

# Where the Energy Transition Becomes Real

Cities, Conflict, & the Right to Shape the Transition

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## Sets direction

Targets, principles,  
frameworks, ...



## Sets rules & budgets

Regulation, subsidies, taxes,  
standards, ...



## Carries the consequences

Disruption, conflicts, trade-offs,  
citizen pressure, ...



# Cities are the battlefield of the European energy transition.

Cities are where legitimate goals *collide*.

One challenge:  
**Decarbonising  
the building stock**



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- EPBD
- EED
- RED II



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# Decarbonising the building stock

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- EED
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- EPB/EPC methodology
- Energy taxation
- Subsidies
- Renovation obligations
- Minimal energy performance labels
- Support schemes



# One challenge: Decarbonising the building stock

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- Support schemes

- **How do we decarbonise buildings in neighbourhoods where space is already scarce?**
- Where can technical equipment go?
- What is acceptable on façades, roofs, courtyards, and sidewalks?
- How do we avoid solving one problem by creating another in public space?
- **Under what conditions should air-water heat pumps be allowed in dense urban environments?**
- Should HP be placed on front façades, rear façades, roofs, or inner courts?
- What acoustic rules are needed? what design rules are acceptable?
- When is an individual heat pump appropriate, and when is it not?
- **How far can cities allow exterior insulation when the public realm is already under pressure?**
- What happens in streets with narrow sidewalks?
- How do we balance insulation, accessibility, heritage, and urban design?
- When should façade insulation be allowed, restricted, or refused?
- **When should renovation be treated as an individual choice, and when should cities organise it collectively?**
- Should we move from building-by-building renovation to street-by-street or block-by-block approaches?
- How do we reduce repeated disruption, scaffolding, road occupation, and neighbour conflict?
- Where does collective organisation create more speed and less friction?
- **In which neighbourhoods should cities prioritise individual heat pumps, and in which neighbourhoods should they prioritise collective heat solutions?**
- Where does district heating make sense?
- Where should electricity grids be reinforced for electrification?
- How should the gas phase-out influence that choice? Who decides the sequencing?
- **In what order should cities organise renovation, heating transition, and infrastructure works?**
- Do we reinforce the grid before or after large-scale renovation?
- Do we open the street once or three times?
- How do we coordinate utilities, road works, and local disruption?
- **How do we ensure that renovation and heat pump policies do not deepen energy poverty?**
- How do cities avoid a transition that works mainly for owners with capital?
- **How do cities decarbonise buildings when the person who pays is not the person who benefits?**
- What can cities do in rental-heavy neighbourhoods?
- How do we avoid leaving renters trapped in inefficient fossil-heated buildings?
- **How should cities act when they cannot rely on abundant local renewable generation?**
- If cities cannot produce enough energy locally, how much more must they focus on reducing demand?
- How do renovation and heating choices change when local renewable potential is limited?
- What does that mean for the pace and ambition of building renovation?
- **How should cities use their role as owners or shareholders in grid and utility structures when building decarbonisation depends on network investment?**
- Are cities using their governance rights strategically?
- How should they respond to stranded gas assets?
- How do they influence investment in electricity infrastructure needed for heat pumps and electrification?
- **How can cities combine building renovation with adaptation to urban heat?**
- How do renovation choices interact with overheating risk?
- How do we align insulation, shading, ventilation, greenery, and public-space design?



**Conflict-poor**



**Conflict-rich**

*Where does the transition physically fit?*

**Conflicts of Space**

**Conflicts of Sequence**

*In what order do systems and works move?*

*Who carries the burden, and who gets protected?*

**Conflicts of Fairness**

**Conflicts of Scale**

*What makes sense in one policy framework may not make sense elsewhere*



# Conflicts of Space

1. Narrow sidewalks limit the potential for exterior insulation.
2. Compact housing makes heat pump noise a neighbour conflict.
3. Limited roof and land area reduce the potential for local renewables.
4. All infrastructure competes with another use of space.



# Conflicts of Sequence

1. A street opened twice is often a governance failure.
2. Building-by-building renovation multiplies disruption.
3. New public infrastructure is often stuck in a Catch-22.



# Conflicts of Fairness

1. The households most in need of renovation are often least able to finance it.
2. Renters often pay the energy bill without controlling the building.
3. A transition designed for owners with capital will lose legitimacy.
4. In cities, unfairness becomes political resistance.



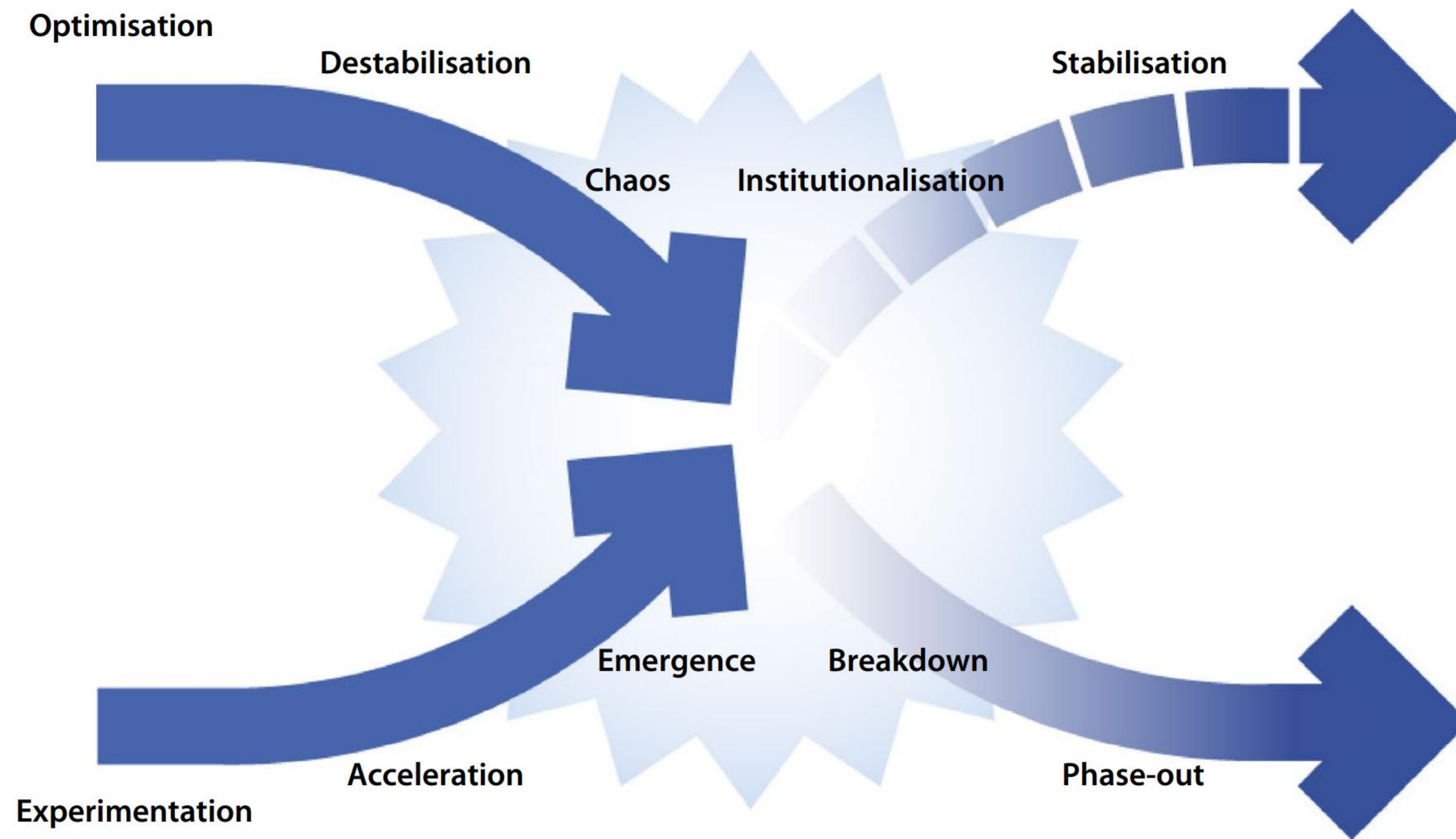
# Conflicts of Scale

Higher-level rules often fit cities badly:

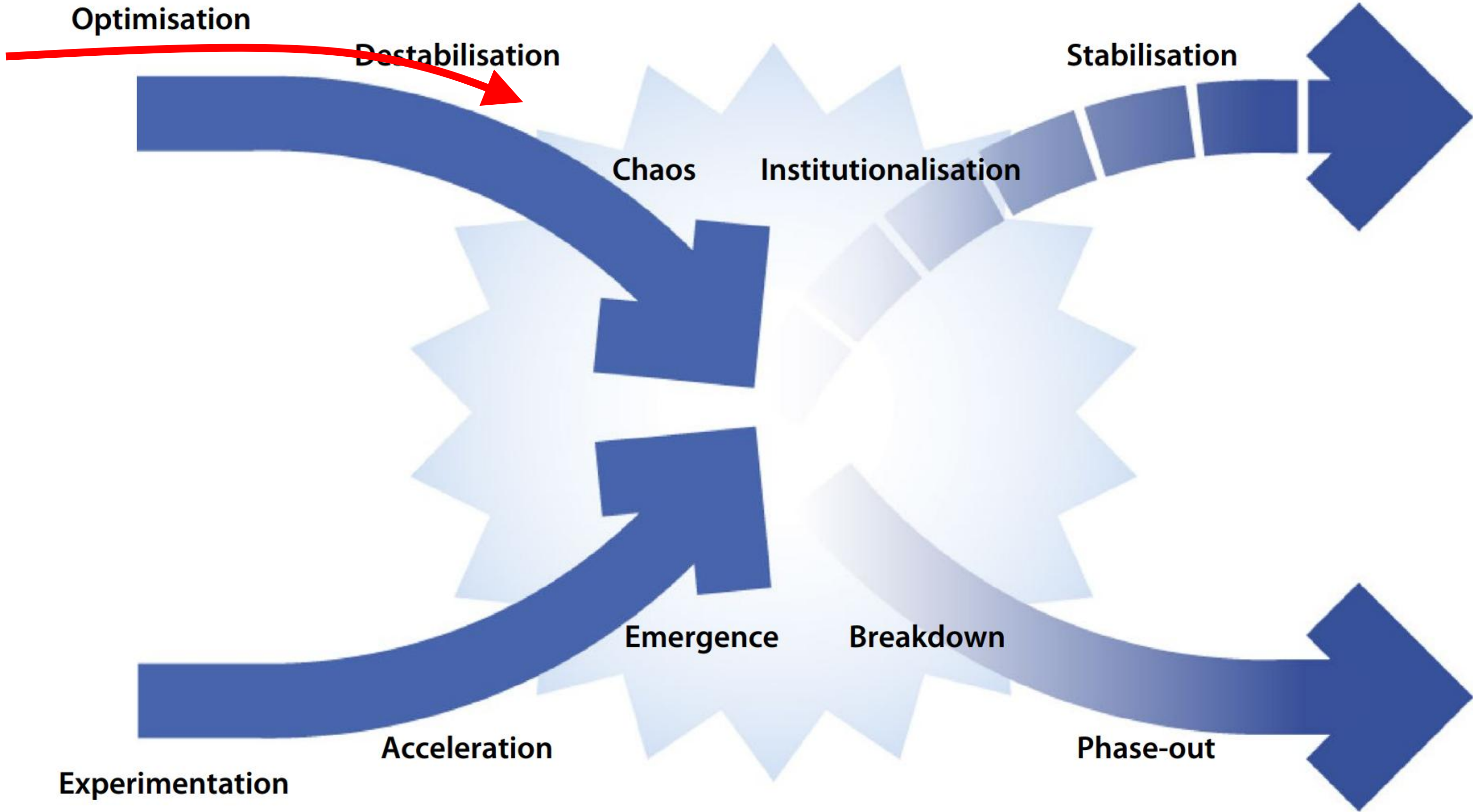
1. Regions/countries make policy failures too.
2. Policies designed around individual homes or private ownership fit apartment cities badly.
3. Cities with limited room for renewables may need different priorities, or targets.

But also local choices do not always add up:

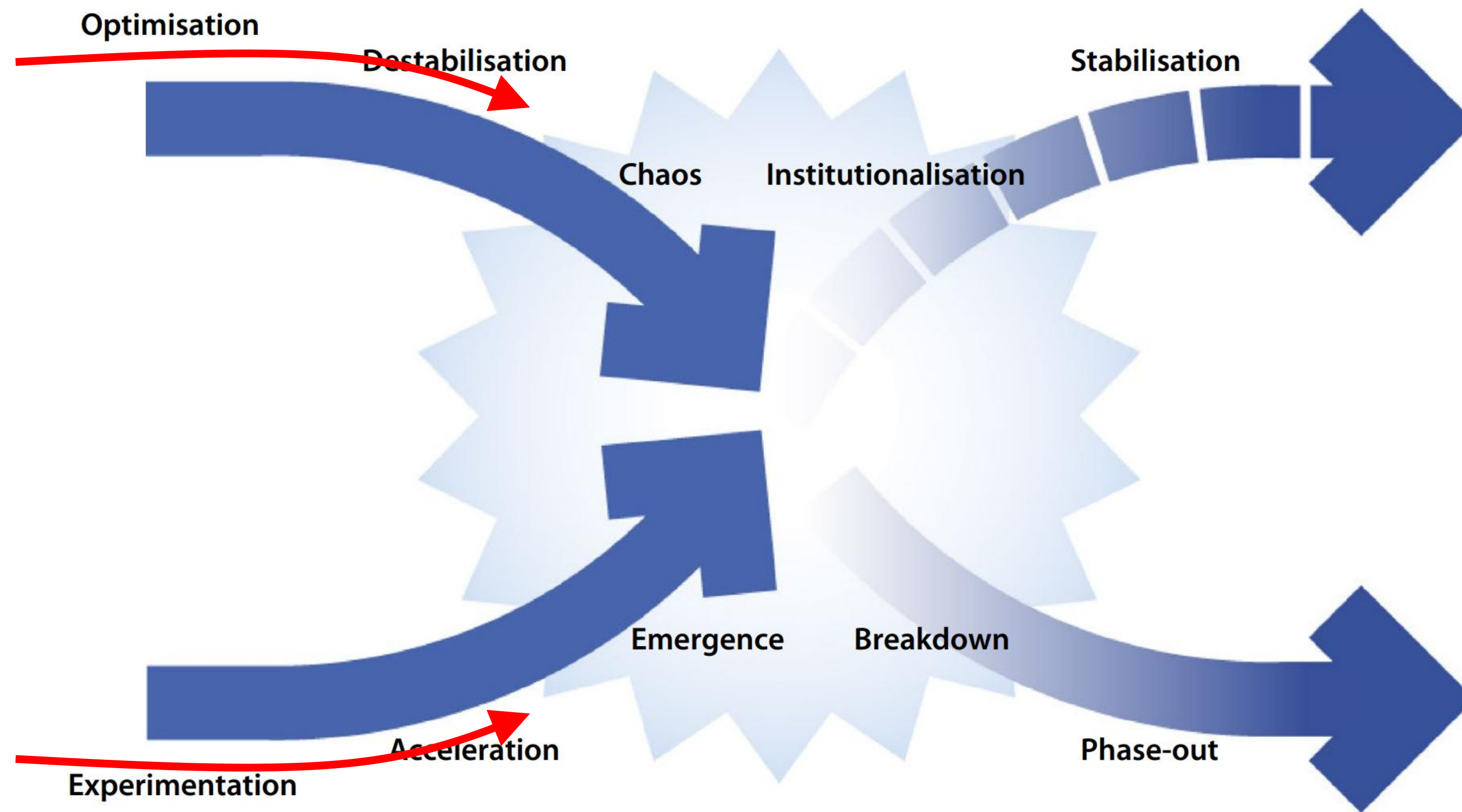
1. A solution that works for one building may fail when every building adopts it.
2. Individual heat choices can create collective infrastructure problems.



1. Focusing on *interim* objectives  
'doubles' the amount of work

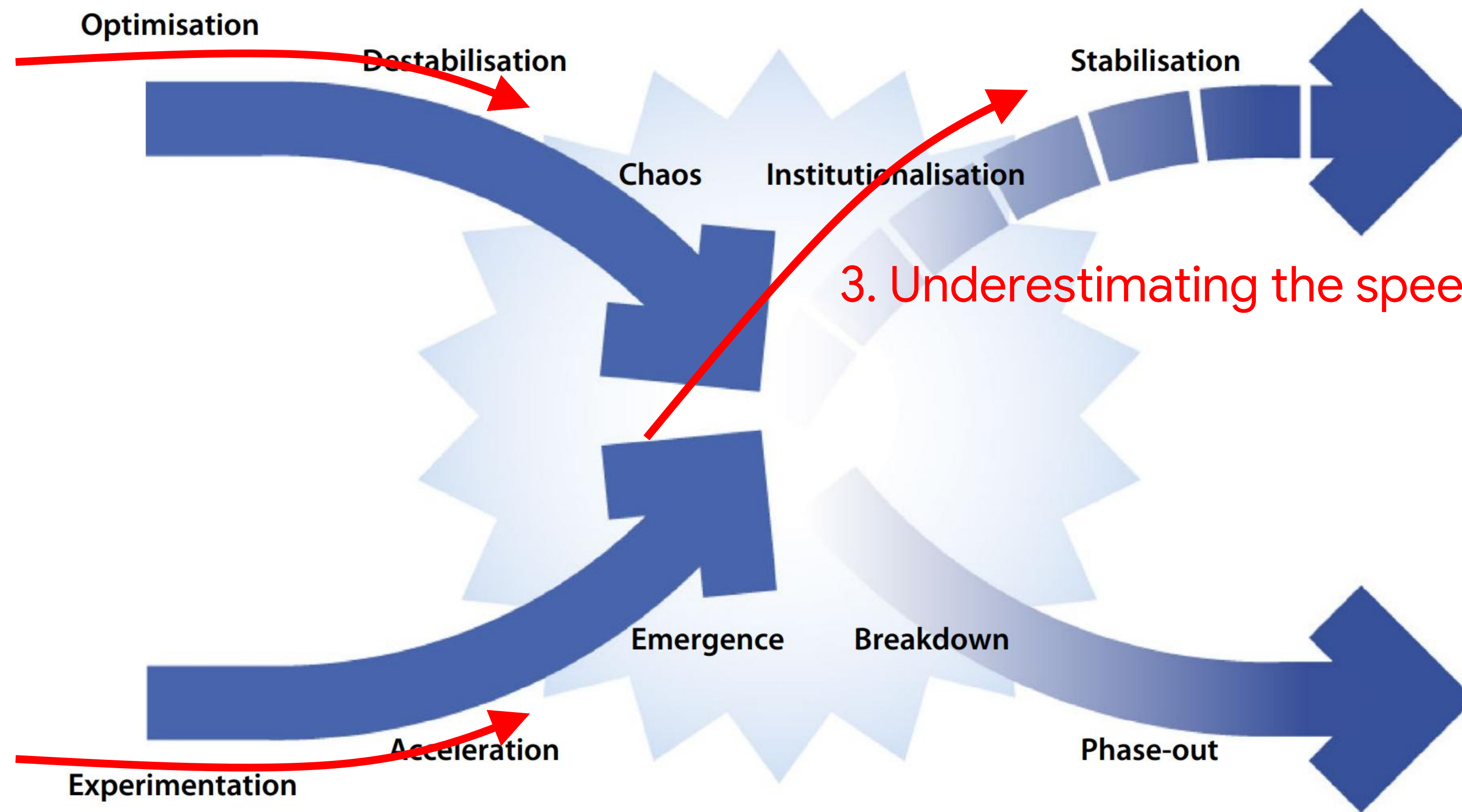


1. Focusing on *interim* objectives  
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2. Too much believe in *un-proven* solutions  
that are hard to scale

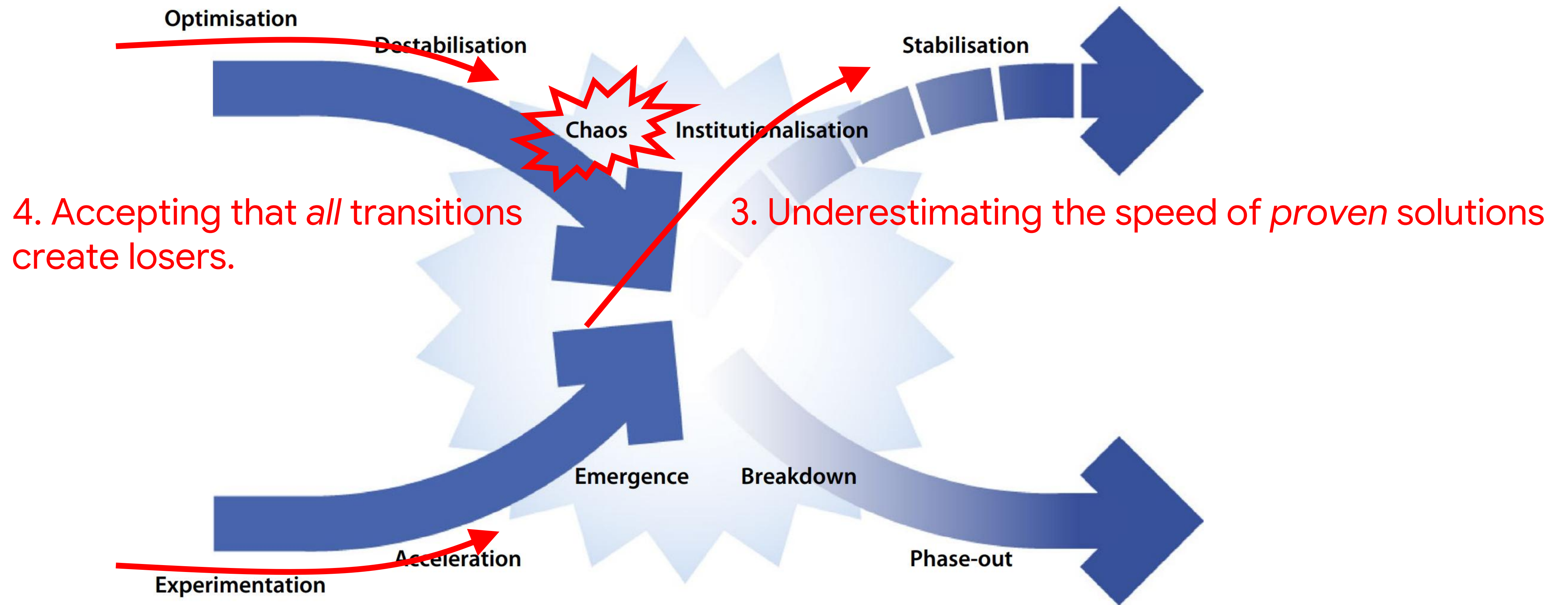
1. Focusing on *interim* objectives  
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3. Underestimating the speed of *proven* solutions

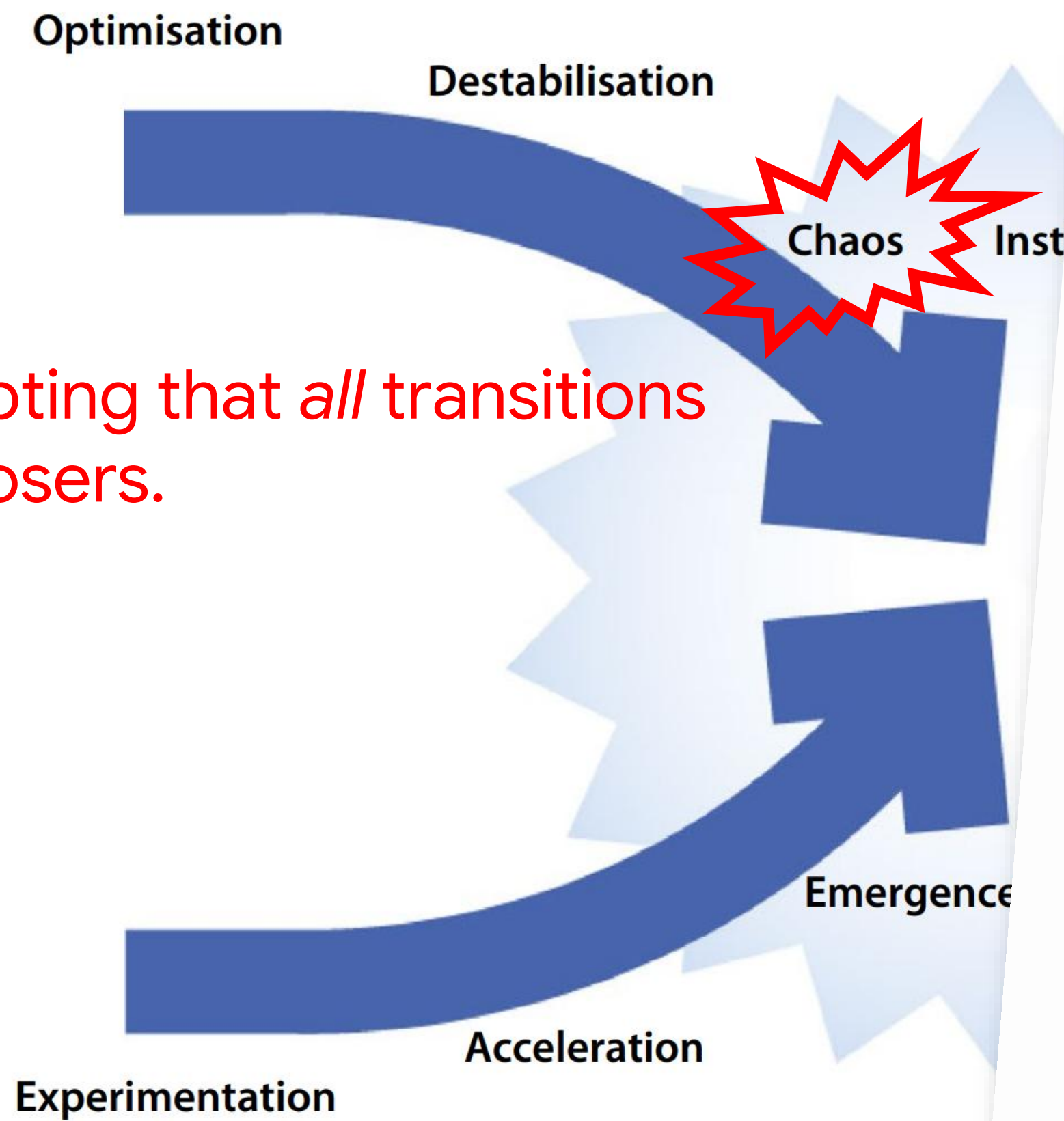
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4. Accepting that *all* transitions create losers.



*Keep in mind:*

The word 'priority' came into the English language in the 1400s. It was singular, and it stayed singular for the next 500 years.

*What kind of actor is a **city**,  
in order to act in and/or resolve all this?*

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in order to act\* in and/or resolve all this?*

Roles:

1. Exposed to risk, accumulating when remaining passive
2. Opportunities to create leverage when acting deliberately
3. Practical delivery

Mainly  
← Exposed to risk →

Mainly  
← opportunities for leverage →

Mainly  
← practical delivery →

Cities are a  
**shareholder**

Cities are a  
**democratic  
authority**

Cities are a  
**planner**

Cities are a  
**convener**

Cities are a  
**asset owner**

Cities are a  
**housing  
actor**



1. **Choose** a transition narrative that is honest about uncertainty, coexistence, and adjustment.
2. Set a clear public order of **priority**
3. Decide what kinds of disruption and inequality are politically (un-)acceptable



1. Decide which areas are primarily suited for direct electrification, which need hybrid or collective heat solutions.
2. Reserve urban space for the **infrastructure** of electrification
3. Use spatial planning to **sequence** load growth.

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1. Create neighborhood transition **coalitions** around bottlenecks
2. Decide where **pilots** on smart charging, local flexibility, energy sharing, thermal storage, or collective retrofit models should be run — and equally, where not to overcommit to immature solutions.

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1. Decide which rental-heavy, apartment-heavy, energy-poor, or co-owned segments need dedicated programmes.
2. Decide whether to create co-ownership support, default renovation packages, neighbourhood facilitators, or financing structures that make collective decisions easier.

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1. Use your own municipal buildings as leverage and demonstration for the transition
2. Use new and existing assets as seeds for optimisation and infrastructure to resolve any Catch-22



1. Force an explicit strategy for the coexistence and decline of gas
2. Use shareholder rights to push DSOs toward neighbourhood-level electrification planning
3. Push utilities to value flexibility as an alternative to pure reinforcement where appropriate



# Cities are the battlefield of the European energy transition.

Cities are where legitimate goals *collide*.

**Transitions** without conflicts don't exist.  
**Cities** without conflicts don't exist.

And that means the job of local leadership  
is not to *remove* all conflict.  
It is **govern** it.



**Sets direction**  
without pretending  
all are equal



**Create coherence,  
resources, & room for  
local differentiation**  
Recognise & enable  
cities as governing  
actors



**Shape priorities, sequence  
change, manage conflict, and  
make the transition legitimate  
in real places**  
Don't just 'absorb'

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