



# Change: The aporia of conservation and subversion

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## Abstract

The ubiquitous, psychological and social phenomenon of repetition represents an integral factor to analyze human behavior and social processes comprehensively. A strong desire to repeat and conserve appears to be part of the human and social nature, which is based on various factors. In the following paper the reasons for these conservational processes and their functions and dysfunctions are outlined. Further, the paper discusses why we occasionally have to destroy what we desire to preserve, as we will otherwise endanger what we aim to secure in the first place. Because change is inevitable and this inevitability requires subversion.

## Keywords

repetition, social systems, psychological systems, neurological systems, conservation, behavioral code, repetition compulsion, path dependency, change, subversion

## Introduction

Social systems, no matter whether society in total, the art system, the scientific system, the political system, or any other form of socially constituted organization, establish rules to secure their existence. These rules aim to absorb uncertainty and to increase stability and are commonly stipulated in the form of behavioral codes. A behavioral code dictates formally or informally which kind of behavior is desired and should be repeated, and which is not permitted and will therefore be sanctioned. Niklas Luhmann identifies the behavioral code as *the* regulative element in any kind of system of action. [1] The more formalized a system is, the more precise its rules are formulated. This necessity to secure the system's continuance can however lead to a level of inflexibility, which consequently endangers what was aimed to be secured — the system itself.

Uncertainty is effectively crucial to the long-term survival of any kind of system. This might sound paradox, but change is probably the only constant in any kind of existence and conservation can hence be rather problematic as it limits the options to adapt to a changing environment. Nevertheless, conservation is what systems are aiming for per definition.

Preservation is particularly disruptive when it applies to structures that might have been crucial to survive at some point, but become dysfunctional and even harmful somewhere further down the line, as it then demands to repeat what should be changed. One might conclude that these

structures can quite easily be identified and modified in the following, but this isn't the case. So what are the reasons that conservation occurs when adaptation would be required?

## Repetition, Repetition compulsion and the demand of change through subversion

Repetition represents one of the most basic functions within complex systems and aids to make complexity manageable by leading towards stability and reliance. To manage complexity is one of the most challenging problems any complex system has to face — whether it's a person, society or any other type of social system. Often misused as a synonym for complication, it means something distinctively different. When a problem is complicated it is difficult to determine the right solution for it, but when it's complex, there is no such thing as one sole right solution but one is rather frequently confronted with a bundle of functionally equivalent solutions. [2] This prevalently leads to the assumption that once a solution is deemed suitable for a complex of problems, the safest way to act in future situations is to be to repeat it over and over again when presented with the same question. Of course this assumption fails to factor in the changing environment and moreover constrains reconsideration of the past decision-making process and these can be rather critical.

But repetition is not solely a social process. Psychological systems — being the necessary precondition for any social system — have a tendency to recreate situations that are neither productive nor enjoyable for them. Psychologically this kind of behavior is specified as *repetition compulsion*. Sigmund Freud, who introduced the term repetition compulsion, identified it as a fundamental principal of human nature to create situations in which a person can relive life- or relationship occurrences over and over again, even if they run entirely contrary to what he calls the pleasure principle. [3] Psychologists are suggesting that repetitive patterns are a consequence of the attempt to deal with certain experiences and conflicts — so they again do have a functional character up to a certain degree — yet they can reach a point of being fiercely deconstructive. This compulsory behavior is apparently of such a strong force that it is even equipped to overrule the human need for pleasure exhaustively, which emphasizes how difficult it is to overcome. [4]

The source of repetition starts at an even deeper level —

at what for all we know is the precondition for consciousness itself—the human brain. What Freud described as the facilitation of neural activity, but was originally more of a speculation of his due to the state of neuroscience at this time, is now defined by neuroscientists as *synaptic plasticity*. Synaptic plasticity describes a phenomenon, which makes neural connections stronger the more often they are used. [5] Widening and strengthening of neural pathways and synapses occur due to changes in behavior, environment or neural processes and lead to increase or decrease the activity of certain synapses. There is short-term and long-term plasticity and it is strongly linked to what we commonly call memory and learning. The more often a manner of processing a certain stimulus is reinforced, the more its cortical representation is strengthened and enlarged. The fact that a neural pathway can be stronger and is therefore more likely to be used than another has to have consequences for the concept of repetition. [6] In layman's terms one might say that once a thought, a feeling or some kind of behavior occurred before, it's likelier to occur again in similar situations and increasingly so the more often that happens, and that because this is easier for the brain to process.

Assuming that the human brain facilitates repetition by its biological configuration and that it is fundamental to the human psyche to trigger events that allow to relive and consequently deal with what has happened before even when this isn't pleasurable, it becomes obvious on which strong grounds repetition is operating on. Our bodies being the material basis and our consciousness the necessary precondition for any social system, these repetition facilitating processes have to have significant consequences for society.

Not only structures within social systems aim to preserve the status quo, but even positions such as certain jobs or political positions within these structures are established solely to conserve it. This necessarily implies that they also aim to decrease the possibilities for change. After all, these positions lose their right to exist once what they are preserving is dissolved, so it is in their strongest interest avoid losing their purpose. Of course it must be added that isn't per se negative to act conservatively — just like new isn't always better, but it reveals that to create something new one has to conquer strong conservational forces.

We also have to conclude that established rules and structures probably even conserve something that has been dysfunctional from its start and is nevertheless repeated. In Economics this phenomenon is called path dependency. Path depending processes are characterized by three essential attributes — non-predictability, inflexibility and potential inefficiency. [7] These characteristics, that are used to explain why even detectably inefficient processes or products are entrenched due to positive reinforcement based on various forms of hazard, can also apply to other social processes. Hence even small events can sometimes lead to the perpetuation of inefficient and inadequate operations and the establishment of rules that endanger the system. So it is not only the preservation of those rules that are no longer

efficiently applicable, but even the conservation of those which have never been optimal for what is aimed to accomplish, that change has to tackle. Unfortunately, to identify these required adjustments is difficult and even more so to reveal them because the difference between right and wrong is ambiguous. Assuming that social processes aren't based on an objective ontological truth, but rather on a symbolically constructed reality, these processes lead to contingency and complexity, implying an overabundance of possibilities and a non-sufficient amount of determinacy. [8] Following these suppositions, it is necessary to change the perception of the symbolically constructed reality and moreover to determine what is insufficient, which is far more complicated than to disprove something under the precondition of an objective right or wrong process or solution.

As soon as the reality constructions resulting in an established code of behavior and formalized structures get so limited that the system can no longer flexibly react to a changing environment, the continuance of the system is uncertain. These formalized structures then function just like repetition compulsion and seriously endanger the system altogether. After all a system needs a certain degree of uncertainty to survive as it would otherwise face solidifying. Dysfunctional codes of behavior and uncertainty absorbing decisions consequently demand deviant actions to enable a reconstruction of reality and fundamental change. These deviant actions are usually permitted within the behavioral code, given that they question the solidarity to not only the rule they run contrary to, but to the system itself.

Subversive actions however are essential to any kind of change and necessarily increase in extend the more fundamental the required change is. Subversion must not be mistaken for simple destruction. The term subversion is etymologically based in the latin term *subverto*, which means to revert, to overturn or to push over. [9] In Italian dictionaries an even more productive interpretation of the word can be found and so the Italian term *soversivo* can be translated as “to overthrow an established order, or the destroy with the aim to create something new.” [10] Subversion can therefore be construed as a strike against traditional structures to design and initiate something new.

Change itself inherits an internal contradiction, an *aporia* of conservation and destruction. When change occurs parts of what is changed are preserved — otherwise it would be simple destruction — and parts need to be deconstructed. To allow the implementation of change consequently requires structures that are capable to adapt and which legalize a certain amount of deviant and therefore innovative behavior and even a certain amount of destruction. This proves to be challenging since it requires continuous inquisition of present and past decisions, to revise and to act situatively and to allow complexity to build up instead of solely reducing it, yet it is just as much a necessity as stability is. When subversion is criminalized, uplift is prevented and the survival of the system is at stake.

## Conclusion

Repetition is an important function to systems that engage in, or are a precondition for, social processes and even for these processes themselves. Repetitive phenomena clearly can have a functional character. They allow the brain to learn, the human psyche to deal with experiences and social systems to increase stability. To phrase it more general, they aid to manage complexity and to handle contingency, which are two challenging problems in a postmodern society — for the individual and for society itself. But to reduce complexity can also lead to oversimplification and solidification, which both come with dangerous side effects. To detect dysfunctional and yet repeated processes is difficult due to the nature of complexity and to overcome them one has to tackle conservational forces. However, if these solidifying processes and structures are held on to the existence of the system itself becomes endangered. In this case subversive practices are essential to generate change. To quote Berthold Brecht: “Change the world: it needs it.” [11]

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## Author Biography

Sophie-Carolin Wagner, born 1984, studied Economics and Social Sciences at the Vienna University of Economics and Business from 2004 until 2010, where she graduated at the Institute of Change Management and Management Development under the supervision of Prof. Helmut Kasper. Starting in 2005, she studied Digital Art at the University of Applied Arts Vienna under the direction of Prof. Peter Weibel and Prof. Tom Fürstner, from which she graduated 2011. Subsequently, she started her PhD studies under the supervision of Prof. Peter Weibel and Prof. Elena Esposito and graduated with highest distinction in 2014.

Sophie-Carolin Wagner investigates the epistemological consequences for communicational processes in functionally differentiated systems, i.e. the effects on the asserted division between a system and its environment, and the contingent nature of decision-making due to increasing levels of complexity and concomitant limits of probability.