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Experimentalism and its alternatives: toward viable strategies for transformative change and sustainability

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ABSTRACT

Experimentalism's newfound prominence in relation to climate-change action invites questions—integral to this special issue—about whether it is capable of meeting the transformational challenges that societies face. Answers require greater clarity regarding what experimentalism is, and is not. To address this, I first conceptualize the available alternatives. Drawing from John Dewey's influential account, these alternatives can appropriately be understood as “absolutist.” I argue that both policy insiders' plans for carbon pricing and trading schemes and outsiders' radical vanguardist visions fit here, each offering the false promise of a singular correct criteria by which to formulate and evaluate strategies for change. By contrast, experimentalism can be understood as a rich and promising method. While critics often characterize it as modeled on voluntary lifestyle initiatives, which can readily co-exist within a larger unsustainable order, an understanding of experimentalism ought not be limited to individualized or depoliticized projects. Properly understood, I argue that it includes approaches that can be scalable and political in ways that might foster systemic change.

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Experimentation is not so much a choice, but an emergent phenomenon that serves to respond to some of the limitations of ecologically modernist approaches to environmental governance, which tend to presume that knowledge precedes action, that public authorities hold the ultimate capacity to govern, that climate and other global problems are ones of a common goods nature (rather than systemic and structural), and that we can continue to have a faith in (technical) progress and market mechanisms as the means through which such issues can be resolved.

Harriet Bulkeley,
“Climate Changed Urban Futures” (2021, 279)

[S]ocial movements remind us of the necessity for democratic experimentation... based on the conviction that we should avoid repeating past mistakes by seeking to advance our understanding of and experience in the world by changing our approach to acknowledged problems.

Deva Woodyly,
“#BlackLivesMatter and the Democratic Necessity of Social Movements” (2017)

[T]hey had no real way of knowing what the global economy was doing now, or what would happen if the central banks continued to fulfill their pledge to create and underwrite a massive infusion of money into the world. Carbon quantitative easing, CQE, was a huge multi-variant experiment in social engineering.

Kim Stanley Robinson,
The Ministry for the Future (2020, 344)

[E]xperimentation is key to the guiding ethos, part of a process [of] “feminizing” politics... [which] says it is okay not to have the answers ready-made, especially when the situations are contingent and complex. Figuring things out together is what municipalists believe cities are for and what democracy is all about.

Astra Taylor,
Democracy May Not Exist, But We'll Miss It When It's Gone (2019, 270)

The best we can do, then, is treat the struggle to move on the pathways of social empowerment as an experimental process in which we continually test and retest the limits of possibility and try, as best as we can, to create new institutions which expand the limits themselves. In doing so we not only envision real utopias, but contribute to making utopias real.

Erik Olin Wright,
Envisioning Real Utopias (2010, 270)

Introduction

What are we talking about, when we talk about “experimentalism” in relation to climate-change action? That question—more than any investigation

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of the efficacy or normative import of particular “experiments”—is the one that motivates my inquiry here. As the quotations above indicate, experimentalism and experimentation have been understood in wide-ranging ways—as pathways to social empowerment (Wright); a guiding ethos for a feminizing politics (Taylor); a basis for successful social movement organizing (Woodly); and a “huge multi-variant” process with uncertain outcomes (Robinson). As the quotation from Bulkeley highlights, it is also critical to pay attention to what experimentalism is reacting against: in this case, the failures of a modernist vision of efficient technocracy to manage the climate crisis effectively. As such, experimentalism can be understood as a largely unchosen response to the massive challenges posed both by these failures and the climate crisis itself.

This range of understandings may appear hard to reconcile with each other, but I suggest that many if not all can fit within a concept of experimentalism as a logic of inquiry and a method of social and political action, which I explicate and defend here. To be clear, this is not the only way experimentalism has been characterized and it is broader than the way this and related terms are often used in policy discussions about climate change. In particular, a concept of experimentalism as a logic and method includes far more than the voluntary, lifestyle “experiments,” and innovations to promote sustainability in “urban labs,” which are examined in other contributions to this special issue. Although it may seem abstract, I aim to demonstrate that conceptualizing experimentalism more broadly has advantages that can help navigate the thicket of claims about the sort of urgent climate-change action needed now.

The nature of experiments is that many will fail. We must be clear-eyed about this, while also recognizing that today’s failure may clear the way for tomorrow’s success. Moreover, it seems predictable that—as some contributors to this special issue argue—many experiments are limited by a smallness of scale and voluntarist appeal. My defense of experimentalism must not be equated with a defense of smallness or voluntarism. A more encompassing concept includes policies, practices, and movements that (also) can be scalable and political in ways that have potential to foster systemic change. While this clearly cannot offer a guaranteed pathway for transformative change, I argue that it is nonetheless the only viable conceptual category within which we can pursue the sort of transformations required.

To embrace experimentalism requires not only acknowledging this true breadth of the phenomena that are encompassed by the concept, but also recognizing the tragically flawed character of the alternatives to it. Grounding my analysis in the

philosophical pragmatism that John Dewey labels “experimentalism” (see 1988, 5), I also find that Dewey’s label for what *isn’t* experimentalism—“absolutism”—captures qualities essential to their character and helps illuminate commonalities across otherwise dramatically different insider and outsider conceptions.

Dewey’s contrast of the experimental with the absolutist reflects his conviction that an experimentalist mode of inquiry is—or at least should be—integral to democracy itself. Experimentalism disrupts fixed ideas and presumed, a priori truths, enabling a pluralistic array of climate strategies to be explored in a democratic society. In Dewey’s time, the prevalent alternative to this notion of democratic, experimental inquiry was characterized in meritocratic and technocratic terms. This view—one he often associated with the arguments of his intellectual nemesis, Walter Lippmann—was rooted in a faith in experts (what Dewey derisively calls “an intellectual aristocracy”) at the expense of the public, which was then disparaged, by those Dewey criticizes, as “an ignorant, fickle mass whose interests are superficial and trivial, and whose judgments are saved from incredible levity only when weighted down by heavy prejudice” (Dewey 1927, 204).

In contemporary climate-change politics, the discussion of experimentalism first seems to have emerged at the urban level (Bulkeley 2021 offers a valuable overview). As in Dewey’s time, it developed in reaction against an expert-driven technocratic discourse, this one centered on talk about complex carbon-pricing mechanisms in national and supra-national policymaking and in elite negotiations at international meetings. While the achievements of such policymaking have proven limited, the experts and other elites driving them have likewise often blamed supposedly ignorant masses for a failure that is more properly attributed to the self-interests and misinformation of members of elites themselves (e.g., Franta 2022; Alderman 2021). The association of experimentalism with urban projects is thus in significant part due to disappointment with policymaking and change at the levels of nation-states and global governance. The city is seen a promising “formative agent” that is more nimble and open to change; less beholden to special interests than the nation-state or international institutions (Dryzek and Pickering 2018, 124–125).

Following Dewey, then, I conceptualize “absolutism” and “experimentalism” as strategic alternatives in response to the climate crisis. Absolutism is reflected in elite-driven, top-down approaches to addressing climate change. If we understand a key challenge for social and political action to be the need to mobilize public support,

then absolutism can be recognized as having a very thin, and oddly apolitical, strategy for mobilization. The premise seems to be that the right ideas will win over those who need to be persuaded or that policies can somehow be imposed and implemented without too much resistance (note the passive voice here).

This is a chimera. In contrast to the uncertainty of experimentalism, absolutist approaches to climate change reflect what Dewey called the “quest for certainty” (1988). The quest can be very alluring, because it seems to offer assurance that some have the necessary understanding to predict outcomes of complex structural transformations confidently *and* accurately. Economists, rooted in a rational actor model of behavior, have often claimed to have such knowledge, something that helps explain their influence in policy-making circles. But other claims—rooted in a Marxist philosophy of history, or in certain and clear criteria for “the political,” or “true sustainability,” or “genuine emancipation”—have also provided adherents with the confidence that a particular form of absolutism offers a compelling alternative to the ambiguities and uncertainties of experimentalism. Yet this is a false promise. Consequently, the objection to absolutist approaches is not simply that they *are* top-down or elite-driven, nor simply that they are undesirable. After all, many have rightly argued that the climate crisis confronts us with undesirable choices. It is, also and crucially, that absolutism is unable to deliver on its promises of efficacious action.

Experimentalism, by contrast, can offer no such promises. Consistent with horizontalist approaches to organizing and polycentric forms of governance, it is not properly understood as a solution at all, but as a contested terrain upon which promising forms of action and change might emerge. There are possibilities—not guarantees—here. Approaches fitting this concept of the experimental may well compete against each other and politics will in part reflect this competition and struggle.

In the sections that follow, then, I first sketch and critique the contours of anti-experimentalist absolutism in relation to climate change. I describe two very different conceptions of absolutism; one rooted in a vision of global governance through a carbon-pricing regime and another in a vision of vanguardist transformation. In two subsequent sections I then unpack climate experimentalism and sketch three dimensions on which it has developed. In this way, I argue that we can understand climate experimentalism as a response to the normative, epistemological, and practical failings of both varieties of absolutism.

On climate absolutism

Climate experimentalism only makes sense as a conceptual category of action if we can also identify an alternative imaginary that is understood as *not* experimental. As I have noted, Dewey characterizes the alternative to experimentalism as “absolutism.” This captures important qualities of the two very different visions that otherwise might seem to have little in common. They share an instrumentalist self-understanding of their vision as a means to a predetermined end; both are elite-driven strategies premised on the assumption that they can know the unknowable and manage the unmanageable (Scott 1999). The first is the dominant insider’s game, reflected in multilateral negotiations over global governance and rooted in an imaginary of ecological modernization. The second is the position of the radical outsider, aiming to overthrow the system.

Global governance via global carbon-pricing policy

Climate experimentalism is often contrasted to an approach rooted in global climate governance. As Bulkeley noted, many manifestations of experimentalism emerged as a reaction to the perceived failures of both global and national climate policymaking. The latter has been the dominant approach of policy-making insiders. While I sketch its contours and key characteristics, I also trust that most readers will be generally familiar with it.

The quest for global climate governance has long been dominated by economists’ and policy-making elites’ imaginary of a grand system of carbon-pricing schemes—including carbon taxes, cap-and-trade, and offsets. Proponents initially cast these market-like mechanisms as innovative policy instruments that avoided the centralized, top-down implementation of so-called “command-and-control” regulations. Yet it has increasingly become clear that carbon pricing and trading is envisioned as a singular scheme to manage the climate-change challenge through further marketization (Leonardi 2017). As such, it is an absolutist project.

The markets envisioned require invention from the ground-up, with complex and invasive systems of oversight and management. The proclaimed contrast with schemes requiring strong state oversight and action thus is imagined rather than actual. Governance via carbon pricing also makes claims to be apolitical and technocratic. Again, this may seem surprising, given—for example—that global summits of world leaders are a prime venue envisioned for policy adoption. Yet even here, the idea that such a venue could avoid “politics” and suppress contestation is reflected in efforts to exclude messages that

are perceived as threatening to this aspiration. So, for example, at COP26,¹ climate-justice activists were allowed into the exclusive “blue zone” where leaders were meeting, but were required to remove t-shirts with messages deemed “too political,” such as “Climate Crisis = Colonial Crisis” (Lacroix 2022).

For roughly 25 years, until at least COP21 in Paris in 2015, policy-making elites regarded carbon pricing as either the only or the best and most attractive mechanism for addressing the looming climate crisis. It was not only at the core of global negotiations, but was presented as more politically feasible, economically efficient, parsimonious, and efficacious than any other policy approaches (Stokes and Mildenerger 2020). Actual experiences and empirical study should long ago have undermined this presentation, but have been dismissed as aberrations. After all, carbon taxes are still taxes—which are rarely popular in any political context. Cap-and-trade creates highly complex and exploitable markets. Yet its ability to mitigate emissions does not rest with trading in these markets, but upon the strength and continued downward pressure of its *cap*, which requires direct regulatory imposition and is therefore subject to ongoing tests of political will. While its *trading* component might lower costs of compliance, it also disincentivizes change in industries where carbon reductions are urgently needed yet more challenging (e.g., Lohmann 2010). It can leave poor and minoritized communities exposed to the worst public health effects of co-pollutants (Pastor et al. 2022). Carbon offsets, like medieval indulgences, can enable the global rich to maintain carbon-intensive lifestyles by shifting the responsibility to the global poor (Spash 2010, 188–189). Moreover, there is growing evidence that in practice, offsets are consistently misleading, miscounted, or manipulated (Foley 2021). In a climate-changing world, forestlands designated as offsets are also increasingly vulnerable to wildfire or other forms of destruction and therefore rarely offer long-term assurances required to actually offset carbon-emitting activity (Choi-Schagrín 2021). Other forms of offset also rely upon counterfactual claims about what would have happened otherwise, which both incentivize overestimates and are inherently impossible to verify (Lohmann 2005).

These problems and uncertainties have long been marginalized by the proponents of carbon pricing as nit-picking or politically naïve (for example, Komaroff 2020; Giles and Klein 2022). Yet the evidence for each continues to mount. The point is not that carbon trading can never reduce emissions from an existing baseline. It can. It is that—in contrast to claims made by its proponents—it is politically problematic to adopt and more so to

strengthen, highly complex to implement, prone to inequitable impacts and to corruption, and its ultimate efficacy is both contingent and highly uncertain. For these reasons, there is also little indication that it broadens or deepens public support for the approach over time (Stokes and Mildenerger 2020).

In both theory and in practice, then, a global system of carbon pricing is premised upon a set of fixed ideas and presumed policy truths, formulated by experts, that stand in contrast with an experimentalist approach. Among those supporting this sort of globalist policy, experimentalist approaches appear lacking in those qualities that define this imaginary: political feasibility, economic efficiency, parsimony, and efficacy. Yet the contrast can only be convincing if carbon-pricing schemes actually and consistently *do* demonstrate these qualities, something belied by decades of experience with attempted policy adoption and implementation.

Revolutionary vanguardism

The second approach that I describe as anti-experimental responds to the clear urgency of climate crisis by insisting upon a particular vision of total, revolutionary change to be implemented *now*. I label this using Lenin’s self-conception as the vanguard who lead a much larger revolutionary subject. For Lenin, of course, this subject was the industrial working class of capitalist society. In the case of climate change, the intellectual elite who envision themselves as the vanguard have recognized the urgency of the moment. But this apt sense of urgency leads them to the overconfident and ultimately incoherent conclusion that the crisis can be effectively addressed through a clear and certain course of action determined and implemented (only) by themselves.

Superficially, the vanguardist approach appears utterly different than the global carbon pricing-policy scheme. After all, while carbon pricing is the purview of policy-making “insiders,” vanguardism has long been the purview of revolutionary “outsiders.” While one might find a few vanguardists among the protestors on the periphery of a gathering like the COP27 in Sharm El-Sheik (Egypt), they would not be found in the literal inner sanctum among the policymakers negotiating the detailed rulebook for policy implementation. These differences are substantial. Yet vanguardism, in the Leninist sense, also offers an epitome of Dewey’s conception of “absolutistic” thinking.² Vanguardism presumes that the means to the end is both a priori knowable and known. It is, therefore, those who “know” this who are at the forefront and must lead the rest forward along what only they recognize

as the correct pathway. Here, I build upon David Graeber's (2003) insightful analysis and critique of vanguardism to argue that while its role in contemporary climate politics is only occasionally explicit, it is far more widespread as an underlying habit of thought.

Among climate activists and intellectuals, Andreas Malm (2020, 153) explicitly embraces the "ecological Leninism" that is at the core of vanguardism. He argues that this offers a "lodestar of principles" including "a predisposition for emergency action and an openness to some degree of hard power from the state." Following Lenin again, he describes his approach—and subtitles one of his recent books—as "war communism in the twenty-first century" (Malm 2020, 109). There are affinities, here, with proponents of what Geoff Mann and Joel Wainwright describe as "Climate Mao" who adhere to an unwavering and uncompromising vision of top-down transformation in the face of climate crisis (see also Dannemann's article in this special issue).

Yet even Malm wavers. On one hand, he uses the rhetoric of ecological Leninism to argue for decisive, immediate action. He explicitly echoes Lenin in asserting that it is needed "this very night" (Malm 2020, 150). Yet for all the challenges that Lenin faced, he was (more or less) in control of a state at the time he propounded "war communism" and he was convinced that he was the vanguard leading a specific, revolutionary subject. Malm acknowledges that neither of these conditions apply to the climate activists to whom he appeals. "All we have to work with is the dreary bourgeois state," he concedes (2020, 151), and while he also recognizes the necessity of a revolutionary subject that might constitute the followers of the vanguard leadership, he makes it clear that he is unable to identify them: "Where is that global subject? Who is it? Merely asking such questions is to weigh up the void in which we fumble" (Malm 2020, 174).

The recognition of the "void in which we fumble," compels even Malm to adopt a dramatically different tone at times. Here, the anti-vanguardist language of experimentalism creeps into his analysis. We must adopt a "plurality of methods" and "also experiment with ecological Leninism" (Malm 2020, 151 and 147, emphasis added). Moreover "there is no reason not to experiment with ecological Luxemburgism, or ecological Blanquism, or Guevarism, or indeed Trotskyism" (153). Indeed, Malm indicates a willingness to "experiment" with almost any strand of the radical tradition, so long as it lends itself to emergency state-based action. What this reveals is that today even an avowed Leninist cannot escape the recognition that certainty is a false promise; it was just this

certainty that was the foundation for vanguardism in an earlier generation.

In a recent critical engagement, Heron and Dean (2022) rightly argue that Malm's insistence upon immediate revolutionary action "evades the problem of revolutionary transition." Yet despite this criticism, they echo Malm in naming their strategy "Climate Leninism," emphasizing the necessity of a strong, revolutionary party.

More self-conscious in their attention to experimentation than Malm, Heron and Dean (2022) argue that the party must build upon and connect activities that include "tactics familiar to movement actors—blockades, occupations, marches, rallies" and "experiments in farming, urban gardening, and similar such survival oriented micro-initiatives." Coalitions must be "*composed* in and through shared struggles, acts of solidarity, and party-building... between Indigenous peoples, workers in the Global North, smallholder farmers and pastoralists, women, racialized communities, and other oppressed and exploited groups on issues of ecological, economic, and political significance" (Heron and Dean 2022). From this perspective, experimentalism and revolutionary transformation are not contrasted; the pathway to the latter must run through the former. Nonetheless, their insistence on centering Lenin's signature conception of a vanguard party, with the absolutism and certainty that form its core, stands at odds with the compositional and pluralistic approach that they advocate.

Despite Malm's rhetoric, and Heron and Dean's lingering appeal to Leninism, vanguardism itself might seem to be a relatively marginal approach today. Raised to a pinnacle in the early twentieth century and influential in the decades that followed, the vanguard's certainty was rooted in their proclaimed adherence to an orthodox Marxist teleology, and the conviction that they were therefore in possession of a singular, correct criteria by which to formulate strategies for change. This has been—for good reasons—the subject of criticism among both Marxists and non-Marxists. Consequently, it has been out of fashion in recent decades.³ Yet as David Graeber (2003) has persuasively argued, "(rather like the idea of progress itself, to which it's obviously connected), it seems much easier to renounce the principle than to shake the accompanying habits of thought. Vanguardist, even, sectarian attitudes have become [so] deeply ingrained in academic radicalism it's hard to say what it would mean to think outside them." It is in this ingrained and often implicit sense, I argue, that we can make sense of vanguardism's continued influence on many criticisms of climate experimentalism.

Graeber recognizes that Leninist vanguardism relied upon faith in the idea of progress, but argues that today it also shapes the habits of thought of those who have renounced progress' inevitability. As a result, the vanguardist habit can be recognized as more widespread than would otherwise be the case. One can presume to know the means to an end—confident in an absolutist relationship—without believing that the masses will be successfully led toward this end. One can be confident in knowing what progress *would* entail, without confidence that such progress will be achieved. This presumption is a powerful but underrecognized source of the critique of experimentalism itself. It is absolutism without revolution; vanguardism without followers or a rearguard.

If one is confident that only a vanguard *could* identify the successful strategic pathway to fostering a more sustainable society, then this becomes a basis for criticizing experimentalism—which cannot confidently identify any such strategy—as doomed to failure. This criticism transcends empirical engagement with the limitations of any particular experiments; here it is their experimental character itself that foretells their tragic inadequacy. Nothing in such an analysis requires a belief that progress will be achieved or that vanguardist strategies will or can succeed. Yet it is shaped by this habit of thought nonetheless. It requires only the more modest conviction that because only a vanguardist vision and strategy *could* succeed, experimentalism is bound to fail. In the absence of successful and effective vanguard leadership (which may be forever absent), true sustainability, genuine emancipation, or truly “political” action can never be achieved. It seems that all that is left to do is fiddle while Rome burns, cultivate our gardens, and “sustain the unsustainable” (Blühdorn 2007).

In this section, I have characterized the alternative to experimentalism as absolutism. I have argued that despite manifold differences, both the long-dominant insider approach of carbon pricing and the revolutionary outsider's vanguardist habit of thought should be understood as absolutist. Among their shared absolutist characteristics is a confidence that means and ends can be clearly and confidently specified in advance, that singularity and parsimony are vital to efficacious strategies for change, and that where these are lacking, we can be sure that failure will result. As such, these stand in opposition to experimentalism.

Reimagining climate experimentalism

The language of experiments and experimentalism comes to us from the natural sciences. Yet we must

not confuse the criteria or context of scientific laboratory experiments with the sort of initiatives and practices being addressed here. As Dewey (1927, 202–203) rightly notes, “[w]hen we say that thinking and beliefs should be experimental, not absolutistic, we have then in mind a certain logic of method, not, primarily, the carrying on of experimentation like that of laboratories... [but] that they will be... subject to ready and flexible revision in light of observed consequences.”

In characterizing the experimental as a “logic of method,” Dewey's argument allows us to distinguish an evaluation of particular initiatives that have been labeled “experiments” from an evaluation of the characteristics of *experimentalism* as a broader method of, or an approach to, social inquiry, political action, and change. The language of experiment is today often identified with proponents of discrete projects that tinker with socio-technical innovations in ways designed to promote green growth (see, for example, Exner and Struver; Kropp in this special issue). Understood in this tightly bounded manner, I have noted that experiments seem to some commentators to be an escape from politics and a retreat from hard choices. They might provide participants with a rewarding lifestyle, but it becomes impossible to imagine how they could lead to the sort of large-scale social and political change that could meaningfully address the climate crisis.

Criticism of the deleterious effects of such lifestyle approaches has been longstanding and advanced by many both in this special issue and elsewhere (Grover 2020; Huber 2021). Lifestyle approaches have been argued to promote individualization and the displacement of responsibility from the public to the private sphere (Maniates 2002), thereby reinforcing gendered and racialized inequalities (MacGregor 2016). To the extent that particular climate experiments replicate or reinforce these tendencies, they represent merely the latest in a long line of efforts to do so. When and where such criticism sticks, it compels the recognition that—even if successful on their own terms—these projects can readily co-exist within a larger unsustainable order and are thereby unlikely to scale-up to the magnitude of the challenges we face (e.g., Haderer 2020).

A related criticism is that experimental projects sacrifice strategic action to promote transformation in favor of a vision of prefiguration that allows participants to “be the change.” For example, a contrast between strategic action and the retreat to a seemingly more purist notion of a prefigurative community—allowing one to live consistently with one's principles in a fallen world—appears to motivate individuals and projects such as Paul Kingsnorth and the Dark Mountain Project.⁴ Such initiatives

can be self-marginalizing (Savini and Bertolini 2019). Criticizing scholars who present experimental projects as “promising ‘prefigurations’ of a more sustainable nature-society,” Haderer (2020, 3, 7) has argued that instead they “primarily expand existing repertoires of consuming, living, and getting around (mobility) rather than chip away at unsustainable dominant ones.” Yet experimentalism can do more than simply create spaces for purists to consume, live, and move in ways consistent with their convictions. It can also provide a “rehearsal” for needed changes that can be scaled-up.

Dan Swain (2019, 52) characterizes the sorts of experiments that retreat into purism as rooted in an “ends-guided” conception of prefiguration, in which “the ends of a given movement must determine its means in a direct and immediate way.” He argues convincingly that such a seemingly straightforward conception hinges upon the conviction that ends can be—and are—clearly known now and so one can read back from them to the means of living today (54). A commitment to living now in a manner consistent with these ends can thereby lead one to eschew any strategic approach that would pull one away from the purity of these ends, as in Haderer’s account. From this perspective, a tradeoff appears inevitable between efforts to “fight the power *or* be the change” (Swain 2019, 48, emphasis added).⁵ Yet, insightfully, Swain contrasts this conception of prefiguration with an “ends-effacing” one that “is open-ended and experimental,” and that he argues offers a more convincing conceptualization of this relationship (Swain 2019, 54; see also Dannemann in this special issue). Here, the presumed opposition between strategic action and prefiguration is itself broken down, recasting the ends being prefigured as “diverse and provisional. This allows it to stress the importance of experimentation” (Swain 2019, 57).

Swain’s analysis of prefiguration could lead to the conclusion that lifestyle initiatives that co-exist with and ultimately seem to sustain the unsustainable are not, in fact, appropriately characterized as experiments at all. But this would take us far from the everyday language used to discuss these initiatives. My more modest proposal is to recognize that such “experiments” cannot adequately encompass the conception of “experimentalism” itself and do not represent its most promising strands. As such, we must separate criticism of lifestyle experiments from criticism of the far broader category of experimentalism *per se*.

An exclusive focus on discrete, local projects that allow individuals to live in accord with an idealized vision is not inherent—or even prominent—in the idea of experimentalism. Instead, following Dewey,

experimentalism as a method or logic of inquiry centers framings that cultivate new forms of understanding, for social movements and political organizing, which aims to build alliances and draw in new constituencies, as well as new projects that operate both within and beyond the boundaries of state sanctions. All of these efforts can then be strengthened by networks that allow sharing of experience and ideas in ways that can enable each of the above to expand and scale-up. Rather than thinking of only one type of project as experimental, here experimentalism characterizes the iterative field of innovation, exploration, and relationship-building. Framed in these terms, experimentalism shares the orientation to transformation that Andrew Stirling (2015, 54) describes—in contrast to “transition”—as “involving more diverse, emergent and unruly political alignments, more about social innovations, challenging incumbent structures, subject to incommensurable knowledges and pursuing contending (even unknown) ends.”

Three dimensions of climate experimentalism

The breadth of climate experimentalism as I define it here exists across multiple dimensions. Recognizing experimentalism as, in Stirling’s terms, diverse, emergent, and unruly, it should be clear that these dimensions cannot be specified with analytical precision. Nonetheless, I will sketch three here. The first is scalar; experiments exist at a variety of scales from the local to the global. While experiments have often been characterized as alternatives to the failures of effective multilateral global governance, the emphasis in the 2015 Paris Agreement upon nationally determined contributions that rely heavily upon experiments and experimental approaches weakened this apparent dichotomy between the local and the global and between experimentalism and global policy ambition (Falkner 2016; cf., De Búrca, Keohane, and Sabel 2014).

One way that climate experimentalism can transcend parochialism is when experiments are networked across cities, regions, or nation-states. Matthew Hoffmann, in his 2011 book *Climate Governance at the Crossroads: Experimenting with a Global Response after Kyoto*, limits the definition of climate governance experiments to those that “cross jurisdictional boundaries of some sort... whether vertically (local-regional-national-transnational) or horizontally (networks of similar actors across boundaries).” As a practical matter, he argues, without this limit the proliferation of experiments would preclude the ability to capture a “reasonably coherent picture of experimentation.” Yet even then, he

was able to identify several dozen experiments that met this and two additional criteria (Hoffmann 2011, 18). Far from being constrained by localism, experimentalism has been described as “particularly well suited to transnational domains, where there is no overarching sovereign with the authority to set common goals even in theory, and where the diversity of local conditions and practices makes the adoption and enforcement of uniform fixed rules even less feasible than in domestic settings” (Sabel and Zeitlin 2012).

A second dimension upon which we can conceptualize climate experimentalism broadly is to recognize some of the most distinctive and effective organizing campaigns and social movements of the past decade as democratic experiments. While climate campaigns have rarely been characterized as experimental, Deva Woodly has drawn upon Dewey to apply the concept of democratic experimentalism to innovations in social movements in general and Black Lives Matter in particular. In *Reckoning: Black Lives Matter and the Democratic Necessity of Social Movements*, she asks: “What makes a citizenry both believe and act on behalf of the belief that ‘another world is possible?’ The answer is social movements” (Woodly 2021, 10). When they are successful, Woodly argues, it is precisely because their organizing is infused with a pragmatic imagination and fosters democratic experimentation (2021, 51, 54, 127; cf., 2017; for other works that demonstrate the breadth of Deweyan democratic experimentalism in this regard, see Honneth 2016; Sabel 2012).

One key innovation in climate politics over roughly the past decade has been campaigns to keep fossil fuels in the ground. Pipeline protests have been, particularly in North America, an important manifestation of this frame. Two prominent examples have been the campaigns to stop the Keystone XL and Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL) projects. The former emerged at a time when then-President Obama’s proposed American Clean Energy and Security Act of 2009—which had a cap-and-trade scheme as its centerpiece—failed to pass the United States Congress, and also in the year when international climate negotiations in Copenhagen collapsed. The pipeline campaign was initially dismissed by many established environmental organizations as a sideshow; insignificant by comparison with the national legislative efforts and international negotiations. Yet Kai Bosworth (2019, 585; 2022) has argued convincingly that what was initially marginalized ultimately transformed and revitalized the entire climate movement following these failures. He summarizes the change: “As these emerging anti-pipeline sentiments coalesced into organized opposition, mainstream climate activists

began to see this movement as ‘more capable of keeping carbon in the ground than lobbying efforts.’” The #NoDAPL movement—led by Indigenous water protectors on the Standing Rock Indian Reservation, but also drawing broad support and global attention beyond Indigenous communities—was distinctive in centering the leadership and experience of Indigenous elders and activists. Rooted in a conflict between the oil industry and Native sovereignty, the campaign drew explicit connections between the forces of climate destruction and colonialism that were not previously legible to many non-Native people (Estes 2019).

At roughly the same time as these and other anti-pipeline struggles were emerging, fossil fuel divestment campaigns also emerged, first on university campuses in the United States and the UK. Modeled after an earlier generation of anti-apartheid campaigns, these efforts have so far resulted in divestment of funds from the industry by major universities, numerous cities, and pension funds in the United States, several large foundations, and the Republic of Ireland. Scholarship has also shown considerable impact on political discourse surrounding climate change (Hestres and Hopke 2020; Mangat, Dalby, and Paterson 2018). As with pipeline protesters, divestment organizers were often dismissed as un-strategic purists, focusing on symbolic campaigns that lacked the potential for meaningful climate impact, and retreating to nurture their affective needs “to *feel* efficacious during times of relatively little progress on climate policy” (Hestres and Hopke 2020, emphasis added). It should be clear that these criticisms echo those directed at projects more readily described as experimental and prefigurative, as noted previously. Yet as Hestres and Hopke make visible, there is an ambitious strategic vision behind these efforts, one that challenges the industry’s social and moral license and builds “a form of counter-power: as a way to diminish the status of the fossil fuel industry and make it harder for it to conduct business as usual” (2020; cf., Della Porta and Parks 2013; Sardo 2023, 17–20).

There is much more that can be said about these and other recent efforts. But a relevant point is that both have experimented with new forms of protest and movement-building, targeting projects and decisionmakers in close proximity to those involved. While there are also differences, these campaigns are noteworthy for a strategy directed toward a new way of conceptualizing the goal to be achieved in the fight against climate change: *keeping fossil fuels in the ground*. These need not be self-consciously labeled as experiments in order to offer evidence of democratic experimentalism in the sense described by Woodly.

The movements were also disparaged for this reason, yet they are arguably more vibrant sources of action and possibility today than sclerotic policy proposals that often fail to distinguish between desired policy outcomes and feasible strategies for building support to achieve them. If the measure of strategic efficacy is a singular end that, if adopted, can directly result in driving a just transition toward mitigating the climate crisis, then these experiments will surely not qualify. Yet if we envision them as part of a broad, seemingly unruly, but nonetheless potentially transformational approach, then we can recognize their strategic significance as far greater.

A third dimension of climate experimentation entails the redefinition of *who* counts as an environmental or climate actor, and thereby a redefinition of *what* counts as climate-change action. Building new community connections and new constituencies are key characteristics of the previous two dimensions as well. But a sketch of climate innovation and experimentation would be incomplete without explicit articulation of this point. Questions of who counts and thereby what counts have been integral to environmental justice organizing for decades, and have more recently motivated the distinctive claims of climate-justice movements (Méndez 2020; Pellow 2017; Sultana 2022; Schlosberg and Collins 2014). Yet the example I offer here is chosen because of how superficially close it appears to the sort of local, lifestyle experiments that are often characterized as limited in their potential.

Cooperation Jackson (CJ) is an ambitious movement-building effort in the poor and predominantly African-American city of Jackson, Mississippi. CJ's projects include a community-land trust, an urban farming cooperative, a community center, and other worker cooperatives at various stages of development. As noted, the particulars of many of CJ's projects are likely to look familiar to scholars knowledgeable about urban "experiments." Yet CJ is distinctive in part for the level of ambition and vision that seeks to embed these cooperative organizations within a broader view of a solidarity economy and ecological relations (Akuno and Nangwaya 2017; Madeson 2022).⁶ It is also distinctive in that both leaders and participants in these ambitious plans and intersectional practices are members of marginalized and minoritized communities. CJ aims to cultivate economic opportunity, social and ecological reproduction, and mutual aid not as "lifestyle choices," but as urgent necessities of everyday life for community members most in need of them. As such, CJ represents innovation and democratic experimentation in terms of who counts as a climate and environmental actor and what counts as a climate or environmental project.

Conclusion

Understood in the expansive and multidimensional manner that I have sketched here, climate experimentalism is a necessary corrective to the lifestyle, purist, and therefore self-marginalizing tendencies that some commentators take as synonymous with experimental projects. In identifying the limitations of these propensities, we can pursue more ambitious, ends-effacing, and intersectional strategies that do not simply challenge the projects themselves but the character of what counts as experimental. Only then can experimentalism be properly understood as a plausible, political response to the normative, epistemic, and practical failings of absolutism.

In a normative sense, networked initiatives are not parsimonious or hierarchical and are often unruly, thereby challenging the top-down reliance upon elites that are integral to absolutist climate approaches. Epistemically, social movements and organizing efforts such as those to keep fossil fuels in the ground build upon diverse ways of knowing thereby highlighting the inherent limitations of absolutism's claims to know best. Practically, projects such as Cooperation Jackson open up new ways to conceptualize the climate crisis that connect in resonant and intersectional ways with the concerns of communities and constituencies that have often not been recognized as prioritizing climate actions.

Finally, I wish to be clear that there is nothing Pollyannaish in this redefinition and defense of climate experimentalism. Climate change works on its own Earth-system timeline, un beholden to human intentions or desires. There are absolutely no assurances or certainties in the possibilities of climate experimentalism, but it is an illusion to think that such certainties were ever available. By recognizing the false promises of absolutist approaches, it should become clear that experimentalism is the only viable terrain upon which climate action can be pursued. This terrain is expansive and contested, inviting questions about how to cultivate, identify, and scale-up strategies in the face of the daunting challenges posed by climate crises today. These are urgent and necessary questions to ask; I have suggested that many of the meaningful innovations and advances in climate action have been in response to them. Hope for a non-dystopian future relies upon continuing to ask, and upon the vibrant democratic experiments that can emerge as efforts to answer, these questions.

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Notes

1. COP 26, held in Glasgow in November 2021, is more formally known as the 26th Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, an international treaty that was originally agreed in 1992 and came into force in 1994.
2. As Dewey himself makes clear: “The disciples of Lenin and Mussolini vie with the captains of capitalistic society in endeavoring to bring about a formation of dispositions and ideas which will conduce to a preconceived goal. If there is a difference, it is that the former proceed more consciously. An experimental social method would probably manifest itself first of all in the surrender of this notion” (1927, 200).
3. Erik Olin Wright (2010, Chapter 9) offers a nuanced and insightful critique of vanguardism in his discussion of “ruptural transformation.”
4. Information pertaining to the Dark Mountain Project is available at <https://dark-mountain.net>. See also Smith (2014).
5. Here Swain is quoting the title of an article discussing this seeming dilemma in relation to the Occupy movement.
6. See also <https://cooperationjackson.org>.

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