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Facing backlash and derailment risks: building capacities for navigating transformations to sustainability and justice in turbulent times

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Abstract

Non-Technical Summary. Transformations to sustainability and justice have recently encountered backlash and political polarization, violent conflict, democratic backsliding, and dehumanization. In this article, we describe three archetypes of backlash that may affect whether and how transformations unfold. We then explore the role of harnessing hope and imagination, hospicing with dignity, and enabling radical collaboration while holding paradox as three capacities that may prove helpful to navigating backlash during transformative change efforts.

Technical Summary. Recognizing backlash as a dynamic of transformations that is distinct from the forms of counter-resistance or contentious politics that have previously been documented as crucial in transformations, we focus on three backlash archetypes and the potential for derailment of transformations to sustainability and justice. Focusing on the specific transformation phase of 'in-betweenness' when systems are in flux and the risk of backlash and derailment is high, we suggest there is a need for capacities that help create provisional spaces to grapple with the range of emotional, relational, and political issues underpinning backlash. We explore the role of three transformative capacities for their relevance in addressing backlash and derailment based on existing evidence: harnessing hope and imagination, hospicing with dignity, and enabling radical collaboration while holding paradox.

Social Media Summary. Societal transformations involve backlash and derailment risks – three archetypes and key capacities to navigate them.

1. Introduction

Recently, a surge of interest has emerged around backlash as a specific and distinct dynamic within societal change processes (see, e.g. Abram et al., 2022; Bosetti et al., 2025; Ergon, 2026; Förell & Fischer, 2025; J. J. Patterson et al., 2024; J. Patterson et al., 2026; Pel, 2021). Colloquially, the term is often used in generic ways, referring to any type of opposition or counter-response. However, scholars have developed much more complex and nuanced understandings of backlash that demonstrate and conceptualize backlash as distinct from more regular reactions or counter movements (Alter & Zürn, 2020a; Deitelhoff, 2020; Sosa, 2022). For instance, Alter and Zürn (2020a) define backlash as involving: i) a retrograde objective or imaginary, ii) a simultaneous articulation of an extraordinary challenge to existing dominant principles, procedures, practices, or development pathways, and iii) efforts surrounding this challenge have reached a certain threshold that they have become mainstream in both public discourse and public life (see also Kallis, 2013; MacArthur & Matthewman, 2018). Patterson (2023) adds a temporal aspect, suggesting the emergence of backlash tends to be perceived as abrupt and unanticipated by the dominant system.

Such a conceptualization of backlash raises new questions about whether and how backlash may lead to the derailment of the many ongoing efforts seeking transformative changes toward peace, sustainability, and justice. Transformations are defined as involving fundamental shifts in: how power, authority, and resources are structured and flow in a system; the practices

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and processes that reflect and reproduce those structures; the norms, beliefs, and values that underpin those structures and processes; and the way all of those shape human-biosphere connectivity across multiple scales (Moore & Milkoreit, 2020). Transformations of these multiple dimensions across multiple scales are also understood to go through different phases, and not necessarily in some sequential ordering (Herrfahrdt-Pähle et al., 2020). Such fundamental re-structuring, re-ordering, re-thinking, and re-valuing will inevitably involve both the 'making' of new connections and new system states, and the 'unmaking', or the phasing out of destructive relationships in the current dominant system (Feola et al., 2021; Loorbach et al., 2017; Moore et al., 2023; Novalia et al., 2022; Olsson et al., 2014; Turnheim & Geels, 2012).

Transformations scholarship has long recognized that various forms of resistance play an important part in the making and unmaking of any transformation process (Falla et al., 2024; Geels, 2014; González-Mon et al., 2025; Temper et al., 2020). That is, the generative effects of resistance are viewed as essential for shifting, not least, the power dynamics that are part of transformative change (Falla et al., 2024; Pelenc et al., 2019; Scoones et al., 2020; Temper et al., 2020, 2018). For instance, numerous studies have explored different methods and processes for engaging with plural ways of knowing, being, and doing, recognizing that this will increase potential for transformation and help in resisting the reinforcement of status quo dynamics (e.g. Caniglia et al., 2021; L. M. Pereira et al., 2018; Parsons & Fisher, 2020). Others have examined how the mobilization of agency can support emancipatory struggles and shift the power dynamics that currently lead to epistemic, economic, linguistic, cultural, ecological injustices and violence (Betasamosake Simpson, 2014; Gobby et al., 2022; McGregor et al., 2020; Stirling, 2015; Temper et al., 2018; Williams, 2024).

However, these diverse forms of resistance, distinct in their goals and their effects on system dynamics and societal transformations, are not equal to the emerging conceptualizations of backlash and its features (Alter & Zürn, 2020b Cupać & Ebetürk, 2020). Moreover, questions remain about the effects of backlash on such generative forms of resistance and on broader efforts for transformative change (Laybourn et al., 2023).

In this article, we bring emerging conceptualizations of backlash together with a social-ecological systems (SES) resilience-based perspective (Folke et al., 2003) on transformations to explore backlash dynamics and the potential of various capacities to navigate such dynamics. We aim to examine existing theoretical and empirical evidence about when and whether backlash may lead to derailment of transformations toward sustainability and justice. We also examine capacities to minimize backlash effects, reduce derailment risks, and support pathways of transformation that reconnect humanity to the biosphere and promote justice.

To do this, we organize the paper as follows. First, we introduce key concepts from a complex SES perspective and a resilience-based approach to transformations. We then explore how backlash may co-evolve with making and unmaking efforts in transformations, and what this implies for potential derailment of transformations to sustainability and justice. We suggest there are at least three archetypes of transformations-backlash dynamics that could occur when a system may be in-between one state and other possible states. Finally, we explore the kinds of capacities that may be important for navigating transformations in the face of backlash.

2. Basins of attraction and X-curve: a resilience perspective on transformation

From a SES resilience perspective, transformations are often depicted as involving multiple basins of attraction, sometimes referred to as the 'cup and ball' model (Figure 1a). The general idea is that a dominant system state represents one basin organized around an attractor (Hill & Kolmes, 2024; van der Leeuw & Folke, 2021). The resilience of that particular system state is defined by the size of the basin, its depth, its width, and how much variability and change can happen within the basin before the 'ball' moves up and crosses a threshold or tipping point toward an alternative attractor (Rocha et al., 2018). A system may hold multiple, competing attractors and basins or states, but different attractors may vary in their strength or weakness (Figure 1b).

Transformations of SESs are understood to involve various phases across these multiple basins, such as preparing a system for change, transitioning between two different states, and the consolidation of the alternative state (Herrfahrdt-Pähle et al., 2020; Moore et al., 2014; Olsson et al., 2004, 2006). Transformations scholarship has also examined the role that crisis (Benessaiah & Eakin, 2021; Moore et al., 2023), disasters (Brundiers, 2018), and political shocks (Gelcich et al., 2010; Herrfahrdt-Pähle et al., 2020) may play in shaping transformative change efforts in different phases of transformations, and the intentional and strategic mobilization of different capacities and transformative agency across transformations processes (F. R. Westley et al., 2013).

Another model commonly used to illustrate transformations is the X-curve, developed within the scholarship on socio-technical systems, transition management, and the multi-level perspective (Hebinck et al., 2022; Loorbach, 2014). The X-curve depicts different system states along intersecting trajectories, with the dominant incumbent system potentially breaking down along one trajectory and an emerging alternative system developing along the other (Figure 1c).

Both frameworks highlight the critical phase in transformations where existing relationships or structures are phasing out and new ones are forming (Figure 1). This phase, referred to as the transition phase in the SES resilience approach (Olsson et al., 2004, 2006), constitutes an opportunity space for major change (Folke et al., 2003; Gunderson & Holling, 2002), but since there may be several basins of attraction (Hill & Kolmes, 2024; van der Leeuw & Folke, 2021) and competing, latent attractors, there is high uncertainty about what the actual changes will be, and what the system may become (Olsson & Moore, 2024a) (Figure 1). Therefore, the transition phase can also be seen as a state of limbo characterized by tipping dynamics, high uncertainty, and turbulence (Carpenter et al., 2019; Olsson & Moore, 2024b). In this article, we focus on this critical period of 'in-betweenness' (Söderlund & Borg, 2018) given that when systems are in flux and uncertainty is high, the risk associated with the effects of backlash and derailment may similarly be high.

3. Different roles of backlash and risks of derailment

Building on previous work using the multiple basins of attraction and the X-curve as heuristics (Figure 1), together with existing empirical evidence on backlash, we propose that at least three archetypes of backlash dynamics may emerge and play different roles in the derailment of just transformations toward sustainability:

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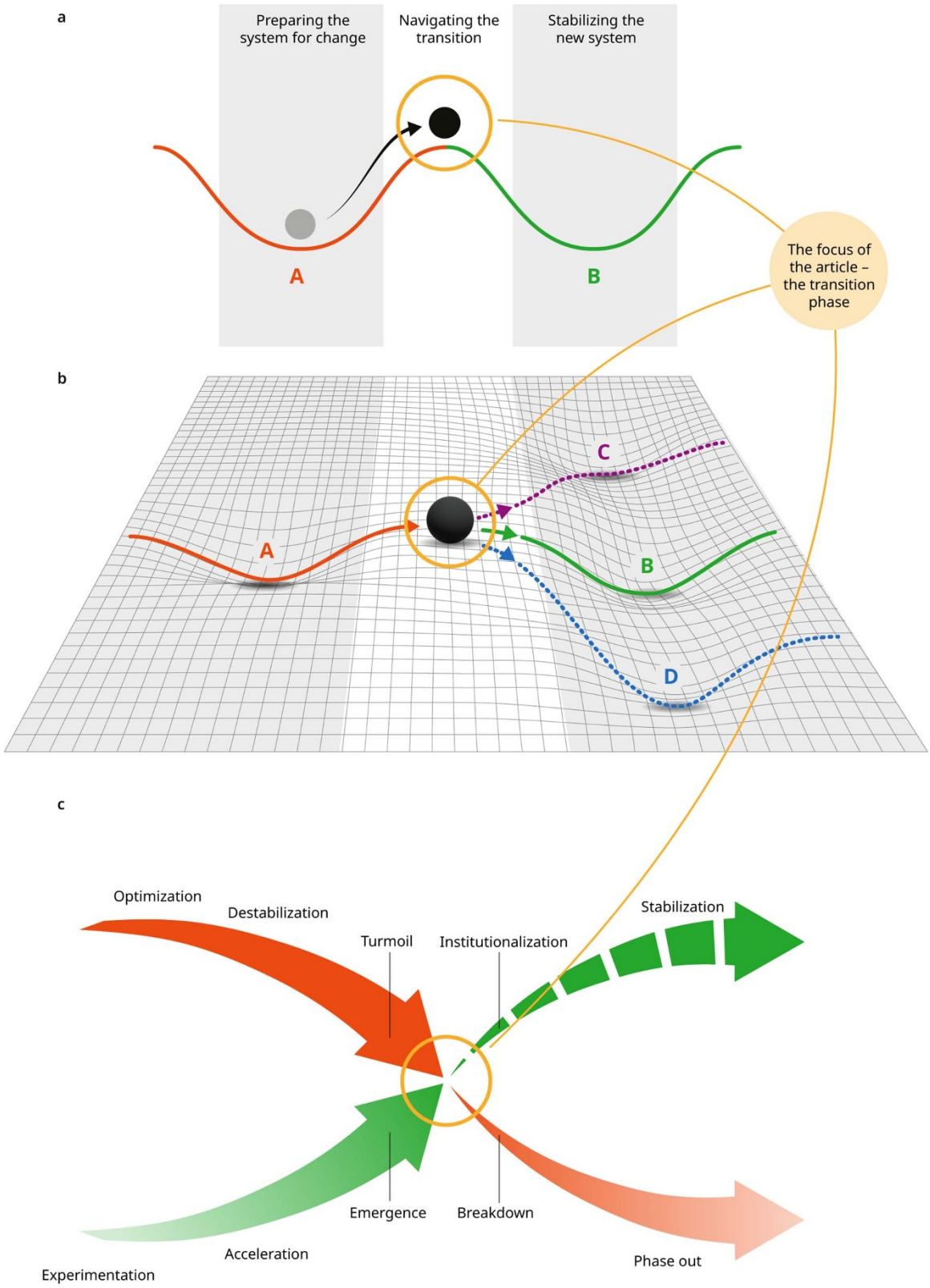


Figure 1. Shows the transition phase focus of this article as the 'in-between' of systems change and two models useful for analyzing and understanding backlash dynamics and transformative capacities needed in this phase. (a) The basins of attraction model highlights the multiple phases of transformations with a system that shifts from one basin of attraction to another, which involves thresholds and tipping dynamics. Panel (b) also illustrates multiple system trajectories represented by multiple basins of attraction that the 'ball' can roll into in the transition phase, due to many competing, latent attractors (C (purple) and D (blue). (c) The X-curve model highlights the making and unmaking dimensions of transformations and that such change requires an acceleration in both dimensions.

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- *Archetype 1*: Backlash that emerges from individuals or groups that may be increasingly marginalized or dissatisfied with the existing status quo but who simultaneously struggle and resist the phasing out or unmaking dynamics that sustainability and justice ideas imply. This reaction may be rooted in fears about immediate losses, such as livelihoods or identity attached to a specific role or specific place. If left unattended, these groups who are not 'attracted' to cup B may ultimately become attracted to cup C;
- *Archetype 2*: Backlash that emerges from efforts of some individuals or groups may effectively be making an entirely different basin (cup C) and deliberately dismantling any efforts that contribute to creating the attractor(s) for cup B;
- *Archetype 3*: Backlash that emerges from incumbents who want to protect the status quo and resist both phasing out and some of the 'making' of alternative basins, and thus resist cups B and C, but may be attracted to or pushing for a cup D as an alternative.

Evidence of each of these will be examined below. We propose these archetypes as a first conceptualization of backlash dynamics specific to the 'in-between' phase of transformation processes. We acknowledge that no single actor controls a complex system, and that agency is distributed across scales, including space and time, and across the human and non-human (see Benessaiah & Eakin, 2021; Galafassi et al., 2018; Moore & Milkoreit, 2020; F. R. Westley et al., 2013). Here we focus primarily on human agency in backlash dynamics, recognizing that actors do strategically mobilize and exert deliberate agency (Brown & Westaway, 2011; F. R. Westley et al., 2013), and it remains valuable to understand what the effects of that agency may have in a particular moment in time.

Furthermore, as Wanvik and Haarstad (2021) state, backlash is an integral part of any transformation process, and thus it is worth understanding the range of its effects. Therefore, if for our purposes, cup B (Figure 1b) is understood to represent a basin with an attractor that centers sustainability, justice, and stewardship and weakens the attraction of status quo systems of oppression, ecological degradation, and exploitation, then it is worth considering how backlash may shape that potential or possibility. We emphasize that the basin of attraction idea is a simplified heuristic and that there is no single cup A, B, or C, given there is no single transformation or system, but many, plural versions and realities.

3.1. Archetype 1

We suggest one transformations-backlash dynamic stems from those who may be increasingly marginalized or dissatisfied with the existing status quo (cup A) but who also struggle and resist the phasing out or unmaking dynamics that sustainability and justice ideas imply and who fear immediate losses, such as jobs, identity (i.e. not 'attracted' to B). This in itself may just exist as resistance in a system. But if left unattended, there is evidence that some experiencing such losses may become attracted to cup C.

For example, scholarship shows that the rapid phasing out of incumbent systems can feel threatening among affected groups (Fischer-Kowalski & Rotmans, 2009; Vallacher & Fennell, 2021; F. Westley et al., 2017), sometimes referred to as transition pain (Bogner et al., 2024). If emotional reactions and grievances are ignored, they can then be mobilized and directed into emotional rage (Busher et al., 2018; Jamison & Henisz, 2025). For instance, studies have explored how workers in sectors involved in coal mining and fossil fuel industries, which have been slated to be phased out, can feel threatened not just economically but also existentially, given the erosion of identities closely tied to their work, place, and communities (Scott, 2010). These same workers are often excluded from envisioning, innovating, and building new systems and futures, and the lack of inclusion has been documented as fueling a weakening of attraction to cup A or B (see e.g. Hogg & Gøtzsche-Astrup, 2021; Piazza, 2024; Vallacher & Fennell, 2021).

However, if left unattended, studies have also shown how the effects of decisions in one area, for instance, policies about climate change, and the perceptions of injustice or grievances that these changes bring have then become linked to perceptions of injustices in other areas (Piazza, 2024). Scholars have studied this linking phenomenon, for instance, in the ways that xenophobia and opposition to migration have become linked with, and amplified, climate change denialism (see Hultman et al., 2019; Krange et al., 2019, 2021; Lockwood, 2018; Walker et al., 2015). It is this change, from having grievances about cup A or B to becoming attracted to retrograde imaginaries, challenging anyone attempting to generate cup B, and contributing to mainstreaming discourse about cup C, that makes this a backlash dynamic – one that can contribute to derailment of transformations to sustainability and justice. Conversely, in places where workers and unions have been included in processes for a just transition, there has been broader support and minimal backlash (Bolet et al., 2024; Bosetti et al., 2025).

3.2. Archetype 2

A second backlash archetype involves some individuals or groups deliberately creating an entirely different basin (cup C) and deliberately dismantling any efforts that contribute to creating the attractor(s) for the B cup. Much scholarship has recently focused on the strategies used to create a new cup C type of attractor. For instance, a significant and growing body of research examines democratic backsliding (e.g. Knutsen et al., 2024) and radical populism and how this may contribute to backlash dynamics (e.g. Bosetti et al., 2025; Hultman et al., 2019; Krange et al., 2021).

Studies have highlighted that groups combine retrograde narratives that romanticize an imaginary past (a key feature of backlash), while simultaneously developing economic innovations that never existed in the past – such as AI or cryptocurrencies – and that provide massive challenges for existing governing institutions that lack the technical expertise or legal jurisdiction to effectively regulate the consequences (Forchtner et al., 2018; Galaz et al., 2023; Krange et al., 2021; McCright et al., 2013; Utrata, 2024). Simultaneously, these efforts have also recently mainstreamed political discourses in several countries that depict sustainability and justice as part of an elitist establishment and as the causes of existing problems, despite many wealthy elites with considerable structural and discursive power being the ones leading this narrative (Fraune & Knodt, 2018; Krange et al., 2021; Wanvik & Haarstad, 2021). Scholars have shown how this same wealth and power may also be, at least partially, then directed toward funding effective machines of disinformation and denialism (Ahmad et al., 2024; Lopez, 2023; Farrell, 2016, 2019). The deliberate spread of disinformation and what has been termed post-truth politics contributes to polarization and may include strategies that amplify, ridicule, or threaten groups that hold different views and perspectives (Diaz Ruiz & Nilsson, 2023; Fraune & Knodt, 2018; Piazza, 2024). These strategies have also been documented for the way they lead to dehumanization of those holding opposing views (Homer-Dixon, 2024; Regilme, 2023) and increasing social acceptance of political violence (Piazza, 2024).

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These backlash effects may both derail transformative change efforts aiming to create a cup B attractor and contribute to dismantling cup A and the status quo. Well-studied examples include how current populist movements have attempted to delegitimize, discredit, or abruptly defund scientific bodies, educational institutions, diverse civil society organizations, and government agencies that have been responsible for creating and implementing policies that either uphold the status quo or support change policies (see e.g. Fraune & Knodt, 2018; Hultman et al., 2019; Krange et al., 2021; Wanvik & Haarstad, 2021). The implementation of these changes also may include dangerous strategies, including harassment, doxxing, trolling, and normalizing threats of violence (Barnes & Karim, 2025).

Despite different motivations and organizing logics, the SES resilience perspective also highlights that the 'unmaking' efforts of those trying to create cup C may combine or overlap with the unmaking efforts of those trying to create cup B (Kish & Quilley 2017). Such a combination could accelerate the unmaking of the status quo (Useem & Goldstone, 2022), but given the very different aims, the conflicting visions of the future, and disagreement on change strategies, this combination and acceleration could create conditions of chaos in the transition phase (Loorbach, 2014).

3.3. Archetype 3

Third, some incumbents of the dominant system may, in theory, have indicated support for cup B efforts but in practice, may actually be supporting cup A or even supporting a cup D or aspects of cup C, such as the rollback of regulations or certain policy approaches while still desiring the peace, geopolitical stability, and certain economic privileges that cup A provided them (Kish & Quilley, 2017). If the attractors of cup C or cup D begin to strengthen, the attractiveness of cup B may weaken for these individuals, organizations, or their networks. The focus may become protecting the benefits that they gained from cup A, and backlash may emerge if this moves to deliberately trying to derail phasing out efforts and the 'making' efforts for cup B. More critical perspectives have argued this as part of 'the complex operations underway to constantly re-secure structural oppression in the face of sustained efforts to transform it' (Sosa, 2022, p. 202). Whether deliberate or done unwittingly, this type of backlash mixes with a form of 'remembrance' (Gunderson & Holling, 2002) such as the institutionalized memory that exists in any system.

As one example, scholars have long criticized the claims that large companies make about sustainability as mere greenwashing and their resistance to changing the status quo (Béné, 2022; Coen et al., 2022; de Freitas Netto et al., 2020; Montgomery et al., 2024). However, amidst the greenwashing, there were some companies that appeared genuine in their attempts to move toward cup B and supported a transition from cup A (Maniatakou et al., 2025; Blasiak et al., 2021). Yet, with a strengthening of an alternative cup C attractor, there is now a growing number of the same actors who are not fully supporting cup C but also no longer supporting a transition from cup A. For instance, a number of companies have recently canceled their own sustainability initiatives and are withdrawing their investments in sustainability and justice (Sands & Ferraro, 2025), something that has often happened during economic instability or crises (Leung et al., 2025). This change, whether only discursive or actual material change, creates a backlash that can derail the unmaking of cup A and the making of cup B, while creating yet another attractor in a possible cup D.

Having proposed these three transformations-backlash dynamics and archetypes, rooted in existing scholarship on resilience-based transformations and on the political dynamics of backlash, we contend there is a need to consider the capacities for transformations that may help prepare for and navigate backlash during the in-between transition phase.

4. Transformative capacities for navigating backlash dynamics

Failing to address backlash dynamics during the transition phase can have severe consequences, including derailment, as well as the introduction of new risks (Laybourn et al., 2023), including risks as significant as those for international peace and security (Black et al., 2022; Hafner & Tagliapietra, 2020). If backlash is understood as an expected dynamic of transformations, then developing capacities to hold tensions that pose derailment risks arising from: political and affective polarization (Iyengar et al., 2019; Levin et al., 2021), the dynamics of violent conflict (Hartwell, 2007; Öberg, 2025; Stedman, 1997), democratic backsliding (Knutsen et al., 2024; Nord et al., 2025), processes of dehumanization (Homer-Dixon, 2024; Regilme, 2023), and mis- and disinformation (Daume, 2024; Lewandowsky et al., 2023; Omari, 2024; Supran & Oreskes, 2017) becomes crucial. Capacities will also be needed to simultaneously continue any momentum for change and address the underlying concerns driving backlash dynamics, if transformative change toward sustainability, equity, and peace is to emerge and endure (Figure 2c).

Previous work drawing on transformations and the multiple basins of attraction framework (Figure 2a) has emphasized the importance of creating a temporary stabilization, or a small and provisional basin of attraction, during the 'in-between' phase (Olsson & Moore, 2024a) (Figure 2b). This momentary stabilization is understood to be essential to create the space, time, and conditions to genuinely address backlash dynamics. Cole and Raphael (2025) suggest that this type of pause also helps to ensure actors do not keep replicating what they were already doing or become locked into certain attractors and system states. Examples of practices that support such momentary stabilization include some of the combinations of transformative and transitional justice practices that introduce temporary structures, such as mediation circles or healing spaces, that give opportunities to identify and address marginalization, identity-based grievances, connect people across polarized differences, or even interrupt harmful patterns that contribute to dismantling institutions and allow for reflection and re design (Clark, 2021; Gready & Robins, 2014). Yet, this implies a need for capacities within the system to create such a provisional space to hold the system in a different, more reflexive state (Juncos & Joseph, 2020; Olsson & Moore, 2024a).

A growing body of literature has examined the need for and role of various transformative capacities, ranging from systems reflexivity (Lazurko et al., 2025; Moore et al., 2018) to capacities for participatory futuring and foresight (Hebinck et al., 2018; L. M. Pereira et al., 2018; Wolfram et al., 2019). However, much of this previous work has not specifically explored the relevance of those capacities for navigating backlash dynamics. To address this, we draw on three transformative capacities from existing scholarship to explore whether and how they may be relevant to navigating the transition phase. These three are not intended to be comprehensive, and we emphasize that having transformative capacities in a system, if not mobilized or combined with strategic, material, and collective strategies, will not alone reduce backlash. For each of the

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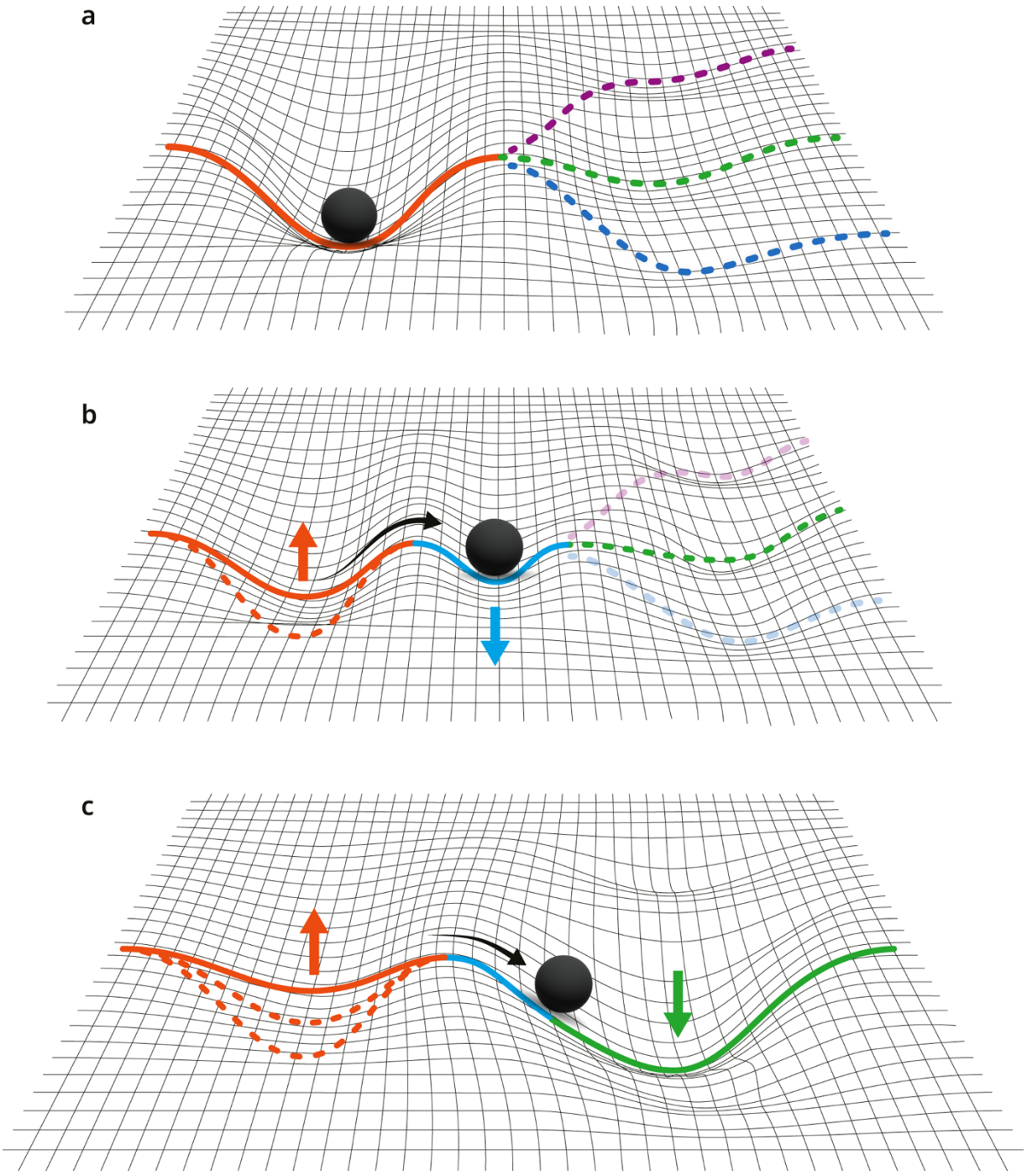


Figure 2. Panel (a) builds on the multiple basins of attraction framework introduced in Figure 1, while (b) highlights the importance of creating a temporary stabilization, or a small and provisional basin of attraction, during the 'in-between' phase. Developing such capacities can help sustain momentum for change while addressing the underlying concerns driving backlash dynamics, so that transformative change toward sustainability, equity, and peace can emerge and endure (c).

three capacities, we highlight their importance as part of overall resilience, relate them to relevant archetype(s), and analyze how they may reduce derailment risks for transformations to sustainability and justice and ensure that the outcomes of backlash are not chaos and collapse.

The transformative capacities we focus on include: harnessing hope and imagination (Moore & Milkoreit, 2020; Ojala, 2023; Stirling et al., 2023), hospicing with dignity (Cole & Raphael, 2025; Machado de Oliveira, 2021; Moore et al., 2023), and enabling radical collaboration while holding paradoxes (Drimie et al., 2021; Kahane, 2023). We highlight these three as they seemed particularly relevant to the emotional, relational, and political nature of backlash. Our selection is also informed by our own work of engaging with changemakers through research and transdisciplinary education over decades. While that does not in itself translate to a method, we think continually reflecting on how these experiences

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inform our conceptualizations is helpful to share. In the following section, we will explore how some of these capacities may be relevant to address backlash and derailment during the transition phase.

4.1. Harnessing hope and imagination

Previous scholarship has explored the role of hope and imagination as capacities in transformative change toward sustainability and justice (Moore & Milkoreit, 2020; Ojala, 2023; Sharpe, 2013; Sharpe et al., 2016; Stirling et al., 2023). We acknowledge that claims about the causal relationships of collective hope or imaginaries with transformations toward sustainability and justice need to be made cautiously, as more empirical work is still needed (Milkoreit et al., 2025). However, given the need to motivate and engage people in imagining actionable alternative futures, scholars and practitioners from diverse perspectives have been developing practices for harnessing imagination, hope, and supporting a sense of agency (see Galafassi et al., 2018; L Pereira et al., 2019; Sokolova, 2023).

Bird (2022) conceptualizes hope as enabling an anticipation of possibilities in complex, uncertain, confusing, and even conflictual settings, separate from despair, wishful, or even fantastical thinking. Bird (2022) emphasizes that the foundation of hope must be grounded in an understanding of the transformations it seeks to catalyze. Without such grounding, hope risks devolving into a deceptive optimism (Bloch, 1986; Collins, 2024; Geiger et al., 2023; Nesse, 1999; Sköld, 2026; Vaškovic & Vičanová, 2024), fostering the unrealistic belief that the same systems responsible for problems can resolve them. Drawing on this conceptualization, we suggest that capacities for hope and imagination create the conditions needed to meet the challenges of changing contexts, which are relevant for dealing with backlash, in at least two different ways. First, harnessing hope and imagination will be crucial for strengthening the attractor of cup B in ways that address the grievances that underpin the backlash dynamics of Archetype 1 while still holding accountability for (in)justices and (un)sustainability that others have also experienced in the status quo system state. Conversely, if one does not feel hope or cannot imagine cup B being able to address their concerns, then cup B is not likely to be a strong attractor for them. We suggest that (re)igniting hope for alternatives may also divert people from becoming attracted to retrograde imaginaries and thus be relevant for addressing all three backlash archetypes.

Second, we emphasize that hope is not just about imagining and anticipating a better future, but if connected to capacity and a place or provisional space to act, endure, and adapt during the turbulent process of getting there in practice, it can lead to different actions in the future. Previous scholarship has also highlighted that hope and imagination are not just individual capacities, but are often developed and strengthened in collective processes (Galafassi et al., 2018; Pereira et al., 2018; Moore & Milkoreit, 2020). Moreover, studies have shown that creating collective processes and places for connecting hope, imagination, and a sense of agency can create opportunities for: i) positive examples to emerge, ii) a transference of ideas among individuals or groups, and iii) creating inspiration through the sensing of hope in others (Courville & Piper, 2004). We suggest this is relevant in the in-between phase when there may even be risks of clashing hopes. Ensuring that ongoing capacities for hope and imagination remain or are strengthened, even in the face of competing, and sometimes stronger attractors, may be crucial for navigating any of the three backlash archetypes, especially Archetypes 2 and 3.

4.2. Hospicing with dignity

The fundamental notion that certain aspects of existing dominant systems will need to be phased out, including dysfunctional or maladaptive infrastructure, institutions, values, norms, behaviors, practices, and certain system relationships or feedbacks, all while prioritizing the inclusion of individuals and communities in the process is central to transformative change (Abram et al., 2022; Bennett et al., 2019; Feola et al., 2021; Moore et al., 2023; Olsson et al., 2014; Reyers et al., 2022). Yet, resistance to this phasing out plays a crucial role in the backlash dynamics of Archetypes 1 and 3 and thus can contribute to derailment.

To grapple with the 'letting go' and the need to address the emotional dimensions of the unmaking, we draw on the concepts of hospicing and dignity. Machado de Oliveira (2021) introduced the healthcare concept of hospicing to recognize the capacities needed to grieve the losses associated with change and to facilitate the emergence and flourishing of the new, so that resentment over the losses does not lead to enduring harm. In this sense, hospicing could lessen the grievances that contribute to backlash Archetypes 1 and 3, and could counteract polarization, conflict, democratic backsliding, and dehumanization, which characterize Archetype 2. However, we add that hospicing must be combined with dignity, defined as the respect for and recognition of one's identity, values, and interests (Wallensteen, 2015), or more simply as 'the glue that holds all of our relationships together' (Hicks, 2013). In peace processes, strategies such as inclusive dialogue, power-sharing, rehumanization, and reconciliation are highlighted as vital for promoting dignity (Wallensteen, 2015). In transformative change, capacities for implementing similar strategies may be crucial for creating the provisional space needed to navigate the risks of derailment and for ensuring that transitions between system states are just, equitable and peaceful (Bräuchler, 2022; Olsson & Moore, 2024a).

One example involves initiatives aimed at establishing or reinforcing women's rights, which have been documented as experiencing backlash dynamics that trigger further increased violence against women (Cahn & Ni Aolain, 2009; Halperin-Kaddari & Freeman, 2016; Roggeband & Krizsán, 2020). New efforts are increasingly linking gender and climate concerns by ensuring that gender-based initiatives prioritize the transformation of cultural norms associated with different forms of masculinities, like those that connect resistance to climate action to gendered identities and power (Daggett, 2018; Hultman & Pulé, 2018; Letourneau et al., 2024). In this way, capacities for hospicing with dignity not only help proactively identify and navigate losses and the resistance to cup B that may emerge but also support the deep cultural shifts needed to sustain transformative change across interconnected social and environmental issues.

Every individual may risk losing something in a transformation process. Fears and grief can emerge about the risk of losing an immediate livelihood or a professional or familial identity (Eakin et al., 2019; Tschakert et al., 2017). Some existing approaches to the just transition have focused on re-skilling or up-skilling employees so that they have qualifications for other forms of employment (Aghion et al., 2016). While such initiatives can provide support, simply offering financing and training does not fully address the grievances of Archetype 1 and the associated derailment risks, including the complexities of emotional loss, identity shifts, or loss

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of dignity that can arise when people must leave behind deeply ingrained roles and livelihoods. Nor does it address those who are most powerful in a system who will not need 'upskilling' but will need to redefine their entire purpose (see e.g. Krange et al., 2019) so as not to push for cup D, such as in Archetype 3. Letting go of an old system involves more than just financial stability; it requires space for grieving, for coming to terms with change and connecting to the new systems in meaningful ways, and for recognizing the effects of losing individual or collective identity and belonging.

4.3. Enabling radical collaboration while holding paradoxes

Polarizing discourses can drown out any middle ground or reduce the liminal 'in-between' spaces that can be crucial during the transition phase, and where agreement or reflexive forms of deliberation might have otherwise emerged (Bräuchler, 2022; Dryzek & Pickering, 2017; González-Mon et al., 2025; Olsson & Moore, 2024a). Conventional approaches to negotiating conflict and bringing multiple perspectives together on contentious sustainability-related issues often involve processes that inherently rely on ideas of reaching agreement or even consensus (Kahane, 2017). However, if backlash dynamics are not just an ordinary type of opposition, such approaches may not be useful, desirable, or possible. Therefore, developing capacities and methods for 'holding the space' (Buhler King et al., 2023) for highly contentious and triggering conversations and 'staying with the trouble' (Haraway, 2018), which focus on the abilities to hold paradoxes and endure the discomfort and uncertainty of navigating transformative changes, may be crucial for creating a provisional stability basin. In the context of Archetypes 2 and 3, such capacities and spaces could prevent elites from impeding or co-opting transformations and mis- or disinformation from spreading or gaining traction.

As one example, stretch collaboration, also referred to as radical collaboration, has been developed as a method (see Kahane, 2023) for contexts in which actors hold distant values, worldviews, preferences, approaches, or ideologies but need to transform the dynamics creating conflict on crucial issues. Such 'conflict transformation' approaches have been developed and used in the shift from apartheid to democracy in South Africa and the ongoing transition from conflict to peace in Colombia and thus is, in many ways, designed for contexts characterized by potentially high levels of backlash (Drimie et al., 2021). Radical collaboration asserts the need for both conflict and connection, and recognizes the incommensurability of diverse perspectives (Kahane, 2023, see also Tengö et al., 2014). Enabling such forms of collaboration tends to rely on experimentation, rather than solutions, as a means to navigate forward (Drimie et al., 2021), and recognizes the dynamics between the micro and macro levels, treating transformations as both involving personal as well as collective and systemic change (Kahane, 2023; Temper et al., 2018).

An example includes citizen assemblies and deliberative democracy initiatives, which are often explicitly designed as spaces for constructive interaction and decision-making for polarizing challenges (Bächtiger & Dryzek, 2024; Daw et al., 2026). Such forms of radical collaboration and deliberation may create a provisional space for addressing backlash dynamics, including the grievances underlying the conflicts that lead to Archetype 1, as well as the disinformation, democratic backsliding, and dehumanization that characterize Archetype 2. Empirical evidence shows that paradoxical tensions can serve as an important source of transformative potential if the different needs underpinning those tensions can be held without forcing an immediate solution (Maryboy et al., 2020; O'Brien, 2024). Therefore, we contend that mobilizing capacities for holding paradox and enabling more radical forms of collaboration may be crucial to ensuring transformative change processes are not derailed.

5. Conclusion

This article is intended to contribute to a better understanding not only of 'what' needs to be changed or transformed in different systems, but 'how' transformative change may involve specific capacities, with a particular focus on when a system may be in-between different states and backlash dynamics are shaping the transformation process. We proposed three different transformations-backlash archetypes that affect the unmaking and making processes of transformation, explicitly treating backlash as distinct from generative forms of resistance, which have long been recognized in transformations scholarship (e.g. Falla et al., 2024; Stirling, 2015; Temper et al., 2018). We then use the existing literature on transformative capacities to explore the relevance of three capacities – harnessing hope and imagination, hospicing with dignity, and enabling radical collaboration while holding paradox – for navigating different aspects of backlash and avoiding derailment during the transition phase of a transformation.

Much of the existing literature on transformations focuses on transformations occurring in democratic contexts or conditions that were operating without deliberate, well-funded disinformation campaigns and counter-institution building (see also Kish & Quilley 2017). Consequently, key backlash dynamics have often been overlooked, or more narrow conceptualizations about the roles of 'elites' as a homogenous group have been adopted. Therefore, existing recommendations about how to support transformations risk being of limited relevance for navigating backlash. Our contribution begins to grapple with how backlash that co-evolves with polarization, dehumanization, democratic backsliding, and more will affect the transition phase of a transformation. We argue that various groups, including but not only separate and heterogeneous incumbents and elites, may engage in different kinds of backlash. If there are insufficient capacities for creating temporary, moments of stability, long enough for people to engage with 'the other', to move past post-truth or retrograde and challenging narratives, and to still find hope and ways to imagine something different for moving forward, attractors for sustainability, justice, and peace may be outcompeted.

Transformations are not only long and difficult, but they are also relational, political, and emotional. Existing evidence implies that the three transformative capacities explored here may play a role in addressing identity-based grievances, retrograde imaginaries, polarization, and institutional dismantling that underpin the different backlash archetypes. We suggest these capacities themselves may even generate new kinds of attractors, although future research needs to explore such a hypothesis. While we focus on capacities, we also emphasize that these capacities should not be seen as simple solutions that will magically resolve backlash. That would underestimate the struggle, time, and contentious nature of transformations. Instead, we focus on them on the basis that giving up on capacities for harnessing hope and imagination, hospicing with dignity, and for collaborating in radically new ways with 'the other' and navigating the innate paradoxes this involves is not going to help those on the frontlines of transformative change.

We close by reflecting on how these capacities and backlash dynamics are often addressed in fragmented ways in scholarship,

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yet their dynamic interrelationships must be considered collectively to fully capture the nature of transformative change. For instance, fear can evolve into anger, and when hope is crushed, it may intensify this anger, triggering further negative dynamics such as hate and dehumanization that are part of at least two backlash archetypes. These processes can perpetuate harm and trauma to people, communities, and nature. Exploring the interplay of these relationships and emotions and the actions or effects they can have within a complex SES is essential to further understanding how backlash may be addressed during transformations. Future research can build on the backlash archetypes outlined here to empirically investigate the complexity and interconnectedness of transformation–backlash–capacity relationships and find ways for advancing regenerative approaches that remain vital for reconnecting humanity to the biosphere and promoting justice. For instance, the concept of common humanity, which is not a reference to all humans being the same but instead offers a relational perspective on connecting despite our differences, could help frame responses to backlash dynamics and derailment risks, emphasizing relationships with each other, the biosphere, and our kinship with the more-than-human world.

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