

# Transition and the morphogenetic approach to social change

It's almost 60 years since Bob Dylan penned his revolutionary anthem proclaiming "The Times They are A-Changin'". Few knew then how rapid the pace of change would become, as the Cold War gave way to today's global society, powered by computer technology and characterised by complexity and risk. Sociologist Andrea Maccarini, from the University of Padova in Italy, argues that we need a new theoretical framework and a morphogenetic approach, if we are to fully understand the nature of contemporary social change.

We are living at a great moment of transition and a new theoretical framework is needed, if we are to fully understand the nature of contemporary social change.

That's the opinion of Andrea Maccarini, Professor of Sociology at the University of Padova in Italy, who states and explores his position in the recent book 'Deep change and emergent structures in global society'.

Few would deny that ours is a fast-moving era, characterised by being global and driven by mass media and technology. It is also consumer-based, resource-hungry, fragmented and uncertain. Historical sociology, which looks at macro history and deep changes in societal formation, is divided over how this new

age should be regarded in terms of social theory.

One approach is to argue that we are living in the age of 'late modernity' - a continuation of post-Enlightenment modernism which places faith in capitalism and industrialisation as the main economic drivers, in urbanisation and the bureaucratic state as key social structures, and in scientific and rational thought as the guiding systems of belief. Another approach is to see our era as the development of a completely different 'post-modern society' which is having to find new ways to live and work, and rejects the traditional narratives that used to bind us together, as well as the old gods in which we believed.

## BEYOND LATE MODERNITY?

Dr Maccarini argues that while historical diagnosis, classical modernization theory and globalization theory have all "produced attractive slogans", they have failed to explain or predict the reality of contemporary society and are inadequate to explain its complexity.

In addition, he believes that we have gone beyond late modernity, which sees modern society as "the product of one main trend", arguing that the developments of recent decades cannot be traced back to old assumptions. At the same time, he rejects post-modernism on the grounds that it is insufficient and unhelpful for practical and policy purposes to describe what is happening now as the end of grand narratives and the collapse of social structures.

Dr Maccarini comments: "Mainstream social theory wants to convince us that



Dr Maccarini argues that a new theoretical narrative is needed to describe contemporary society.

"The idea is that such an approach can help keep together chance, structural forces, human plans and agency in one model. The approach is focussed on the points where structure, culture, agency, and chance interact to generate, establish or reject social novelties."

## HERMENEUTICS OF TRANSITION

It is the multi-layered nature of such 'social novelties', and the need to understand how they come together, that leads Dr Maccarini to expand on the social theory behind the morphogenetic approach. He explores this in a chapter of his book entitled 'After late modernity? The morphogenetic approach as hermeneutics of transition'.

Hermeneutics is the act of interpreting layers of meaning, for example of an historical document, including the social norms that inform its sub-text(s). In the context of social change, Dr Maccarini argues that this kind of interpretation provides a theoretical framework that is particularly fit for interpreting societal transitions in general, and the present transition in particular. He explains: "It seems particularly adequate to explore the present societal predicament, which can be conceived of as a great moment of transition, after which our forms of life might lose diversity and freedom."

## CONTINGENCY AND DIFFERENTIATION

Dr Maccarini illustrates his thesis by reviewing relevant contemporary social theory and discussing some of its implications. He also looks at

## Contemporary global society seems to defy all possibilities to make sense of its shape and direction.

we are witnessing a meta-transition – that is to say, not a transition from one 'kind' of society to another (for example, from 'traditional' to 'modern'), but from one form of society to a state of random-like fluctuation, in which it is impossible to discern any logic of development."

However, Dr Maccarini argues that what is needed is a new theoretical narrative to describe contemporary society. What he proposes is a "fresh insight into contemporary social change" - an alternative 'morphogenetic approach' as a framework to understand and explain social evolution and global change, from the macro- to the micro-level. Developed by the English critical realist sociologist Margaret Archer in the 1990s, this approach has since been promoted by the Centre for Social Ontology, a research centre based at the Grenoble Ecole de Management in France, with which Dr Maccarini collaborates.

## THE MORPHOGENETIC APPROACH

The approach to social order proposed by Dr Maccarini is based on the concepts of morphogenesis, that is the process by which systems develop or change shape, and morphostasis, which is the ability of systems to maintain structure in a changing environment.





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other sociological responses to our contemporary challenge.

For example, he discusses the implications of regarding our era as one of 'contingency', that is to say a time when social outcomes are a result of various influences and circumstances coming together and creating consequences that could not have been predicted. He also considers the principle of 'differentiation', namely that society becomes more complex through its recognition or development of sub-systems such as specific social groups, and specialised institutions such as education systems.

#### EVOLUTIONARY THEORIES

Dr Maccarini finds an evolutionary model more compelling. He argues that "the morphogenesis of complex systems cannot be explained by causal laws or by rational considerations" but involves what German sociologist and systems theory proponent Niklas Luhmann called "the likeliness of the unlikely."

Dr Maccarini argues that the task for sociologists is to identify "how the mechanisms of variation and selection can be identified within social systems." Rather than being determined by, for example, religion, he finds that the determinant is now society itself, together with "symbolically generalized communication media such as power, money and the law."

Dr Maccarini explains: "A given innovation finds its way in the economic system if it is profitable. In this context the morphogenesis of social complexity depends on the issue of what media are more effective than others in solving their selection problems, to adapt to modern

time structures or to articulate their accomplishments. The current situation seems to proclaim the dominance of technology, money and specialised forms of rationality."

#### NEW GLOBAL AGE

No one can doubt that we are living in a new global age, the likes of which have been made even clearer by the effects of the world-wide pandemic caused by the Covid-19 virus. Written pre-pandemic, Dr Maccarini's book reviews relevant social theory and sociological responses

### This way of looking at social change rejects the idea that human society is a naturalistic phenomenon, subject to laws of evolution.

to modernization and contemporary challenge and offers a new framework for thinking about social order in our brave but perilous new world.

He writes: "Even in the case of liberal post-democracies, illiberal democracies, 'populism', and other catastrophes of the late modern order, what we are witnessing is a complex morphogenetic process which does not simply resist change or lead back to pre- and early modern politics, or even to 20th century forms of authoritarianism."

Dr Maccarini does not suggest that using the morphogenetic approach to interpret macro-social transition explains all aspects of contemporary society. Rather, he suggests that it provides a means of understanding the links between different models of social evolution using the

hermeneutics of transition. He argues: "The underlying spirit is not to herald the one 'new' and 'better' approach that should supersede the 'old' ones, but to establish a corridor between paradigms."

#### WHERE ARE WE GOING?

Whatever the future holds, Dr Maccarini argues that it will be a product of the ways in which transition is happening. As signified by the "deep change" referenced in his book's title, the future is subject to "multiple processes and mechanisms which are not always observable." We are living in a society characterised by limitless innovation in a confined global space with finite resources. Dr Maccarini explains: "Our destiny depends on how we tackle the situation that results from the combined effect of unfettered, freewheeling morphogenesis in a closed, fragile and disposable world."

We are at what British sociologist John Urry has called "a chaos point", but there is hope and a morphogenetic approach can help our understanding. Dr Maccarini explains: "That point of high contingency does not mean just chaos, in the sense of intractable randomness. It is still the

point where human agency, personal and collective creativity can make a difference, and this needs a model that is capable of interpreting the ongoing processes."



# Behind the Research

## Andrea M. Maccarini

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### Research Objectives

Professor Andrea Maccarini's main research interests lie in social theory, cultural change, and the sociology of education, concerning both education policy and socialization processes.

### Detail

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#### Bio

Andrea M. Maccarini is Professor of Sociology at the University of Padova (Italy), and is a collaborator of the Centre for Social Ontology. He held visiting appointments in various Universities, among which UCLA, Boston University,

and Humboldt-Universität Berlin. He served as Italian representative at the governing board of OECD-Ceri (Center for educational reform and innovation).

#### Funding

Andrea Maccarini is currently leading field research, mainly in the interweaving domains of education, socialization, social integration of immigrant children in European societies, and skills for the 21st century. His principal research projects at the moment are the following:

- a) KIDS4ALL - Horizon 2020 (EU funds) ([https://spgi.unipd.it/sites/spgi.unipd.it/files/KIDS4ALL\\_leaflet\\_2020UNIPD.pdf](https://spgi.unipd.it/sites/spgi.unipd.it/files/KIDS4ALL_leaflet_2020UNIPD.pdf))
- b) Viral education: schooling and character skills in the pandemic crisis - research grant from Foundation for School, Company of St. Paul, Turin.

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### References

Maccarini, A. (2019). *Deep change and emergent structures in global society: explorations in social morphogenesis*. Springer International Publishing. ISBN 978-3-030-13624-6. <https://www.springer.com/gp/book/9783030136239>.

### Personal Response

**Publication of your book preceded the global pandemic. Does the theoretical framework of the morphogenetic approach help us to understand the impact of the disease on global society, and if so, how?**

/// The book was written before Covid-19, but the pandemic is confirming its relevance. This may be summarized in three points: first, catastrophic events produce a bundle of chance, structural inevitability, and resilient efforts by human agency and rational plans. My approach helps to make sense of such a complexity. Second, chapter 4 examines how unbound morphogenesis may result in enclaves or vortexes, as particular kinds of social environments which emerge when complexity exceeds the coping capacity of social systems. Third, the two scenarios sketched in the final chapter, i.e. regional warlordism and digital panopticon, provide a useful insight into the current situation. //

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