1962!, ⁵2003) has been frequently identified. Coming from a rural background, this sociologist and communication scholar focuses primarily on the transfer of new technologies in agronomy and the health-sector (also in developing countries). A successful “diffusion” of innovations (so far not their invention) is a field where “change agents” should intervene with all their communication (soft) skills as *catalysts*, especially from *outside* a strong hierarchical chain.

In the second half of the 1990s consultancy- and change management-conceptions (for the development of organizations) made frequently use of the

³ It is noticeable that the dynamics of these „great transformations“ pass essentially through technological inventions or production-innovations whereas f. ex. a concept like “The Structure of Scientific Revolutions” (by Thomas S. Kuhn, 1962) situates radical “paradigm”-changes in history *first* ‘in the minds’ of important (groups of) scientists (example Newton), avantgarde of a new “Weltbild” (world view).

term, now mostly locating the change agents – as part of the “system” – inside the hierarchies or functionalities of an enterprise or organization including (public) administration where an effective policy-transfer is desirable (“Change Management”-methods turn out here as “New Public Management”-strategies). Policy-maker picked it up, particularly for the design of development- and transformation-agendas, f. ex. some German Ministries.⁴ It is therefore not surprising that an Advisory Council on *Global Change* dedicates an important part of its analysis and strategic reflection to a comprehensive notion of “change agents” (cf. WBGU, 242-246), resuming in the Glossary:

Change agents is a term used in diffusion, innovation and transition research to describe actors who play a central role in the initiation and shaping of change processes. Initially, these are usually single individuals and small groups fulfilling various tasks or functions in transformation processes, including the identification of alternatives, development, communication and mediation, synthesis, investing, optimization, diffusion, etc. (WBGU, 391)

In the typology which is introduced in this context we may observe the scala of various competencies and talents brought together under the shelter of the “change agents”-term:

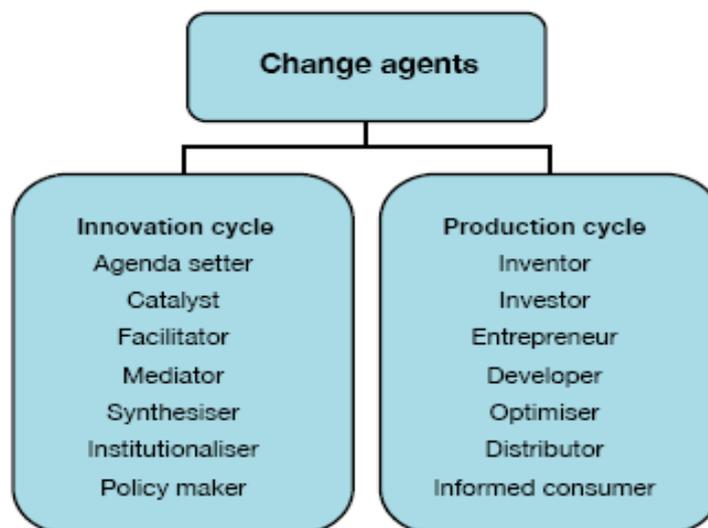


Figure 6.2-1
Typology of change agents.
Source: WBGU.
(WBGU, 244)

⁴ Illustrative example in the field of academia and science (for development): the common Press-declaration of BMZ and DAAD (June 18, 2013) “Erfolgreiche ‘Agenten des Wandels’” with reference to foreign scholars who return having finished their studies in Germany and take over after a couple of years relevant management positions in their home-countries.

In this figure the innovation cycle concentrates more on political, the production cycle more on economical change. Everyone may consider which type would be most suitable to describe his personal characteristics or ambitions to interfere or engage in change processes. Could this figure be a base to answer the question which type(s) of innovators are most urgently needed for the transformation processes Egypt is undergoing presently? It may disturb that the different functions (or the corresponding personalities) of change agents appear as parts of a “cycle”, so virtually as ‘willing fulfillers’ of a pre-established (systemic) logic (historical?, entrepreneurial?)...

Surprisingly the WBGU presents as key-example for change agents Leonardo da Vinci, the “uomo universale” par excellence of the Renaissance-era (the second example – closer to us – is the German 19th-century-chemist Justus Liebig, a catalyst of the Industrial Revolution linking pure research to product-development; cf. WBGU, 244s.). An “uomo universale” (following Jacob Burckhardt) is a ‘multitalent’ in a form that combines innovation *and* perfection in several branches of art and/or sciences with an overall impressive personality. Maybe that in our times such an ideal - for which Leonardo stands as convincing realisation – can subsist only split up in a series of competencies incarnated in different “change agents”.

Nevertheless: The starting point for change agents (according to WBGU) being often even a marginalized or outsider position (like Leonardo’s) – niches where nearly invisible processes of innovation begin whose importance even the inventors themselves might be unaware of – , those agents are in many cases single and outstanding personalities. Their social position is not limited to a certain class, but they can of course also be a part of the ruling elite. Anyway, inside of transformation processes they will obtain the strategic *function* of an “elite”, a term which we understand here in an ethical perspective as responsibility- and service-oriented (cf. Weber, 2001).

The souvenir of the Renaissance-icon Leonardo may be a signal for us to step away once more from the current “transformations” to the background of history and to reflect on the *religious* dimension of the “Menschenbilder” (conceptions of human being) and their correlation (or maybe incompatibility) with the change agents-discourse.

2. Times of faith: Religious actors as agents of change?

In times of radical political, social and cultural change religious leaders and institutions are challenged to clarify their positions and to re-interpret their traditions. Important changes or even loss of orientating values in a society should call the religious communities to re-think and eventually to reform their discourse on values and also their institutional structures what certainly does not mean to assimilate simply to often short-sighted tendencies of a “Zeitgeist”. It

could even mean to transmit – in a comprehensible way – a clearer own ‘profile’ inspired by their traditional faith and ethical convictions.

Concerning our reflection on transformation and change agents it may be challenging but helpful to remind that – according to Bernhard Uhde – an essential principle of the leading world religions is the *retention of human will (intention; “Zurücknahme des menschlichen Willens”)*.⁵ In other words: If “God’s will” is a deeply influencing factor for religious people, in their daily life as well as on their view of historical developments (“deeply” means here: other than in the way of rapidly changing “lifestyles”), their attitude towards transformations, particularly when they are shaped in projection-models which follow a linear time-logic, are expected to be different. In this perspective we will take a glance at the Christian and Muslim faith as these religions and their denominations, particularly their leaders are challenged to take over an important responsibility inside the current developments in Egypt.

2.1 “Yet not as I will, but as you will.” (Mt. 26,39)

As to Christian faith the reference to God’s will means according to the Gospel and the life- and death-example of Jesus Christ at the same time: giving time and space (in your decisions) to God *and* striving to recognize and to promote the life-potentials of the other human beings, including here – in the consequence of a religion of universal solidarity (“love”) – also the “enemies” and via an “anamnetic” solidarity (Johann Baptist Metz), the victims (of the history) and the dead.

We may find a striking example of what this double-binded reference to others and the Other could mean for leading “change agents” of the Christian communities (the “Elders”/presbyter) in the words of St. Peter:

Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care, serving as overseers – not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. (1 Peter 5,2s.; translation of the New York International Bible Society, 1978)

This early Christian and biblical testimony places the responsibility for the religious leaders under its general motto: “Be holy” (see chapter 1 of the letter) and reminds us that in Christian perspective the real “elite” is not to be found

⁵ Cf. Uhde, 129. This scholar of theology and philosophy of religions (Freiburg im Breisgau/Germany) demonstrates his thesis based on the originating texts and traditions of Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist faith. It serves also as major argument to illustrate the deep potential for a peaceful and non-violent attitude in these religions. (*In view of the “Grenzsituation” (crisis situation) of the “Earth system” it is worth to consider “retention of human will” as principle beyond religiously inspired ethics.*)

primarily among the hierarchical positions, but in exemplary lives of “holiness” (cf. the contributions of Peter Hünemann and Albert Franz in Weber 2001).

The auditors of St. Peter’s letter may have lived still with the confidence of their Lord’s coming back soon, but the principle of Christian relation to time remains – in retention of human will – the enduring awareness that our time includes not only the future (“futurum”) – “open” in multiple directions (Ernst Bloch) – we have to project and to manage, but also the “absolute future” (“adventus”; Karl Rahner) which is in last consequence the almighty and merciful God Himself.

2.2 The “homo islamicus”: submission and creativity

“Islam” means in a literal sense the submission to God’s will. The “homo islamicus” as F. Anawati describes him (cf. Anawati, 90s.), agrees deeply – like in an act of “expropriation” – that God participates even in the most insignificant details of his life, he agrees deeply to hand over to Him the whole freedom of intervention. A classical (orthodox) “Credo” like that of al-Aš‘ari (died ca. 936) emphasizes God as creator of all human acts so that human freedom only consists in the awareness of the pre-determined and the acceptance of the pre-elected (cf. Endreß, 64-66). A short-sighted interpretation of these theological premises may disconnect such an “homo islamicus” from all kind of creativity, innovation and consequently change as fruit of his own projection, planning and action.

As “archetypic” constellation of a controversy on Islam and innovation (via science) the dispute between French orient- and bible-scholar Ernest Renan and Scheikh Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1883) is still worth being remembered (cf. Abd El Gawad, 149s.): Renan describes Muslim people and societies as natural ‘veto-players’ whenever the creation and the transfer of new ideas and innovations are concerned *due to their faith*. As far as the Quran – following a fundamentalist lecture – contains already all kind of “science”, it seems difficult to give space to conceptions of progress-oriented change and development driven by innovative agents on the base of scientific research and prognosis. On the contrary: Scientific research which is not referred to the Quran as fundament seems to be simply a form of “ignorance”.

Moreover: traditionalist Islamic groups tend to understand “Western” historical paradigms of *progress* and development from their (“scripturalist”) Quran-centred view as *decline*, leading f. ex. here in Egypt to a “pre-islamic” form of society where “progressive” change could only be shaped in direction of a society penetrated by Islamic faith and law (cf. the figure of Scheikh Schâkir in Alaa al Aswany’s novel “The Yacoubian Building”, in Arabic first published 2002).

Yet a positive and new relationship of Islamic faith and thought to (scientific) rationality and intellectual creativity seems possible. Life and works of F. Anawati in dialogue with his Muslim partners f. ex. witness of the challenges but also the success of such an undertaking. Anawati's premise therefore was – in striking contrast to Renan's prejudice of "inferiority" – that he had still to face the challenge of giving an answer to a strong if not superior rationality of Islamic philosophy and theology which has not been restricted to a "golden" past (in European terms "medieval"; cf. his studies on Avicenna etc.).

A Quranic fundament for this approach could be Surah 2, where "Adam", the human being, receives from God the dignity of a "vice-gerent" (or "vice-governor" – "Khalifa") and an important part of God's own knowledge (2,30; cf. Abd El Gawad, 152s. and Tatari/Renz). Due to this dignity, a responsible and "intelligent" struggle against the evil is possible and needed starting with a "greater jihad" against the forces in ourselves which oppose God's will and intention as creator. Could that be an initial point to introduce human "concreativity" (Dietmar Mieth) in Islamic thought?

Georges Anawati tried to re-construct bridges between Islam and "intellectuality" – and consequently also between Islamic and Christian thought -, particularly in the "liminar-space"-encounter of mystic movements (cf. "Intellektueller Sufismus"; Anawati, 117-121). The mystic ideal of a "perfect man" as reliable mirror of God's perfection seems then to be the supreme realisation of what had been trusted to "Adam" by his Creator.⁶

3. Arab intellectuals for the 21 century?

The outcome of the so-called "Arab Spring" for the region and the countries concerned is uncertain and far from linear developments and solutions leading to more democracy and social integration. As "1989", the events of "2011" and the following years had not been effects of strategic planning and scientific prognosis (so far "adventus" and a pre-sentiment of "absolute future"...). We have tried to study in this context the concept of "change agents" confronting it with religious conceptions of the human being which inspire or limit important and powerful actors in the Arab countries. The change agent-concept showed its limitations due to its economy- and technology-related history and the ambivalence between systemic functionality and catalyst impact from "outside".

May I suggest to re-think as complementation or radicalisation of the change-agents-discourse for the Arab context the – in a certain way in this region

⁶ „*Ens perfectissimum*“ as traditional and most comprehensive characteristic of God in Christian philosophy (Anselm etc.) could therefore be a good base for theological dialogue.

traditional – concept of “intellectuals”?⁷ This “species” has been surviving in Egypt under a constant threat as shows Hoda Issa (cf. Nachwort, in: Anawati, 83-85), first through nationalist pressure after the revolution of 1952, then through Islamist propaganda after the war of 1967. This may serve us as proof that intellectuals can stand for freedom of the human spirit independently if moral or physical constraints come from an authoritarian system or a societal pressure inspired by a religious ideology; not to forget the new challenges of an “information-society” where quick mobilisations via internet and social networks could create penetrating but often rapidly changing discourse-taboos for a follower-“swarm” which moves far from the air of a free and independent spirit.

Let us conclude with some even prophetic reflections of Dieter Weiss on Arab creative intellectuality, a German scholar and important researcher on Egypt and its economy, always inspired by the vision of a “Euro-Arab University”.⁸ They may encourage us on our common and promising way to invest in education and to promote reforms of the Higher Education system via exchange:

Creative intelligence will be needed to come up with new paradigms far beyond linear styles of 19th century mechanistic reasoning. Channels of opportunity amidst mounting constraints will be difficult to identify. We have to train the ability of reaching to unforeseeable challenges from a position of relative strength. Development will become ever more an outcome of playful curiosity and imaginative research. Higher education must turn out courageous innovators rather than imitators who feel comfortable with conventional textbook wisdom. (Weiss, 118)

⁷ For the history of this concept and an essay to shape it new from a Christian/Catholic background facing the knowledge-based globalising society of the early 21 century cf. Weber 2013.

⁸ In the same context of Weiss’ contribution (a KAAD conference in Lebanon) I presented a study on barriers and chances for Arab scientists under a “brain-drain”-paradigm of international migration (cf. Weber 2006).

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