
THE TRANSITION MOVEMENT:

QUESTIONS OF DIVERSITY, POWER, AND AFFLUENCE

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1. INTRODUCTION

As the global economy continues to degrade planetary ecosystems (Rockstrom *et al*, 2009); as biodiversity continues to decline (United Nations, 2010); as climate scientists offer increasingly confident and dire warnings (IPCC, 2013); as peak oil arrives (Miller and Sorrell, 2014; Brecha, 2013); as fresh water and other key resources become scarcer (Brown, 2011) while population continues to grow (UNDSEA, 2012); and as financial systems continue to show signs of instability (Tverberg, 2012), the question of how nations around the world are going to 'transition' to a stable, just, and sustainable society is more pressing than ever. Things seem to be getting worse, not better, which calls for new thinking and new action, both at the personal and social levels, but also at the macro-economic and political levels. If early in the Environmental movement it was assumed that buying 'green' products, switching to energy efficient light bulbs, and taking shorter showers, were the 'lifestyle' solutions to environmental problems, more recent evidence firmly indicates that such measures are not working or are not going to be anywhere near sufficient, necessary though they may be. The extent of ecological overshoot is too great (Global Footprint Network, 2013). Furthermore, many promised efficiency gains that were supposed to flow from technological advances seem to be getting lost due to the Jevons Paradox and rebound effects (Herring and Sorrell, 2009; Polimeni *et al*, 2009), meaning that technology – the great hope of Ecological Modernisation – will not lead to environmental rejuvenation unless technological advances are governed by an ethics of sufficiency, not a growth imperative. Efficiency without sufficiency is lost (Alexander, 2014). But just as the planet seems to be reaching the 'limits to growth' that were anticipated long ago (Mill, 1848; Meadow *et al*, 1972; Meadow *et al*, 2004; Heinberg, 2011; Turner, 2012), governments and institutions around the world seem to be more focused than ever on 'going for growth' (OECD, 2013). This is the great contradiction underlying the attempt to achieve sustainable development by way of 'greening' capitalism: evidence is mounting that economies must give up the limitless pursuit of growth, but growth-based economies dare not consider this policy option, let alone implement it.

All this may tempt some to despair, but as Bertrand Russell (2009: 45) once stated: 'gloom is a useless emotion'. This mood of defiant positivity is in fact a defining characteristic of the Transition Town movement ('the Transition movement'), which is one of the more promising social movements to emerge during the last decade in response to the overlapping problems outlined above. Since its inception in 2005 (see Hopkins, 2008), the Transition movement has spread to many countries around the world (Bailey *et al*, 2010: 602-3), and is gaining increased attention from academics, politicians, and media. Defined further below, its fundamental aims are to respond to the twin challenges of peak oil and climate change by decarbonising and relocalising the economy through a community-led model of change based on permaculture principles (Holmgren, 2002). In doing so, the movement runs counter to the dominant narrative of globalisation and economic growth, and instead offers a positive, highly localised vision of a low-carbon future, as well as an evolving roadmap for getting there through grassroots activism. While this young and promising movement is not without its critics (e.g. James, 2010) there are some, such as Ted Trainer (2009: 11), who argue that if civilisation is to make it into the next half of the century in any desirable form, 'it will be via some kind of Transition Towns process'.

As promising as the Transition movement may be, there are crucial questions it needs to confront and reflect on if it wants to fully realise its potential for deep societal transformation. Firstly, critics argue that the movement suffers, just as the broader Environmental movement arguably suffers, from the inability to expand much beyond the usual middle-class, well-educated participants, who have the time and privilege to engage in social and environmental activism (see James 2009a; James 2009b; Connors and McDonald, 2010). While the Transition movement is ostensibly 'inclusive', in this article we examine this self-image in order to assess whether it is as inclusive and as diverse as it claims to be, and what this might mean for the movement's prospects. Secondly, we consider the issue of whether a grassroots, community-led movement can change the macro-economic and political structures of global capitalism 'from below' through (re)localisation, or whether the movement may need to engage in more conventional 'top down' political activity if it is to have any chance of achieving its ambitious goals. Finally, we raise the question of whether the movement is sufficiently radical in its vision. Does it need to engage more critically with the broader paradigm of consumer capitalism, its growth imperative, and social norms and values? Is building local resilience within this paradigm an adequate strategy? And does the movement recognise that decarbonisation almost certainly means giving up many aspects of affluent, consumer lifestyles? We do not expect to be able to offer complete answers to these probing questions, but by engaging critically with these issues we hope to advance the debate around a movement that may indeed hold some of the keys to transitioning to a just and sustainable world.

The analysis begins with a brief literature review, through which we offer a more extensive definition and history of the movement. After outlining some of the movement's defining activities and most attractive features, we offer a sympathetic critique of the movement along the lines outlined above, raising questions about the movement's diversity, its relationship to power structures, and the nature of its underlying vision. Our analysis draws from the academic and generalist literature, but it is also shaped inevitably by our involvement in and connection with Transition Coburg, a 'transition initiative' based in an inner suburb of Melbourne, Australia. All researchers have potential biases that may result from studying a subject from a particular viewpoint, but we feel that one means of being reflexive and transparent in this regard is for us to state our relationship with the movement from the outset. That is to say, we are sympathetic critics looking at things 'from the inside'.

2. OVERVIEW OF THE TRANSITION MOVEMENT

The concept of a 'transition town' originated in Kinsale, Ireland, in 2005, where Rob Hopkins, one of the founders of the movement and a permaculture teacher at the time, developed an 'Energy Descent Action Plan' with his former students from the Kinsale Further Education College (Hopkins, 2011: 20). The plan outlined strategies to respond and adapt to peak oil and resource scarcity in various sectors, such as food and agriculture, technology, energy production, transport, economics, and livelihoods. The idea of planning for energy descent at the community level was explored and developed further in the market town of Totnes (Devon, UK) and soon after in Lewes (East Sussex, UK), where Hopkins, in collaboration with Naresh Giangrande, fleshed out the Transition model and implemented it on the ground. The model spread to other parts of the United Kingdom and the world, and the notion of a 'transition town' was soon renamed a 'transition initiative' to reflect the diversity of places involved in the movement – not just 'towns' but also cities, neighbourhoods, suburbs, villages, schools, etc. (Hopkins, 2008: 136).

The Transition Network was founded in 2006 to 'inspire, encourage, connect, support and train communities' on their 'transition' (see Transition Network, 2013a). It reinforces the idea of self-organisation (Hopkins and Lipman, 2009), as its objective is not to centralise decision-making but to connect diverse initiatives in order to share experiences, knowledge, skills, and ideas on

best practice. As of September 2013, the network comprises 462 official initiatives, 654 non-official initiatives ('mullers') in over 43 countries (Transition Network, 2013b). According to its co-founder, Rob Hopkins, the Transition movement is based on four key assumptions (Hopkins, 2008: 134):

- (1) That life with dramatically lower energy consumption is inevitable, and that it's better to plan for it than to be taken by surprise;¹
- (2) That our settlements and communities presently lack the resilience to enable them to weather the severe energy [and economic] shocks that will accompany peak oil [and climate change];
- (3) That we have to act collectively, and we have to act now;
- (4) That by unleashing the collective genius of those around us to creatively and proactively design our energy descent, we can build ways of living that are more connected, more enriching, and that recognise the biological limits of our planet.

One of the primary goals of the Transition movement, therefore, is to catalyse localised, grassroots responses to peak oil (or the end of cheap oil) and climate change. More recently, the theme of economic instability is being introduced more prominently into the debate (Hopkins, 2011), adding to the original concerns about peak oil and climate change. The rationale for grassroots activity is that 'if we wait for governments, it'll be too little, too late. If we act as individuals, it'll be too little. But if we act as communities, it might just be enough, just in time' (Hopkins, 2013: 45). According to some commentators (Barry and Quilley, 2008: 2), this approach represents a 'pragmatic turn' insofar as it focuses on *doing* sustainability here and now. In other words, it is a form of 'DIY politics' (Barry and Quilley, 2009: 3), one that does not involve waiting for governments to provide solutions (Seyfang *et al*, 2010), but rather depends upon an actively engaged citizenry.

The paradigm shift of Transition is articulated around notions of 'decarbonisation' and 'relocalisation' of production and consumption. What this means in practice will be unpacked further below, but the basic dynamic is that decarbonisation is necessary and desirable for reasons of peak oil and climate change, and given how carbon-intensive global trade is, decarbonisation implies relocalising economic processes. As well as this, a central goal of the movement is to build community 'resilience', a term which can be broadly defined as the capacity to withstand shocks and the ability to adapt after disturbances (Hopkins, 2008: Ch. 3; Barry, 2012). Notably, crisis in the current system is presented not as a cause for despair but as a transformational opportunity, a change for the better that should be embraced rather than feared (Hopkins, 2011: 45). Consequently, the vision presented by the Transition movement is very positive, one that is 'full of hope' (Bunting, 2009: np) for a more 'nourishing and abundant future' (Hopkins, 2008: 5). Hopkins, who is by far the most prominent spokesperson for the movement, plays a crucial role in promoting such an optimistic message, while at the same time acknowledging the extent of the global problems and asserting there is no guarantee of success (Hopkins, 2011: 17). By doing so, Hopkins skilfully walks a delicate line: he openly acknowledges the magnitude of the global predicament, but quickly proceeds to focus on

¹ Within the Transition movement the inevitability of 'energy descent' is based on the general acceptance that fossil fuels will eventually peak and decline; that climate change requires giving up fossil fuels; and that renewable energy systems, while necessary, are unlikely to be able to replace fully the net energy production of the current fossil fuel industry. There also seems to be deep scepticism with respect to nuclear energy, or at least a pragmatic realisation that, especially since Fukushima, nuclear is likely to contribute a smaller, not a larger, part of global energy supply in the future. For these reasons combined, Transition envisions and plans for a world with less energy production and consumption, not more, which is another one of its defining characteristics (see generally, Hopkins, 2011; Heinberg, 2011; Trainer, 2013a; Trainer, 2013b).

positive, local responses and action. Whether his positivity is justifiable is an open question – some argue that it is not (Smith and Positano, 2010) – but it is nevertheless proving to be a means of inspiring and mobilising communities in ways that ‘doomsayers’ are unlikely to ever realise.

Many issues are included under the banners of relocalisation, decarbonisation, and resilience, which helps broaden the movement’s appeal (Bailey *et al*, 2010: 602). Indeed, ‘the Transition Network has sought to fashion energy scarcity into a general metaphor for ruptures between the spatially-joined but issue-disconnected world of globalisation’ (Bailey *et al*, 2010: 3). This turns energy descent into a springboard for the broader critique of globalisation and economic growth, both of which are arguably unsustainable in their current form and which oil scarcity may make ‘irrelevant’ (Bailey *et al*, 2010: 598; Hopkins, 2011: 33-34; Heinberg, 2011; Rubin, 2012). Through the lens of energy – which remains its focus – the Transition model nevertheless attempts to engage broader issues of power imbalances ‘associated with corporate globalism’ (Mason and Whitehead, 2012: 496), as well as issues such as individualism, atomisation of social relationships, social justice concerns about poverty and inequality, boom-and-bust economic cycles, financial crises leading to economic instability, and increased living costs and unemployment. Beyond climate change and peak oil, therefore, these issues are being used ‘as a way to open up discussion over scarcity and community economic resilience’ (Barr and Wright, 2012: 530), and positions the Transition movement as not merely an ‘environmental’ movement, but a movement that encompasses broader societal concerns. How successfully the movement takes on these broader issues is a question to be considered in more detail below.

When it comes to applying these broad ideas and concerns in practice, Hopkins (2008) outlines a 12-step roadmap that is intended to help communities start, grow, and run a localised ‘transition initiative’. These steps involve setting up a steering group, raising awareness about critical issues, developing visible practical projects, organising activities to ‘re-skill’ the community, and formulating an Energy Descent Action Plan. These steps, it should be noted, are fairly generic and demonstrate that the Transition movement does not propose ‘prescriptive solutions’ (Hopkins, 2008: 137) or a ‘one-size fits all’ approach, but rather constitutes an ‘open-ended experiment’ (Barry, 2012: 114) and a broad rethinking of ‘how local economies feed, house, and power themselves’ (Hopkins, 2012: 74-75). Hopkins’ *Transition Handbook*, published in 2008 (with a second Australian and New Zealand edition in 2009), was a milestone for the movement and provides some strategies on how to operationalise the Transition model. This text is supplemented in helpful ways by his *Transition Companion* (Hopkins, 2011) and the newly released *The Power of Just Doing Stuff* (Hopkins, 2013), both of which offer deeper insight into the achievements and challenges of the movement during its relatively short lifetime. While the apparently non-prescriptive nature of these texts can be considered one of their more attractive features, it could be argued that prescription certainly exists in these texts, only in implicit ways. Others (Trainer, 2009) argue that transition initiatives need to be provided with *more* guidance on the best strategies to adopt, not less, and that the questionable attempt to avoid prescription is actually harming the movement. Debates such as these are to be expected in any new social movement, and indeed we would suggest that such debates are both healthy and vital.

2.1. *Head, Heart, and Hands: Three Dimensions of the Transition Model*

As Hopkins (2011: 72-76) emphasises, ‘transitioning’ is both an inner and out process. Change is needed not only in the external physical structures, institutions, and organisations upon which societies rest, but also in our worldviews, norms, attitudes, and values. In recognition of this, the Transition model of change attempts to weave together the power of imagination, visioning, and storytelling, with the practical manifestation of these alternative narratives,

through the engagement of the head, the heart, and the hands (Hopkins, 2008). Below we explore these dimensions in more detail, as they are central to understanding to the movement.

First, the psychology of change underpinning the movement is worth highlighting, as well as the way the movement conceptualises and articulates inner change as an enabler for long-term outer change (Hopkins, 2011: 75). Transition recognises that the challenges of peak oil, climate change, and the shocks they are likely to bring, can seem confronting and even overwhelming. However, in contrast to some prominent approaches in the traditional Environmental movement, Hopkins contends that negative feelings like anger and guilt, or focusing on 'doom and gloom', do not foster change (Hopkins, 2011: 78; Hopkins, 2013: 41). Rather, the Transition movement draws on psychotherapy and psychology (including eco-psychology) to describe, understand, and support incremental inner change in people and communities, with the intention of leading to enduring behaviour change. For example, different communication strategies and activities are used at different stages, from raising awareness to taking action (Hopkins, 2011: 124). The movement also uses insights from Eastern religions and traditions around mindfulness, meditation, and the 'transformation of consciousness' (Prentice in Hopkins, 2011: 141) to learn how to deal with change in a positive way. These 'inner' efforts are part of the development of 'different self-understandings' and 'new subjectivities' that are required for the transition to a radically different society based on low-carbon living (Seyfang *et al*, 2010: 14-15; Barry, 2012: 99; Bay 2013: 180-190).

Second, Transition relies on 'unleashing' powerful 'expression[s] of imagination' (Sharp, 2009: 35) through positive visioning and storytelling. This is one of the defining approaches of the movement. As Chamberlin (2009) outlines, collective or cultural narratives shape our understanding of the world and our place in it, and in order to transition to a post-petroleum, localised society where 'small is beautiful', we need very different narratives and imaginaries than the one(s) we have now (see also, Barry, 2012: 99). Furthermore, as Pelling and Navarrete (2011) note, there are many elements in the current system that inhibit the process of 'conscientization' and reinforce the 'institutionalised status quo' by 'closing down imagination and discussion of alternative values and organisation' (2011: np). In this context, different collective narratives can play a role in 'questioning the inevitability of the neoliberal model' (Amin, 2013: 142) and opening up space for alternatives. This is what Transition does, or aims to do, by opening up new possibilities and story-lines in various ways, including sharing stories and experiences; developing 'Transition Tales' (a program based in Totnes for secondary students, Hopkins, 2011: 229-230); drafting articles, ads and cartoons for the newspapers of the future (see Hopkins, 2008; 2011), and visioning exercises such as 'what will the town/neighbourhood look like in 2030?' (Hopkins, 2011: 114-116). This promotes a holistic and 'whole of system' approach to the issues, while always focusing on local action, responses, and solutions. These initiatives tell the story of a future that will be highly local and situated, and speaks to 'a desire to reconnect with a lost sense of the importance of the place itself' (Cato, 2008: 92). But these stories are also about people and an 'untheorised sense of the goodness of humanity' (Sharp, 2009: 35), a sense of community, and social solidarity. In these ways, Transition is attempting to shift the current social framework, cultivating different cultural values and identities, and creating microcosms of hope and sustainability (Greene, 2010). Storytelling in transition is therefore about the 'possibility of change' (Cato and Hillier, 2010: 877) and transforming the story communities tell themselves about where they are and where they want to go.

Third, in addition to providing a space for reworking, negotiating, and assembling stories, identities and values, the Transition movement aspires to lead by 'practical example' (Hopkins, 2011: 73) and puts into action some of the stories and ideas coming out of the community. Hopkins (2011: 146) emphasises that the Transition movement should not be 'just a talking shop' and that 'practical manifestations' of relocalisation are essential to create momentum. As he notes, 'a transition initiative with dirt under its fingernails will gain credibility' and thereby

attract new people (Hopkins, 2011: 146). These projects also offer an opportunity for experiential and social learning, connecting or reconnecting with nature, as well as acquiring new skills. This 'Great reskilling,' as Hopkins (2011: 152-154) calls it, is an essential aspect of resilience building and developing local adaptive capacities. As a practical matter, food usually appears as an early focal point of transition initiatives, and many initiatives offer training in permaculture and organic gardening, cooking and preserving food (Hopkins *et al*, 2009; Pinkerton and Hopkins, 2009; Bay, 2013). Collective initiatives are also put together to encourage local food provisioning, with the aim of 'delinking food and fossil fuels' (Heinberg and Bomford, in Hopkins, 2011: 56) and promoting bioregionalism. For example, many transition initiatives try to set up a community garden/allotment or a veggie box scheme, organise an urban farmers' market, as well as fruit tree and nut tree planting days, seed banks, and seed swap days. These are merely illustrations of the broader attempt to build resilience and decarbonise the economy, and ultimately to fundamentally restructure the economy to support localisation and better promote social and ecological justice. Other transition activities include: establishing local currencies (Longhurst, 2012) and community owned renewable energy companies; organising carpooling schemes, car-free days, educational films nights, bicycle or sewing workshops and cooperatives, and workshops on energy efficiency in the home and workplace (Hopkins, 2011; 2013). According to the transition literature, these projects and the process involved should be fun, enjoyable, convivial, 'playful and unthreatening' (Hopkins, 2011: 149). This relentlessly positive discourse may be problematic given the extent of change needed and the likely resistance of existing organisations and powers in place, but as a definitional matter, positivity in the face of challenges is a central characteristic of the movement.

Overall, the Transition movement aims to catalyse deep societal change through envisioning a different, post-carbon collective story for a community and taking steps towards realising it. To the extent that the movement attempts to create new meanings, identities and subjectivities beyond the dominant socio-cultural paradigm, it fits within the conceptualisation of new social movements (Barry and Quilley, 2008: 21-24; Seyfang *et al*, 2010: 14-15) and given that it is a prominent and promising social movement in response to peak oil and climate change, it deserves critical attention. As noted in the introduction, there are obstacles and limitations to the Transition model and they should not be underestimated. The movement is still relatively small and young and, according to some commentators, transition initiatives mainly attract the usual suspects (see an example of this in Smith, 2011) who have 'the resources and leisure to be open to radical thinking' (Cato, 2008: 95). Furthermore, 'doing' Transition often turns out to be more difficult than expected for various reasons, including lack of funding (hence the reliance on volunteers), difficulty mobilising people and building momentum for action (Seyfang, 2009; Seyfang and Haxeltine 2012), and adapting the model to larger scales and urban settings (see Taylor, 2012; North and Longhurst, 2013 and Hopkins, 2013: 74-75 addressing the issue of scale). In the remainder of this article we explore some of these issues from a more critical perspective.

3. DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION: TRANSITION FOR WHOM? BY WHOM?

The Transition movement explicitly advocates collective, community-based action and an inclusive approach to building resilience. Inclusion is the second 'principle' of Transition (see Hopkins, 2009: 144). Diversity is one of the key characteristics of resilience (Walker and Salt 2006) and permaculture ('use and value diversity' Hopkins, 2009: 142), both of which are major underpinnings of the movement. The rhetoric of community in social movements is not new, but there have long been criticisms that the Environmental movement, in particular, has not lived up to that rhetoric and that it has instead been somewhat insular and 'middle-class'. The suggestion is that caring for the environment is a privilege that generally only arises once the struggle for basic necessities has been won. Whether that is a valid characterisation of the

broader Environmental movement is a question we leave to one side (Martinez-Alier, 1995), but we do wish to explore the question of whether the Transition movement is just another 'pleasurable, leisure based community movement' (James, 2009a: 19) and an expression of 'bourgeois community resilience' (James, 2009b: 15), as some of its critics, often from the political left, assert (see Trapeze Collective, 2008). We contend that the reality of what Mason and Whitehead (2012: 511) call 'inclusive localism' is more complex than that, although the danger is real that the Transition movement may end up as little more than an exclusive middle-class club for nice, comfortable people who already have the resources and options to adapt. Empirically, little research has been conducted on the demographics of the Transition movement, with some notable exceptions. For example, the surveys of Transition coordinators and participants conducted by Seyfang (2009) and Seyfang and Haxeltine (2012: 388) confirm the stereotypes of primarily white, highly educated, 'postmaterialists' who already are environmentally conscious. If this is so, what are the implications of this? And what, if anything, can the movement do about expanding its demographic reach?

It is worth noting that the movement is demonstrating a level of transparency and reflexivity around this issue, and its 'leaders' have acknowledged the challenge of 'extending the transition movement's outreach beyond the demographic silo of middle-class pro-environmentalists' (Bailey, Hopkins and Wilson, 2010: 601). They have started addressing it through the appointment of a 'diversity coordinator' in 2010 and the launch of a 'diversity plan' and a 'diversity and social justice newsletter', and while this initiative ended in 2011 because of a lack of funding (Transition Network, 2011), these themes remain present. Additionally, there has been some discussion around what the right means of communication and marketing should be in order to target as many people as possible. This is reflected in the shift of rhetoric in the *Transition Companion* (Hopkins, 2011) and *the Power of Just Doing Stuff* (Hopkins, 2013) that both emphasise economic instability and crisis a lot more than the original *Handbook* (Hopkins, 2008). The intended message is sufficiently clear: getting involved in transition is fun, and should lessen impact on the environment, but it will also save you money (through growing more food, recycling and re-using, DIY skills such as sewing, preserving, brewing beer, etc.). Some academics close to the movement have similarly argued that 'the doing of community-based activities which offer immediate benefits (cost savings, pleasure, sociability, sense of achievement, community self-expression)' (Seyfang and Haxeltine, 2012: 394-395) should take precedence over the more abstract/intellectual awareness raising and education focused activities (which constitute the first steps prescribed by the *Transition Handbook's* roadmap).

Rather than condemning the movement for its perceived lack of openness or elitism, it may be more constructive to investigate the barriers that prevent the Transition movement from 'responding to a diversity of needs using a diversity of strengths' (Pickering, diversity coordinator in Transition Network 2011). After all, the authenticity of the movement's desire for inclusivity is not in doubt; we only seek to inquire into the realisation of that desire. In her thesis, Danielle Cohen (2010) explores the issue of diversity in an inner-city London area and notes that Transition is not 'explicitly concerned with social justice' (Cohen 2010, 3). That may have been true at the time, or in that particular initiative, but the transition discourse seems to have shifted in the last couple of years and now explicitly engages with issues of social justice, albeit usually only in passing still (Hopkins, 2013: 67).

Nevertheless, Cohen fairly points out that the Transition model is generally based on specific participative methods such as Open Space technology (or world cafe), 'a method of creating participant-led events [which] exemplifies self-organisation, stressing individual responsibility for learning and contribution' (Cohen, 2010: 44; see also Aiken, 2012: 95). So while valuing inclusion, Transition's focus on 'catalysing people to generate their own solutions' to promote 'empowered individualism' [as the basis for community building] in itself influences who shows up (Cohen, 2010: 44). Some people might not feel conformable or 'expert enough' to turn up and the focus on individualism 'is associated with a middle-class way of life, where the inner self is

often highlighted' (Cohen, 2010: 10) The fact that a pass to the yearly Transition Network Conference in the UK costs 100 pounds with few concession tickets available does not help diversity either (see Cutler and Chatterton, 2009).

Cohen (2010) and others (e.g. Trapeze Collective, 2008: 34, James, 2009a) also highlight that Transition seems to be insufficiently attentive of the power differential and dynamics within communities and the way ethnicity, gender and socioeconomic background play a role in shaping community relationships. In this context, inclusion arguably means 'assimilating others to our way' of thinking about the world (Cohen, 2010: 45). The challenge, therefore, is to find a way of being open and encouraging diversity without 'othering', 'perpetuating social stratification, denying inequality or claiming superiority' (Cohen, 2010: 51). This challenge is not unique to the Transition movement but one of the ways to overcome it may be to embrace the particular context and cultures of individual transition initiatives instead of strictly following the 12 steps and the movement's 'Bible,' that is, the *Transition Handbook* and its grand narrative which some argue can lead to 'cultural blindness' (Connors and MacDonald, 2010: 570). The top-down 'steering' of the Transition Network and 'brand management' (Seyfang and Haxeltine, 2012: 391) by the founders in England (e.g. through the accreditation process to become an 'official' transition town) has been perceived as running counter to the bottom-up grassroots 'creativity [and diversity] the movement seeks to embody' (Smith, 2011: 102, see also Trapeze Collective, 2008: 26; Cato and Hillier, 2010: 877; Connors and MacDonald, 2010: 569). This may involve re-thinking the way the movement is organised (to push for more non-hierarchical structures – see an example in Australia in Bay 2013) or doing away with the prescriptive 12-steps and the 'managerialist approach' (Smith, 2011: 102). On the other hand, perhaps some level of 'brand management' is useful or important to preserve the cohesion or coherence of the movement and possibly contribute to making transition initiatives more recognisable by mainstream organisations like local governments and funding bodies (Smith, 2011: 102). Again, this is unlikely to be an issue that will reach a consensus anytime soon, but arguably the movement will be stronger for continuing to debate it.

Looking at the issue from a different perspective, by pushing a very inclusive agenda, the movement is arguably 'bound to disappoint its adherents' (Connors and McDonald, 2010: 561) because it cannot possibly satisfy everybody. The inclusivity and diversity within the movement creates 'latent tensions in relation to the geographical form and ideals of the movement' (Mason and Whitehead, 2012: 497) potentially resulting in significant delays, conflict, division, and 'lack of focus' (Smith, 2011: 102). For example, food can be a thorny issue: since meat is a high-impact food, should Transition (more clearly) advocate a low or no-meat diet through its literature and activities, or would that alienate too many people? A similar issue arises in terms of consumption: should the movement highlight the significant lifestyle implications of post-carbon living, or would that also alienate too many people? Overall, if inclusion means going for the lowest common denominator, it may lead to 'little meaningful change' (Connors and McDonald, 2010: 560) or worse 'a bland local consensus of inaction' (Mason and Whitehead, 2012: 511).

The movement has also been criticised for its 'political naivety and absence of an analysis of power' (Cato and Hillier, 2010: 871; see also, Cato 2008 and North 2010) and we now turn to this question.

4. TRANSITION, POLITICS, AND POWER: ANGLES OF POLITICAL CRITIQUE

4.1 Reflecting on Transition Strategies for Change

As mentioned in the previous section, the Transition movement presents itself as very positive, fun, and non-confrontational. Indeed, in its rhetoric, the movement in general and Hopkins in

particular, are, in many ways, non-political or a-political, in the sense that they generally pitch the movement against 'protesting', 'campaigning', 'rocking the boat', conventional political activism, parliamentarianism, etc. By aiming to be as accessible and inclusive as possible, some argue that the movement 'does not support particular campaigns but rather develops a model that forms around what many different people have in common. It's a model about positive responses and not something that takes positions against institutions or projects' (Trapeze Collective, 2008: 5-6; see also Bay 2013: 182-183 for a practical example of this). In the words of Richard Heinberg, the movement is 'more like a party than a protest march' (see foreword to Hopkins, 2008: 10). This makes sense in light of the 'inclusive' goal of the movement and the psychology of change it deploys. After all, talking openly about radical opposition to consumer capitalism, protesting, civil disobedience, and direct action may not appeal to a broad range of people and it may be that the more political and 'radical' issues are not explicitly discussed for strategic reasons (see Alexander, 2012a: 9-10). Yet, as Cutler and Chatterton (2009) point out, the dichotomy between 'positive alternative building activism' and negative 'radical left activism' (as Hopkins calls it) is artificial because a lot of groups and individuals can and often do engage in both strategies. Stereotyping 'good' and 'bad' activists who are essentially motivated by very similar concerns for environmental and social justice may not be very constructive in the long-term either. At the same time, it is essential that the movement is self-reflective about its strategies for change, because it hardly has energy and resources to waste. This is particularly important because some argue that de-politicised or post-political discourse can serve conservative or neoliberal agendas by framing an issue as one that can be solved with 'consensual' knowledge or 'neutral' expertise, hence 'diverting attention from [or even rendering invisible] questions of power, justice, or the types of (socio-natural) future that can be envisaged' (Welsh, 2013: 7; see also James, 2009a: 19).

This raises the question: To what extent can the Transition movement avoid the pain, hardship, and conflict historically associated with significant social movements (e.g. Civil Rights, Women's Rights, Gay Rights, etc.)? After all, vested interests in the status quo are almost certainly going to try to maintain the status quo, suggesting that the ambitious goals of the Transition movement (including decarbonisation, relocalisation and building a new economy) are probably going to confront, or are confronting, hard political opposition from enormously powerful political and economic forces. For this reason, we would argue that pain and conflict cannot be sidestepped on the path of 'transition', while at the same time acknowledging that activists and participants in the movement may well find the struggle meaningful and worthwhile, no matter how difficult the path may turn out to be. To paraphrase Friedrich Nietzsche: they who have a *why* to live, can bear almost any *how*.

As well as the possibility of having to engage in old-fashioned political struggle, as opposed to building the alternative 'beyond politics', there are also questions about how the impacts of peak oil and climate change are going to play out, and the political implications of this (see Bettini and Karaliotas 2013 for a critical analysis of the peak oil discourse in the Transition movement and other red-green groups). It is almost certain that peak oil and climate change are going to have varying impacts depending on space, time, and class, and this suggests that the ideal of relocalisation may not be directly or equally applicable to everyone (Bailey *et al*, 2010: 598; North, 2010). According to some critics, the implicit assumption of the Transition movement is that 'localisation will be capable of solving political as well as environmental problems. This suggests an inadequate consideration of the aspect of change that is about power rather than place' (Cato, 2008: 96). Indeed, it is becoming increasingly evident that some places and people will be more affected than others and more or less capable of adapting (Paavola and Adger, 2006; Barnett and Campbell, 2010). In this sense, the transition away from cheap oil, for example, is likely to be 'politically troublesome and highly divisive' (Dennis and Urry 2009 in Barr and Wright, 2012: 530) because relocalisation is a highly 'subversive project in relation to neoliberal globalisation' (Cavanagh and Mander 2004 in North, 2010: 591). As Barr and Wright (2012: 531) put it, in 20 years time, 'there is likely to be a diverse geography of resilience within

and between communities that map onto existing social, economic and political systems and inequalities'. Therefore, the movement needs to address these more political and social justice questions or runs the risk to become another form of 'gated community' or 'bunker' sheltering the powerful, away from 'environmental terror' (Duffield 2011: 19; see also James 2009a and 2009b on the survivalist drift within the movement). Or, as Trainer (2009: 11) puts it, the movement may become 'a Not-In-My-Backyard phenomenon, with towns trying to insulate themselves from the coming scarcities and troubles'.

The issue or issues here can be put more directly: can a social movement, such as the Transition movement, achieve fundamental change without engaging in 'top down' political action? And is grassroots localism the best way, or even an effective way, to change 'the system'? Traditional 'leftists' and eco-socialists answer these questions in the negative (e.g. Sarkar, 1999). A number of critiques have focused critical attention on the 'small step' bottom-up approach used by the Transition movement, as well as its emphasis on localisation. The central question is 'whether small acts of resistance and micro-transformation can destabilise macro-systems and effect transformation of the system as a whole' (Cato and Hillier, 2010: 880). More specifically, if the movement grows enough food itself and sets up farmers markets and community gardens, can it eventually undermine industrial agriculture? If the movement develops alternative currencies, can it undermine global finance? If it creates more cooperative business ventures, can it undermine corporate capitalism? If it creates more decentralised, small, local-scale renewable energy projects, can it make coal companies irrelevant and change energy planning and policy? Is localisation of production and consumption the best way to achieve a more sustainable and equitable future? Or, on the other hand, does the movement need to take state power, or more directly challenge state power, through civil disobedience, parliamentarian lobbying, progressive voting, or even violent revolution? These are very complex issues, and opinions differ vastly on the question. We do not pretend to have the 'right' answer, but these tensions in the Transition movement are worth examining further.

4.2 Problematising Relocalisation: Strengths and Weaknesses as a Political Strategy

People in Transition tend to argue that actions to build resilience and increase local provisioning from the bottom-up is the 'right' way to go about changing the system. Much can be said in support of this approach. In a neoliberal era, waiting for governments to do something may not be useful (perhaps even wasteful or harmful), so a case can be made that communities should do things themselves and lead by practical example using the resources they have at the local scale. Once a transition initiative is relatively well established, Hopkins (2008: 170) argues that transitioners should 'build a bridge to Local Government' and seek 'alliances and coalitions of the willingly local' (Barry, 2012: 108) for funding and other forms of support. Researchers and academics have even called for more external networking with governments at the local and national level (Bailey *et al*, 2010: 603; Seyfang *et al*, 2010: 12; Seyfang and Haxeltine, 2012: 391-394; Bay 2013: 182); for example, by providing *evidence* of the impacts of the transition activities through a managerial performance-based approach (using the 'measurement' language of corporate actors with proxies, quantitative aggregations, etc; see Merritt and Stubbs, 2012 proposal for a Local Sustainability Index). For many, this 'politics of engagement' therefore has the potential to develop into a 'productive sub-politics' to shake up local administrations (North and Longhurst, 2013: 1426). From a bottom-up localisation perspective, these series of small steps at the individual and community levels could have a cumulative effect and lead to bigger structural change (Alexander, 2013). This approach is similar to what Handmer and Dovers (1996) call 'type 2 resilience' or 'change at the margins', an approach which argues that 'gradual nondisruptive change is the only realistic option' (Handmer and Dovers, 1996: 500). However coherent this strategy may be, there are also potentially significant limitations with this as a theory of change.

To begin with, there is arguably no ‘causal relationship’ between ‘environmental improvements in a *place* and environmental improvements to a *system*’ (Trapese Collective, 2008: 33). Similarly, there is no guarantee that building resilience to shocks like climate change, peak oil and economic crisis at a small scale will create similar resilience at a bigger scale (James, 2009a: 18). In fact, looking at the literature on resilience, this assumption does not seem warranted, since complex adaptive systems like most socio-ecological landscapes tend to function in a non-linear and unpredictable fashion (see Holling *et al*, 1998; Folke, 2006; Walker and Salt, 2006; Miller *et al*, 2010).

The ‘local’ is also a problematic notion and needs to be qualified further. The local can often be reified and romanticised; it can be a way to construct places in an isolationist way, as if they could be cut off from the rest of the world. In this case, the local can become synonymous of autarky and protectionism leading to practices of exclusion (Mason and Whitehead, 2012). This conceptualisation of the local often goes hand in hand with the assumption that local communities are homogenous and free of conflict or inequalities which is problematic (Featherstone *et al*, 2012). Consequently, localisation can potentially turn into little more than ‘middle-class voluntarism’ (Featherstone *et al*, 2012: 178). Furthermore, critiques of localisation as a strategy, particularly from the political left, maintain that localisation is too often associated with ‘backwards, constraining, authoritarian and parochial’ ideas and practices (North, 2010: 592; see also, James, 2009b; Aiken, 2012). Others argue that localisation, rather than enhancing human welfare and wellbeing, leads to ‘retrograde balkanisation’ (North, 2010: 592).

However, we would argue that these features do not flow *necessarily* from localisation as a strategy for change. An ‘inclusive’ (Mason and Whitehead, 2012), ‘intentional’ (North, 2010) or ‘progressive form of localism’ (Mackinnon and Derickson, 2012: 266) is possible if the local is understood as ‘open and relational’ (Mackinnon and Derickson, 2012: 264) in terms of linking with other places, other groups and other movements grappling with the consequences of globalisation, climate change or resource scarcity. The local can become a powerful tool of mobilisation because it is where people live and experience the world, and therefore constitute ‘socio-ecological memory’ (Bathel *et al*, 2010: 255). In this sense, the local has been and can continue to be a ‘moral starting point and a locus of ecological concern’ (Tomaney, 2013: 1) where realising change is more likely to be within reach (Hopkins, 2013).

The Transition movement, however, still has some way to go to reach more progressive forms of localism. While the *Transition Companion* spells out that localisation is not self-sufficiency, insularity or dominance by local powerful actors (Hopkins, 2011:48), a concern (beyond lip service) for inequalities within and between communities and places remain largely absent from the strategies proposed by the movement. For example, Transition’s vision of a new localised resilient economy (Hopkins 2013: 27) does not seem to recognise the differential patterns of (socio-economic) vulnerability and capacities that exist within communities of places (i.e. the barriers that prevent people from engaging in Transition initiatives like lack of time, social or economic capital). It generally ignores conflict that inevitably arises between different interests within communities (e.g. capital and labour, environmentalists and sceptics, libertarian and egalitarian versions of democracy) and also presumes that everybody will benefit from increased resilience (Fainstein, 2013: 15).

Another key issue with localisation as a political strategy is that the local does not necessarily constitute the most effective scale to tackle climate change, peak oil or economic instability given how multi-scalar these phenomena are (North, 2010: 587) and how globalised and interconnected the current system is. The reality is that even the most successful relocated communities in the Transition movement like Totnes are ‘still embedded within the global capitalist system through their dependencies on jobs, pensions [...] and economic exchanges with often global customers’ (Wilson, 2012: 1229).

Lastly, from a left-leaning political economy perspective, issues of ‘social justice at a distance’ (Mason and Whitehead, 2012: 507) in terms of North/South development and relationships also need careful consideration. If bottom-up localisation means severing most trade relations with the developing South, it may result in leaving the poor fending for themselves ‘with nothing other than their own wiles and materials they can temporarily muster’ (Amin, 2012: 152); ultimately, of course, self-determination in the global South is to be desired, and the sooner the better, but given the current dependency of the South on the North (and vice versa), this aspect of transition also needs to be negotiated carefully. Admittedly, the movement is again showing some reflexivity around this issue. North and Scott-Cato (2012: 104), who are both engaged in Transition initiatives, note that ‘[i]t would be important from a progressive standpoint to maintain the benefits of fair trade and of international connection, if transport could be justified within ecological limits.’ Hopkins (2011:52) also talks about the need for ‘fair trade’. It would be fair to say, however, that this aspect of the movement is under-theorised.

4.3 The Problem of Power, Politics and Structure

As the previous section suggests, localisation has many positive features but it is not without its challenges and limitations, and alone it is unlikely to bring about the changes required. It would be naive to think that existing structures, organisations and powerful (public and private) players will just crumble away and be made irrelevant by climate change and the end of cheap oil (Connors and MacDonald 2010, 560; Seyfang and Haxeltine, 2012: 394). As some Marxist critics maintain, ‘uneven access to material resources and the levers of social change must be redressed’ as well (MacKinnon and Derickson, 2012: 255). This would involve re-centring the political and questioning what sorts of community and socio-ecological relations we want to see in the future. From the perspective of the orthodox political left, finding ways to change individual behaviour and reduce personal consumption is not enough, and *real* transition means ‘taking on power and those who hold wealth and influence’ and who continue to push ‘business-as-usual scenarios’ (Trapese Collective, 2008: 7). In other words, some argue that more direct, anti-systemic challenge is needed; in particular, some political theorists hold that nothing less than taking control of the state for structural transformation and fundamentally changing the rules of the game will get us there in the time frame available. Eco-socialist approaches, such as those defended by Sarkar (1999), advocate this. Clearly there are clear risks in adopting a reformist approach that is mostly apolitical and brushes aside or gives insufficient attention to sensitive questions of power, state, and structure.

Indeed, as with most reformist, non-confrontational approaches, by the time the movement creates enough change to become noticeable, the existing system may already have had time to adapt and simply adjust to that change, or at least give the appearance that it has by adopting particular rhetoric or discourses. This has little impact on actual policy and leaves underlying structure, unequal social relations, and hierarchies intact (Handmer and Dovers, 1996: 501; Smith, 2011: 102). In other words, reformist movements are easily co-opted into the political mainstream and the Transition movement is no exception, especially because it seems to neglect or underestimate the adaptive capacities of the current system (Trapese Collective, 2008: 27-32; Trainer, 2009). Politically charged projects or those disturbing economic activity can be hindered (or blocked) by technical and administrative strategies and inertia from governments. Overall, the often subtle and insidious resistance from governments reflects the broader legal, economic, social and structural constraints that potentially ‘lock in’ people in unsustainable behaviours and high-consumption lifestyles. These lifestyle and political decisions are not made in a vacuum; rather, they are influenced by laws and policies and not addressing those top-down state structures may ensure that the Transition movement remains incidental, marginal, and dependent on the very systems it ostensibly opposes.

This leads us to think that the Transition movement needs a stronger political dimension *in addition* to generating knowledge and practices about how to deal with climate change and peak

oil at the community level. While the project of formulating a coherent and detailed 'politics of transition' lies well beyond the scope of this paper, the movement may eventually need to engage more directly with political and structural issues. This may take the form of more participants in the movement standing for local government or actively lobbying councillors and parliamentarians; or it may require formulating a strategy that falls within the eco-socialist tradition that works on replacing capitalism with something 'wholly other'.

Ted Trainer (2010a), on the other hand, envisions a political solution to our current dilemma through anarchism or, using a less loaded term, through grassroots self-organisation and radical, participative democracy. Trainer places no hope in the existing political system because he argues that the state will never voluntarily dissolve the structures of growth that drive ecological degradation, therefore individual citizens and communities need to build cultural, social and economic alternatives themselves underneath the current model. For Trainer, capitalism cannot be reformed, it has to be replaced, but not with a centralised eco-socialism, but with self-governing communities who essentially set out to ignore capitalism to death by building the new economy within the shell of the old (see also, Holmgren, 2013).

Overall, there are no silver bullets or miracle recipes to tackle climate change and peak oil but there are synergies between the different approaches, which should be recognised and fostered further. The strength of the Transition movement lies with its ability to generate a change of mentalities, and to start to put into practice other ways of living, working, producing and consuming in a post-oil community (rather than in 'its ability to make the necessary changes alone' North and Scott Cato, 2012: 99). The grassroots relocalisation of Transition can be 'extended as part of alternative political projects', whether it is anarchist, eco-socialist or some expression of radical democracy (Featherstone *et al*, 2012: 180) to tackle systemic issues such as exclusion, inequalities in resources and power and the economic and political factors that keep supporting business-as-usual. Obstacles (structural or otherwise) that still prevent parts of the community from participating in and benefiting from Transition initiatives also need to be spelt out and tackled. As mentioned earlier, a starting point could be bridging with other places and groups to feed into broader socio/ecological/political movement, standing in solidarity with nearby communities and groups in resistance, getting involved in non-violent direct action, divestment campaigns etc. There is no doubt that individual Transition members are already doing some of this (see North, 2011; North and Scott Cato, 2012, for experiences in Liverpool and Stroud) and they should be encouraged to do so.

In the last section, we turn to the question of whether Transition is radical enough. We articulate our critique around two key aspects: the resilience discourse used by the movement and the often timid engagement with consumerism and the macro-economics of growth.

5. CHALLENGING CONSUMPTION, CAPITALISM AND GROWTH

5.1 Is Resilience Enough?

The Transition movement's discourse and vision is underpinned by resilience thinking, arguably the new 'pervasive idiom of global governance' (Walker and Cooper, 2011: 144). Indeed, if sustainability and sustainable development were the buzzwords of the 20th century, resilience has imposed itself as the dominant discourse when it comes to risk management and change management in the 21st century (Walker and Cooper, 2011; Zolli and Healy, 2013). There is a very large number of definitions and conceptualisations of resilience in the academic literature (Walker *et al*, 2004; Brand and Jax, 2007; Miller *et al*, 2010; Davoudi, 2012). Nevertheless, the central feature of resilience relates to adapting to change and disturbances while maintaining a system's integrity and basic functions, and factors that generate this sort of resilience include, diversity, modularity (system elements are distributed and loosely

connected, independent but overlapping in some ways) and tight feedback loops (consequences of actions are felt quickly in social and ecological systems allowing people to recognise thresholds and tipping points)(Hopkins, 2013 and Miller and Hopkins, 2013 define resilience in a similar way). Just like sustainability, resilience is a 'boundary object used as a communication tool' across different communities of knowledge and practice (Brand and Jax, 2007: np). In other words, the concept is vague and stretchable enough that it can attract a very large and diverse audience of people with different aims and interests (the survey conducted by Seyfang (2009: 5) confirmed that 'building self-reliance', a concept often associated with resilience, is the main priority for participants in Transition initiatives). The purposeful vagueness embedded in resilience constitutes the 'primary appeal of the movement and its central weakness' (Cato, 2008: 96) because it 'hides conflicts and power relations' (Brand and Jax, 2007: np) and also avoids or conceals the more normative questions of 'whose resilience we are concerned with and to what end' (Cote and Nightingale, 2012: 482); put differently, transition to what or where, by whom and for whom? There is no a-political consensus on these questions and the distributional and asymmetrical consequences of these decisions (particularly across places like developed and developing countries) need to be considered (Hornborg, 2009; Beymer-Farris *et al*, 2012). This is a common theme found in the literature on Transition in terms of what a resilient community might look like, how is power distributed politically and/or otherwise, who is included, etc (see e.g. Smith 2011; Barr and Wright, 2012: 530). Resilience theory does not provide a clear answer to this.

Another issue with resilience discourse is exemplified by the New York Times article 'Forget sustainability, it's about resilience' (Zolli, 2012). The piece's sub heading is 'Learning to bounce back' and this is precisely the sort of message that is associated with resilience in mainstream culture – bouncing back to where you were before the shock, the resistance and robustness of your system (i.e. engineering resilience, see Davoudi, 2012). Mainstream resilience discourses use the same 'feel-good rhetoric characteristic of discussions of sustainability' (Fainstein, 2013: 15) and remain within stability framings (i.e. the status quo); this is why resilience (not revolution) has become the 'rallying-cry of the early 21st century' (Hornborg, 2009: 252). Within this particular framing, resilience does not necessarily encourage the sort of regime shift, transformation and social learning required to transition to the low-carbon economy Transition envisions (Welsh, 2013: 8); nor, some argue, does it 'provide the basis for the mobilisation that can ultimately change the boundaries of the politically possible' (Fainstein, 2013: 15).

In addition, resilience has become instrumental to the neoliberal agenda of many Western governments (certainly in the UK, US and Australia) and has been 'mobilised to facilitate archetypal governmental technologies of neoliberalism; government at a distance, technologies of responsabilisation' (Welsh, 2013: 2). Amin (2013) among others (Fainstein, 2013; Welsh, 2013) sees the widespread use of resilience discourses as a neoliberal push to move away from 'an all-protections and state-dependant culture of risk management on ideological grounds' (Amin, 2013: 140). The new UK Conservative's 'Big Society' policy, which is accompanied by drastic cuts to the public service, exemplifies this 'latest mutation of neoliberalism' (Featherstone *et al*, 2012: 178). In this sense, resilience discourse fits the bill quite well: it shifts the responsibility for action in the face of crisis (climate change or peak oil) from the state to local communities and individuals (without providing funding or support) who need to become active/autonomous subjects and vigilant citizens, responsible for their own protection in a context of increased uncertainty. Resilience discourses also act as means of systematically lowering public expectations by putting a lot of emphasis on 'adversity as only partially preventable' and almost necessary (Amin, 2013: 150), thereby sending the message that we cannot expect to be protected against everything and that we certainly cannot rely on the state for it. By presenting crisis as opportunity, resilience thinking is also self-referential and makes itself immune to critique (Walker and Cooper, 2011). Resilience becomes the measure, not of one's fitness to live, but of one's 'fitness to survive' (Welsh, 2013: 4) in an evolutionary and deterministic sense. Put differently, when used in a particular way (especially by government

and the private sector), resilience is not about altruistic, ecocentric concern for 'global environmental change' but rather it focuses on 'the pragmatism of greater self-interest and survivability' (Barr and Wright, 2012: 525). Resilience rhetoric therefore potentially undermines 'a regime of worth with universalist protections' and the 'cross-societal commitment' to protect those without means (Amin, 2013: 142). By using resilience thinking and principles, the Transition movement may become an inadvertent ally of this sort of politics and again only engage those who can afford it.

Overall, resilience does not tend to address normative questions of power, inequalities, distribution of resources and culture, or big picture issues associated with risk and socio-ecological change. It can therefore be argued that it implicitly maintains the 'social-ecological relations of capitalist resource extraction' (Nadasdy 2007: 217–18, quoted in Hornborg, 2009: 255). Because of its affinity with neoliberal economics and governance, the risk of co-option is high and to an extent already on the way. While some acknowledge the limits of resilience and argue that it's the best we can aim for at the moment (Alexander, 2012b), others warn that the type of resilience embedded in Transition (change at the margin) will lead us on the same road to nowhere as did sustainability and sustainable development (Handmer and Dovers, 1996: 501).

5.2 Challenging Consumer Capitalism and Growth

Mackinnon and Derickson (2012) argue convincingly that 'the processes which shape resilience operate primarily at the scale of capitalist social relations' (255), so capitalism and the growth paradigm are unavoidable questions for a social movement like Transition. Consumer capitalism is one of the root causes of our current predicament and often, it is also the big elephant in the room. Trainer (2009, 2010) and others (Alexander, 2012a; Latouche 2010) have championed this type of critique and it is worth reiterating and developing. Currently, the Transition movement is not 'motivated by the clear and explicit goal of replacing the core institutions of consumer-capitalist society' (Trainer, 2010b: np). Rather, its 'targets' are more 'abstract' and 'diffuse' like climate change vulnerability and socio-economic instability (Barry and Quilley, 2009: 11), and the movement prefers a consensual positive approach as highlighted earlier. Yet, it is arguably impossible to 'decouple economic growth from carbon emissions' (Trapese Collective, 2008: 11) and it is partly the 'exploitative dynamic of capitalism' (Hornborg, 2009: 255) that got us in trouble in the first place. The current rate of resource consumption and GHG emissions is driven by the obsession for economic growth and it cannot be ignored (Latouche, 2010). To put it directly, the low-carbon society envisioned by many in the Transition movement arguably cannot be a capitalist society or a growth-based society, because that may just produce more of the same, i.e. environmental destruction and blatant social inequalities. It cannot be a society that measures social wellbeing and human happiness with GDP (see Jackson, 2009).

Interestingly, recently there have been some developments on this front in the 'official' transition literature. In the *Transition Companion*, economic growth starts to be addressed through the central theme of energy (that is cheap energy is one of the foundations of economic growth, Hopkins, 2011: 33) and economic instability (Hopkins, 2011: 34-35). In the *Power of Just Doing Stuff*, Hopkins (2013: 13) asserts that 'relentless growth in GDP is no longer an appropriate or desirable idea' and should be replaced 'with a goal of well-being, of happiness, of community, and connectedness' (Hopkins, 2013: 31). He challenges the mainstream 'growth-at-all-costs agenda' (Hopkins, 2013: 27) and starts to explicitly talk about the fact 'we need to live within certain constraints' and to build a 'post-growth economy' (Hopkins, 2013:30; see also, Miller and Hopkins, 2013). These are positive steps but it still shies away from specifically addressing 'capitalism' and from spelling out what the consequences of degrowth may be (Trainer, 2012). Obviously, Hopkins may find it difficult to talk openly about radical change

because of the movement's demographics and there is evidence that this type of message does not sit easily with people's lifestyles and everyday realities even in Transition communities (Bailey *et al*, 2010; Wilson 2012). The current economic context, particularly in Europe, also makes it hard to talk about degrowth and capitalism since economic growth is heralded as *the solution* to our problems, i.e. what will bring back prosperity and jobs.

Consumption is another thorny issue because to challenge those pro-growth structures, we need 'a radical change in cultural attitudes towards consumption' (Alexander, 2012a: 7) and this represents one of the biggest challenges for the movement at the moment. The lack of clear communication on this topic may partially explain why Transition initiatives have been portrayed as bourgeois and middle-class since they implicitly convey the idea that you can transition to something better – environmentally and ethically – without having to downsize your material standard of living and consumption levels. In practice, despite the discourse around resilience, connection to nature and inner transformation in the Transition movement, for the majority of people this 'plays second fiddle to the everyday acts of consumption that define us as practicing, mainstream members of a high-consumption society' (Barr and Wright, 2012: 530).² Obviously this is a difficult issue, not the least because historically 'no one has ever rioted for austerity, people have taken to the streets in the past because they want to consume more of things, not because they want to consume less' (Monbiot 2005, in Barry and Quilley, 2009: 7). In addition, consumption touches on lifestyle choices and individual liberty as well as deeply engrained norms and values. So getting the message across that a life based on 'far simpler material living standards' and 'frugal self-sufficient collectivism' would be a good life is not an easy task. Yet, transitioning to low-consumption lifestyle is indispensable for both pragmatic and symbolic reasons within the Transition movement. First, consumption is part of what drives the growth engine (and the widespread ecological degradation that goes with it) so it needs to be addressed if we want a fighting chance to curb/slow the effect of climate change and biodiversity loss. Second, if the Transition movement is ever to grow to a significant size, people will need to be able to dedicate more time to building the movement and a new society, instead of being locked into long working hours just to provide for high-consumption lifestyles. Lastly and more symbolically, if the frame of reference and measure of success remains individual income and ever-expanding material possession and consumption, and Transition does not challenge it, the movement will not be able to influence social practices around consumption because they are shaped by individual decisions but also by the broader context, narrative and 'lifeworld' people are in (see Spaargaren, 2003). Transition 'from the grassroots up' (Alexander, 2013) needs to involve a move away from growth-orientated capitalism – or perhaps capitalism altogether – which itself implies overcoming the cultures of competition and overconsumption that are so deeply entrenched in modern life.

CONCLUSION

The Transition movement is a nascent movement that aims to tackle some of the biggest challenges of our times. It makes the case that the transition to a localised economy and a low-carbon lifestyle can be fun, and that the transition will benefit the community and the environment. It argues that an incremental approach to building community resilience 'can add up to something big and extraordinary' (Hopkins, 2013: 132). The movement aims to create a different vision for where we want to go and provides ideas and techniques to get us there collectively. Questions remain around how inclusive the movement really is and whether local

² Although there has not been specific study on consumption levels in Transition, Pir's (2009) study on resilient food systems in one of the historical and most established initiatives in Totnes shows that despite people being aware of the problems associated with large scale industrial food production, they still shop primarily at the supermarket (because of cost and convenience, choice and variety offered by big retailers, and lack of social cohesion).

initiatives can have enough influence and/or build enough momentum to lead to a transformation of the current growth-based consumerist capitalist system. Transition will most likely not be able to achieve this alone and it could benefit from collaborating with dissident and defiant groups that challenge consumerism, capitalism and the actors that support/generate our 'unsustainable, ecocidal economic system' (North and Scott Cato, 2012: 110). On a global scale, the movement is still small, but so were the Civil Rights, the Women's rights, sexual liberation, LGBTI movements once; they looked too small to effect change. But tipping points arrive, often unexpectedly, when suddenly things change. It could be that we are at the pre-tipping point stage with Transition and the potential is definitely there. But it needs a spark of some sort for that potential to be unleashed.

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