

## Transforming Unsustainable Nature-Society Relations from the Bottom-Up: An Empirical Reconstruction of Scope and Limits of Local Experiments in Socio-Ecological Change

Back to the Future? European Progressions and Retrogressions

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In social-science based sustainability and environmentalism literature, local experiments in socio-ecological change (henceforth LESECs), such as food co-ops, repair cafés, urban agriculture, library of things, and eco-housing, are commonly presented as promising drivers for transforming everyday practices into more sustainable ones. LESECs are often framed as “grassroots innovations”; “concrete utopia”; or “resilience pioneers”, framings some of which seem to be more indicative of a commitment to pinpoint “signs of hope” for a sustainability transformation than to a close engagement with self-understandings “on the ground”.

In this paper, we take a step away from (normative) *ascriptions* to LESECs towards an empirical reconstruction of *self-conceptions*. Driven by the question of why “people do what they do” when they engage in and commit to given LESECs, we carried out focus group discussions with members of six initiatives in Vienna: a food co-op, an urban gardening initiative, a repair café, an eco-housing project, a tools library, and a collective bicycle rental. The material thus gathered was subjected to the analysis of social patterns of interpretation [*soziale Deutungsmusteranalyse*], that is, the social – as opposed to the mere individual – meaning-making that motivates and legitimizes given actions and engagements. The paper shows that the self-understandings on the ground differ, in part, considerably from the meaning and functions ascribed to them in some strands of the sustainability and environmentalism literature. We found out, among others, that transforming unsustainable nature-society relations that is often less important than the experience of community, self-exploration, as well as -optimization. We also found out that upscaling more sustainable nature society- relations to the societal mainstream was often less important than the creation of niches and alternative infrastructures that allow those who want to opt into more sustainable forms of life to do so without, however, seeking to actively interfere with or disturb dominant forms of societal reproduction.

The overall goal of our paper is certainly not to devalue bottom-up engagements with socio-ecological change. The point of our contribution is to challenge ready ascriptions to LESECs in (some) academic discourses and to invite a deeper reflection on the transformative scope and limits of LESECs, including possible societal function beyond the commonly ascribed function of transformation. Such an understandings strikes us a key to shift towards greater sustainability. All to ready narratives of hope alone, to put it bluntly, will not do.