



The Research Group

Cosmopolis Centre for Urban Research

has the honor to invite you to the public defense of the PhD thesis of

Deborah Lambert

to obtain the degree of Doctor of Sciences

Title of the PhD thesis:
Circular food imaginaries, policies and practices in Brussels

Promotor:
Prof. dr. David Bassens (VUB)

The defense will take place on
**Tuesday, February 7, 2023 at 14 h in
auditorium D.2.01**

Members of the jury

Prof. dr. Kobe Boussauw (VUB, chair)
Prof. dr. Nele Aernouts (VUB, secretary)
Prof. dr. Nel De Mûelenaere (VUB)
Prof. dr. Michiel Dehaene (UGent)
Dr. Aristide Athanassiadis (École Polytechnique
Fédérale de Lausanne)

Curriculum vitae

Deborah Lambert has worked for several years as an environmental justice activist in non-governmental organisations, focusing on the social and environmental impacts of the policies and practices of private actors, such as banks. She obtained her Master's degree in Geographical Sciences at the Université Libre de Bruxelles in 2016. She started working as a PhD student at the Department of Geography of the Vrije Universiteit Brussel under the supervision of Prof. Dr. David Bassens in 2018. She has published parts of her work in three scientific articles in international peer-reviewed journals.

Abstract of the PhD research

The aim of this dissertation is to study the place of circularity in new food policies, practices and imaginaries in contemporary cities and its role in urban transformations. Cities and urban regions have started to use the Circular Economy (CE) concept to develop roadmaps, programs, strategies and policies to deal with their material flows and waste. This includes the food sector which is targeted for both waste minimization and value creation. The food question and circularity have been converging at the urban level in policymaking, leading to new practices. Yet, with regards to the CE and food “little is known about their interaction in the transition to a sustainable urban food system” (Miret 2022, 2). Furthermore, at the urban level, debate fails to address the spatial and social implications of a CE agenda (Hobson and Lynch 2016). My research addresses these gaps by examining circular food practices in the Brussels Capital Region (BCR) with the lens of social imaginaries.

My overall research question is: **how are competing circular food imaginaries materializing in variegated ways in contemporary cities?** On the one hand, I want to understand which imaginaries are driving the BCR's recent food and circular policies and how its vision is supported by a range of practices and, hence, materialized in the city. On the other hand, I study six circular food practices to understand and assess their transformative potential. I am critiquing existing circular policies and practices and also investigating diverse ways of producing, distributing and consuming food in urban settings that incorporate circular values. I adopt a case-study method in order to understand what the role of circularity is, and how it is understood, mobilized and functioning in imaginaries, policies and practices. I combine field work and desk research, empirical data and theoretical concepts. This dissertation aims to articulate the material (practices and objects) and the cultural (discourses and imaginaries). To do so, I use a variety of methods and mobilize different way of speaking about imaginaries to find out what are these practices' “potential to drive real change through imagining alternative futures” (Roux-Rosier et al. 2018, 17).

So, how is it that ‘circular’ narratives have been acting as guiding imaginaries to marry on-going urban development agendas, yet appear as well to be able to imagine new ways of producing, distributing and consuming food? This research project demonstrates that CE imaginaries are multiple and co-exist in tension. While there is a dominant CE imaginary that is based on growth and the myth of decoupling that will get us nowhere near a just ecological transition, contesting CE imaginaries that need to be nurtured to expand appear at the margin. To foster the development of such imaginaries of common, degrowth and solidarity, autonomous food spaces need to proliferate and spread more widely.