

Experimentations

Pickerill, J. 2019. Experimentations, in Antipode Editorial Collective (eds.) *Keywords in Radical Geography: Antipode at 50*. Wiley.

Being experimental and experimenting in other ways of being is a central tenet of radical geography (Gibson-Graham, 2006; Harvey, 2000; Bell and Valentine, 1995). What constitutes experimental geography is contested and unlimited, and includes experimentation in methods, knowledge, practices, representations and with interdisciplinarity (Kullman, 2013). Yet across the many forms of experimentation is a common emphasis on venturing into the unknown, creativity, openness and on facilitating change (Gross, 2010; Paglen, 2008; Kerr, 2008). It is a “conscious mode of intervention ... a project to make others conscious of their ‘world-making’” (Last, 2012, 709) that seeks change beyond academia. It is a process of ‘learning by doing’ (Caprotti and Cowley, 2017). There is a joy in this engagement with the unknown, a creative risk, a hope, a play with surprise and a release from the strictures of conventional academic knowledge production.

There is often a distinction made between geographers conducting experiments or staging experimental interventions (experimental geographies), and the geographical analysis of already existing sites of experimentation (geographies of experiments) (Kullman, 2013). For example, geographers working on experimental urbanism (Evans 2011; Evans *et al.*, 2016; Bulkeley *et al.*, 2018) have often not set up these experiments themselves, but use them to explore the possibilities of alternative urban futures. Alternatively, creative cultural geographers experiment in collaborating with artists in new methods of representation and intervention (Hawkins, 2011). This distinction, however, is troubled by the way many geographers actively participate in a variety of experiments while not being the sole or lead author, and such experiments rarely being established primarily as an academic moment, for example, Paul Chatterton’s role as a co-founder of the LILAC eco-community in Leeds, England. Indeed, experimentation is often an explicitly more collaborative and responsive way of working, of being co-experimenters.

While some reject any focus on useful or productive outcomes from such experimentation, or argue that such outcomes will always remain unmeasurable, for many geographers the point of experimentation is to produce a noticeable change, even if the form of such change will initially be unknown and uncertain. Despite openness and surprise being an important element of experiment, without some clear intent there is “a danger of not arriving at anything at all” (Last, 2012, 716).

Experimentation has an uneasy history in geography, which is seemingly ignored and troublingly repeated by some contemporary geographers. There are worrying links between experimentation, exploration and exploitation in the colonial past of the discipline. But the quest to experiment, for example in exploration of urban hidden spaces, has led to accusations of unreconstructed notions of the white male macho explorer (Mott and Roberts, 2014). Equally there are ‘dark’ experimental spaces, such as refugee camps or concentration camps, and problematic notions of ‘testing’ subjects in such spaces (Kullman, 2013; Last, 2012).

If there is an interest by geographers in experimental interventions that enact societal and environmental change, then there has also been a particular focus on certain types of experimentations. Geographers have a fascination with how money, food, transport, energy and housing can be collectively done differently, with more attention to reducing environmental impact and facilitating social change. These have been explored through urban labs, community economies, community bicycle repair shops, food growing networks, community gardens, land trusts, co-housing and autonomous geography projects (Carlsson and Manning, 2010). These experiments are examined through attention to their new governance structures, planning processes, household infrastructures, collaborations, and social practices, which require “attention to the full range of bodies, texts and practices that constitute spaces of experimentation” and how they weave together (Powell and Vasudevan, 2007, 1790).

Common to these experimentations is an emphasis on the neighbourhood scale, the everyday, personal and collective action, often with the explicit intention that should such experimentation work then they can be ‘scaled up’. But experimentations are not limited to these often-urban neighbourhood places; they are also in online spaces (activist media), transient moments (music festivals and protest camps), and long-running rural spaces (eco-communities). Much geographical research has focused on small-scale alternative bundles of practices (such as local food growing schemes) that signal post-capitalist possibilities (Gibson-Graham, 2006). Yet research into eco-communities calls for greater attention to be paid to the interdependencies and interrelationships between the social, material, political, economic and environmental activities of these alternatives, and how they interconnect between places and scales (Pickerill, 2016).

Experimentations are not necessarily temporary nor spatially bounded; experiments overflow into their surroundings creating ‘complex cartographies’ (Davies, 2010) such that “an experimental intervention is necessarily a temporal-spatial one” (ibid, 668), and obsolete experiments will be replaced by new ones while others elsewhere will endure. Not only will these experimentations be embodied differently but “the body becomes an experimental site” (ibid, 668) where, for example, alternative food practices are engaged with. Experimentation is not limited to organised defined experiments, but encompasses the ongoing processes of experimenting with new ways of daily life, be that in response to changing personal circumstances or crises (Kullman, 2013). Crucially, there will be a multiplicity in how such experimentation is generated, experienced, understood and contested.

While many of these experimentations involve material changes, such as developing new infrastructures for growing and sharing food, they are social as much as material, often requiring changes to social practices, social relations and social expectations. Change often needs to be collective; a process of encouraging each other in shifting cultural expectations of what is acceptable. Understanding these social dynamics, particularly how people adapt and reconfigure what they deem acceptable and appropriate, is central to enabling transformative change. Indeed Caprotti and Cowley (2017) argue that there needs to be more focus on these subjects of experimentation.

With any experimentation it is vital to ask “who or what is really being transformed, and to what ends?” (Last, 2012, 710). Given the history of experimentation in geography there remains a risk that experimentation is about the privileged, heroic experimenter. This is evident in the experimental work of eco-communities, most of which have a

diversity problem and struggle to reach beyond a highly educated, white, able-bodied cohort. Chitewere's (2018) analysis of EcoVillage at Ithaca (EVI) detailed how the class and identity of its residents' acts to exclude differentiated others. Only those "with both the economic and social capital" (140), who have money but only work part-time or from home can join EVI. Seemingly subtle assumptions about participation, common values, lifestyle and food choices shape who gets to be part of eco-community experiments. There are important questions here about power, privilege and participation.

Yet some forms of experimentation, especially in cities, seek to turn all citizens into experimental subjects. Datta's (2018) work on smart cities in India contends that urbanism in the Global South can violently exclude subaltern others who are deemed to not fit into the experimental future city. Experimentation here is a form of neoliberal expansion rather than a politically progressive intervention for social change.

Even seemingly politically progressive experimentations can actually be built on troubling exclusions. What might initially appear as alternative forms of transformation can be built on neoliberal rationalities, reproducing neoliberal conditions that undermine their radical potential. Argüelles *et al.*, (2017) summarise such rationalities as a focus on individual responsibility rather than calling for State intervention, which in turn "might help to legitimize neoliberal attempts of disposing the State from its economic and societal functions" (38). This ability to retreat from the State is reliant on the "privileged progressive whiteness that permeate" (40) these experiments, an environmental and social privilege that enables such individuals to self-provide, self-organise and improve their quality of life. Absence of a critical analysis of privilege and power in such experiments means the broader political possibilities of transformative change are limited. There is a need, then, to be vigilant to the *politics* of experiments (Powell and Vasudevan, 2007) and to their *justice* (Caprotti and Cowley, 2017).

It is vital that geographers are vigilant in their construction of and/ or support for such experimentation. There is a tension here in the scale and temporality of what such experiments are trying to achieve, whether they are momentary interventions that offer temporary (and ultimately inadequate) solutions to 'solvable' problems, or whether they are tackling larger structural issues for which solutions are less immediately likely but through which, in the long run, more transformative and inclusive changes might be realised. There is also a tension in how crisis can appear to offer an opportunity for experimental innovation, given that crisis can often be politically manufactured to facilitate regressive change.

Feola (in his project 'Societal transformation to sustainability through the unmaking of capitalism') argues that geographers have not paid enough attention to the need to make space – symbolically, materially, temporally and spatially – for experimentation. Using the example of the need for space to experiment in degrowth, Feola explores the necessity to unmake, deconstruct, destabilise or displace existing capitalist socio-ecological configurations. Without adequate attention to processes of decay then the dynamics identified by Argüelles *et al.*, (2017) of apparent alternatives continuing to be built within neoliberal rationalities, are likely to continue. Unmaking does not, however, require the erasure of all that has gone before; rather it is a creative and generative process alongside acts of refusal, a material as well as a social unmaking. This is a dynamic open-ended process of destruction alongside creation, mirroring Davies' (2010) articulation of the spatial-temporality of experimentations folding into and over

one another. This process will likely be messy, at times personally contradictory, hidden rather than overt, but always generative.

Using this notion of unmaking highlights the need to understand better the failure of experimentations. Despite experimentation often being about understanding whether something works, is successful and has the potential to facilitate social change, the failure of experiments is too rarely discussed. Geographers have started to more openly talk about failure, and have sought to recast failure as a necessary part of the research process arguing that discussing such failures is enriching and ultimately productive (Harrowell *et al.*, 2017). Failure is integral to the process of learning, reflecting and improving. Yet disclosing failure remains an inherently risky act in the contemporary neoliberal university and is often avoided (Klocker, 2015). Indeed many geographers have tended to identify the positive possibilities for transformation in experimentations such as eco-communities and alternative food networks, rather than their limitations.

What is powerful about experimentations is their messy, unfinished, fluid and open nature, their unbounded, overflowing implications, but only if we also engage in what is not achieved, undone or remade. This involves staying with the mess, working with experimentations over longer timeframes and critically reflecting on failure, who is included, who and what is being transformed, and the experimental subjects.

Experimentations are multi-level and multi-dimensional, and they have particular spatialities and temporalities. Caprotti and Cowley (2017) argue that experimentations require some element of structure, of boundedness, a clear intent, beginning and end, and Kullman (2013) suggests that experiments need to be “controlled enough to hold together” (885). Yet geographers should also expand the notion of experimentation to include more open-ended, fluid interventions in ‘world-making’ which might be better positioned to tackle larger structural issues and therefore more transformative change. Experimentation allows the opportunity for change, a hopefulness in an uncertain world, but we must remain vigilant in ensuring such hope is reflected in practice and is not yet another form of neoliberal appropriation.

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