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The transition to a low carbon and sustainable economy represents a major transformation that can only be compared to one other comprehensive transition in modern human history: the industrial revolution. Like the low-carbon transformation, the process of industrialisation was above all an energy regime change. However, industrialisation cannot be solely reduced to a fundamental change in the energy system. The “global methamorphosis” towards industrial societies was driven by economic, cultural and social processes progressing at different speeds. Transformations are actually the result of “Häufigkeitsverdichtungen von Veränderungen” (Osterhammel, 2009), a concurrence of multiple changes. The non-linearity of far-reaching transformations becomes particularly apparent in the non-parallelism between the history of ideas and real socio-economic changes. The social, cultural and cognitive “software” of modern societies was already developed by the thinkers of the Enlightenment. The concept of “Sustainability” follows very similar trajectories. Against this background the concept of a social contract for sustainability gains relevance. It symbolises that the transformation to sustainability implies a fundamental realignment of societies, which requires the legitimization of their citizens. In the last part of his paper the author describes emerging pillars for the social contract of sustainability. An optimistic interpretation of these trends would be: although global emissions are still rising, in many societies the cognitive, normative and cultural conditions for a sustainability transformation are now being established.

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