

On Experimentation

Jenny Cameron

Please cite as

Cameron, Jenny 2015. 'On Experimentation' in K. Gibson, D. Bird Rose & R. Fincher (eds) *Manifesto for Living in the Anthropocene*, Punctum, New York, Chapter 15, 99-102.

In the 1950s, the American scientist Roger Revelle wrote that "human beings are now carrying out a large-scale geophysical experiment of a kind that could not have happened in the past nor be reproduced in the future." He was of course talking about our experiment with global industrial development and the release of millions of tonnes of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. As we now know, it is an experiment that is starting to produce disastrous consequences on a global scale. We have truly been playing with fire and it is increasingly evident that we have been burned. As a result many of us are going to have to make major shifts in how we live our lives or those shifts will be forced on us as the world changes and adapts around us. Whatever the case, the future is scarily unknown.

What role can social research play in coming to terms with a future in which the certainties of the past have gone and the future lies before us unknown?

If we are now living in a planetary experiment, perhaps social research could also take a more experimental approach. By this I do not mean the sort of carefully controlled experiment where we isolate and test variables to try and determine cause and effect. Rather I'm thinking of more open even playful forms of experimentation that would try out new ways of living in the anthropocene.

Such an approach would mean setting aside the idea of research as a neutral and objective activity in which there is critical distance between the researcher and the object of study. Instead, research would entail making a stand for certain worlds and for certain ways of living on the planet, and taking responsibility for helping to make these worlds more likely and these ways of living more widespread.

Despite the scariness of these times, this type of experimental research requires a hopeful stance initially as we look for glimmers of possible worlds and ways of living with human and nonhuman others, and then as we devise ways for our research to help make these glimmers stronger. An ethics of researching in the anthropocene therefore means not just foregrounding the realities our research is helping to build but attending to how our research methods might help to bring these realities into being.

These research 'methods' might involve working alongside others who in their everyday lives are trying out and experimenting with new practices for new worlds. This would mean forming the types of hybrid research collectives made up of the academic and 'lay' researchers that Roelvink discusses in this volume. Perhaps we might work with lay researchers to help articulate and delineate what they are doing by drawing on our skills of connecting and framing. Perhaps we might work with lay researchers to help sharpen and strengthen what they are doing by applying our critical aptitude in a generous and creative

spirit. Perhaps we might work with lay researchers to help broadcast what they are doing by turning our skills in communicating and teaching to new contexts.

None of this means that we have to respond to the planetary experiment at an equally planetary scale. The scale of these experiments by lay researchers may be small; and the scale of our academic research may be also small. And well may they stay that way, for the risk of things that are 'joined-up', 'rolled-out' or 'scaled-up' is that we replicate on a global scale the one approach or model—as we have done with the current economic and technological development pathway that has gotten us into this situation. Instead, let us respond to the planetary experiment that so many across the globe (human and nonhuman) are unwittingly caught up in by proliferating small-scale experiments that might offer multiple openings and avenues for new ways of living.

Let us also take to heart the idea that our research is an *open* experiment. Our experimental social research approach is not aimed at establishing and entrenching an end point and knowledge certainty. For a long time, the world will be changing and adapting around us, and we are going to have to respond and adjust. This understanding helps to take us away from the notion that our research has to be oriented towards determining whether things are a success or failure. Instead we will be experimenting in and with an ever-changing and uncertain world that is going to throw up surprises some of which will seem to stymie possibilities but some of which will offer new possibilities. As experimental social researchers these are the possibilities we need to be attuned to and responsive to.