

Grassroots Innovations, Concrete Utopias and Resilience Pioneers: Reconsidering the Academic Turn to Bottom-up Local Experiments in Sustainability Transitions.

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Despite claims and the acceptance of the necessity of trans-local and decisive action on socio-ecological challenges (at the level of civil society, for instance, recently by Fridays For Future) many of the sustainability interventions currently emphasized in different strands of academic sustainability transitions, environmental politics and governance literature tend to be highly local and experimental. Academics turn, inter alia, to urban bottom-up initiatives in transitions, including local food production and distribution networks, repair cafés, sharing platforms, eco-villages and transition towns in contrast to former emphases on the central role of trans-local markets, governments, multi-stakeholder processes or mass movements (e.g., Seyfang & Haxeltine 2012; Smith et al. 2014; Kallis & March 2014; Schlosberg & Craven 2019). The common denominator of the heterogeneity of perspectives on bottom-up local experiments is their framing as promising actors that challenge the unsustainable status quo and already contribute to sustainability transitions.

Although often presented as novel and innovative, the focus on the local and the experimental has been central to nature conservation and environmentalism since its very beginning. In this paper, conceptual in nature, we seek to make sense of the current emphasis on the local and experimental as well as to take issue with their positive framing as new hope for sustainability transitions. Are local experimental interventions promising alternatives to market-only solutions that do not work, governments and governance that do not act (sufficiently) or social movements that have too little momentum to effect a tack of change? Given the recurring emphasis on local experimentalism we historically contextualize the current turn to bottom-up local experimentalism and make sense of it as specific academic reactions to academic discourses. Therefore, following the historical contextualization we systematize the heterogeneity of hopeful academic perspectives and propose three ideal-types: the grassroots innovations, the concrete utopia and the resilience pioneers perspective. Considering the highly unlikelihood of up-scaling under current societal conditions, the argument we want to rehearse is that the heterogenous academic perspectives may rather react to diagnoses of specific academic discourses than provide promising solutions to socio-ecological problems: innovation to complexity; utopia to power relations; resilience to urgency.

We argue that a hasty normative imposition of local experiments runs the risk of blocking a deeper understanding of the resilience of unsustainability, which analysis is a necessary condition for the possibility of sustainability transitions. The isolated adressation of specific antecedents of unsustainability (complexity, power, urgency) lead up to specific but also to common academic blind-spots regarding the three framings of bottom-up local experiments. Beyond innovativeness (innovation), prefiguration and resistance (utopia) and a promising rallying cry and collapse preparation (resilience) local experiments may fulfill other functions in the current societal condition of sustained unsustainability, namely coping strategies of academic discourse and an attempt to revitalize authority in eco-political debates, retreat under the post-political condition, ecological distinction and experience of nature, community and the self.