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**Title: The Transition movement as politics and pedagogy in communities**

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## **Abstract**

Previous contributors to the *CDJ* have already critically appraised tensions within the Transition approach by examining its tacit assumptions about community (Connors and McDonald, 2010) and its political economy (Barnes, 2015). We add to this work by analysing how the movement's cultural politics frames its pedagogical approach. We analyse the Transition movement's pedagogy in the wider context of theoretical arguments about 'post-politics'. Its pedagogy aims to mould new subjectivities that are commensurate with the energy descent plan of the movement. Central to its approach is the way in which its collective identity has been carefully crafted as distinct from the wider environmental movement in order to generate public appeal. The movement's focus on local community as a site of consensus rather than conflict, descent rather than dissent, resilience rather than resistance, are central to its curriculum. In this respect, the Transition movement builds on what can be useful and valuable in the language of 'community', whilst at the same time embodying, or perhaps even amplifying, its limitations and omissions.

## Introduction

Praxis is a powerful educational concept because it draws attention to the relationship between acting in the world and the ways in which action generates, and is underpinned by, ‘learned’ or socialised cultural patterns of behaviour. Therefore, the success of any nascent social movement depends on: firstly, the extent to which potential adherents are able to ‘unlearn’ dominant cultural codes and social practices; secondly, the extent to which it goes beyond being merely oppositional by generating alternative forms of knowledge, which can take root in the rhythms and practices of everyday life. Crucially, such learning processes are affective, cognitive and behavioural.

It is widely recognised that this relationship between knowledge, emotion and action is particularly vexed in the context of climate change and its relationship to the fossil fuel-based infrastructures of daily life. It is difficult to unlearn dominant cultural codes and social practices, simply because when we are structurally embedded in daily routines and habits of consumption that are dependent on emitting fossil fuels, this creates feelings of existential discomfort that are easier to bracket away. In response to such issues, the Transition movement has recognised the importance of culture as a hinge between knowledge and action, in the sense that culture takes account of people’s affective commitments.

We use the specific term cultural politics (rather than, for instance, cultural beliefs or values) since it encapsulates the inextricability of both: political change is partly a cultural phenomenon and cultural change is partly political. Following this logic, ‘Transition Culture’ (<http://www.transitionnetwork.org/blogs/rob-hopkins>) must be analysable in political terms. Transition participant and intellectual North (2010, 2011) - through his ongoing participation in the movement - has made a convincing case that Transitioning communities are part of a normative political project, even if the contentious political dimensions of such a project are suppressed by its pragmatism.

Yet such claims raise the further question of what is meant by ‘political’. Existing scholarship on the Transition movement (Kenis and Mathijs, 2014a; Kenis and Mathijs, 2014b) in Belgium has addressed this question, drawing on critical theories of ‘post-politics’, as well as the political theory of Laclau and Mouffe (1987), more specifically. The post-political thesis implies that ‘broadly speaking, dominant representations of society tend to be consensual or technocratic and thus make power, conflict and exclusion invisible’ (Kenis and Mathijs, 2014a, p. 148). Whilst the Transition movement certainly sees technocratic policy as a primary obstacle to locally-embedded cultural change, Kenis and Mathijs (2014a, 2014b) argue that its focus on local community as a site of pragmatic consensus aligns it with the ‘post-political’. Helpfully, they draw on political theorist Mouffe’s (2005) specific interpretation of ‘the political’, understood as a mode of social organisation that recognises the necessity of ‘we/they’ relations, thus legitimising adversarial relationships and dissent as the generative core of political engagement. Consequently, Kenis and Mathijs (2014b) argue that the pitfalls of ‘localism’ in Transition Culture are better interpreted as the pitfalls of post-politics. For them, the Transition movement would only become ‘political’ by rendering the antagonisms,

exclusions and power relations intrinsic to community building visible, and therefore negotiable. To the extent that ‘Transition Culture’ both emerges from and informs dynamic processes of community education and development, this paper seeks to address and assess the pedagogical implications of such arguments in more detail.

### **Pedagogy as cultural politics: Educating the emotions**

We begin with the recognition that social movements can be understood as collective learning processes that generate distinctive forms of knowledge and act as living labs that educate participants, the wider public and even political elites. Eyerman and Jamison (1991) call this process ‘cognitive praxis’. In this context, we might say that previous research has considered the tensions between the ‘cognitive praxis’ of the Transition approach to collective action and direct action in the context of differing worldviews and theories of social organisation and change (e.g. North, 2011; Kenis and Mathijs, 2014). Specifically, whilst TIs have tended to avoid contentious politics, direct action involves a critique of post-politics insofar as confrontations with power aim to reveal its social organisation to the wider public (for example, corporate-state collusion and the suppression of oppositional activism through the courts and by the police) (McGregor, 2015).

However, to the extent that climate activism is broadly educational, it would be a mistake to analyse the tensions between different cultures of climate activism, and the learning they generate, in overly cognitive terms. It is legitimate and important to frame social movements as germinal responses to the ways in which forms of elite power rationalise the irrational. This seems particularly true in the context of climate activism, which uses the weight of climate science to challenge policy contradictions and make political arguments. But since political arguments always contain normative value judgements, and since such value judgements require our affective investment in them, we need theories able to account for the tripartite relationship between reason, emotion and action.

As Raymond Williams (1973, p. 9) pointed out, if hegemony was somehow located in the ‘top of our minds’ it could be overcome with better arguments. Since affective investments in everyday practices and routines tend to be deeply-held and complex, critical educational encounters are not only about knowledge or information so much as finding ways to engage with the emotional effects of knowledge that disturbs everyday life and its often tacit value base. This goes beyond seeking to understand the ways in which a latent revolutionary consciousness is suppressed by structural constraints, towards engaging with peoples’ affective investments, in order to ‘reconstitute learned fatalism into a desire for agency’ (Amsler, 2011, p. 59). As a ‘knowledge producer’, Transition’s official discourse operates very much at this meta-level, because part of the movement’s learning is about learning itself – how we learn and its connection with emotion, place and action (Hopkins, 2011; Hopkins, 2008a; Chamberlain, 2009). However, the movement’s response has been to emphasise a particular part of the emotional spectrum at the expense of those parts of it associated with what Laclau and Mouffe call the ‘political’ (Kenis and Mathijs, 2014b; North, 2011). Since emotions like fear and despair can be paralysing in the absence of individual or collective agency, and

the righteous ire of radical forms of climate activism can alienate the mainstream, agency in Transition is located at a local level which everyone can engage in and is catalysed by optimistic narratives rooted in the idea of community *resilience* rather than *resistance*.

This approach is interesting because it taps in to a broader cultural vocabulary associated more with ‘therapeutic pedagogies’ than ‘critical pedagogies’ (Amsler, 2011). Amsler (p. 56) argues that ‘therapeutic pedagogies’ are valuable insofar as they recognise that desire for happiness, wellbeing and self-care in the face of sustained hardship and intractable problems involves emotional work. This is the legitimate affective dimension of educational work for social change, which critical pedagogy has often neglected. When critical pedagogy has focused on emotions, it has been predominantly on the mobilising power of ‘legitimate rage’ (Martin, 2003). On the one hand, the forms of collective engagement catalysed by the Transition movement recognise these affective dimensions. On the other, its cultural vocabulary is shaped by insights from positive psychology and forms of ‘resilience’ education, which in other contexts often merely train people to cope with the very pathologies produced by neoliberal conditions (Amsler, 2011). Thus, the strange proximity of the Transition approach to the so-called ‘therapeutic pedagogies’ signals a recursive engagement with popular culture replete with all kinds of contradictory possibilities. In what follows, we aim to clarify and reflect on these.

### **Methodology of the study**

To foreground the cultural politics of Transition we examined the discursive artefacts of the movement over a significant period of time. The Transition movement’s pedagogy can be understood as being produced within the practices of local communities, it is disseminated amongst participants through its artefacts, and to the wider public, through new and more traditional forms of popular media. We should be clear that our data collection methods make no particular claim to objective representativeness. Rather, the validity of this study will be determined by the extent to which the reader is persuaded by our application of this logic to the Transition movement.

Our theoretical approach to analysing the cultural politics of Transition involves a research model composed of textual artefacts, including scientific papers, policy documents, publications and ephemera indirectly and directly related to the Transition movement. As the Transition movement emerged in 2005 from a community experiment in Kinsale, Ireland (Hopkins, 2008a) this date formed our start of data collection. Textual artefacts up to and including 2011 were included. This later date is arbitrary to the extent that it marked a necessary end to data collection and the beginning of the process of analysis. We also analysed 205 newspaper articles from the UK, national and local titles available in Scotland, using the digital archive LexisNexis. Interpreted as one source of public curriculum, the national and local popular press remains particularly interesting as it continues to represent one primary arena where hegemonic contests are played out.

Newspaper articles were found by searching for ‘Transition Towns’, in the first instance. In the second instance, specific Scottish initiatives were identified through face-to-face conversation with a coordinator of the Transition Scotland network and by consulting the

Transition Scotland network website ([www.TransitionsScotland.org](http://www.TransitionsScotland.org)). The newspapers were then searched using the names of the Scottish Transition initiatives. This textual analysis was preceded by 10 face-to-face pilot interviews (conducted between 24 May and 11 June 2010) with climate activists based in Scotland in order to better understand the construction of activist identities and to identify potential points of intersection and cleavage between the Transition approach to mobilisation and more contentious forms of climate action. Whilst we believe the analysis is relevant to the movement as a whole, the newspaper and interview data has a bias towards Scotland.

Our overarching aim is to describe how the loose collective identity embodied in Transition culture frames its pedagogical dimensions. Our coding sought to identify how this emergent identity was spatially, temporally, and politically constituted through its insertion into chains of equivalence (i.e. subsuming and connecting) with some identities and interests, and by differentiating itself from others (Hansen, 2006; Laclau and Mouffe, 1987). This, in turn, helped to reveal how the frontiers of Transition culture shifted over time.

### **Background: Evolution of Transition movement**

As of November 2014, there were 1196 Transition initiatives registered, 472 official initiatives, with 702 communities ‘mulling’ the process over, worldwide (Transition Network, 2014). The Transition movement is an attempt to create networks of community-based initiatives to build local resilience in the face of climate change and peak oil<sup>1</sup>. Resilience – a significant concept of the movement – can broadly be defined as the ability to absorb change through adaptive learning processes.

The movement’s co-founder, Rob Hopkins, dates the emergence of the idea of Transition to the production of an energy descent action plan for Kinsale, Ireland, by students on a permaculture course he taught (Hopkins, 2011a, p. 20). Permaculture, originally a contraction of ‘permanent agriculture’, started as the principle of modelling agricultural practices on the self-organisation and regulation of natural systems. Over time, the concept came to be understood as a contraction of ‘permanent culture’, applying the concept of permanence to one’s cultural world (ibid., p. 98).

From these roots, the idea of Transition developed through a process of intellectual bricolage whereby ‘other people started getting involved and bringing pieces from systems thinking, psychology, business development and the power of the internet to spread ideas (ibid., p. 21). In short, what Hopkins describes as ‘the emergence of an idea’, is an eclectic recombination of different bodies of knowledge ‘built around the stories and experience of...[p]eople who are learning by doing—and learning all the time’ (ibid., p. 17). This practical community-based learning involves such diverse foci as local economies, social enterprise, food, energy, transport, waste projects, and so on. Crucially, practical learning is given meaning not only through an analysis of environmental issues but by cohering around a shared collective identity, which secures a sense of historical, geographical and social belonging in precarious times. In what follows, we consider whether or not the ‘Transition’ identity can cohere in this way. The claim which Hopkins

makes that '[i]t's a good thing to avoid definitions' is premised on the notion of making it simple to belong to the Transition identity (2011a, p. 73). Yet, it is possible that this makes it difficult to engage in critical reflection on the fault lines along which Transition culture is formed and which, ultimately, may be significant for its capacity to develop a coherent and critical pedagogy for action to address the environmental problem of the hydrocarbon twins. So it is to its pedagogical practices that we now turn our attention.

## **Transition pedagogy and collective identity**

### *Historical identity*

Transition pedagogy initially built an identity which had particular resonance in the British context by appealing to WWII memories and the significance of community resilience in the face of adversity. The memory of 'digging for victory' has been deployed in Transition rhetoric, as an emotionally resonant story from the UK collective past that can articulate with many other Transition concerns: namely, import substitution in the face of resource scarcity, enabled by an inward substitution of skills, democratisation and sharing of useful knowledge, social solidarity, health and wellbeing, and so on.

Hopkins (2008a, p. 65), in asking 'can any lessons be learned from Britain's most recent national 'Powerdown', WWII?', highlighted that food production rose by 91% (ibid., p. 66); that 'local authorities set up horticultural commissions...teaching practical skills' (ibid., p. 66); and that 'rationing rebalanced [class-based] inequalities in diet' (ibid., p. 67) to the benefit of the working class and poor. Necessity, in other words, can stimulate better ways of living. This cultural characteristic of the movement was reported on positively across the ideological spectrum in the popular press. For example,

Between 1939 and 1944, food imports to Britain halved - and the nation responded, nearly doubling domestic food production. Peak oil does not concentrate the popular imagination in quite the same way as Hitler did, but at least the Transitioners will be prepared when, as they predict, an energy crisis occurs.

(Leitch, 2008, p. 2)

As a cultural resource, this historical linkage seeks to generate a 'we feeling' which can feed into a process of intergenerational learning through past practices providing a practical guide to current realities and ways to solve future problems. It situates 'Transition' within a 'British' cultural history which, for some, has powerful emotional resonance of stubborn refusal to give in and to doggedly prevail against the odds. The historical link also incorporates themes of self-help in austere times, ensuring that the meaning of 'Transition' is capacious enough to seem relevant particularly in contexts of economic crisis:

[I]t seems that the combination of credit crunch and environmental concern is driving us to seek out the wisdom of other ages...that for too many years has



been brushed off shamefully as the chuntering of old codgers too eager to talk about the privations of war and rationing. (Flintoff, 2008, p. 8)

In a similar vein, but drawing on a different historical experience, a documentary film on the Cuban response to their geopolitically-caused oil crisis called *The Power of Community*, was widely used across the UK to raise local awareness of what can be achieved by Transition initiatives. This more recent historical connection has also made its way into wider public discourse:

*The Power of Community* is about what happened to Cuba after Soviet oil supplies dried up and the US embargo curtailed other imports. It shows how Cubans gradually turned from reliance on carbon-intensive agriculture: urban spaces were cultivated, from window boxes to wasteland. The Transition took years...but, by the end, even people in cities were producing half their annual fruit and vegetable needs. (Flintoff, 2007, p. 3)

In both the *Power of Community* and the WWII narrative the identity of the movement is positively aligned with the capacity to act individually and severally at the level of community. The positioning of community as a context for action, and community organisation as a structure to act from, are critical in responding to the urgent environmental problem of the 'petroleum interval'.

#### *Petroleum interval pedagogy*

Within the wider temporal context of thousands of years of human history, the notion of the petroleum interval invites us to visualise ourselves as standing at the peak of a brief 200-year blip of oil extraction staring at the downslope, whereupon 'further expansion of oil becomes impossible because new production flows are fully offset by decline' (Skrebowski, in Hopkins, 2008a, p. 21).

Hopkins (ibid., p. 70) argues that our species 'addiction' to oil has enabled 'our society to do 70 and 100 times more work than would have been possible without it' (ibid., p. 19). Nevertheless, there is no ludic dismissal of globalisation in Transition discourse: rather it is argued that we must find ways of 'unleashing' the 'collective genius' that carried us to the peak, in order to help us transition away from practices which have been designed in such a way that we are hopelessly vulnerable to disruptions in energy supply.

However, peak oil as a mobilising concept can be associated with generating a number of different political responses that are broadly speaking counter to the movement's political repertoire. These range from cosmopolitan (as opposed to parochial) relocalisation, to right-wing nationalism, to survivalism, to justification for further environmentally destructive projects, particularly oil sands extraction and Arctic drilling. The question then becomes, how does the Transition movement distance itself from apocalyptic undertones and conservative self-interest? The answer mainly lies in depicting 'community' as the source of egalitarian optimism.

### *Community optimism*

"Before, it all seemed so futile. What was the good in changing a few light bulbs? There are ice-shelves breaking off, for goodness sake! But when you know that more and more towns are coming online with Transition, and each has an army of dedicated volunteers, it seems much more do-able." (Transition participant, in Leitch, 2008).

Community activism in Transition rhetoric is a desire to generate a sense of 'engaged optimism' by connecting people through a shared sense of place so that participation would feel like a better way to live regardless of the wider environmental problem people face (Hopkins, 2011a, pp. 29-37). Transition, according to North, is 'based on inclusion, local distinctiveness, equality and freedom' (2010, p. 591). As a cultural project, the notion of a inculcating a shared sense of place has an important pedagogical aim:

Part of [Transition's] growing success is how it meets several needs simultaneously. It tackles social recession – the sense of disconnection and fragmentation of community – at the same time as it collaborates on the huge behavioural change that will be required for a low-carbon society. The latter is far more likely to come about in the context of personal relationships than as a result of discredited politicians dictating change. (Bunting, 2009, pp. 31)

Yet community, as a proxy for identity, always implies borders and exclusions reflecting power relations that are present but obscured behind rhetoric (Shaw, 2007). We will return more fully to the politics of community later in the discussion, but next we want to highlight how community works in Transition pedagogy by delineating itself from other forms of social action.

### *What are TIs against?*

For some, the Transition movement clearly 'stands against neoliberal visions of a deregulated economy based on free trade underpinned by cheap fossil fuels and externalised emissions' (North & Longhurst, 2013, p. 1425). It opposes implausible 'technofixes' which avoid addressing the social and cultural underpinnings of climate change and fossil fuel use. In promoting relocalised, convivial economies it is *de facto* against capital's compression of space and time where it rubs up against constraints to its expansion. Whilst Transition's pedagogy contains an implicit anti-capitalist political economy, for reasons of impression management this is usually suppressed (e.g. Hopkins, 2008b, 2008c, 2011b). Rather than use terms such as 'anti-capitalism', Transition discourse adopts more affirmative language such as 'steady state economics' and 'de-growth' to position itself away from radical political stances that it sees as potentially alienating a broader public.

However, there is a tension between 'the political' and the spatial that requires unpacking. Transition's approach seems to be that since resource constraints mark the limit points of capital accumulation, there is no point in protesting against that which has no future.

Rather, TIs aim to ‘engage in knowledge production about how to deal with energy crisis and climate change... in the positive sense of a method of thinking in creative ways that make alternative futures possible’ (North & Longhurst, 2013, p. 1426). The danger, however, in overemphasising community optimism at the expense of oppositional politics is that legitimate emotional repertoires associated with marginalised social positions become pathologised, whilst mainstream theories of change aligned with self-interest slip in ‘through the back door’. There is evidence, as indicated below, that the looseness of the Transition identity has made this difficult to prevent.

### *Appeals to self-interest*

Possibly the most emblematic British TI (the one that started it all), Transition Totnes, received funds from the British Government to participate in the *Low Carbon Communities Challenge* between 2010/2011. In feeding back ‘lessons learnt’ from their engagement work, a story emerges of appealing to people’s pockets. What this also hints at is a process of recursive learning between the state and TIs, through which participants may be learning to frame their activity through social marketing:

Particularly for the hard-to-reach we have focused entirely on messages like ‘Fancy some free electricity?’ and ‘We can give you money towards a solar-PV system... and if you’ve less than £250 in your pocket after you’ve paid your household bills each month you could get it virtually for free’. It’s all about the money and we don’t get into environmental impacts, CO<sub>2</sub> emissions etc. This worked really well. (Department for Energy and Climate Change, 2011, p. 40)

Thus, TIs have experimented with social marketing strategies advocated by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) and in the government Strategy Unit’s paper *Achieving Culture Change* (Knott, Muers, & Aldridge, 2008). However, appealing to people’s self-interest is a path strewn with difficulties. But this is, of course, all part of a broader cultural strategy so that political elites and public opinion commentators can less easily dismiss its argument and appeal. Its discourse reflects and reinforces this approach, and some evidence suggests that it has been successful in building alliances and influencing policy at local authority level (Scott-Cato & Hillier, 2010; North & Longhurst, 2013).

### **Discussion**

Local Transition initiatives have been able to mobilise support across the political spectrum, which itself is a significant achievement. It has been argued by activist-intellectuals aligned with a more radical politics that the Transition movement has made negligible direct policy impact (e.g. Towers, 2012). However, the point worth making at this juncture is that Transition has undoubtedly had an indirect influence as mainstream politicians have learned from the movement. In this sense, Transition reworks the ‘in and against’ the state argument that refuses to see the state as an unmoveable monolith (North & Longhurst, 2013, p. 1435).

Despite the global significance of the problem Transition has also encouraged a sense of empowerment through developing community structures to generate change at a personal and local level. At the same time, this pedagogical strategy taps into a popular vocabulary of wellbeing, in which public and political appetite for therapeutic discourse and positive psychology is at an all-time high:

[We] had a group of...volunteers who were trained-up in energy efficiency and motivational interviewing, which is a behavioural change technique from health psychology...used to work with people who maybe want to stop smoking, have alcohol addictions or drug addictions and it's a kind of person-centred approach. We've taken that and applied it to energy. (Scottish Transition organiser)

It is understandable that an intentionally fuzzy optimism pervades Transition discourse: it is designed to inspire, and it has always been explicit that the movement is a translocal social experiment. The particular trope of oil 'addiction' suggest that solutions can be found at the level of the personal rather than the political – the cognitive, affective and behavioural rather than the structural.

Nevertheless the sense of optimism and community level of action generated by the movement can be misleading in that it explicitly avoids addressing some of the deeper antagonisms that lie beneath the surface. In Mouffe's (2005) terms, this misses the point that antagonism can be productive. For example, the narrative of the Transition movement articulates no historical linkages to past or present social movements, to the extent that one sympathetic activist wrote '[i]t is as if a nascent idea had been cut out from its social and historical context, planted in a vacuum and expected to grow' (Nicolson, 2009, no pagination). Yet, as part of the Transition culture's pedagogical strategy of creating a sense of 'engaged optimism', 'rather than just protesting' (Hopkins, 2011a, p. 27), the movement has articulated its own distinct historical linkages, important in the construction of a populist story.

Another sign of this less conflictual approach occurs in relation to the state. The Transition movement seeks to develop a dynamic relationship between a renewed and resilient cultural politics of communities that can then transfer and shape the political culture of the state, rather than engaging in direct action against the state. This logic of action is expressed in the following:

Communities could set the agenda, saying to government, "Here is our plan: it addresses all of the issues raised by the coming challenges of climate change and energy security, and it also will revitalise our local economy and our agricultural hinterland, but it will work far better if carbon rationing is in place, and if the true costs of fossil fuels are reflected in goods and services." The fear of change is removed for government... [and] previously non-vote-winning policies become the norm. (Hopkins, 2008a, p. 76)

However, carbon rationing and a 'true reflection' of fuel costs, at the extreme end of the spectrum, hints at a kind of green-authoritarianism that might exacerbate inequalities

rather than reduce them in lieu of sober political analysis. The woolly conception of ‘community’ in its discourse, coupled to the notion of ‘resilience’ – often popularly described as ‘bouncebackability’ – leave little room for an analysis of power asymmetries and political economy (e.g. Barnes, 2015). As a result, critics of the movement have expressed scepticism regarding its ability to avoid insipid compromise and state co-optation.

The ambivalent discourse of ‘resilience’ connects ecology, positive psychology and the ‘therapeutic pedagogy’ as discussed above. Seligman’s notion of ‘optimism as a learnable skill’—in which resilience is one component of a positive personality (Seligman *et al*, 2009)—is directly cited as an influential idea in the key text the *Transition Companion* (2011a, p. 77). The salient point is that by denying or downplaying what Mouffe has called ‘the political’ in Transition identity, its ideas are all the more easily co-opted in encounters with power. For example, Joseph (2013, p. 43) argues that whilst *resilience as policy* gives a perfunctory nod to the concept’s more nuanced origins in ecological systems theory, the ‘last thing these documents want to do is engage in complex philosophical arguments about adaptive systems.’ Instead, the concept is used to support the production of active, responsabilised and self-aware citizenry. This is achieved through reinforcing the idea that ‘even if we cannot change the world, we can survive better through knowing how to adapt’ such that resilience becomes placed in relations of equivalence with ideological interests which posit the idea that we must ‘change our behaviour and adapt to things beyond our control’ (ibid., p. 43).

The question is whether the bracketing of such ideological functions in the pedagogy of the Transition movement is desirable or ultimately possible. Although the movement advocates for relocalised economies, how can it overlook the macro processes euphemistically termed ‘structural adjustment’ beginning in the mid-80s, which coerced and incentivised states in favour of transnational capital? Can ‘microcosms of hope’ ever address wider inequalities of power if their pedagogical strategies intentionally skirt the issue of power at this scale?

Moreover, whilst ‘Transition’ may be *de facto* anti-capitalist for some, for others, it opens opportunities for social enterprise models and local entrepreneurship. This ambivalence is revealed in the following press excerpt:

When the first Transition town was established five years ago [it was about] creating a more sustainable community to reduce their dependency on oil...Now,..[o]ut goes the focus on abstract notions of "peak oil" and in comes an emphasis on "social enterprises", economic development and growth...Localisation is an economic process that shortens the distance between consumer and producer. (Morrison, 2011, p. 22)

‘Transition’ has come to represent an increasingly improbable nodal point around which interests in energy security, action on climate change, community, democratic renewal, green enterprise and entrepreneurship cluster. As a result of the movement’s suspicion of antagonism, the nearest it has come to developing a

critical political position is to make a rather anaemic distinction between progressive ‘localisation’ (Transition) and ‘localism’ as part a socially unjust project of austerity (Hopkins, 2011a, p. 28). Therapeutic discourse and positive psychology, on their own, miss these nuances. From our experience, Transition participants obviously do not see their idea of resilience as part of a discourse of either austerity or cultural conservatism. Yet, this is to miss the point completely: the total investment in the idea that ‘whoever comes are the right people’ (Hopkins, 2008a, p. 168), alongside the valorisation of ‘grassroots community’ as its basis for legitimisation, leaves the movement vulnerable to co-option whilst obscuring the actual operation of power at the micro, meso and macro levels.

Another important consideration in Transition pedagogy is that its strategy is geographically contingent, and this begs the question of who such narratives do and don’t speak to. For example, Preston *et al*’s research into British community learning in the context of ‘disaster preparedness’ argued that ‘resilience’ and ‘local community’ were linked together in ways that conjured fetishized images of white, middle-class, bucolic forms of social capital, whose tropes of ‘Britishness’ and ‘Dunkirk Spirit’ implicitly occluded BME voices and perspectives (Preston, *et al*, 2011). Indeed, in an interesting challenge to this discourse, North and Longhurst (2013, p. 1435) argue, that ‘urban cosmopolitanism’ provides a much richer starting point for social innovation than ‘local resilience’ in more homogenous and bounded local communities.

In one sense Transition’s strategy can be explained as the strategic and provisional suppression of situationally potent identities and projects in order to communicate across differences. Mische (2008) argues this identity juggling is a learned skill that activists gain through participating in heterogeneous networks. Below Hopkins replies to another movement intellectual involved in both direct action and Transition, who has argued for solidarity between the two cultures:

[B]oth approaches are more skilful for standing on their own distinctive ground, being skilful about what they make implicit and what they make explicit, as well as reaching out far, far beyond the usual suspects... In the protest movements, we take up a position outside of mainstream culture, use language, dress codes, behaviour and forms of protest which at best bewilder and at worst enrage mainstream society, yet we expect them to see the error of their ways and the validity of ours and embark on a radical decarbonisation. (Hopkins, 2008c, no pagination)

Whilst contentious forms of collective action can be prone to the kind of ideological entrenchment that Transition seeks to avoid, the combination of ‘British’ pragmatism with consensus-based dialogue can be prone to bland appeasement, which favours the status quo. This is what sympathetic participant DuCann (2011, no pagination) is getting at when she asserts that ‘[w]e are in danger of living in a never-never land of allotments and spiritual clichés’. Although Transition culture may be concerned with alienating the ‘Top Gear’ viewer and ‘truck drivers’ through reducing Transition to a process of radical political education (Hopkins, 2011b, no pagination), starting with where ‘people are at’ does not mean this is where one stops. A key strength of Transition cultural pedagogy is

its elasticity: it recognizes that since practical engagement in place making generates all manner of unlikely alliances and relationships, it must unite disparate interests through simple but engaging narratives. However, in order to avoid lapsing into incoherence, it arguably requires pedagogy capable of addressing the manifestation of ideological struggle at the local level and its connection to national and supranational politics.

## **Conclusion**

In this article we have attempted to foreground the politics of knowledge and pedagogical practices of the Transition movement. By generating a narrative of itself as distinctly different from the environmental movement the Transition approach has attempted to make itself open to new constituencies of interest.

What is central to the movement's pedagogy and effectiveness, however, is its focus on community resilience as the context for collective change and for mobilising new cultural practices. We recognise that the Transition movement has been an important mobiliser of community support for change that we should not underestimate. However, TIs have been met with sympathetic criticism for the parochialism of their approach and its ideological naivety in relation to confronting wider structural inequalities of economic power: 'if everyone can agree with an idea then what exactly is going to change, and how is it different to what went before?' (Chatterton and Cutler 2008 p. 24)

For Laclau and Mouffe (1987) adversarial encounters are generative of all social identities, and failure to recognise this leads to pathological depictions of expressions of dissent. This, we conclude, is a useful insight for two reasons. Firstly, failure to recognise the generative power of hegemonic encounters blinds one to the undecidedness and ambivalence of 'local community', 'resilience', 'peak oil' and 'positive psychology' in ideological encounters. This leads to a corresponding blindness to the ways in which the best of what the movement's curriculum has to offer can so easily become repurposed as a function of neoliberal and neoconservative discourse. Secondly, it helps to shine light on the ways in which the notion of 'choosing conflict' (Chatterton and Cutler, 2008) involves misrecognition of what is at stake when we talk about place and community. Particularly, the constituents of 'contrived communities' choose conflict about as much as they choose the conditions into which they were born.

To return to the relationship between reason, emotion and action, we might argue that the movement's pedagogy could benefit from developing a more nuanced emotional vocabulary. As the recent 'affective turn' in critical pedagogy has argued, this vocabulary would recognise that 'thought and praxis are disruptive and sometimes painful and that conformism, anger and the desire for positive emotions are therefore within the range of possible responses to critique' (Amsler, 2010, p. 52). Kenis and Mathijs (2014b, p. 182) have argued that 'rendering visible the disagreements and powers that permeate and surround' Transition Culture can 'sharpen the movement's awareness of the stakes and obstacles of its 'struggle'. Insights from critical pedagogy might help in this respect, because they recognise that the desire for positive emotion is part of a complex emotional spectrum that is politically contested and ideologically inflected. Interestingly, Amsler

(2010, p. 58) proposes that ‘there is no reason to assume that we cannot do for ‘emotional literacy’ what Paulo Freire did for textual literacy – to establish affect as a site and resource of both learning and political struggle.’

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<sup>i</sup> Peak oil can be understood as the point at which petroleum extraction reaches its maximum rate, after which production will gradually decline to the point where the energy input/output ratio of extraction is no longer viable. This can apply at varying scales—for example, to a particular field, or globally.