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Conceptualizing Disruption

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When we look at a term like disruption, we are faced with a great deal of terminological vagueness, which can easily lead to conceptual blurring. My proposal to achieve an initial conceptual sharpening consists of generating a typology in which disruption is contrasted with transformation as an opposition in order to then work out distinct attributes. The categories used to compare disruption and transformation make it possible to understand and classify the different nature, outcomes and effects. Such a typology inevitably involves a dichotomization, which on one side is certainly rough but on the other can be helpful, firstly, to gain a better understanding of both concepts per se, secondly, to differentiate between them and, thirdly, to assess moments of dialectical interplay. My theoretical take on the endeavor of classifying and contrasting disruption and transformation is strongly relying on an agency approach; that is, the perspective is to examine the role of actors, their preferences, perceptions and also discourses in the context of the two phenomena of change.

My considerations for the categories of this typology are - among others - inspired by the concept paper by Greschke, Koch and Wagenknecht and the presentation by Christmann, Ilbert and Schmidt during the TUDISC conference in December 2023. While Greschke et al. also identify categories serving to show the variance of disruption, I develop this further by adding this broad variance of disruptive phenomena to a distinction between disruptive and transformative processes, thus enabling an initial sharper focus. Christmann et al. refer to categories that partly coincide with those of Greschke et al. I draw partially on this category formation, systematize them and at the same time propose superordinate denominations for the dichotomous comparison. This can provide the starting point for further interpretations, that go beyond this think piece.

Even if the typology is intended to crystallize a more precise understanding, a basic definition of disruption is provided here, according to which it represents a type of "extreme event" with "massive physical, psychological or material consequences" that "exceed the own capacities to prevent these events" (Hällgren et al. 2018: 113).

Typology of disruption and transformation

The point of departure is that both disruption and transformation can be subsumed under the broad notion of change. However, the nature and character of the change on the one hand and the effects and results of this change on the other are different. From the perspective of political and social sciences, the question also arises as to how actors - be they political actors such as governments, parliaments, parties - or social actors such as citizens, civil society, etc. - deal with the various forms of change. Change is therefore fundamentally understood here as a phenomenon that requires actors to deal with it. Even if an event or process occurs unexpectedly or unintentionally, it is supposed to trigger agency and the attempt of actors to somehow manage the irritation or crisis.

The typology I have developed includes the category of *temporality*. This temporal aspect distinguishes the time span in which disruption takes place, namely within a short period of time or even punctually, while transformation develops and lasts over a longer period of time. In terms of *scope*, it is meant that "disruptions affect many sectors at once, is not delimited by territorial borders and/or institutional boundaries (Boin et al. 2009) and "ripples across scales" (Mahanti et al. 2023). The *character of the change* can be broken down into three categories: *degree of predictability, of radicality and of uncertainty*. The former sees disruption more as an unexpected event, while transformation is a purposefully and deliberately planned change. The second assumes that disruption is more radical than transformation, which is more incremental. And thirdly, disruption creates an increase in uncertainty, which can be massive in some cases, while transformation is actually undertaken to reduce uncertainty and create a new certainty.

Another relevant category is *manageability*, insofar as there is little possibility of control in the case of disruption, while the ability and willingness to control and steer the process is seen as a prerequisite in the case of transformation. In the case of disruption, change is initiated without it already being programmed ex ante which actors will tackle

this disruption and in what form they will do so. And since change is also a question of negotiation, the phenomenon of disruption initially leaves open which forms and actor constellations are involved in processing the disruption including negotiating possible solutions. In the case of transformations - be they political, economic or social or encompassing all of these subsystems - the relevant actors involved clearly identified and even can be hold accountable for their successful (or not) efforts in transformation, even if this circle of actors can change during the process itself.

With regard to the *outcome*, a difference arises from the assessment of the extent to which a certain result is defined and aimed for. Even if the achievement of the goal ultimately remains open, in the case of transformation determined objectives are defined and also the steps to get there. A process of transformation basically assumes a defined objective; see democratic transformation as a change from a dictatorship to a democracy or see energy transformation as a change towards decarbonized energy sources and production. Whereas disruption is not necessarily linked to the vision of goals or maybe even less steps to reach this goal. Disruption might trigger ideas and discourses about possible objectives, but how relevant actors will negotiate them remain open also. Thus, In disruptive processes not only the outcome is much more open, the perspective of which actors will become active and in what form and how their action will evolve also remains less clear.

Figure 1: Typology of disruption und transformation

Category	Disruption	Transformation
Temporality	punctual, selective short/condensed time period	Ongoing, enduring long time period
Scope	comprehensive	usually limited to certain sectors/areas, even if the process itself is comprehensive

Character of change; degree of		
a) Predictability	low/not present	high/purposeful and planned process
b) Radicality	high	low (if incremental change) to middle (if major reform)
c) uncertainty	high;increases uncertainty	low; decreases existing uncertainty or creates new certainty
Manageability	Low; involved actors unclear or not clearly identified, forms of control not defined ex ante	High; actors identified, forms of control negotiated and defined
Outcome	Specific result is not defined, outcome open	Specific result is defined and targeted; target achievement however open

Own compilation.

Dialectics and relationality

It has become clear that disruption and transformation are different processes of change, but they can still be related to each other. Where does the dialectical moment lie? Disruption can be the starting point for transformation, but it can also be the starting point for radical change. Conversely, however, it is rather unlikely and not "designed" for a transformation to lead to a disruption or to develop disruptively. In this respect, this relationality appears to be rather unidirectional.

Christmann et al. address a very interesting aspect when they state that disruptions embody "turning points" that divide the steady flow of time and societal practices into a pre- and a post-disruptive phase. In other words, disruptions become critical junctures where path dependencies are broken and become visible in a massive

way. In addition, such a turning point implies a "re-interpretation of the past, an improvisation in the present (as practices and routines are interrupted), a search for innovative solutions in the medium term, and the re-formation of fictional expectations of the future." (Christmann et al. 2023) This refers to the interpretative dimension of disruption, which is associated with diverse reinterpretations and new interpretations, in which narratives or myths are formed, but also programs and visions are developed. However, all of this happens after the disruptive event has taken place or the disruption triggers all of these interpretations.

This interpretative character of disruptions (and its absence in transformations) refers to perception and also the aspect that Greschke et al. mention, namely affectivity. "Disruptions affect" and can generate worry - fear - anxiety - panic // amazement - hope - pleasure - euphoria (Greschke et al. n.y.). Kornberger is very similar, stating that events may bring about "existential angst" (Kornberger et al., 2019: 242), "euphoria"; "anger" even "hate". Here, too, I would like to formulate the thesis, because there is not enough space for a more detailed examination, that transformations can also be processed affectively, but are less associated with strong emotions. This assumption is in turn based on the fact that the actors involved in the transformation are already involved in the processes of reform, change, etc. and thus follow objective constraints, for example to become involved in a solution-oriented manner, to represent certain interests, etc.

To summarize: In order to define disruption more clearly and categorize it as a distinct phenomenon of change, it is useful to differentiate disruption from transformation. The typology I have presented is a proposal for this, which can of course be expanded in terms of categories. At the same time, it is not sufficient to stop at a typologizing level; the dialectic of the two phenomena under consideration (and possibly others) must be taken into account, as well as their relationship to each other and possibly also their interaction. As mentioned in the beginning, my perspective is actor-centered and thus assigns a major importance to agency. What the typology reveals is that indeed besides other structural differences, the two types of change – disruption and transformation – do differ in the relevance of actors, definition of their roles, and scope of their involvement in the two processes. This is an insight that points to future research paths.

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