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INSTITUTIONS FOR OPEN SOCIETIES (IOS)

Transforming Open Societies

A position paper

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Utrecht University

A position paper for Institutions for Open Societies (IOS)

December 2024.

The notion of '**open societies**' emerged after World War II and has since had various meanings. Currently, open societies face new external and internal threats and **challenges**, such as the rise of populist and authoritarian movements, controversies surrounding open borders, immigration and inclusion, as well as power concentrations in large tech companies, climate change and ecological destruction. These internal challenges should not lead us to reject the concept of open societies, but rather to renew and refine it. The openness of societies is a value worth fighting for.

To renew and refine the concept of open society, we distinguish between a "thin" and "thick notion", i.e. a more basic definition of open societies and a more extensive one. A **basic definition of openness** is that for a system to be called open, it must be contestable. In an open system, participants can challenge prevailing ideas and concentrations of power, leading to dynamism, pluralism, and inclusivity. Institutions, defined as informal and formal rules and norms, are crucial in organizing the openness of such a system. However, this very basic understanding of openness does not provide sufficient direction to organize society. For this, one needs to consider specific normative perspectives on society. We discuss five examples of such **normative perspectives** in this paper: (1) democracy & the rule of law, (2) well-being & broad prosperity, (3) justice & equality, (4) sustainability and (5) the so-called 'pluriverse'.

To realize open societies that align with these normative perspectives, **institutional transformation is needed**. For institutional change to be transformative, it is not enough to create new institutions, it may also involve maintaining existing institutions that are worth preserving, reviving old institutions that deserve a second life, and dismantling old institutions that have become dysfunctional. At the end of our paper, we discuss what these arguments and proposals could mean for the *Institutions for Open Societies community*, for the academic community in a broader sense, and also for the university in relation to society and public debate more in general.

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1 Introduction

How can open societies and their institutions be understood, studied and developed in the face of ongoing societal challenges and needs? This question has guided Utrecht University's Strategic Theme *Institutions for Open Societies* (IOS), which aims to bring together academics to support interdisciplinary and societally engaged research and education. Its mission since its inception in 2013 has been to study the past, present and future development of institutions for open societies, against the back-drop of pressing societal needs, challenges, and crises.

Today, in 2024, these pressing societal needs have become even more urgent. Open societies and their institutions are undergoing multiple challenges. Democracies are under threat by populist and authoritarian movements. Big tech corporations have introduced algorithmic content-curation and decision-making, with the threat of shrinking the space for critical thinking and debate so vital to open societies. Climate change and other forms of environmental destruction create severe harms that will last for many generations, putting pressure on the notions of 'fairness' and an 'open future'. Meanwhile, geopolitical tensions are rising and the legitimacy and credibility of the international rule of law-based systems is increasingly challenged, as not only authoritarian regimes, but also Western democracies are failing to consistently abide by humanitarian law. Looking towards the future, there seems to be a growing sense of doubt: about the viability and survivability (of the notion) of 'open societies' themselves, and about their desirability too. A need is felt for a deeper transformation of core institutions (and society itself), but the direction such a transformation should take is very much open to debate.

In this position paper, we reiterate the case for engaging with institutions for open societies. *Openness* of societies is a value worth caring about. *Institutions* continue to be the fabric weaving societies together: these formal and informal rules play a key role in realizing open societies. Unravelling the *challenges* faced by open societies and studying how their institutions have responded to them, has been and remains a core task for our community.

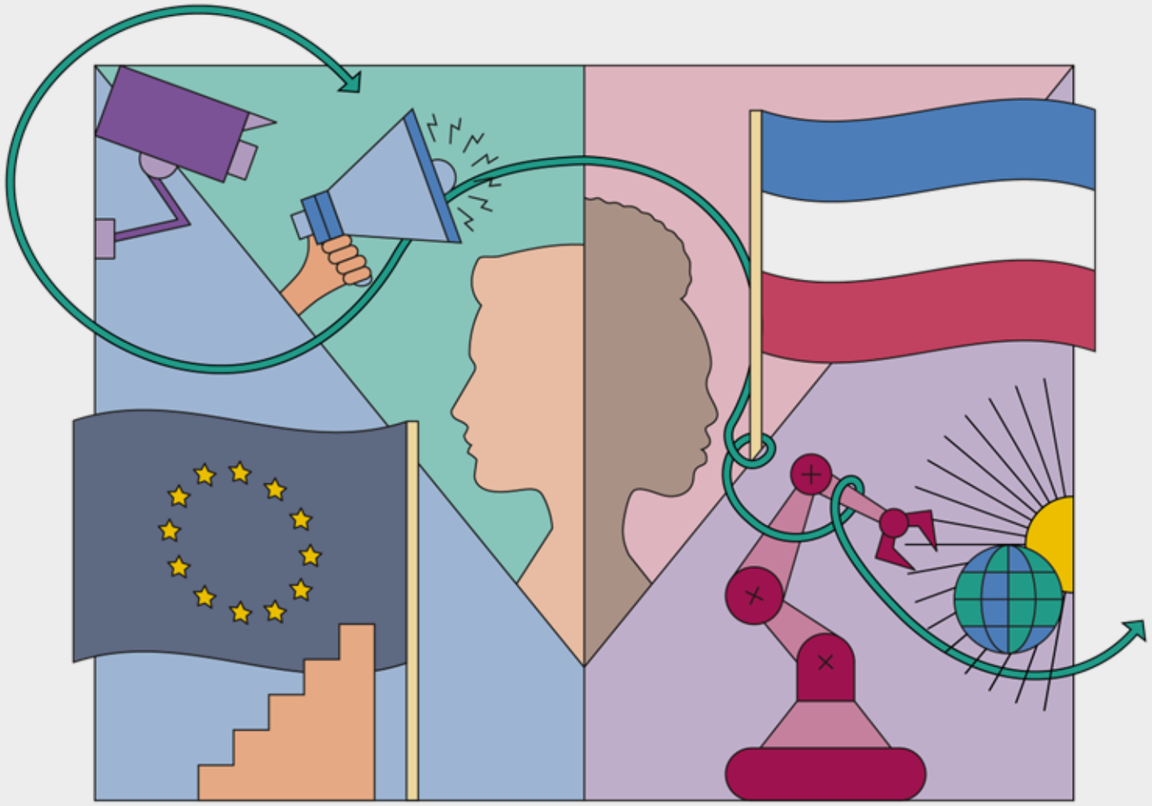
In section 2 we highlight some of these challenges. But going beyond this diagnostic work, we also propose that these challenges give us reason to rethink the notion of open societies itself. In section 3, we argue that this can be done by combining a core ('thin') notion of open societies with one or more normative perspectives. By way of illustration, we present five of them to show how such a combination works. Finally, in section 4 we propose that the IOS research community can focus more on proactively identifying opportunities for *institutional transformations*. How can and should institutions respond to these challenges in the future? This emphasis on thinking about transformations has ramifications for novel methodologies too.

In 2024, the IOS community has grown into a vibrant community of diverse platforms,[1] which is based on an ever-growing involvement of researchers and educators, with a solid institutional basis in four faculties and within Utrecht University. We are part of this community. Throughout this paper, "we" refers to the four authors of this paper. As authors, we are an interdisciplinary ensemble crossing various (inter)disciplines, ranging from philosophy and law to geography and political sociology, working in diverse fields such as corporate governance, competition policy, innovation studies and sustainability research. While we are part of the broader IOS Board,[2] this paper has been explicitly written as a position paper that reflects the views of the four authors, not necessarily of the IOS Board as a whole.

Nevertheless, many members of the IOS community — both the platforms and the Board — have also been involved in shaping our thoughts while writing this position paper. It has been an iterative and interactive process which is still ongoing. The aim of this paper is to propose avenues for future research and debate on open societies in a changing societal context, building upon the many initiatives, research foci and methodologies already in place. With this paper, we specifically aspire to conceptualize, (re)define and refine the notion of open societies and institutional transformation. We also identify theoretical and empirical research questions. We do not claim to answer these questions. On the contrary, this paper is a starting point for research and debate on how to address these grand research questions, within and beyond IOS and Utrecht University. The paper is therefore also ultimately limited (though it is not short): not all disciplines could be equally represented in examples and methodologies discussed, or normative viewpoints offered. However, all disciplines are invited to connect to and engage with this position paper.

It is our conviction that rethinking the notion of open societies is both timely and necessary within the university as well as in the public debate more broadly. As such, the audience of this paper is threefold: it is aimed, firstly, at engagement within the IOS community, secondly, with the academic community at Utrecht University more broadly, but also, thirdly, at engagement with other academic and societal communities who are interested in conceptual and practical engagement with the theme of institutions for open societies.

1 https://www.uu.nl/en/research/institutions-for-open-societies/interdisciplinary-research/academic-foundations.
2 https://www.uu.nl/en/research/institutions-for-open-societies/about-ios/researchers.



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Open Societies: historical context and new challenges

The use of the notion of 'open societies' has gone through at least three phases. Coined in the aftermath of the Second World War by Karl Popper and others, the term was strongly polemic. It defined the self-understanding of broadly Western, modern societies, against the Communist bloc as well as against the defeated fascist dictatorships. It defined how these societies perceived themselves: as open, pluralist and inclusive, versus closed, hierarchical and dogmatic. Politicization in this phase was towards the external world; the flip side of this was that within liberal-democratic countries, the adherence to core ideals of the open society was broadly shared, across partisan lines.

With the demise of communism in 1989, a second phase started. This was a phase of optimism, as expressed in Fukuyama's famous declaration of the 'end of history', which posited the open society (capitalist liberal democracies) as a model for the whole world. International organizations, intellectuals and thinktanks pushed this agenda. 'The rest' should follow 'the West' and become open societies too. This entailed a certain *depoliticization*, compared to the earlier, heavily politized, phase. One could no longer seriously be 'against' the establishment of an open society.

What was this consensus about? Often mentioned are at least the following ingredients: openness towards criticism and revision of beliefs, towards cultural diversity, including religious beliefs (as opposed to a dogmatic society); respect for individual rights and freedoms and being supportive of emancipatory directions (as opposed to an illiberal society); based on constitutional democracy and rule of law (as opposed to authoritarian or totalitarian societies); and heterogeneity and inclusiveness, with open and contestable markets and open borders (as opposed to a stratified and nationally closed society). We will call this the 'classical' notion of open societies: it champions openness in the cultural and scientific, legal and political, and social and economic spheres of society.

Today, for various reasons, optimism has faltered. Open societies are contested again, and re-politicized. This marks a third phase. In some respects, the current socio-political climate resembles the postwar decades. Autocratic regimes around the world again contest open societies from the outside. Putin, Orban, Xi, Erdogan and others have put forward various 'alternative models', such as that of 'illiberal democracy' (Orban), 'development with Chinese characteristics', etc. These *external* challenges to the legitimacy of the concept of open societies itself resemble the ideological battles of the Cold War. They can have grave consequences, to the extent that they mark new (global) security challenges, new geopolitical realities, and new (threats of) war and conflict with the West. This all resembles the first phase.

However, a decisive difference is that open societies now also face a series of strong *internal* challenges. Many people, also from within liberal-democratic societies, challenge the concept's adequacy, and even its continued value as a normative touchstone for the shape of societies. As a result, we can no longer (or: to a lesser extent) speak of a shared heritage which defines a broad consensus amongst the populations of liberal democracies. Since these critiques put into doubt the usefulness of the notion of open societies, also for the research and educational community within Utrecht University this means we need to address them head on. While there are undoubtedly more, the following five challenges have recurred in conversations about open societies. We take each of them to represent an important challenge to the classical notion of open societies.

DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION: THE CHALLENGE OF INSUFFICIENT OPENNESS

Academics, activists, and social movements have questioned whether open societies are *really* open to everyone, *really* pluralist and inclusive, with respect to all concerned. Feminist and intersectional movements have pointed to widespread and persisting gender, racial and intersectional inequalities in political access, economic resources, and cultural forms of respect. Movements for linguistic diversity have emphasized the existence of languages beyond the standard national language dominant in many societies. Here, the critique is that open societies have not been open and inclusive enough and should become *even more open*. At the same time, ecological movements have lamented the poor legal and moral status of non-human life and ecosystems in most liberal democracies, as well as the unequal distribution of environmental burdens experienced mostly amongst the Global South and marginalized communities. In the digital public spere, there is both an accumulation of discursive power at a handful of large technology platforms, and a fear of algorithmically curated personalized social media feeds, which dominate the way many people obtain 'the news', splintering the public sphere into silos.

Perhaps these are not reasons to reject the notion of open societies, but rather reasons for doubling down on its affirmation. Societies should become *even more* open and consistent in giving space to the perspectives and interests of all individuals and groups in society. In this sense, we could say: the ideal was never really achieved. While this is true, we also feel that merely striving for 'more openness' is a too simplistic idea about combatting these challenges of inclusion. Formal institutions treating everyone equally may not give every group the same substantive opportunities in the context of deeply ingrained and historical inequalities. This is well known in the context of competition for scarce jobs or access to educational programs. Similarly, the limitless options for connectedness that 'the internet' brings do not themselves provide everyone with substantive opportunities to enjoy the benefits of such connectedness, given the lack of (digital) literacy on parts of the population.

This diagnosis suggests that the need for updating the classical notion of openness by striving for more radical forms of openness as well as 'importing' substantive equality/equity requirements into the notion of 'openness'. This also suggests orienting empirical research in the direction of a study of new forms of inclusion, the advantages they bring, and the obstacles they face in contemporary societies.

CAPTURE: THE CHALLENGE OF INTERNAL CLOSURES

The key institutions of open societies have proven vulnerable to internally generated threats. Democratic politics is a key example: it is vulnerable to the participation of parties and politicians who aim to weaken or even abolish the institutions of constitutional democracy itself. This is a form of capture. Donald Trump's undermining of political institutions of the USA during his (first) presidency is a vivid example of what can happen when the democratic process is captured by anti-democratically motivated politicians. While it is easy to point to the USA, we also see examples in Europe and the European Union, including in the Netherlands.

A similar challenge of capture is inherent in the market economy. While market economies theoretically allow participation of everyone, they can also be captured by firms wanting to weaken or even abolish the competitive process itself, becoming monopolists and abusing market power to exploit consumers, workers, taxpayers, and the environment. In relation to the very large platform companies dominating the digital economy, this capture of (economic) markets and formidable corporate power may spill over into politics and also into the media's opinion forming channels.

In both politics and the market, then, open societies need to find ways to remain open to everyone, but also protecting the inclusive,

Today, for various reasons, optimism has faltered. Open societies are contested again, and re-politicized.

competitive process of allocating political power and market share. Both in the market and in the political arena, to guard against parties which want to capture and overthrow the openness of the system is necessary.

This diagnosis suggests the need for a second updating of the classical notion of openness. The democratic system nor the market system are forms of 'spontaneous order' that are 'self-sustaining' in their openness, as previous theorists of the open society (such as Friedrich Hayek) held. Openness is itself always fragile, a social construction, which requires permanent vigilance, protection of democracy and its rule of law basis, and cultural and educational investment. This also suggests orienting empirical research to the threats faced by these institutions, and how such threats have been and can successfully be overcome.

COMMUNITY: THE CHALLENGE OF OPEN BORDERS

The notion of Open Societies in the classical sense has been strongly associated with the idea of open borders. Open societies were in the first postwar phase established within the confines of nation-states; in that sense the idea was never a purely cosmopolitan dream of a borderless world. However, neither was the idea 'nationalist' in the exclusivist sense championed by fascist regimes, where one nation took itself to be (culturally, morally) superior to the others. Open Societies, while grounded in a nation-state, were meant to be open to international collaboration, international trade, and internationally oriented science with flourishing of exchanging ideas across borders. Some decades later, radical openness underlay the first iterations of the internet: 'cyberspace' would not lie within borders, governments would have no sovereignty, and it would be a world where anyone, anywhere, could enter, as John Perry Barlow famously declared.

Today, new waves of nationalism shake this open attitude. A longing for a sense of community, hostility to migration, and a critique of economic globalization, resonate with large swaths of the population in liberal-democratic countries. This is true for the global trade and market system too, in which Brexit shook the EU, where globalized trade is criticized as contributing to climate change and ecological depletion, and where geopolitical tensions give rise to notions of strategic autonomy and concerns about global security. The internet also has not become a place without borders, but has developed along different paths in China, the USA, and the EU. And while it is still a space for finding likeminded individuals from all over the world and for building communities, providing voice to the voiceless and a source of news outside state-owned or influenced media, it is also criticized as an unsafe space, fueling discontent polarization, and being a space for new forms of (cyber)crime, leading to call for further borders and guardrails.

Open societies and their institutions are undergoing multiple challenges. These are not reasons to reject the notion of open societies, but rather for doubling down on its affirmation.

Attitudes of longing for a sense of community can point to a wish to mark off a space for national identity, history and language. This questions the edges, but might still 'fit' within the classic notion of an Open Society which remains compatible with strong international cooperation – in the same vein as support of WTO and the EU may be combined with focusing on lessening dependence on long supply chains. However, these attitudes can also turn into exclusivist, xenophobic and even racist notions, which challenge 'openness' to its core.

This diagnosis suggests another departure from the classical notion of openness. Somehow maintaining openness of a society means balancing openness to other societies (the classical orientation to international cooperation and exchange), with the need to organize society as a community to which people feel attached, and over which people experience a sense of control and co-ownership. All of this without falling into exclusivist nationalistic orientations.

With this problem of community, we also touch upon the question of how to define the notion of 'society' in 'open societies'. While the nation-state remains a (if not 'the') key referent for defining society in many contexts, this also hides a variety in reality: there are also sub- and supra-national societies, crosscutting digital societies, and perhaps even a rising 'world society' in some respects. The rise and decline of all these types of societies, questions around inclusion and exclusion, and the relations with nation-state societies, are an important area of (empirical) research for understanding the different shapes and forms of open societies globally.

CAPITALISM: THE CHALLENGE OF OPEN MARKETS

The classical notion of openness was strongly wedded to 'open markets', and – connected but not identical – to capitalism. Almost no one is in favor of 'closed' markets, in the sense of the capture of markets (mentioned above). The challenge to markets here is different. It is about their fitness as a mechanism to organize economic life. The for-profit, commercial orientation of incentives in markets may be less suitable for public services (such as education or health care) and may inhibit cooperation between market parties where it is needed for guaranteeing vital public interests. The inequalities in income and wealth established through a market-based organization of the economy, and the often weak position of workers in labor markets are long-standing concerns. Traditionally, in the postwar decades, the institutions of the welfare state were thought to counterbalance these shadow-sides of capitalist organization. The welfare state was developed as the key mechanism insuring people against market risks and supplementing their incomes where the market fails them. In the EU's treaty-texts this is exemplified by the notion of a 'social market economy'.

Today this seems insufficient. For example, the mostly profit-driven digital transformation, including the promises and pitfalls of AI, leads to the re-questioning of the market: to whom befall the profits and to whom the (societal) costs of the rapid development and introduction of AI systems? Social movements, furthermore, point to the need for even more radical corrections of the market-order to combat climate change, and more broadly, the incompatibility of the current economic systems with planetary boundaries. The market is home to too many extractivist companies that continue to profit from large-scale unsustainable production processes, and companies that use the market and innovation and investments structures to strengthen corporate power.

This diagnosis suggests that openness with respect to economic systems of production and consumption needs to be rethought. The welfare state is likely to remain an important component. But the demand to maintain open markets also needs to be balanced with more radically sustainable and equitable forms of production. Empirical research can identify such new forms of production, the obstacles faced by them, and how institutions might transform to accommodate those changes. This may imply replacing markets, competition, and profit-driven firms with non-market mechanisms, socially designed firms, and collaboration to shape the future economy.

GLOBAL PLURALITY: THE CHALLENGE OF WESTERN UNIVERSALISM/COLONIALISM

The notion of open societies has often been seen as both Western *and* universalist. On the one hand, it was perceived as grounded in the historical experience of the West, with its heritage of the Enlightenment, the Atlantic Revolutions, etc. On the other hand, the idea itself was not meant as 'culturally exclusive' to Western populations. Other parts of the world could, indeed should (so it was held) also adopt the values and institutions of open societies. Colonial conquest was at the time defended as doing exactly that: bringing 'civilization' to other parts of the world.

This arrogant attitude, starting from 'us' in the West and radiating out to the rest of the world, is no longer tenable nor desirable (we could argue it never has been). More awareness of the deep exploitation of non-Western peoples mark contemporary discussions of the colonial experience and a growing desire and need to decolonize discourses, practices and institutions. This engagement brings into question the legitimacy not only of a singular interpretation, but also of the notion of open societies itself. Furthermore, the value of a plurality of knowledge systems is increasingly clear and valued, for example in the context of the ecological crises and growing inequalities. Indigenous knowledge and non-hegemonic locally embedded knowledge systems have

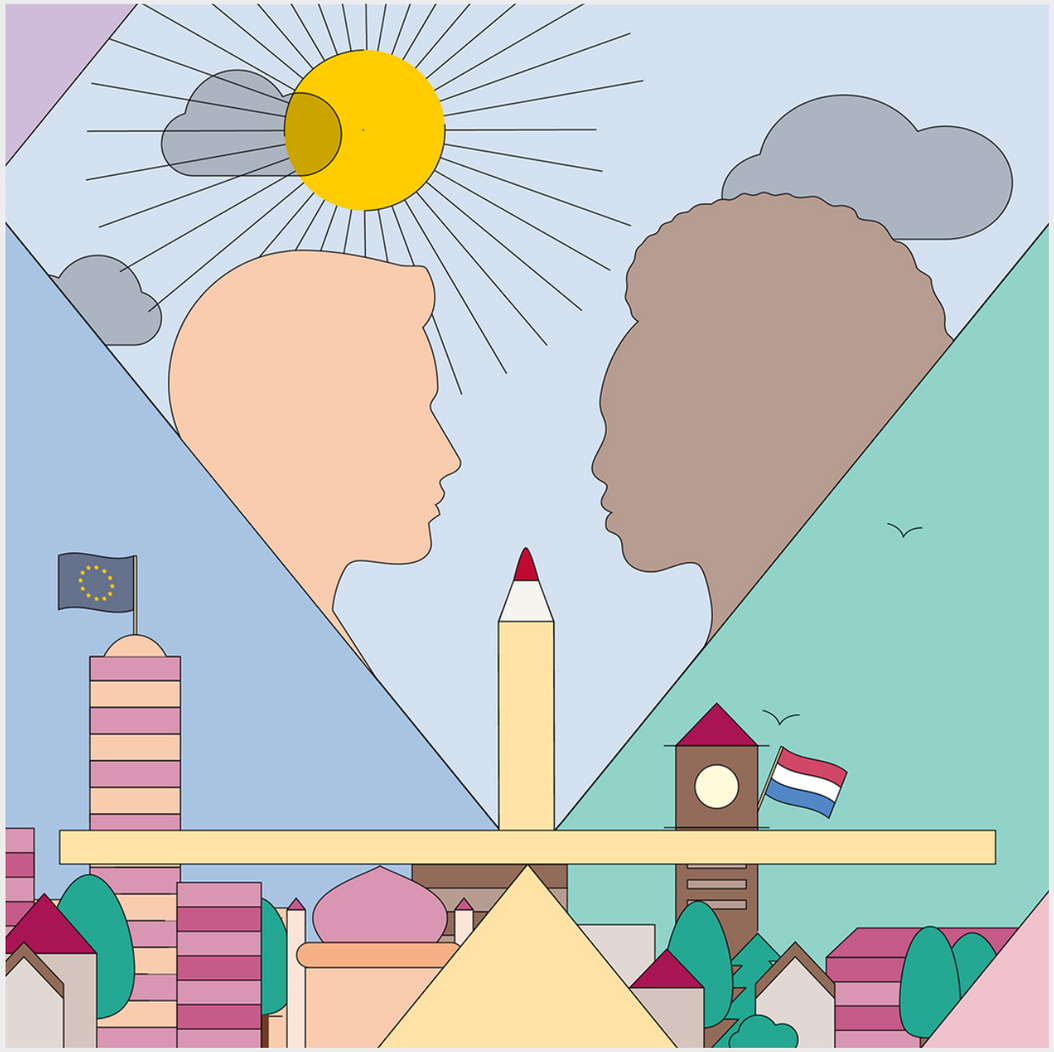
reoriented not only the idea of what an open exchange of ideas entails but knowledge systems themselves.

Whether these institutions can be understood as exemplifying 'open societies in their own way' (hence pointing to a deeper, underlying convergence) is a source of study and debate, but we propose to embrace this plurality of notions and knowledge systems as inherent in openness.

CONCLUSION: THE NEED TO RETHINK OPEN SOCIETIES

Perhaps also because of these challenges, there seems to be a rising tide of disenchantment, discontent and distrust: in politics and politicians, in the scientific method and the results it yields, in international and humanitarian law, in the capitalist market system, and in the widening gap of unequal distribution of (social, cultural, monetary) capital between groups in society. Such growing tides of disenchantment, discontent and distrust are not only understandable but, in our perspective, also legitimate. As scholars and authors of this position paper, we experience such disenchantment ourselves, to varying degrees: the existing institutions of open societies, often built up in the decades after the Second World War, no longer 'deliver', or at least not well enough. Existing institutions sometimes do not deliver enough openness, while at other times they have proven too vulnerable to capture. They have allowed too much inequality and extractivist economic practices. To address these challenges, rethinking open societies is needed. In diagnosing these various challenges, we have already suggested a rough direction for such rethinking. The next step would be to develop well-worked out views of what open societies in the future could look like. How to rethink Open Societies in a systematic way? This is the question we turn to in the next section.

Openness is in itself always fragile, a social construction, which requires permanent vigilance, protection of democracy and its rule of law basis, and cultural and educational investment.



3 Re-thinking Open Societies

In this section we argue that rethinking open societies can best be done by taking two steps. First, we need to define what is the 'core' of the idea of an open society. We argue that this core lies in the idea of contestability. Any system, to be called 'open', needs to be contestable by the participants within that system. This, however, is a rather *thin* notion. A second step is to think about how to institutionalize contestability, to address the challenges to open societies identified above. We argue this requires the adoption of normative perspectives. We briefly discuss five illustrations of such perspectives: democracy, well-being, justice, sustainability, and the pluriverse.

A THIN NOTION: OPENNESS AS CONTESTABILITY

The classical notion of open societies is a multi-faceted concept in which openness is associated with various institutions in all spheres of society: openness to new results and paradigms in science, open flows of communication and ideas, open processes for participation in the political sphere and respect for individual rights and freedoms, openness to new beliefs and practices in arts and culture, open borders, and open markets. The commonality in these concepts of openness is – we propose – the idea of *contestability*. A social system (or social practice) is open to the extent that the ruling ideas, positions, decisions in that system can be contested and can be more or less open. More openness in the system therefore means that more people can participate by objecting and proposing changes, and they can do so more easily. This core idea of contestability relies, in turn, on two other concepts:

- *Power:* in any system or practice, there are ruling ideas, positions and decisions. We can study who can influence what (and how) become the ruling ideas, who holds ruling positions, who sets the agenda, and who makes the decisions.
- *In/equality* in the power (ability) to define these ideas, positions and decisions: some have more power than others. We can study these relative power positions within the different social systems and practices: more open (more egalitarian) or less open (less egalitarian).

Understood in light of these concepts, the notion of an open system is very close to that of an egalitarian, or democratic system, as against a system in which one person/group/organization holds all power and has the power to block the entry of others (a dictatorship). Open systems disperse power, so that many can join in. This does not imply there are no hierarchies, as also in a democratic society there can be, for example, ministers, mayors and parliamentarians, but it does entail that the entry into these positions of power remains contestable.

This naturally leads to the importance of *institutions*. Openness is not a natural given; there are individual and group tendencies to monopolize power and 'close' the system to their benefit. Hence institutions are the anchoring norms and practices through which openness will (or will not) be realized. Electoral laws to open up power positions in politics, competition laws to maintain competitiveness in markets, scientific journals opening their pages for new paradigms in science, are examples, all of which have in them the possibility for people and groups to circumscribe their openness. As the continued openness of institutions is always the hard work of people, people with an *open mindset* and the willingness to defend the openness-maintaining institutions are needed. Participants in an open system collectively share the responsibility to rise above their self-interest, and defend the system's openness. Openness defined in this way is closely associated with the idea of pluralism – a *pluralism* or diversity of voices and perspectives in all social spheres – and with *inclusiveness*, of the people putting forward these perspectives.

However, openness defined in this way does not dictate one's normative stance on various issues. It remains a rather *thin notion*, because the exact shape of any system will be determined by the participants themselves, how they relate to each other and contest each other's ideas. Even when agreeing on the value of open systems in society, there will be differences in opinion on such complex issues as migration, how to safeguard against terrorism (and how to define it), the urgency of climate change mitigation measures, what a just distribution of income and taxation looks like, how to protect society against polarization and populism, or whether to make diversity in corporate boardrooms mandatory. At the same time, there is a limit to the plurality of perspectives which an open society can bear, because certain ideas, positions and decisions will themselves have a negative effect on the openness of the system itself. Such judgements about what is, and what is not a threat to the openness of the system, cannot be made from an external 'observer's perspective', but only from the – clashing – perspectives of the participants to the open system. To address the challenges introduced in the previous section, a *thick(er)* notion of open societies is needed. This requires developing a normative perspective.

NORMATIVE PERSPECTIVES

Figuring out how different normative perspectives relate to open societies is a huge research agenda in and of itself. Such a research agenda also requires a genuine interdisciplinary effort, which implies more collaboration (e.g. at our University between IOS and other Strategic Themes). Here we merely want to illustrate this task, by introducing some of the ongoing normative debates that relate directly to the societal challenges that we discussed earlier. The question we ask is: what are possible normative perspectives to give more shape and substance to (the institutions required for) the so-far-very-thin notion of openness? We limit ourselves here to five often-recurring perspectives with which we as authors of this paper are familiar from our own research: constitutional democracy, well-being, justice/equality, sustainability, and pluriverse. This list is *not* exhaustive. Other normative perspectives are present in the work of researchers both within and beyond the IOS community. Understanding these different normative perspectives, and how they relate and manifest, is an important theoretical and empirical challenge for future research.

Constitutional democracy and open societies. The notion of democracy is double-faced: while the term often is used to refer to a set of institutions (elections etc.), it can also refer to the underlying normative perspective why it is good to have these (electoral, etc.) institutions: because this is more democratic. Used in this normative sense, 'democracy' is per definition better than its opposite, autocracy. The notion of democracy is – out of all normative perspectives listed here – definitionally the closest to the notion of an 'open society' itself. As we saw above, an open system is one in which all participants can join in contesting the ruling ideas, positions and decisions, which is more or less the same as a democratic system. Democracy is judged valuable in turn, for intrinsic and instrumental reasons. *Intrinsically*, it gives everyone an equal voice, and thus expresses the value of equal worth of all human beings. Here it is strongly connected to the notion of constitutionalism: the rule of law and protection of individual rights and freedoms.

Any system, to be called 'open', needs to be contestable by the participants within that system (...) Open systems disperse power, so that many can join in.

An open society is a democratic society, based on the rule of law. *Instrumentally*, it is often argued that rule of law-based democracies (in the long run) deliver more justice, prosperity and stability to their citizens. While all of this may be true, this does not mean that democracy is a univocal perspective. There are competing ideas about what the best theory or form of democracy is (such as theories of representative and direct democracy, deliberative democracy, participatory democracy, agonistic democracy). Also, there are competing ideas about the limits of democratic decision-making (think of constitutional limits to majoritarian decisions which cancel the rights of minorities). Finally, there is no consensus about which institutions should be democratically designed (e.g. democracy in schools, hospitals, families, and companies). Each of these competing ideas has its own implications for the design of institutions.

Well-being/broad prosperity and open societies. In economics, traditionally the most important normative perspective is that of utility or well-being. This has sometimes been understood as simply referring to 'welfare', in the sense of material welfare as measured by GDP and other resource-based indicators. However, welfare is at best a proxy for well-being, in the sense of human beings' real level of satisfaction or happiness. Today, many economists and others move back to this underlying, more fundamental notion of well-being, and try to capture it in a broader, richer set of outcome-based indicators than material welfare alone. On a global level, a prominent example of this movement to go 'beyond GDP' has been inspired by the UNDP's Human Development Index, which builds on the work of Amartya Sen and others in developing a view of well-being grounded in fundamental human capabilities. In the Netherlands the notion of 'Brede Welvaart' ('Broad Prosperity') focuses on social, economic and ecological components, and includes balancing the perspectives of the 'now' and the 'future', and the 'here' and 'there' (see also below); it is a leading concept for important societal actors. From such broader normative perspectives, one can study how various institutional arrangements of open societies contribute to human well-being and criticize them if they fail to do so.

Justice/equality and open societies. Justice is arguably one of the most contested concepts in both the humanities and social sciences. One way to understand justice is as a multi-dimensional phenomenon that includes distributive justice, i.e. the equitable distribution of material resources and services; procedural justice, i.e. participatory, inclusive and democratic decision-making (note the overlap with 'democracy' above); and recognition justice, i.e. the recognizing of historical context, values and (gender, racial, linguistic and other) identities. In all these manifestations, justice is about providing a particular sense of *equality and equity* between people, from different background and in different places. This is not about 'always treating

Openness is not a natural given; there are individual and group tendencies to monopolise power and 'close' the system to their benefit. Hence institutions are the anchoring norms and practices through which openness will (or will not) be realized.

everyone in exactly the same way', but about a subtle tailoring towards what everybody deserves to get, given the particularities of the situation; expressed in the ancient Greek understanding of justice as 'giving everyone their due.' The relation between openness and justice varies with the specific theory of justice one adopts. In the context of socio-economic inequality, some theories of justice – like a libertarian one – identify open societies strongly with open markets. Whatever distributive outcome comes out of open market processes is deemed fair. That some people end up with a lower socio-economic status than others is from this perspective unproblematic. Other theories of justice want to make people's 'fair share' (to a certain extent) independent from market processes. Yet other theories of justice would say a robust claim on property-holdings is a precondition for people to be able to participate in open markets in the first place. This illustrates – if only in relation to one example, i.e. markets – how from a normative theory of justice one can draw implications for the design of institutions.

Sustainability and open societies. The notion of sustainable development is most famously framed as a development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs. In its original meaning – as encompassed also in the SDGs – sustainability inherently revolves around the interconnections between ecological, economic, and social dimensions, and explicitly includes combatting issues of poverty and inequality. For open societies, this basic notion of sustainability means openness to consider both current and future generations ('now' and 'future'), and openness to consider both the needs of people and planet in the place where one *is* (the 'here') and the needs of people and planet elsewhere (the 'there'), including in production and consumption patterns. More fundamentally, and tying in with theories of justice, this entails a systemic and global perspective. This notion of sustainability means that a transition cannot be called sustainable if global socio-economic inequalities are left intact. Thus, a closed society cannot easily be called a sustainable society; but neither can a society that is very open but ecologically depletive. In this context, we must recognize that liberal democracies have so far failed in dealing sufficiently with climate change. Perhaps also in response to this failing, in the past decades the word 'sustainability' has become mostly associated with pure environmental concerns. Sustainability discourses, both in academia and policy, may have developed blind spots for issues of inequality, exclusion and exploitation. At the same time the interconnectedness between sustainability and justice is increasingly recognized in academic fields like environmental justice and by institutions like the United Nations and the European Union. This is true also for the interconnectedness between sustainability, justice and long-termism, and the connectedness between the necessary sustainability transitions and the mostly innovation-led digital societal transitions. Developments in AI also have led to seriously postulating the future of post-scarce economies. Each of these notions, including the connections and contradictions inherent in the sustainability transformation, are not only subject of study, but their normativity can also feed into the shape of institutions.

The pluriverse and open societies. The pluriverse is a concept that challenges what is called the 'One-World doctrine'. Scholars first bringing forward the concept of the pluriverse emphasize that there is a multiplicity of distinct worlds, which are mutually entangled and co-constituting, and which have different epistemological and ontological world views. As such, the pluriverse is explicitly distinct from pluralism. While pluralism refers to the acceptance of, and tolerance towards, different views within a shared reality, the pluriverse poses the (possibility of) fundamentally different ontologies or realities. The notion of the pluriverse brings together many different intellectual traditions, including calls for decolonization and recognition of indigenous knowledge and post-humanist discussions about the need to recognize more-than-human beings and worlds. This also entails the acknowledgement of cultural politics as political struggles over meaning and identity within societies. Theoretically, it stems from critiques of dualism, and from traditions reflecting a deeply relational understanding of life. For open societies, a pluriverse means, at very least, consistently challenging the idea that 'open societies' should all look the same, recognizing the rights of more-than-humans, and seriously decolonizing our discourse on open societies and democracy. This also includes sensitivity to different cultures and languages and acknowledgement of the linguistic biases that may underly predominantly Anglo-Saxon discourses on open societies. For scholars, entrepreneurs, intellectuals and activists that engage with environmental justice, intersectionality and notions like alternative economies and the 'pluriverse', an *ideal* world is one in which all these ideals go hand in hand. The pluriverse notion has implications for engaging with and acknowledging the value of different knowledge systems, including (non-hegemonic) local knowledge systems from all over the world. A pluriversal perspective on open societies also invites critically engage with notions like transhumanism in relation to technical developments (e.g. technologies aimed for longevity and cognition) and in relation to AI (where humans are replaced by AI's). The pluriverse is both a notion to be further disentangled, built, and understood and has implications for the shape of institutions in open societies.

MOBILIZING NORMATIVE PERSPECTIVES TO ADDRESS THE CHALLENGES TO OPEN SOCIETIES

In an ideal world, democracy, well-being, sustainability, justice and the pluriverse would all go well together in harmony. However, in practice there are many tensions, contradictions, and trade-offs between and within these normative directions. Merely as illustration: there can be transition-tensions between environmental sustainability and different dimensions of justice, e.g. between the urgency of climate change and the need to take rapid and bold action, versus the time that we need to have procedural justice through inclusive decision-making. However, acknowledging tensions is not the same as deriving no directionality from the normative perspectives at all.

With the help of these and other normative perspectives a thick notion of openness can be developed, which supports addressing the challenges identified above. As mentioned, such a thicker notion is necessary because a thin notion ('openness as contestability') cannot help us with answering the question whether a certain directionality is, at very least, reasonable to take; showing what the direction of concrete institutional transformations should be; or establishing that living in this open society is valuable in itself. Based on the diagnosis of section 2, we propose the following as an attractive *thicker* notion of open societies:

- An understanding that more radical openness as well as a more substantive (equity-based) concept of openness is necessary – as against a purely formal idea of openness, which may in reality lead to insufficient diversity and inclusivity for all to participate.
- More vigilance to capture of open institutions by powerful interests – as against a simple belief that open systems can spontaneously maintain themselves as open for contestation.
- Attention to the fact that any open society also requires its organization as a community, over/in which people feel a sense of belonging, control and co-ownership – beyond a simple equation of 'open society' with 'open borders'.
- Understanding openness as embracing a plurality of market and non-market mechanisms in economic organization – beyond a simple equation of 'open society' in its economic manifestations with 'open markets' and 'capitalism'.
- More openness to local and non-Western concepts and knowledge systems as alternative ways to conceive of openness itself – as against a simple belief that open societies are a unique and unified Western invention.

This proposal is deliberately a rough sketch; but it is sufficient for the illustrative purposes of this position paper. Different actors within society, as well as different academics, can construct their own thick notions, depending on the normative perspectives they draw from. In our thicker notion, the normative imperative of open societies is one of *pluralism*, *inclusivity* and an *open mind-set*, engaging with these different perspectives and how they interact and relate to each other. Striving for more open societies is thus not about one fixed image of what open societies should look like exactly, or about imposing more liberal democracy in other countries; more open societies are also about more openness towards perspectives that aim to be inclusive towards current and future generations of both humans and more-than-human life. This notion of open societies thus compels us to acknowledge how normative perspectives are deeply contested, to give continued space to such contestation and debate, and to seek how to best navigate perpetual existing tensions and challenges. However, at the same time this thicker notion of openness does give a sense of directionality in addressing the challenges. It feeds the question of *how* to shape institutions that fit this thicker notion and address the challenges. We propose to use the notion of 'institutional transformation', both as descriptive concept and as a driver for change informed by this informed directionality. We turn to institutional transformation in the next section.

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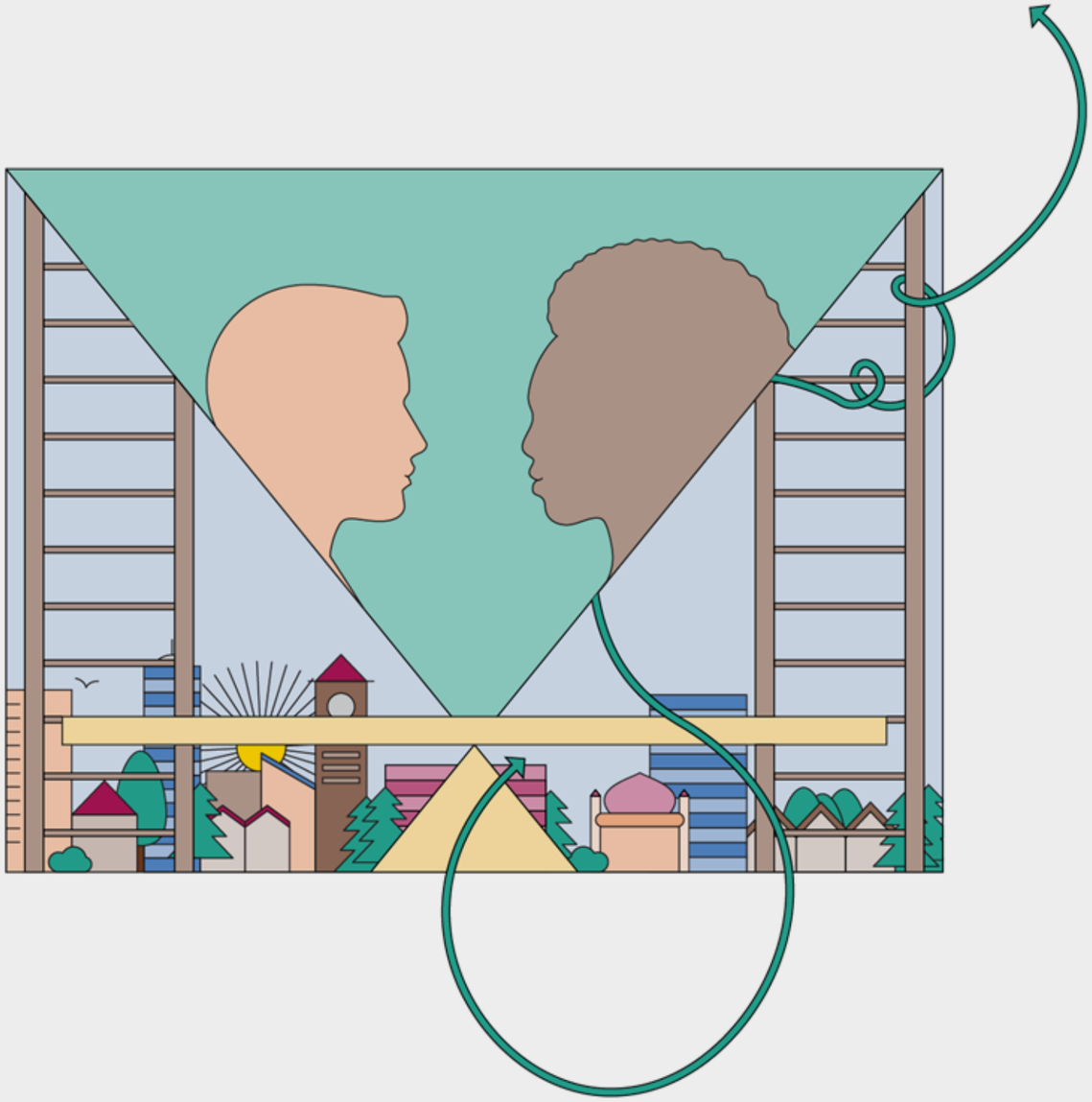

4 | Institutional Transformation in and for Open Societies

Our discussion about the notion of open societies and interplay with institutions in the previous sections, points to a need for change, including to the need for *transformation* of institutions. The challenges discussed in the previous sections, both external and internal ones, are entangled with a wide variety of institutions and raise questions on how institutional change co-evolves with open societies. On the one hand, institutions are changing in many different directions, and such institutional change is affecting open societies in both desirable and undesirable ways. On the other hand, the challenges of open societies as discussed previously, raise questions on how institutions can or should be changed and designed to enable and defend open societies (viewed from the normative directions introduced in the previous section).

The complexity of institutions, their many inter-dependent elements and the often-competing interests of different groups of societal actors are all reasons to expect institutional change to be a multi-dimensional, complex and contested process. To make sense of how institutions are changing/could change in the context of open societies, we propose the concept of 'institutional transformation' as an overarching idea. Here it is important to emphasize that we refer to **institutions** in the broad sense of the word, including *both formal and informal rules and norms*. Before we define institutional transformation, we explain what we mean by *transformation* and how this notion relates to other notions of change, such as *innovation* and *institutional change*.

We will use the example of the phenomenon of energy cooperatives to explain the differences and relations between these notions, with brief mentions of other examples too. The main example should demonstrate how processes of transformation, innovation and institutional change all manifest as distinct but deeply interrelated dimensions. It serves the purpose of *illustrating* our ideas, yet we stress that many more examples can be found, both within the IOS platforms and beyond.

TRANSFORMATION, INNOVATION AND INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE

In essence, **transformation** is a type of change that is *fundamental* in several dimensions. One can characterize transformation in terms of the *depth* of structural change, the *breadth and scale* of systemic change, and/or the *temporality* of long-term, non-linear and irreversible change. On the one hand, there is an idea of transformation as a large, long-term and all-encompassing process of fundamental change, like the Great Transformation by Polanyi or the overthrow of the capitalist system in Marxist theory. On the other hand, there is a more micro-political process understanding of transformative change as an unfolding of processes and turning points, which may contribute to a systemic transformation to different degrees.

In this paper, we build on the latter understanding of *transformation as a process*, or more accurately as *plural processes*, in which dominant structures and power relations are being challenged, altered and/or replaced. As such, assessing whether a particular type of change is transformative is a *matter of degree*: a process can be considered transformative *to the extent that* it challenges, alters and/or replaces dominant structures and power relations. In this sense, institutional transformation is closely connected to the openness and contestability notions discussed in the previous section. Such processes of transformation are often initiated by social movements that contest the existing order and push for new norms. However, they can also emerge from within existing government and market institutions, who may advocate change as a strategy to preserve selected elements of institutions. Which origins, actors and intentions drive institutional transformation is primarily an *empirical* question that is elaborately discussed in various strands of research across and beyond IOS.

To discuss one example: In the case of **renewable energy cooperatives**, the dominant institutions being challenged are those associated with fossil-fuel-based energy systems controlled by incumbent energy companies and where households can only be passive consumers. As such, a renewable community energy initiative is transformative to the extent that it challenges this existing fossil-fuel energy system, its structures and power relations. Regardless of the degree of transformation, we do not consider such transformative processes to be inherently good or desirable: there are many different directionalities in transformative processes, some more teleological, others more emergent, some more intentional, explicit and conscious, others more unintentional, implicit or unconscious.

In this position paper we focus on conceptualizing how processes of transformative change could contribute to more open societies, specifically open societies that can tackle the challenges of our times as discussed in the previous sections. More specifically, we are interested in ***institutional* transformation** as a specific type of transformation that is deemed necessary for the working of open societies. However, before we dive deeper into the concept of institutional transformation (in the next section) we want to clarify how it relates to another important notion of change, namely **innovation**. Innovation refers to the invention of novel products, services, practices and ideas. *Technological innovation* refers to the introduction and uptake of novel technologies. *Social innovation* is about sets of ideas, objects and activities that are changing social relations, involving new ways of doing, thinking and organizing. In the example of energy cooperatives that are producing their own renewable energy, there is both technological and social innovation. There is technological innovation in the solar panels, the windmills and the smart grids managing energy flows. There is also social innovation in the changing relations between e.g. consumers and producers (in fact consumers become producers), and all sorts of new social practices as well as different organizational forms like e.g. the cooperative as a legal form.

Importantly, innovations – technological or social innovation – can contribute to transformation but they do not necessarily do so. On the contrary, innovations can also be instrumental in reproducing a status quo at the system level. A good example would be the electric car, a technological innovation that can be used to keep almost everything the same about our transport system when it comes to road infrastructure and car-dependency. While the electric car has potential to shift from fossil fuel to renewable energy, it is also still perfectly possible to use electricity that is generated through fossils. Another example comes from the emergence of digital platforms. The underlying digital technologies and the related technological innovations have the potential to support democracy when combined with social innovations like those supporting independent news reporting, but they can also concentrate power in few corporate players and help maintain existing economic structures.

Institutions and **institutional change** play a very important role in processes of innovation and transformation. In the context of technological innovation, institutional change manifests itself typically in the development of new regulations and standards around novel technologies and the normalization of these novel technologies and related practices. The relation between institutional change and social innovation is more complex, because in many ways, institutional change can be considered a form of social innovation itself. Also vice versa:

This compels us to acknowledge how normative perspectives are deeply contested, to give continued space to such contestation and debate, and to seek how to best navigate perpetual existing tensions and challenges

social innovation, defined as changing social relations involving new ways of thinking, doing and organizing, often includes institutional change. However, not *all* social innovations necessarily include institutional change, and not all social innovations are institutionalized. In this position paper, we build on these ongoing debates about institutional change, innovation and transformation. More specifically, we are interested in understanding how *institutions themselves are (actively or reactively) transformed* in the context of open societies. To unpack this question, we propose the concept of '**institutional transformation**'.

CONCEPTUALIZING INSTITUTIONAL TRANSFORMATION

We understand institutional transformation as entailing fundamental and structural change of *institutions*, in which existing structures and power relations are challenged, altered and/or replaced. Developing new institutions can be part of it, but dealing with existing institutions is also critical. Some elements of existing institutions might be worth defending and maintaining, others might be more clearly in need of being challenged, replaced or supplemented. As such, institutional transformation is not a singular, coherent or linear process, but rather a combination of plural, non-linear and sometimes contradictory processes. We propose to define institutional transformation as a combination of the following processes, all of which we will elaborate below: creating new institutions, maintaining institutions, reviving old institutions, dismantling institutions.

Creating new institutions. The creation of new institutions refers to new ways of thinking and organizing that are in the process of being institutionalized, either formally or informally. There are many examples of new institutions that are created and contribute to open societies in terms of contesting power concentration. In our example of energy cooperatives, the idea of energy democracy and new ways of deciding collectively about how to produce what kind of energy can be seen as the creation of a new institution. Energy cooperatives propose a new configuration of energy markets and their power relations, by challenging the notion that energy production should be concentrated in the large energy producers, instead of distributed across small energy prosumers. Another example, is participatory budgeting as a form of direct democracy in which citizens are directly involved in deciding how government budgets – often at the level of municipalities – are spent. Besides different processes of selection and representation, these democratic innovations often also go hand in hand with alternative forms of deliberation and inclusion, such as deep democracy (focused on including 'the wisdom of the minority') and sociocracy (using consent rather than majority voting). Hence, these initiatives propose new democratic institutions with different structures and power relations.

The normative imperative of open societies is one of pluralism, inclusivity and an open mind-set, engaging with these different perspectives and how they interact and relate to each other. Figuring out how different normative perspectives relate to open societies is a huge research agenda in an of itself.

So far, many of these institutional innovations, both the energy cooperatives and the direct democracy initiatives, are experiments that remain at a relatively small scale. However, we can observe that there are social movements and translocal networks growing around these different initiatives, as an important form of diffusing these innovations. One example can be found in the *International Observatory of Participatory Democracy (IODP)* where municipalities, associations, organizations and research centers from 1000 cities in 95 countries across the world come together.

Maintaining existing institutions. The maintenance of existing institutions refers to their enforcement, protection and implementation. In the context of open societies, the focus is on enforcing, protecting and implementing institutions that guarantee the contestations and decentralization of power. Here 'existing' institutions can refer to institutions that are relatively new i.e. recently created, but it can also refer to old institutions that have existed for a long time. It may seem paradoxical to argue that the maintenance of existing institutions is part of institutional *transformation*. However, one of the things that distinguishes transformation from other types of change, like e.g. innovation and creation of novelty, is that it is structural and that it shows a certain level of irreversibility. As such, there is a need to not only create and introduce new institutions but to also implement and enforce them over longer periods of time.

This is for instance illustrated by the often volatile nature of financial incentives as introduced by governments to enable sustainability transitions. A good example in the case of energy cooperatives is that of the feed-in tariff that was introduced in 2000 in Germany as part of the energy transitions. This feed-in tariff guaranteed that citizen initiatives could feed renewable electricity into the grid and receive payment according to a certain tariff, which enabled the flourishing of many renewable energy cooperatives. However, under pressure of the incumbent energy lobby, the government made amendments which included a reduction of feed-in tariffs and introduction of an auction model for renewable energy, affecting the viability of the cooperative model. This is a good example of the need to not only create and introduce a new institution like a feed-in tariff, but to also maintain it over longer periods of time and defend it from resistance and pressures to abolish it.

Besides the maintenance of relatively new/recent institutions, one also sees evidence of efforts put into upholding and protecting older, existing institutions that are believed to be essential to open societies. Examples include the protection of the principles of the rule of law, being challenged by populist parties, but also media plurality within the context of the digital transformation. In upholding and protecting these higher-level institutions, there is a role for the creation of new institutions, or new institutional elements, so as to be able to reform, improve and strengthen the existing institutions under threat. For example, new forms of financing, including crowdfunding, can complement existing financial institutions to support independent journalism or even energy cooperatives. This is another way in which maintenance of existing institutions and creation of new institutions might come together as complementary processes within institutional transformations.

Reviving old institutions. Reviving old institutions is about rediscovering institutions that existed in the past and were dismantled or replaced by different institutions which ended becoming the new norm. In the context of open societies, it is about reviving institutions from the past that seemed to contribute to the contestations and decentralization of power concentrations. Energy cooperatives provide again a good example, because the cooperative as a legal form is not exactly 'novel'. The cooperative in its current legal form has existed for almost two centuries, and can be dated back to the medieval commons, which as such are older than the Limited Company legal form that mainstream discourses have come to consider so 'normal'.

Empirical work demonstrates a rediscovery and 'reinvention' of the cooperative, and other institutions for collective action. As such, the creation of new institutions often goes hand in hand with the reviving of old institutions, and both are part of institutional transformations. Or in other words, things don't need to be entirely novel to contribute to transformative change: they can also be a about novel combinations of existing things or reinvention of old things in new contexts.

A key question here is: how do institutional transformations help to tackle the challenges of open societies?

Dismantling institutions. Dismantling of institutions is about the phasing out of (elements of) institutions that are considered undesirable. In the case of open societies, the focus is on dismantling institutions that reproduce and enforce power concentrations. In the case of renewable energy cooperatives, one can argue that the cooperative as an alternative form, inherently challenges the capitalist structures and power concentrations in incumbent fossil fuel energy companies. On the other hand, empirical evidence on the challenges of upscaling these experiments also shows that such inherent 'challenging' through demonstrating alternatives, is not sufficient. Monitoring of investment indicates that significant effects might only come with more pro-active and explicit dismantling, for instance in the form of divestment from fossil fuels that protest movements against the fossil fuel lobby.

In relation to the need for the dismantling of institutions, there has been an increasing interest for documenting processes of phase-out, exnovation and decline across various fields (in e.g. innovation, transition, organization studies). Therein there are many examples of institutions that are being dismantled or at least significantly challenged through e.g. several divestment movements regarding the fossil fuel industry and the weapon industry. At the same time, research continues to expose how several existing institutions in the above fields embed fundamental injustices and challenges to open societies.

Dynamics of institutional transformation. While the processes of creating, maintaining, reviving and dismantling institutions may occur partly in parallel, they are also entangled, and they may enforce or challenge each other. As such, the challenge is to study how different elements of institutional transformation interact with each other over time. Open questions concern how these interactions enable or impede more open societies. For instance, how does the creation of new democratic institutions like citizen assemblies relate to the maintenance, or the dismantling, of majority voting in representative democracy?

If we go back to the example of energy cooperatives, for institutional transformation it is not enough for the new institutions around energy cooperatives to be created, it is also necessary to maintain and implement these, to revive old institutions and to dismantle existing institutions so the underlying energy system is challenged, altered and replaced, which is centralized, fossil fuel based and embedded in an economic system of unbridled capitalism, overconsumption and extractivism. Such a transformative process does not necessarily need to be revolutionary, rapid or immediate. It could also be the case these energy cooperatives remain an alternative that coexist with other forms at the start and only replace the institutional systems around energy production over a longer period. As explained before, institutional transformation is expected to be a non-linear, long-term and complex process.

Institutional transformation is not a singular, coherent or linear process, but rather a combination of plural, non-linear and sometimes contradictory processes. For institutional change to be transformative, it is not enough to create new institutions, it also needs to (...) maintain existing institutions that still work, revive old institutions that deserve a second life, and dismantle old institutions which have become dysfunctional.

TRANSFORMATION FOR WHAT? TACKLING CHALLENGES OF OPEN SOCIETIES

Just like innovation does not automatically lead to transformative change, transformation also does not automatically lead to societal improvement. Institutional transformation, like any kind of transformation, is not inherently 'good'. As such, the question is not only whether institutional transformation is taking place, but also: in which direction are institutions being transformed? Or in other words, what are institutions being created, maintained, revived or dismantled *for*? And maybe even more importantly: Which institutions are worth creating, maintaining, reviving or dismantling when it comes to upholding open societies?

Here it can be useful to learn from fields of research that have explicitly focused on transformation towards specific normative goals. Examples include research on socio-ecological transformation and sustainability transition research, but also research from fields that do not necessarily use the same vocabulary, but in essence focus on the same types of questions, as they undergo a 'normative turn'.

A key question here is: how do institutional transformations help to tackle the challenges of open societies? In the previous section we identified five challenges: (i) Diversity and inclusion: the challenge of insufficient openness, (ii) Capture: the challenge of internal closures, (iii) Community: the challenge of open borders, (iv) Capitalism: the challenge of open markets, (iv) Global Plurality: the challenge of Western origins and universalism. For each challenge, institutional transformation could be investigated as either contributing or frustrating to address the challenge. That is where the IOS community could play a role, engaging in different types of scholarship focused on the emerging agenda prompted by the key question presented here. To do so, it seems crucial to unleash the potential of the many methodological approaches that could provide a fruitful avenue of investigation.

The question is not only whether institutional transformation is taking place, but also: in which direction? What are institutions being created, maintained, revived or dismantled* for*? Which institutions are worth creating, maintaining, reviving or dismantling?

ANALYZING AND DEVELOPING INSTITUTIONAL TRANSFORMATIONS FOR OPEN SOCIETIES

When analyzing institutional transformations, we can focus on various levels and units of analysis. There are many empirical questions about how institutional transformations are unfolding (or not). How, by whom, where, when and for which purposes are new and old institutions being created, maintained, revived and/or dismantled? Empirical research on the macro-structures as well as the micro-processes and individual agency behind institutional transformations helps to answer these questions, characterize institutions and compare them in time, across geographies and between sectoral contexts, and investigate how institutional transformations affect the behavior of different stakeholders, encounter sympathy or instead resistance, and so on. There is also a diversity of social, cultural, political, historical, economic and legal theories that discuss how institutions are, can, could and should be created, maintained, revived and/or dismantled, to reach desirable normative outcomes.

We often observe a certain divide between empirical and theoretical research, or between empirical and normative research. We feel that this divide risks being oversimplified, and also obscures the many connections across the divide. The empirical vs normative dichotomy does not do justice to the breadth of research questions that one can ask. In an earlier IOS Think Paper[3] Ingrid Robeyns provides a very useful framework, where she distinguishes a wide scope of different types of research questions: conceptual, descriptive, interpretative, explanatory, evaluative, prescriptive and predictive research questions. We cannot here – nor do we need to do so – discuss these different types of questions and how they relate to each other. But we do urge to take the full breadth of the spectrum of questions to bear upon the transformations of institutions for open societies, and explore the connections between them.

We also argue that any of these types of research (conceptual, descriptive, interpretative, explanatory, evaluative, prescriptive and predictive) can, and we argue, should, engage in a critical questioning of institutional transformation. Without arguing that every researcher necessarily should deeply engage with critical theory, we do emphasize the importance

3 https://www.uu.nl/en/research/institutions-for-open-societies/ios-think-paper-series.

of being critical when analyzing institutional transformation, in whichever approach one takes. Here *being critical* means to question whose values and interests are being served and taken into account in processes of institutional transformation, and whose values and interests are not. This is partly a matter of acknowledging and unpacking the political dimensions of institutional transformations, including questions on how and which power relations are being (re)produced and/or challenged in processes of institutional transformation. This includes critical questions like who is involved, and who is not, and which values are being normalized, and which are not.

Finally, going, beyond 'analyzing' institutional transformation, we can ask the question how academic research can contribute to the *development* of institutional transformations Deliberate initiatives are taken by actors and groups that wish to develop, i.e. enable, facilitate, organize or otherwise work on and with institutional transformation towards more open, pluralist, justice and sustainability. Academics can play multiple roles in these processes. Besides the analytical role as described above, they can also play more explicitly evaluative, prescriptive, experimental or pedagogical roles. There are also specific methods that come with these roles. They include futuring, participatory action research, scenario building, co-creation, community-engaged learning, mixed classrooms and many more methods for transdisciplinary research.

In fact, the distinction made here between analyzing and developing, also connects to the temporal dimension of analysis. IOS has built strong complementarities between reflections on the past (what can we learn from history?), engagement with the present (high quality theoretical and empirical research to make sense of current developments) and anticipations of the future (policy design, scenario development). These complementarities can also become synergies by connecting the different types of activities within thematic debates. For instance: how can history help to build future scenarios?

If openness is – at its core – contestability of existing ideas and power relations, then academics should develop perspectives which help to understand the university as itself a place where such contestations happen, or do not happen, depending on how open the institution is.

5 | Conclusions and Questions

In this position paper, we have aimed to re-think what it means to study open societies and their institutions, and how these are and can be transformed. We have offered a perspective for engagement, undoubtedly partial and bound to the expertise and worldview of the authors. Still, we hope that this paper serves as a source of inspiration and discussion for academic communities in IOS, Utrecht University and beyond. In this concluding section, we will first summarize the main conclusions, and then suggest three sets of tasks ahead. The first is about the IOS community, the second is about the academic community more broadly, and the third is about the university in relation to society and the public debate more generally.

MAIN CONCLUSIONS OF THE POSITION PAPER

We can summarize our conclusions in this position paper in three points. The first is about the challenges facing open societies; the second about the notion of open societies itself and its connection to various normative perspectives; the third about institutional transformations.

First, we have shown how the idea of 'open societies' is itself historically situated. It arose just after the Second World War, and since then it has meant different things in different time periods. Currently, we argue, open societies face new external threats, as well as a series of **internal challenges**. The latter are particularly vexing, since they throw into doubt the self-understanding of many within – broadly speaking – democratic societies. We have argued that these internal challenges should not lead us to reject the concept, but to renew it. We identified five of these challenges, revolving around diversity and inclusion, capture, community, capitalism and global plurality.

Second, we have argued that to deal with these challenges, it is useful to distinguish a thin and a thick notion of open societies. At its core, the notion refers to a very thin idea, i.e. that any system that is called open is **contestable**. In an open system, participants can contest ruling ideas and ruling power-holders. This leads to dynamism, pluralism and inclusivity. Institutions, understood broadly as informal and formal rules and norms, are crucial to organize the openness of any such system. However, to institutionalize openness in any sphere of society (whether in politics, in the economy, in science, in civil society…), this thin concept is not enough. A thick – or at least thicker – concept of openness is needed. To generate this, we argued, one or more additional **normative perspective(s)** is needed. To illustrate this, we chose to highlight five perspectives: democracy, well-being, justice, sustainability and the pluriverse. There are of course other normative perspectives, both within and beyond the IOS community. Understanding these different normative perspectives, and how they relate and manifest, is an important theoretical and empirical challenge for future research.

Third, we have argued that to confront the challenges facing open societies and to institutionalize such a thicker idea of openness, processes of **institutional transformation** are needed. We argued that institutional transformation involves both technological and social innovation, but that innovation is not enough. For institutional change to be transformative, it is not enough to create new institutions, it also needs to challenge, alter and replace existing power relations and structures. Part of relevant transformations is also to maintain existing institutions that still work, revive old institutions that deserve a second life, and dismantle old institutions which have become dysfunctional. In sum, we proposed to define institutional transformation as a combination of *creating* new institutions, *maintaining* institutions, *reviving* old institutions, and *dismantling* institutions. Finally, we argued that understanding institutional transformation requires various modes of inquiry, ranging from conceptual, descriptive, interpretative, explanatory, evaluative, prescriptive and predictive research questions, which also means involving a variety of methodological approaches.

QUESTIONS FOR THE IOS COMMUNITY

If our analysis in this position paper makes sense, we could use it within IOS to bridge and explore ongoing and future themes and activities within and across the platforms. First, we may ask how the work within and across the IOS platforms relates to our arguments in this paper. More specifically, we can ask the following questions:

- How is the **notion of open societies** defined and referred to in the IOS platforms, implicitly or explicitly, and to what extent does the thin notion of open societies in terms of contestability resonate across different platforms?
- How and to what extent are the **challenges to open societies** that we identified (diversity and inclusion, capture, community, capitalism and global plurality) recognized and studied? And how do these relate to other societal challenges that are identified and discussed across IOS?
- Which of the **normative perspectives** that we discussed (democracy, well-being, justice, sustainability and the pluriverse) are addressed across the platforms, and what other normative perspectives are relevant?
- How are different processes of **institutional transformations** studied, and what are the diversity of methodological approaches applied to study institutions and institutional transformation?
- What can we learn from IOS platforms about how challenges, normative perspectives and institutional transformations intersect, both on a conceptual level as well as on the level of specific institutions?

Asking these questions may be a way of taking stock of the expertise that we have in-house, theoretically and empirically, i.e. the state-of-the-art of IOS. At the same time, it can also be a way to identify potential research gaps and avenues for future research.

Second, our arguments in this paper may also be an invitation to ask reflexive questions about IOS itself as an organizational network and community. How does IOS relate to open societies, its challenges and normative perspectives? How open is IOS itself? How and to what extent are processes of institutional transformation ongoing or desired within and around IOS? In the successful development and consolidation of IOS and its platforms, it can become a challenge to remain open to new initiatives and ideas, and new people who want to join the IOS community. How can we think of new ways to prevent the closure of interpersonal networks, working paradigms and organizational forms, within IOS?

These questions also interlink with how IOS relates to other groups, both within the university (e.g. other Strategic Themes) and outside. How does IOS relate to societal actors, including citizens, local communities, NGOs, entrepreneurs and governments, ranging from more established to novel institutions, in addressing the abovementioned challenges, normative perspectives and institutional transformations? What different perspectives and framework do they have from which we might learn, are there insights that we as IOS can contribute to them, or are there overlaps and areas where we can collaborate?

Underlying these large questions, there is an equally pertinent issue on how these challenges, normative perspectives and institutional transformations could get a place in the education programs to which IOS is contributing. Education is one of the most important duties of the university and we hope the analysis here can also help bolster IOS' contribution to this educational mission.

In this paper, we have deliberately refrained from making practical suggestions on each of these fronts, since we feel this is part of a much larger conversation. We hope that on each of these fronts, the position paper can inspire new steps and help focus IOS' mission in the years to come.

QUESTIONS FOR ACADEMIC COMMUNITIES

Engaging with open societies as a research topic also has consequences for how academics do their work. During the discussions on earlier drafts of this paper, this was a recurring theme. At least two issues are at stake.

First, academic researchers relate very differently to the topics which IOS studies. This is obvious where the origins of such differences lie in disciplinary orientations, which naturally bring certain attachments to paradigms, theories and methods. Some focus on historical inquiries,

others focus on the future and undertake scenario-studies, some focus on laws and their interpretation and design, others empirically study causality in social systems or conduct more engaged action research. The challenge for interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary academic research into the institutions of open societies is for these differences to inspire and complement each other. This requires an open attitude to what others contribute to one's own understanding of a problem; and most ambitiously, to think about common research set-ups in which groups can work together to tackle challenges for open societies.

The various ways academic disciplines relate to normativity deserve attention here. The concept of an 'open society' is a normative concept, and its positioning in the title of the Strategic Theme is most of the time a source of strength and inspiration, but also sometimes a source of tension. It is a source of strength since it signals a commitment to **engaged scholarship**, addressing real-world social, economic and political problems which directly speak to many citizens, policymakers and people working within private and public organizations. However, this normative concept can also become a source of contestations and **tensions** in certain situations. First, when one engages with other academics who hold opposing normative positions – this will often be the case; after all, in this paper we have indicated that there are various normative perspectives with respect to the values and desired institutions of an open society. These can easily point in different directions. Second, tensions can arise when one academic takes a normative position, while another considers taking a(ny) normative stance is problematic from the start; since it is considered to be anti-scientific, given science's commitment to value-neutrality and objectivity.

Both tensions refer to long-standing debates in the social sciences and humanities. Academic communities that are committed to the notion of 'openness', like IOS is, are particularly challenged by these tensions. The danger is that – paradoxically – the commitment to 'openness' is itself seen (rightly or wrongly) by some as an 'ideological' commitment, a sign of intellectual closure. This is why we have placed so much emphasis in this paper on redefining how a thin notion of openness can (and in our view should) be combined with various normative perspectives. In general, we believe that academics should be committed to **responsible academic pluralism** in its study of open societies and their institutions. This means, minimally, that: First, those with opposing normative perspectives, or those with opposing beliefs about value-neutrality, should tolerate each other's stance on these issues, as long as a minimal level of openness within these stances is guaranteed. Second, academics should be honest and transparent about their normative perspectives (even if these focus on pluralism or neutrality) as a commitment to recognize one's own positionality.

When processes of institutional transformation are occurring all around us, whether we like it or not, which role does the university wish to play in those ongoing and future transformations?

But we hope for more than this minimal baseline. Ideally, we strive to make these oppositions fruitful, by ensuring that each academic is able to work from their own positionality and to sharpen their own position by engaging in academic debates with opposing viewpoints. Moreover, we would hope that all are able to work collectively on common research projects in which the work of one complements the work of others, so that the sum is greater than its parts.

By working in such modus with respect to our normative differences, we would exemplify what it is to live in an open institution, which is at the same time, a community. This is a second reason why we have highlighted these normative perspectives in this paper. Not just to show their variety, but also to stress that we need to debate them to come to carefully crafted ideas for institutional transformations that could resolve challenges for open societies.

QUESTIONS FOR THE UNIVERSITY IN RELATION TO OPEN SOCIETY

The notion of open societies is not a mere academic notion, but, as we have discussed, specifically geared towards real world societal challenges. As such, the conundrums, challenges and tensions that we addressed in this paper are not only a matter of academic debates, but also play a central role in political and public debates on the direction of our societies. This raises many questions on what the role of the university and its academic communities can and should be in that public debate. In this paper, we do not provide answers to all these questions, but rather propose our redefined notions of openness, in combination with a diversity of normative perspectives, and institutional transformation, as a lens for formulating specific questions on and to the university.

First, there is the question of how 'open' the university itself is, and which normative perspectives it embraces. The ownership and sharing of science are one of many themes therein. Debates around **Open Science** and what it means for the underlying new academic roles are ongoing. Utrecht University has embraced Open Science as a normative direction, aligned with the ambitions for the societal role the University aims to play. In fact, one could say the movement towards Open Science is itself an institutional transformation. It entails new institutions, including new norms for evaluating academic performance such as those given by the Recognition and Rewards framework, but it is also about maintaining old institutions, including scientific values of replicability and integrity, as well as dismantling certain existing institutions, including academic publishing practices that only serve extractive strategies of commercial actors. At the same time, Open Science also opens controversies and prompts academics to reflect and even oppose some of the changes that come with Open Science.

While the rise of Open Science is noteworthy and commendable, the question of openness in the university goes far beyond it. It also touches on how the university is organized and how decisions are made. How and to what extent are existing power concentrations at the university contestable? Which normative perspectives does the university want to apply to its own functioning, in terms of e.g. democracy, well-being, justice, sustainability, or other perspectives? How are processes of institutional transformations, within and outside the university, affecting its organization, and how and to what extent does or should the university aim to transform its own institutions?

Besides the question of how open the university is in itself as an organization and community, there is also the question of how the university addresses the challenges to open societies as posed by e.g. populist and authoritarian movements, big tech corporations, climate change and other forms of environmental destruction, as we discussed at the beginning of this paper. We have seen, over the past years and months, an increasing unease around the ways that the university deals with disagreements amongst its own community of staff and students on how the university should respond to global affairs, political turmoil and highly contested topics in the public debate, with Gaza, fossil fuel divestment and related protests being recent examples.

All this links back to the very notion of openness. If openness is – at its core – contestability of existing ideas and power relations, then academics should develop perspectives which help to understand the university as itself a place where such contestations happen, or do not happen, depending on how open the institution is. Rediscovering what it means to be an open institution is thus an important task. At the same time, in the same way that the thin notion of openness does not provide sufficient direction for society, as we have argued in this paper, it may also not be enough for the university. Hence, it is worth asking, for the university as for any other institution, which normative perspectives shape and should shape the university. And when processes of institutional transformation are occurring all around us, whether we like it or not, which role does the university wish to play in those ongoing and future transformations?

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