

## Can we Experiment ourselves out of the Crisis? Scope, Limits and Blind Spots of Urban, Experimental Responses to Climate Change

**Call for Papers | International Research Workshop | 18-19 November, 2021**

[Institute for Social Change and Sustainability \(IGN\)](#)

Vienna University of Economics and Business

Department of Socioeconomics

Convenors: Margaret Haderer, Hauke Dannemann, Ingolfur Blühdorn

Confirmed speakers:

Harriet Bulkeley (Durham University), Cordula Kropp (University of Stuttgart)

John Meyer (Humboldt State University)

This international, 2-day research workshop is concerned with understanding, locating, and theorizing current portrayals of the city as a key laboratory for tackling social-ecological crises, climate change in particular. Urban, real-life experiments in climate-friendly living and producing are commonly presented as promising components of *environmental and climate governance*, as innovative forms and sites of *knowledge co-production*, and as hopeful signs of *citizen-driven, hands-on engagements* with pressing socio-ecological challenges (Bulkeley et al. 2019). “The promise of experimentation” (Evans et al. 2018) – prompt, genuine socio-ecological change by being radical in ambition *and* firmly rooted in real-life environs – is looming large. Smart cities, urban living labs, low carbon urbanism, civil society-driven niche experiments in sustainable living, etc. (Jong et al. 2015; Seyfang und Haxeltine 2012), all draw on the idea that experimentation can generate more liveable, prosperous and sustainable urban futures. Part of the allure of experimentation is the assumption that it is possible to scale up from an individual project to the city, other cities, a region, and megaregions through processes of *trialling, learning* and *rolling out*. Thus, the key hope attached to sustainability experiments situated in urban everyday life is that they do not stop short at locally bounded change, but usher in *systemic* change. Having become a “new normal” approach to socio-ecological challenges, climate change in particular, urban experiments in climate friendly social provisioning are embraced and endorsed by academics, no less than public, corporate, and civil-society actors.

Yet, to what extent does experimenting really pave the way towards fundamental socio-ecological change? What is the relationship between the need for “rapid, far-reaching and unprecedented changes in all aspects of society” (IPCC 2018) on the one hand, and the local, exploratory, and participatory nature of urban experiments on the other hand? May the proliferation of sustainability experiments also be conceived as a way of circumventing currently unpopular yet, from a long(er) term perspective, clearly necessary radical, political decisions? What are the functions of, and what becomes of the knowledge produced in urban laboratories? May situated, collaborative “deep leaning” (Brown und Vergragt 2008) not only boost shifts towards greater sustainability, as is commonly assumed in transdisciplinary research, but also serve the “sustaining of the unsustainable” (Blühdorn 2007)? To what extent do real-life experiments in socio-ecological change embody spaces, sites, and practices in civil society that challenge dominant ways of living and embody promising alternatives to the latter (Meyer 2015; Smith und Stirling 2018); to what extent have they so far merely expanded existing ranges of “lifestyle choices” in late modern, liberal-capitalist societies? How can alternative practices be put into policies (Shove 2014) that break with rather than prolong entrenched ways of social reproduction?

Are there, with view to the need for radical as opposed to incremental societal change in light of the climate crisis, any lessons to be learned from the handling of the coronavirus crisis?

With these questions, we seek to venture into new intellectual territory with view to “the promise of experimentation” in light of pressing socio-ecological challenges – a territory that this 2-day workshop seeks to explore. The workshop builds on and expands the [research agenda of the IGN](#) and embodies a milestone in the three-year, FWF-funded research project [Urban Experiments in Socio-ecological Change](#). It seeks to bring together the research fields of experimental environmental governance, democratic innovation and political theory (especially theories of and on decision-making/decisionism); transdisciplinary and post-normal science, urban studies, urban political ecology and environmental movement studies. Sounding out *the scope, limits, and blind spots of experimentation in light of pressing socio-ecological challenges, such as climate change*, is its main pursuit.

As was the case with all previous expert-workshops held at the IGN, the pursuit will not end at the 2-day workshop, but the workshop is a stepping stone towards a high profile Special Issue in a prominent peer reviewed academic journal.<sup>1</sup> We invite theoretically informed empirical studies and conceptual papers under three main headings:

The scope, limits, and blind spots of

- A) *governing through (urban) experiments* vis-à-vis the obvious need for *political decisions*;
- B) *situated, transdisciplinary, context-based knowledge co-production*;
- C) *(urban), civil society experiments* in socio-ecological change.

**Schedule for submitting abstracts** (350 words) and **full draft papers** (6.000 words):

**Deadline for abstracts:** April 15<sup>th</sup>, 2021

**Notification of acceptance:** early May, 2021

**Deadline for full draft papers:** September 30<sup>th</sup>, 2021

**Please send your abstracts to:** [jakob.werni@wu.ac.at](mailto:jakob.werni@wu.ac.at)

We’d like to encourage authors to explicitly state where they see their original contribution to the field and venture into new intellectual territory.

This event will be planned as a hybrid-event, that is, participating physically or virtually is possible. We have a preference for the former, yet are also considerate of the negative environmental impacts of certain forms of travel – hence the possibility of joining and contributing to the workshop online. What’s really important to us is a lively and committed exchange over the full two-days, regardless of how our invitees and participants join us.

If you have any questions, please contact Margaret Haderer ([margaret.haderer@wu.ac.at](mailto:margaret.haderer@wu.ac.at)) or Hauke Dannemann ([hauke.dannemann@wu.ac.at](mailto:hauke.dannemann@wu.ac.at)).

---

<sup>1</sup> For previous examples see: SI on new forms of social activism in *Social Movement Studies* (eds. Blühdorn and Deflorian 2021); SI on citizen participation in *Democratization* (eds. Blühdorn and Butzlaff 2020); SI on emancipation in the *European Journal of Social Theory* (eds. Haderer, Butzlaff, Blühdorn forthcoming).