"The Silent Community? From practicing (a)-political volition to re-politicising difference."

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Abstract

The search for new approaches to low-carbon transition have led to an array of different movements over the past 10-15 years, most notable has been the Transition movement which has grown from humble beginnings in Totnes (Devon) to become a global movement. But while Transition is now a global movement in reach, many initiatives are not only falling short of their goal to bring about radical community-wide change, but in many cases are not a visible presence to the community. Part of this, as I will suggest, is down to the Transition Movement's apolitical approach, which seeks to recast grassroots action as a practical, innovative approach to building urgent community resilience. Acting beyond the frontier of confrontation with government institutions and political differences between Transition Town participants is said to offer a convivial approach to action where similarities are privileged over differences that might delay or outright block the resilient, sustainable future they seek to build. Applying the theoretical contribution of Ernest Laclau to post-structuralist discourse theory this project analysed interview data across 3 Transition initiatives in Northern England to determine what is *new* and different about the Transition Movement and its apolitical approach that has captured the attention of so many different people across the UK and beyond. Attention is then drawn to the possible limitations of apolitical, non-confrontational action at the local scale through an analysis of the disjunction between the spatial characteristics of garden and community energy projects operating within 'community' space(s). Project failure thereafter can have the effect of re-politicising action when participants reflected on unwillingness to confront local actors for change. A noteworthy success of the Transition Town model has been its flexibility and adaptability allowing it to contextualise initiatives across different towns, villages and cities. But while the model needs to be adaptable, empirical evidence showed a marked difference in the approach to political confrontation and interpretation of what apolitical entails between each initiative. One such issue, presented as the *apolitical paradox*, refers to well documented concerns that if a group hopes to be inclusive of everyone in the local community it must subsequently remain indecisive over contentious local issues that divide the community questioning the ability of initiatives to bring about transition. One such reason for remaining apolitical is to 'build bridges with local government' as a means of ascertaining resources, support and knowledge. The issue with this is that remaining on good terms with government can curtail countercultural change, and put an increased dependence on voluntary groups to deliver environmental services as a way of masking central government cuts and normalise contemporary community consumption as it is. This in turn manifests a post-political normalisation of climate change in everyday life, something that Transition explicitly aims to avert. This project therefore argued that the de-politicisation of Transition initiatives, while a reason to adopt the Transition ethos, can also limit the movement to inaction at the community scale; fashioning its own post-political trap by limiting action to non-confrontational spaces that are largely unengaged with and invisible to the local community.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1. Introduction and Overview

The threat of climate apocalypse and the fall of modern society as we know it have become a dominant imaginary of the 21st century, feeding into popular culture through dystopian literature, film, and most notably political debate regarding pre-emptive environmental problem solving (Urry, 2011; Giddens, 2011). But with the threat of abrupt and—possibly—catastrophic climate change on the agenda of climate politics for so long, and with minimal reformist change, more radical-imaginative forms of action have become populist alternatives to post-political environmental problem solving—most notably at the grassroots (Dryzek, 2005; Seyfang, 2009). The most distinguished of the recent growth of grassroots environmentalism has been that of the Transition Town Movement and its propagation throughout the UK and abroad.

The Transition movement has been widely recalled as 'empirically interesting' with its radical aims to confront directly the required socio-technical change to contemporary systems of provision, at the local scale (Haxeltine and Seyfang, 2009: 2). But what has struck academic and civil communities as radically different about the Transition approach has been its apolitical approach, and unapologetic attitude to remaining non-confrontational (Connors and McDonald, 2010). Transition's apolitical approach is largely reactionary to the alienation of politics driven by economic growth and thereafter the

ineffectual institutional response to climate change. The inability to agree on reducing CO_2 to safe levels leave the environmental movement in what seems like a perpetual floundering of the same catastrophic visions: of post-apocalyptic society fractured into tribal warfare, mass migration and man fighting over what is left of the world's resources (Urry, 2011; 2013; Bettini, 2013a). Transition proposes a solution that society can quite literally put their 'hands' on; a convivial imaginary of the future, localised and built around resilient communities able to live carbon-free and relatively self-sufficient (Hopkins, 2008).

What is so intriguing about Transition's apolitical approach is that it has been asymptotic of the movement's successful growth but also its limits. Remaining apolitical has enabled uncompromising community-wide inclusion irrespective of political attitude allowing communities to develop their own initiatives without alienating social groups interested in building community resilience and promoting pro-environmental behaviour (Scott-Cato and Hillier, 2010; Hopkins, 2011). But the Transition approach has also cause for concern as its approach willingly de-politicises the process of radical and imaginative change at the local scale. Empirical analysis in Transition initiatives conducted throughout this study uncovered an increasing unease at the apolitical approach, and concerns whether counter-cultural change in-fact requires more willingness to engage in confrontation and identifying more specific facets of the movement that are divisive but clear. This debate about the de-politicisation of local-scale action has been a concern raised in academic literatures and by other environmental groups (i.e. Trapese Collective) since the publication of Rob

Hopkins (2008) *The Transition Handbook* which outlined the Transition movement's approach to confronting the twin concerns of climate change and peak oil (Connors and McDonald, 2010). This thesis explores in further detail what is so appealing about the Transition movement's apolitical, non-confrontational approach to taking action, but then explores in what way de-politicising and actively averting confrontation with other groups and institutions may be limiting. And limiting insofar as the play of political antagonism is as inherent to communities where initiatives are located as the inner circles of polity (Massey, 2005; Mouffe, 1993).

This question of political antagonism within initiatives is clearly of key interest to the Transition movement, as it is a key element that has received the most attention for the greatest amount of time—and is a key point of discussion within the Transition movement itself (see Hopkins, 2014).

1.2.   The argument

The Transition Town movement, as Rob Hopkins (2011: 13) himself has described, refers to 'a more holistic, more appropriate model [about] transforming the place you live from its current high vulnerability, non-resilient, oil-dependent state to a resilient, more localised, diverse and nourishing place.' This powerful imaginary of a resilient and self-empowered approach to climate change, has captured the attention of communities and gained praise from a number of academics for its rhizomic spread at the grassroots, and ability to re-contextualise across different towns, villages and cities (Bailey et al., 2010; Scott-

Cato and Hillier, 2010). Emphasis on intentional localisation, as North (2010) has recalled, has been especially popular for its radical proposition of time-space re-extension to counter the carbon footprint of hyper-globalised flows (i.e. food miles). In this sense, the Transition movement seeks to devise a radical and imaginative departure from our hyper mobile and growth-intensive political-economic system by building a 'world within a world' sufficient to sustain itself (Dryzek, 2005; Seyfang and Smith, 2007: 597). But while different traits of environmentalism can be broadly defined based upon their discursive differences (i.e. green radicalism differs from sustainability insofar as radicals adopt a wholesale re-orientation of the political economy)—albeit without clearly defined boxes—Transition does not seek to explicitly differentiate itself from other forms of environmentalism, adopting instead open participation.

The convivial vision Transition Towns' offer have clearly been highly successful in capturing the attention of the UK and wider global public with over 1196 initiatives, as of 2014, according to the Transition Network website (www.transitionnetwork.org/initiatives). But while much has been covered in literatures exploring the spread of the Transition movement, concerns for the intra-initiative growth within the local community have not been explored in any great detail (see Wilson, 2012 *community development*). A number of critiques have emerged of the so-called 'apolitical pragmatism', which has been criticised for its neglect of the inherent political tensions that are played out at the local scale (Mason and Whitehead, 2012). Furthermore, Kenis and Mathijs (2014a) have outlined how the local scale can become a post-political trap for the movement, as a result of their central focus on (re-)localisation, and at times

their *a priori* designation of localisation as inherently more practical for taking action and working together without a need for confrontation (see Connors and McDonald, 2010). While I would not contend that 'apolitical pragmatism' plays down inherent political difference at the local scale, this analysis across 3 Transition initiatives revealed few *a priori* assumptions of the local scale as a goal in itself, but rather unwillingness to engage in political antagonism most often associated with confrontation with government institutions for change (i.e. lobbying). For Transition initiatives the local scale offers a means to an end, and the possibility of de-alienation and re-empowerment by enacting civil society as a vehicle for change.

In order to confront the rationale for local-scale apolitical action, this project analyses the more complex practices at the local scale to determine why so many initiatives have been drawn to local action, and to analyse how such a broad (Transition) concept which aims to remain as all-inclusive as possible is able to construct an identity that is *new* and radical. But with such a broad appeal and focus on non-confrontation and conviviality—in its approach—there must be limits to the action that Transition initiatives can instigate without political antagonism re-emerging. The local scale is not free from antagonism, but it is clear that the proximity offered by this scale does come with benefits that allow groups to situate and materialise action. But local stakeholders are likely to challenge action if it affects their own interests—for example, the effects of a hydroelectric turbine on salmon biodiversity for Anglers (see Shapiro, 2003). These spaces are therefore more political because there is an active process of agonistic debate to reach a compromise (Mouffe, 2001). Hereafter there must be

limits to what forms of action can be practiced apolitically at the local scale. This is important, as a wealth of literature over the past two decades has analysed the perpetuation of the 'climate as fear' discourse in western ontology (Hulme, 2008; Davis, 1999). Transition is premised as a realistic response to the vulnerability of society's contemporary socio-technical configuration, by acting without political setbacks it proposes a self-emancipating response able to respond and build resilience before it is too late (Hopkins, 2008).

But what is at stake is not just a project going under and groups then trying again, as Hopkins (2008) advocates, the stakes are increasingly high and remaining apolitical is premised on the enablement of action without antagonism or self-interest. According to Smith (2011) the Transition Movement is 'grounded in the discourse of an apocalyptic future, where resource security and climate change have significantly altered society' (p. 337). It is the evocation of existential 'fear', that the world as we know it could end 'that is explicitly posited as one of the main reasons to support the argument towards eco-localisation of contemporary political ecologies' (Bettini and Karaliotas, 2013: 337). Intentional localisation of political ecologies offers a galvanised vision of a resilient future, but with the stakes so high materialising action at the local scale involves the investment of a great deal of confidence in projects coming into fruition. In other words, the success of Transition projects can be understood as materialisations of the future in the present, in as far as they open up the conditions of possibility for resilience at the community scale (Anderson, 2010). Transition proposes a radical alternative to the contemporary post-political predicament we are faced with in (inter)-national climate politics by '[setting]

out the vision of a powered-down, resilient, relocalised future' (Hopkins, 2008: 172). But with such an investment in the materialisation of projects the affect failure can have on participants deserves further attention, as failure can open up moments in environmental narratives where catastrophic futures are made realisable. This in turn has the potential to re-politicise transition leading individuals to seek different forms of collective action if initiatives fail to deliver the desired change.

But the apolitical and non-confrontational approaches can also have an impact on the ability of Transition to work democratically and as empowering collectives. Engaging in the on-going debate between Rob Hopkins (2014) and critical sustainable groups such as the Trapese collective, this report also engages with the limitations of remaining out of politicised issues at the local scale, such as local planning decisions and the impact this has on the identity and visibility of Transition initiatives to the communities they wish to represent. Questions have also surrounded initiatives over their unwillingness to identify with green issues at the local scale, as this process of de-politicisation prevents members acting through the group as certain forms of action may be judged unrepresentative of the entire community (Connors and McDonald, 2010; Chatterton and Cutler, 2008). So while remaining apolitical and non-confrontational may open up the Transition initiative to the entire political spectrum at the local scale it may also reduce the ability of initiatives to take action and become a visible part of community life.

Part of Transition's major success in initiatives such as Totnes has been the ability to work alongside government and utilise the knowledge and resources at its expense (Hopkins, 2011). Engaging with government, as Hopkins (2008) has expressed strongly, is essential to the success of any Transition initiative as building bridges with government allows influence and access to funding. These are obviously essential to the success of any initiative looking to grow at the local scale, but according to Aiken (2012) taking local action should be aware of this scale not as autonomous of government but rather the very scale where its power is exercised. Drawing on from the local-post-political theme explored in Kenis and Mathijs' (2014a) analysis of *localisation* in Flandrian Transition Towns, questions in this empirical investigation have been raised in Transition initiatives regarding the use of government rhetoric to fill gaps left by government cuts to public environmental services. The concern in question regards the ability of government to mask cuts to environmental services through the self-responsibilitisation of Transition initiatives by delegating responsibilities of the local government to these environmental groups. Careful post-political management, as Oosterlynck and Swyngedouw (2010) have demonstrated, allows government to manage environmental group demands to prevent universal claim making against the economic status quo. Similar concerns have emerged among frustrated Transition Town participants who feel more radical forms of action are being curtailed through affective management of group expectations. Further analysis is therefore needed to determine whether remaining circumspect to government hand-outs may lead to a post-political trap, wherein real change is curtailed by a dependency on government (Swyngedouw, 2010).

This essay asks whether Transition Towns can become resilient vis-à-vis the guiding principles offered by Rob Hopkins, and whether there are in-fact major flaws to rejecting political confrontation that has, according to Brangwin and Hopkins (2008), led to a political stalemate in climate politics. While I would not contend that there have been a number of impasses in intergovernmental climate change negotiations over the past 25-30 years—most notably over the commitment to emissions reductions not exceeding levels that would cause dangerous climate change (Demeritt, 2006)—political differences are essential to developing a robust and discernable identity as well as challenging conventional politics (Kenis and Lievens, 2014). The challenge for many Transition Towns is developing initiatives beyond the rigid guidelines of Hopkins' *Transition Handbook* (2008) and *The Transition Companion* (2011) into their own 'fascinating social experiment[s]' (Seyfang, 2009: 16) capable of generating a radically different identity used to build support and deliver clear messages about building sustainable and resilient local communities.

1.3.   Objectives, aims and question

Chief among the concerns of participants within my own empirical research has been the ability of the group to adequately identify its approach to taking action. Many individuals expressed concerns with regards to the ability of initiatives to not only take decisive action but also to become visible to the local community and present a radically different vision of local community life. The objectives of this thesis, thereafter, are to:

(1) determine with use of empirical data what is different about the way Transition initiatives approach local action and what is *new* about the Transition movement through an analysis of how individuals identify with local action;

(2) analyse the disjunction between different spaces at the community scale and chiefly the disjunction between gardening practices and establishing community energy projects, and how remaining apolitical and non-confrontation may become a barrier to effective action across the whole community;

(3) examine the effects of non-confrontation and de-politicisation of Transition on assimilation of demands held by individual members of Transition initiatives particularly with regards to group structure and visibility to wider community; and

(4) analyse concerns raised by Transition participants regarding the "watering down" of the Transition counterculture through government rhetoric around 'empowerment' and 'autonomy' to environmental groups at the grassroots.

These objectives in turn aim to illustrate how an unwillingness to engage in political confrontation can perpetuate the post-political normalisation of climate change within contemporary political ecologies.

Central to these objectives is concern for the Transition movement's emphasis on remaining apolitical and non-confrontational, and the effects this can have on the goals of the movement. To this degree the central objective is to determine whether the apolitical approach in-fact places limits on the degree of action the Transition movement can take rather than opening up the conditions of possibility at the local-community scale. The following question is considered in conjunction with this concern:

Does the Transition movement's apolitical approach—of taking action without confrontation and antagonism—in fact self-limit the ability of the movement to take practical local-scale action, inevitably confining action to the garden and fashioning its own post-political trap?

With this question in mind, and to offer a forecast of the preceding sections exploration of (a)-politics in the Transition Town Movement this project is divided into a literature review followed by a brief critical framework (chapter 2) exploring the complexity of the identity and practices of Transition initiatives, a methodology (chapter 3) which offers a rigorous format for exploring environmental discourses and practices at the grassroots. Drawing upon the current debates around politics, and applying Laclau, Žižek and Stavrakakis' discursive contribution to ideological theory the discussion explores the following topics, divided into 4 discussion chapters and guided by the (above) objectives: firstly (chapter 4), what is *new* about the Transition movement's approach to taking action, and thereafter how individuals come to identify with the Transition discourse; second (chapter 5), the possible limits of remaining

apolitical at the local scale through the affect of engaging with other local actors

and their interests, and thereafter to analyse the effect of failure on the re-

emergence of catastrophic climate discourses; third (chapter 6) to explore the

implications of remaining apolitical on the structuration and contextualisation of

Transition's identity within local communities, and how this can be problematic

for planning how initiatives plan their growth, intra-group decision-making and

democracy; and fourth (chapter 7) analyses whether 'building bridges to

government', as Hopkins (2008) suggests, may lead to a watering down of the

radical change that Transition initiatives strive for at the local community scale;

and whether this contributes towards Transition's own post-political trap by not

actively seeking countercultural change.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

A plethora of literature has been written over the past 50 years recording the emergence of 'New Social Movements' (NSM), and particularly the prominence of the environmental movement in response to global environmental change, and their associated political ecologies (Giddens and Sutton, 2013; Rootes, 2013). These movements are principally characterised by their departure from conventional paradigms associated with collective social struggle over inadequate material wealth (for example workers pay), towards post-material strife over quality of life and environment, cultural attitude and civil rights (Melucci, 1989; Giddens and Sutton, 2013). Essentially, these social movements are post-industrial, and draw upon new forms of mobility and information technology in order to organise collective action (Giddens, 2011). According to Sydney Tarrow (1998: 207-208) 'what *is* new is that they have greater discretionary resources, enjoy easier access to media, have cheaper and faster geographical mobility and cultural interaction, and can call upon the collaboration of different types of movement-linked organisations for rapidly organised issue campaigns.' The environmental movement has drawn heavily upon information technologies in order to organise protests and build glocal communities composed of actors around the world to raise awareness of global environmental problems, as well as to sustain pressure on governments and big businesses to reduce greenhouse gas emissions (Rootes, 2014; Giddens, 2011). The onus has clearly been upon big institutional changes to bring about cuts to global carbon emissions.

But the Transition movement sets out a radically different approach to collective action; one that enacts both 'old' and 'new' skills for mitigating and adapting communities to the effects of climate change and reduced carbon dependency (Bailey et al., 2010). Furthermore, while traditional approaches to environmental action have struggled to attract and mobilise an influx of support for their campaigns, the Transition movement has been recalled for its dramatic expansion (Haxeltine and Seyfang, 2009). This dramatic expansion raises further questions of what is *new* about the movement's approach to local action, especially as grassroots action is clearly not new, so what is it about the Transition movement that has been so popular since its inception in 2005?

2.1.   *Transition Towns in Context*

The past 10 years have witnessed the unprecedented growth of the Transition Town Network (TTN) throughout the United Kingdom and beyond. The movement has plotted its growth from the flagship project developed in the Devon market town of Totnes, which was established as the first Transition Town in 2005 (Hopkins, 2008). Though the roots of the Transition model can be traced to Kinsdale's Further Education College, where Rob Hopkins taught Permaculture. It was from the concepts underpinning permaculture that Hopkins developed the first energy descent plan for Kinsdale Village (Brangwin and Hopkins, 2008), which was later transferred to Totnes to form the model for the Transition Town Movement (Hopkins, 2008). Concern for what Hopkins (2008) considered the twin threats to society—peak oil and climate change—led

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him to devise a community development model in order to build a collective effort capable of widespread community-scale transition with the ability to be contextualised in different local settings (Seyfang and Haxeltine, 2012). The Transition model works as a malleable process towards developing community-based strategies to reduce carbon dependency at the grassroots level, and over time developing initiatives and infrastructures at the local level capable of rendering communities resilient to the future threats of peak oil and climate change (North, 2010; North and Longhurst, 2013).

The rhizomic spread of the TTN throughout the UK and abroad—across 43 countries according to the Transition Network website—now encompasses over 1,196 initiatives as of figures revised in 2014[1] making the Transition model one of the fastest growing environmental movements in the world (Transition Network, 2015). One of the most likely explanations for the exponential growth of the TTN is the way the model can be adapted in different communities. This approach allows the dissemination of tools and techniques from other grassroots environmental movements adopting 'local-to-global' action as well as successful Transition models such as Totnes, Bristol and Brixton to new and developing initiatives (Hopkins, 2008). The ability of Transition Towns to network between one another is essential to knowledge dissemination and developing the vision required to develop solution-oriented community development and transition (Scott-Cato and Hillier, 2010).

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[1] This includes all grassroots initiatives holding mulling status, which is not full accreditation within the Transition Town movement. Actual numbers are considered to be of an order around 472 official initiatives and 702 muller initiatives as of November 2014 (www.transitionnetwork.org/initiatives).

Transition Towns are action-oriented grassroots environmental groups acting in response to the consequences of the contemporary regime of accumulation and circulation afforded through processes of neoliberal globalisation, and the impact this will have on society's survival in the future (Bettini and Karaliotas, 2013). Seyfang and Haxeltine (2012), arguably, summarise the most practical definition of the TTNs key aim, namely "to mobilise community action and foster public empowerment and engagement around climate change, with the objective of preparing for the transition to a low-carbon economy" (p.387). Transition Towns aim to mobilise community support revolves around the increased generation of social capital required to support and reskill the community to prepare for the consequences that climate change will have on society's system of provisions (Wilson, 2012; Barry and Quilley, 2009; Connors and McDonald, 2010). The aim is therefore to develop a progressive response to climate change and peak oil through re-localisation of economic functions and a revival of skills previously afforded to the local scale (North, 2010; Gibson-Graham, 2006).

Transition Towns have drawn heavily upon the concept of resilience, a term adopted from permaculture and with its foundations in systems ecology (Hopkins, 2008; 2010; Walker and Cooper, 2012). Resilience, in the context of the TTN, is used to refer to the ability of a system – in this case the community system – to maintain its ability to function throughout a prolonged period of external forcing, such as climate change and decarbonisation (Bailey et al., 2010; Hopkins, 2008). As Welsh (2014) summarised, Transition Towns have been one of the clearest attempts to utilise resilience towards a 'regime shift' insofar as

they premise a 'niche' from which to propagate wider socio-technical change. By developing a countercultural model against the predominant mechanism of governance in society (i.e. petroleum fuelled transport) Transition Towns function as a radical niche opposing conventional systems of provision in society (see Geels and Schot, 2007; Geels, 2012). Eco-localisation of the global space of flows (i.e. petroleum-fuelled mobility), operated through Transition Towns, therefore looks to develop a progressive response to globalisation and its discontents – a concept strongly advocated by anti-globalisation activists such as the occupy movement (Chomsky, 2012).

But despite this radically different imagination of society, the movement maintains an apolitical and non-confrontational approach to action (Barry and Quilley, 2009). The TTN claims that participation is a core principle in the ethos of the network allowing democratic participation, which is inclusive rather than dissociative of local community (Chamberlin, 2009; Hopkins, 2008). Hopkins' (2008) vision of local transition was to enable unapologetic inclusivity, which seeks to incorporate all forms of political, economic, cultural and social classes (Connors and McDonald, 2010). The fixation on an apolitical and open process is an essential component towards enabling the geographical community to adopt and support rebuilding community solidarity and resilience (Mooallem, 2009; Scott-Cato and Hillier, 2010). Furthermore, the apolitical nature of transition is said to allow a non-confrontational dialogue with local government, helping grow a supportive network of local actors (Hopkins, 2008). Transition initiatives are therefore encouraged to find commonalities among their collective

differences rather than search for differences that might stifle swift community

transition (Connors and McDonald, 2010).

Creating and maintaining links with local government and local non-governmental actors (NGOs) are regarded as essential steps to Transition, as they offer financial backing and can offer practical guidance—and often share goals (Hopkins, 2011; Connors and McDonald, 2010). Achieving transition, according to Hopkins (2008) requires a step-by-step process towards achieving a local energy descent action plan (EDAP)[2]. These steps are largely characteristic of community development, and already existent community groups (**Table 2.1**). But according to Seyfang and Haxeltine (2012) initiatives are often unable to break with the contextual 'path dependency' and direct the local community towards the desired transition pathway (Wilson, 2012). Moreover, Connors and McDonald (2010) have argued that step 11 – 'let it go where it wants to go' – contradicts offering a step-by-step model to transition, or managing transition for that matter. Initiatives may be caught between following the 'prescriptive' transition steps and formulating a more appropriate model in the given setting (ibid).

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[2] Energy Descent Action Plans (EDAPs) are provisional plans recommended in the Transition Town model towards building the positive vision of local sustainability and self-sufficiency. This will often include a 5 or 10 year plan with local objectives the group hopes to achieve (i.e. a local energy initiative is often part of this plan) (Transition Network, 2015).

12 Steps of Transition
(1) Set up a steering group and design its demise
(2) Raise awareness
(3) Lay foundations
(4) Organise group unleashing
(5) For sub-groups
(6) Use open spaces
(7) Develop visible and practical manifestations of the project
(8) Facilitate local reskilling
(9) Build bridges with local government
(10) Honour the elders
(11) Let the initiative go where it wants
(12) Create an energy descent plan
… Transition / Local Resilience?

Table 2.1: Table adapted from Brangwyn and Hopkins (2008; see also Hopkins, 2008) to illustrate the 12 steps of Transition to local resilience.

The rationale for developing transition at the local scale emanates from a sense of urgency to developing solutions, which, as of yet, have not been taken seriously at the national and international levels of politics (Hopkins, 2008; North, 2010). Routed from his 'hands-on' experience of permaculture, Hopkins (2008; 2011) advocates the local and community scales as the most practical for developing pro-active solutions to the dilemma of resilience to climate change and initiating sustainable transition (Seyfang and Smith, 2007; Bailey et al., 2010). 'The hands' are a key concept in Transition culture (Hopkins, 2008) developed out of a deeper sense of entanglement with the earth system, key figures in 20th century green philosophy, such as Arne Naess's (1973) *Deep Ecology* philosophy and James Lovelock's (1979) *Gaia* hypothesis. These concepts are interwoven into the Permaculture philosophy from which Transition culture was directly grown (Hopkins, 2008; Holmgren, 2011).

The concepts of 'resilience', 'community' and 'transition' are developed out of practices in permaculture. The principles behind permaculture are that a logical and community-based solution to issues of unsustainable food production and pasture is to develop a deliberately planned process that is not underwritten by economic processes and societal demand. Instead, permaculture offers to develop forms of agriculture that are more 'permanent' by "consciously [designing] landscapes which mimic the patterns and relationships found in nature" (Holmgren, 2011: xix). Building resilience at the community scale implies a proactive and collective effort of developing 'parallel public infrastructures' (PPIs) capable of generating supportive flows of energy (energy descent) and commerce (economic capital) (Bailey et al., 2010). In this respect the grassroots can operate as a practical level for socio-technical transition through innovative use of social capital (Seyfang and Smith, 2007).

But while the Transition model has been praised for its practical implementation and inclusion of populations at the local scale, these successful elements of the Transition approach—namely non-confrontation, de-politicisation and localisation—have also been identified as potential limitations to the Transition movement's ambitious aims. Amongst the most prominent criticisms of Transition has been the Trapese collective's criticism of the movement's unapologetic apolitical approach to community issues such as sustainable planning, arguing that de-politicising issues that divide communities 'risks either confining the movement to irrelevance or having it co-opted by the state' (Connors and McDonald, 2010: 565). Despite this criticism Hopkins (2014) has defended the movement's approach stating that 'Transition is a tool designed

for a highly specific purpose' namely 'to transform communities, economies, shift power back to the local level, encourage communities to own their own assets and be more in control of their economic destiny.' The following sections explore the debates surrounding the Transition's approach to politics in further detail.

2.2.1. *The Transition Movement: Local or something else?*

The Transition movement, described by Hopkins (2008; 2011), adopts a strong narrative around recognition of the undesirable, vulnerable and non-resilient present, and emphasises imagining a more resilient and powered-down future at the community scale. In literatures developed by the Transition movement attention is drawn to the importance of moving from a state that is not desirable towards one that we can imagine as returning to a more rural-communitarian 'world within a world' (Seyfang and Smith, 2007: 597) built around a willing desire to transform and rebuild what has been decayed by globalisation (Neal, 2013; Wilson, 2012). As a resolution to the so-called bad space of flows akin to the Neoliberal regime of accumulation and circulation, as discussed in Bettini and Karaliotas (2013) and North's (2010) respective analysis of Transition discourse, the Transition Town movement seeks the re-localisation of socio-economic flows to the local-community scale (Bailey et al., 2010). It is 'fear' of the consequences of peak oil and climate change, according to Bettini and Karaliotas (2013: 337), that 'is explicitly posited as one of the main reasons to support the arguments towards eco-localisation of contemporary political ecologies.' Correspondingly, Barry and Quilley (2009: 1) have posited that the Transition Town movement starts from two premises: (i) the potentially

catastrophic effects of climate change will undoubtedly force a change in conventional political ecologies; and (ii) there will be an inevitable shortfall in the availability of oil following its peak having 'geo-political, economic and social consequences' on society as we know it.

Concerns for society's 'resource security', 'overshoot' and 'collapse' in the future, as acknowledged in Hopkins' (2008) *The Transition Handbook*, led Barry and Quilley (2009) to argue that the Transition adopts a survivalist discourse. But rather than a simple *survivalist* discourse as a central discourse, Bailey et al. (2010: 595) recall 'the relocalisation movement's adeptness at applying "borrowed" techniques to the peak-oil question illustrates a growing sophistication among environmental movements in positioning themselves politically, socially and geographically.' Hence, for Bailey et al. (2010) the Transition movement represent a 'blending' and 'interpretation' of discourses that have been central to other environmental movements. But with this so-called blending of 'old' and 'new' skills and discourses within the Transition ethos questions are raised with regard to what is *new* and different about its approach to taking action. And thereafter what is constitutive of the discursive centre of the Transition movement, unifying the movement's approach whilst appealing to the masses.

The Transition movement has been accounted for, in Bailey et al.'s (2010) analysis, as a progression of the *survivalist* discourse. As Dryzek (1997; 2005) has exemplified, the survivalist discourse has evolved out of notions such as 'carrying capacity' (Hardin, 1968) and 'limits to growth' (Meadows et al., 1972)

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that contributed to well-known visions such as 'sustainable development' or 'small is beautiful' (Schumacher, 1973). The problem with these approaches, according to Dryzek (1997), has been their utopian optimism with regards to providing a road map about how to achieve either a prosaic sustainable vision (sustainable development) through the economy, or a practical way of scaling-down society (small is beautiful). Transition Towns are progressive, thereafter, as they provide a model and guiding principles as to how a local-to-global decentralised society could work (Hopkins, 2008). In this case, stressing 'decentralisation' in the *Green* discourse (Stavrakakis, 1997).

The emphasis on decentralisation—or more specifically *localisation*—in Kenis and Mathijs's (2014a) account of the Transition movement's central signifier was arguably the crucial *element* that articulates its identity. There is no doubt that the Transition movement is about the local scale, as Mason and Whitehead (2012: 498) have recalled: 'the real heart of transition is the local initiative.' Likewise, Neal (2013: 62) has supported this claim arguing that 'the community and local context have so effectively popularised Transition.' The interwoven-ness of *localisation* into the Transition narratives, as Kenis and Mathijs (2014a) articulated, leads to the centralisation of the local in the Transition discourse articulating other elements around the local (i.e. local democracy, local currency, etc.).

Focus on the local scale as the central signifier of the Transition movement led Kenis and Mathijs (2014a) to warn against a reflection on the local as *a priori* the means to an end in itself—the solution being the act of

localisation—rather than the end goal being sought through action taking place locally. The designation of *localisation* as the signifier, through which all difference is halted and a consensus is formed begins to construct the local scale as a post-political trap. This is because articulating the local as a goal in itself de-politicises the complex process of local politics required for constructing the local scale (ibid). Articulating solutions around the notion that the local holds inherent properties is as Born and Purcell (2006) have warned dangerous for grassroots movements, as there is nothing inherent about the local scale over any other in terms of democratic representation (Purcell, 2006), defence against external disturbance or globalisation. A consensus around finding 'local solutions to global problems' of climate change are therefore cautioned, as 'the local trap could easily manifest itself as a post-political trap: conceiving of the local as a goal in itself often relies on an obfuscation of the inevitability political process through which the local is constructed' (Kenis and Mathijs, 2014a: 181).

Post-political accounts of the 'local' refer to Rancière's argument that policy discourse has shifted towards a 'perverse mode of administering social affairs' (Žižek, 1999: 248). The political transition Rancière (1999) refers to is a movement from 'hystericized' politics—where inner circles of polity are characterised by political antagonism and ideological contestation over the reality of climate change—towards 'perversion'—the 'techno-managerial planning, expert management and administration, 'whereby the regulation of the security and welfare of human lives is the primary goal' (Žižek, 2008; Swyngedouw, 2010: 225). As Swyngedouw (2010; 2009) has argued, post-politics refers to the disavowal of political antagonism, and thereafter the

constitutive split of the people inherent to democratic politics. This represents a de-politicisation of 'the political' differences—referring to the discursive and symbolic terrain characterised by the expression of disagreement (Dikeç, 2005; Schmitt, 1998)—in the governance of climate change. As Rancière (1999) has posited, the post-political, therefore, refers to the policing of contemporary political ecologies through a more managerial style than proper political dimensions (Žižek, 2002). Post-politics thereafter suggests that political claims made regarding climate politics are managed to prevent universal claims being formed against government institutions (Oosterlynk and Swyngedouw, 2010).

The intention of the post-political project, as Neal (2013) has summarised, is to minimise division and dissent vis-à-vis 'the disavowal of antagonism through the invocation and institutional arrangement of consensus' (Oosterlynk and Swyngedouw, 2010: 1581). As Mason and Whitehead (2012) have posited, the Transition movement is in danger of falling into this trap as a result of their 'commitment to openness and engagement' (p. 509) which has been criticised for an almost unremitting openness to everyone at the community scale (Chatterton and Cutler, 2008). As Neal (2013) recorded in her empirical investigation into the rural-urban Transition ethos, accommodation of non-antagonistic and diverse ranges of people across community resonates with the post-political project. The dedication to openness across the community scale, and Hopkins' (2008) unapologetic dedication to remaining open to the widest possible skillsets at the local scale have been well recorded in Transition literatures (Connors and McDonald, 2010; Mason and Whitehead, 2012).

It is the fixation on the local scale that Kenis and Mathijs (2014a) have been particularly critical of. Drawing upon the previous work done by Born and Purcell (2006) on the cautions of the local trap, they have argued that assumptions over the local scale as *a priori* harmonious and socially connected represents a post-political trap by virtue of the invocation of the rural 'good life' that it offers (Neal, 2013). But other critics have contested that there is more to grassroots groups, and indeed the Transition Town movement, than presumptions of the local scale and its ability to offer a scalar fix to climate change and peak oil.

To assert that the Transition take on the 'local' is the cause of the post-political condition is to devalue the actual aim of the movement itself, and the efforts of grassroots activism. According to North (2010) we cannot devalue the process of *localisation*, or indeed scale, to pure social construction, as this refers to a logical process whereby a more spatially proximate network would require these global flows to find a more sustainable scale to operate on. This is based on the simple premise that there are technological and material limits to the global economic system (i.e. current mobility is dependent on oil; see Dennis and Urry, 2009; Geels, 2012; Urry, 2013). Converse to Swyngedouw's (2007) conceptualisation of climate change as 'post-political', North (2010) concludes that there localisation is not 'autarky', as it requires different calculations and contextualisation of where localisation could be located, and an active process of discerning the good flows to remain connected to and the bad flows that must be severed. In Hopkins' (2011) sequel to *The Transition Handbook—The Transition Companion*—he sets out the more complex processes involved in localisation,

processes that are much more far-reaching than a simple presumption of the local as a goal within itself. Reflecting North's (2010) discussion of localisation, Hopkins (2011) does not simply refer to localisation as the only focus of local-to-global, but rather an assessment of the good flows we rely on and seeking to cut off those that are damaging, where possible.

2.2.2   Intricacies and iterations of local action:

As Gibson-Graham (1996) discussed in their book *The End of Capitalism (As we knew it)* the thing that makes capitalism appear so indestructible is the way it intrudes on our own discursive interpretations of the world. Indeed, as Žižek (1990) has postulated—paraphrasing Fredric Jameson—'it seams easier to imagine the 'end of the world' than a far more modest change in the mode of production, as if liberal capitalism is the 'real' that will somehow survive even under conditions of a global ecological catastrophe' (p. 1). Gibson-Graham (1996) have argued that the power of the capitalist discourse has been in the way it is 'thought' as the global hegemon around which everyday life is constructed (North, 2014). Provocations of an 'End of History' and the domination of systems of exchange by capitalist regimes of accumulation and circulation have become, to some extent, all that is imaginable in modern society (Žižek, 1990). Contrarily, North (2014) and Gibson-graham (1996; 2006) have argued the provocation that 'Their Is No Alternative' is wrong. This is because it ignores the diversity of existing 'non-capitalist practices and liberal economic projects' (North, 2014: 247) that already exist at the local scale and have been developed contra to normative systems of exchange.

One of the distinct strengths of the Transition movement, according to Barry and Quilley (2009), is its quality of imagining how alternative networks might operate at the local scale. The emphasis on realising the potential community at the local scale can be understood as an anti-systemic response through cohesion with other local actors sharing interests in re-building resilience within the local geographical community (Seyfang, 2009). One well-known survivalist discourse reflecting this approach is Schumacher's (1973) *Small is Beautiful*, which argues that a move towards small scale living and a reduction in the mobility of everyday life is a more desirable way of living that has less impact on society. Transition Towns, as Bailey et al. (2010) have argued, look to provide the means through which to achieve such a goal but with the addition of practical steps—for example, the 12 steps of Transition—and visioning ahead in ones local context. A reflection of this approach is North's (2014) argument that the first step towards generating alternative economies through local currency schemes is visioning how the system will work and building affective strategies to introduce the new currencies (see Longhurst, 2010). Generating alternative imaginaries, to this degree, is not a misrecognition of the properties of the local scale as Born and Purcell (2006) have argued, but uses the practicality of local proximity to devise a more situated approach to generating and practicing alternative systems and networks. By making space for different forms of social and economic practices at the local scale without the influence of Neoliberalism, new forms of politics can emerge (Gibson-Graham, 2006; Scott-Cato and Hillier, 2010).

The grassroots scale, according to Seyfang and Smith (2007), serves as a more practical place to innovate and experiment as it offers a space where people can come together in a *locale* (Massey, 2005). The local scale, in North's (2014) account of paper currency schemes, offers a scale where 'material' economic practices can be grounded, and visions—within a manageable scale—can be brought into fruition. The local scale, for initiatives like a Transition currency scheme, can only come into fruition, thereafter, through the energies of community around a cause; through the enactment of community, the promise of the vision can be realised (Gibson-Graham, 2006).

Converse to Kenis and Mathijs's (2014a) focus on the local scale Seyfang and Haxeltine (2012) utilised the multi-level perspective (MLP) to understand how the local scale operates as a 'niche' wherein 'grassroots innovation' can be focused, as a 'community-based, action-oriented model of social learning' (p. 381). The ability of the grassroots to deliver innovative potential, rather than being conceived of as *a priori* assumptions of inherent abilities does offer, in the most practical sense a place wherein micro-level innovations may take place through the proximity the local scale provides for common actors (Smith et al., 2010). These spaces offer a distinct proximity through which to demonstrate to others the potential of particular actions, often leading more people to adopt said practices (Seyfang and Smith, 2007; Wilson, 2012). Examples of the successes these schemes have had are recorded in the adoption of local food projects, such as incredible edibles, across the UK from its origins in Todmorden.

2.2.3. *The Transition Approach: Skills, tools and innovation*

Transition Towns, and other grassroots initiatives have been recognised for their distinct ability to deliver what Seyfang and Smith (2007) have outlined as 'grassroots innovation' (Seyfang and Haxeltine, 2012; Seyfang, 2009). Community action has been explicitly outlined as a practical scale through which to embed the sustainability agenda (DEFRA, 2005; see also DECC, 2014). According to Burgess et al. (2005) community change is essential as it offers an ability to increase social capital and within it embed the required behavioural change. Born and Purcell (2006) have strongly repudiated such arguments as adopting *a priori* suppositions about the qualities of the local scale offering the ability to deliver sustainability based upon a number accounts. Chiefly, they argue that there is often a confusion of the local as an end in itself rather than a means to an end (ibid).

Exploring these assumptions of the local scale is crucial to understanding why it is so desirable. As Aiken (2014) has demonstrated the local is often conflated with community, as they are assumed to hold similar geo-spatial characteristics. The focus of many academic literatures has therefore been on how communities operating within specific places—places as *locale* (Castree, 2009)—are a influential as a result of their ability to deliver different forms of *social capital* (Wilson, 2012). Communities, as Wilson (2012) has discussed extensively through the context of resilience, offer a distinct ability to develop transition corridors on account of their lived-in nature. Chaskin (2008) has gone further arguing that communities, as local environments, have distinct qualities

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in their ability to 'act' in response to adversity, protect their well-being, and adapt to change in day-to-day life—as a product of relationships and dependencies built within community. As Wilson (2012) has argued, *transition theories* provide a novel lens capable of providing the means for rather than an end at the local scale. As Wilson (2012) has elaborated throughout his work, transition theory provides a detailed plan of how communities can transition over time and across space, setting out pathways for change and acting on them thereafter. As shown in **figure 2.1**, Wilson identifies different transition pathways based upon variations in the economic, social and environmental capital of any given community depending on specific gains and setbacks, as well as how there can be interference from other local stakeholders interests, as shown in **figure 2.2**.
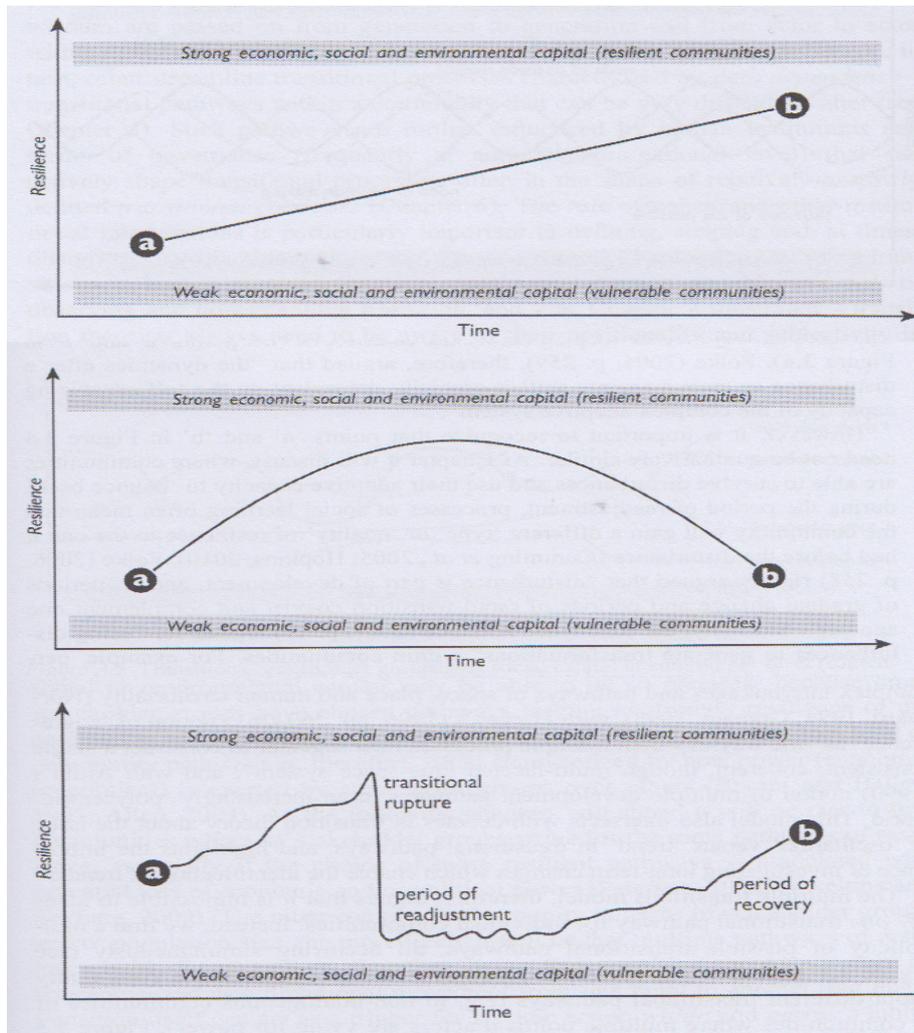
Figure 2.1: Transition pathways according to different strengths of social, economic and environmental capital. (A - top) shows a linear community transition with sustained social, economic and environmental capitals leading to increased resilience. (B - middle) shows a failed transition pathway resulting from weak social, economic and environmental capital leading to low community resilience. (C - bottom) shows an example of Transition ruptures where an initiative ruptures, readjusts and must then recover its capital (Source: Wilson, 2012).
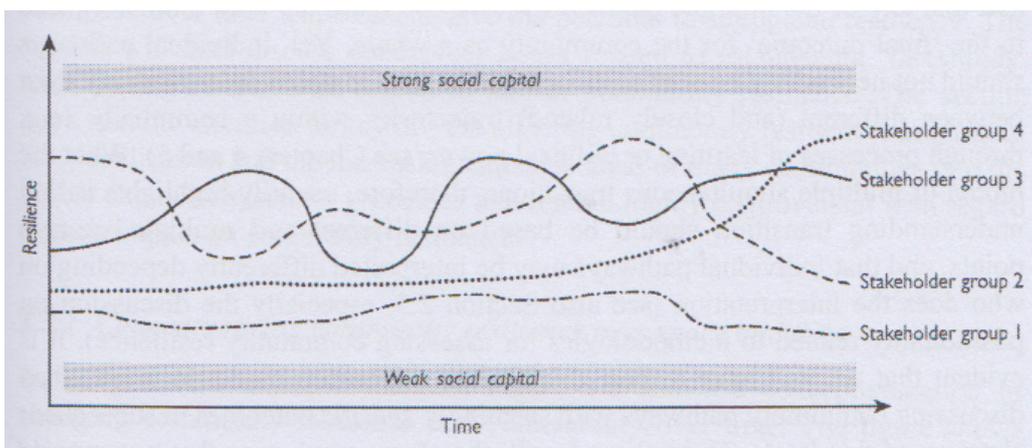
Figure 2.2: Influence of different stakeholders on one another at the community scale. This figure demonstrates how different actors may come into contention with one another over time—based upon different interests—leading to a variation in resilience over time (Source: Wilson, 2012).

Hopkins' (2008) approach to *transition theory* is to bring people into centre-circle and seek solutions through utilising their skillsets and by reskilling. Transition departs from the imperative in *conventional environmentalism* of 'the man on the street as the problem' and advocates 'the man on the street as the solution' (Hopkins, 2008: 135). Pressing for re-skilling, as Hopkins (2008: 135) argues, 'builds a fundamental sense of can do' and offers an ability to build-resilience for ones self and community. As Bailey et al. (2010) have discussed, the Transition process refers to a relocalisation of infrastructures and skillsets, towards building PPIs such as food networks, currency schemes and energy infrastructures (Brangwin and Hopkins, 2008). As illustrated in Scott-Cato and Hillier's (2010) discussion of Transition Town's, the movement can be understood as a revival and rehabilitation of the blue-collar skills from the social stigma they receive within the highly specialised service economy towards greater social inclusion and innovation at the local community scale. Indeed this invites further elaboration from studies of skill and the somewhat invisibility of these skills in our seamless socio-technical configuration (Graham and Marvin, 2001).

The seamlessness of our current socio-technical configuration, it has been argued, renders many of the everyday infrastructures we utilise in modern society invisible (Graham and Thrift, 2007; Graham, 2010). According to Graham and Thrift (2007) the dependency we have on the repair and maintenance of the objects and environments we use in our everyday life is invisible behind their seamless functionability. This is on account of tools being present-at-hand for the purpose of maintenance and repair of the objects that we utilise for our

everyday lives (Harman, 2002). The current complex and splintered socio-technical infrastructures that we rely on are therefore reliant upon the maintenance and repair of road infrastructures being ready-to-hand, for example, for society to remain mobile (Geels, 2012; Graham and Marvin, 2001; Graham and Thrift, 2007). The maintenance of these complex socio-technical configurations requires a massive dependence on natural resources—and primarily oil and gas—transition from these is therefore a highly multifaceted process (Shove and Walker, 2007).

For Hopkins (2008) our dependence is not a simple matter of the average person being to blame but rather they can become educated about environmental problems and adopt skills more suitable to a sustainable approach. Transition is an approach that shows what can be done within a manageable space (i.e. community) and by drawing upon skills still available at the community scale (Hopkins, 2010; 2011; Homer-Dixon, 2006). According to Barry and Quilley (2009: 3) this shift towards local action represents a form 'of DIY politics, which may have the potential for actual transformation of communities.' Hopkins (2008) utilises the image of 'The Hands' throughout *The Transition Handbook* to signal the importance of people in building parallel infrastructures needed to build resilience and more sustainable lifestyles. It is important to note that while there is clearly more to Transition than an *a priori* reading of the local scale, the skills practiced at this scale may become limited by the Transition ethos (or model) itself on account of its apolitical and non-confrontational approach to practicing local transition (Connors and McDonald, 2010). The apolitical ethos might therefore limit the degree to which radical

action can be practiced locally, as avoiding antagonism with other local actors is likely to prevent any call for counterculture, thus fashioning a post-political trap; this subject is discussed in greater detail later in this chapter.

The practices of re-skilling refer to a retrieval of the skills once practiced at the community scale, where rural communities played a more supportive role in everyday life (Hopkins, 2010). Rural skills, and the ability to adopt these practices, have been acknowledged in Neal's (2013) account of ruralist practices in the context of urban areas. This implies a more active function in building the capacity to maintain and repair certain aspects of community as first explored in Heidegger's analysis of 'being' (Mulhall, 2013).

Heidegger explained through the concept of *Dasein* (being there or being in the world) that things we employ for particular purposes are not merely present-to-hand—and provided *a priori* for our utility—but are ready-to-hand (Mulhall, 2013). As Heidegger explains, there is a difference between the visible surface where our lives unfold by *counting on them*—our interaction with things—and the subterranean world that requires support, maintenance and repair (Harman, 2002). In this sense, 'equipment is forever *in action* constructing in each moment the sustaining habitat where our explicit awareness is on the move' (ibid: 18). The Transition movement, as Hopkins (2008) explains, draws a great deal of its ethos from permaculture (Holmgren, 2011), and specifically a recognition of the support the environment provides for human life, and the sustained provision of food through natures symbiosis. Recognising the support and interconnectedness of human and environmental systems is integral to the

Transition discourse, as in any other *Green* discourse (see Eckersely, 1992). But Transition Towns depart from the conventional confrontation with political protagonists to connect with the natural environment and demonstrate that action can be taken into our own hands (Hopkins, 2008: chapter 10).

One of the core assumptions of any given Transition initiative, as Hopkins (2008: 134) has outlined, is that 'we can build ways of living that are more connected, more enriching and that recognise the biological limits of the planet.' Recognition of the biological limits of the planet (as well as limits to its general natural resource base) and their importance in maintaining crop yield are central to Hopkins' (2008; 2010; 2011) vision of communities that are capable of maintaining themselves and building-resilience. In such a case, as North (2010) elaborates, cutting off damaging flows refers to many of the processes we take for granted within contemporary socio-economic regimes and locating supportive mechanisms closer to their market through adoption of more ecologically sensitive modes of production.

The importance of 'skill', and its revival within the contemporary community setting is essential (Wilson, 2012). According to Neal (2013), Transition adopts a vision of community to become inclusive of non-human life (i.e. animals, plants, soil, etc), in what she terms ruralist practices. Conceptualisations and practices of and within the environment can be said to go beyond the surface reality wherein objects are ready-to-hand, towards a more materialist conceptualisation of tools for change being 'present-at-hand' through agricultural practices and re-introduction of ruralist skills of the past that

recognise the need to maintain the environment (Harman, 2002; Hopkins, 2010; Neal, 2013). One such reflection of ruralist skills is the recognition of the vital maintenance provided by earthworms in the breakdown of organic matter involved in garden practices (Philips, 1990).

The lack of attention in Transition Town literatures to the importance of skill and the relationship with materials requires further discussion. If the Transition movement is about responding to inaction of governments, there is a recognition of the effects of climate change and peak oil despite its invisibility (Giddens, 2011), and a process that involves taking-on responsibility for natural and man-made materials that support society (Hopkins, 2008).

2.3. *Materialising Transition, Averting the Apocalypse*

The role of Transition Towns as a vehicle for change operating as an example to government policy rather than a operating in confrontation with government is an explicit premise of the movement (Connors and McDonald, 2010; Hopkins, 2008; 2011). As discussed—albeit briefly—Transition Towns adopt a survivalist discourse but seek to adopt a convivial take to acting at the local scale, in what has been likened to Homer-Dixon's (2006) account of the *Upside of Down*. The Transition take is therefore premised on what Hopkins has referred to as 'a future, without oil [that] could be preferable to the present' (2008: 53). The inversion in this sense offers an ability to act upon climate change rather than perpetuating society's 'climate as fear' discourse (Hulme, 2008). The emergence of 'ecologies of fear' (Davis, 1999) announces a need to

respond to these issues, as society becomes increasingly preoccupied with the future and modernity's insidious affect on society (Giddens, 1990). But the problem for a number of political theorists and the Transition movement is the speed at which we are responding to modern risks, such as climate change and peak oil (Hopkins, 2008). As Giddens (2011) outlines in the *Giddens Paradox* the invisibility of the climate change and its risk to society explains the lacklustre response of governments to climate change, but by the time these problems become tangible they are likely to have become too acute to deal with. The Transition ethos offers the ability to make just enough change: 'if we wait for governments, it'll be too little too late. If we act as individuals it'll be too little. If we act as communities, it'll be just enough, just in time' (Transition Network, 2015).

Community action presents a possibility of taking responsibility for the process of transition, and putting a positive spin on the process itself (Barry and Quilley, 2009). Brangwyn and Hopkins (2008) present transition as a choice in one of their earlier publications outlining the Transition model. The choice is between 'dithering about, waiting for technology or government to solve the problem[s] for us' or 'for local communities to step into a leadership position on this' (p. 7). Effectively what is set out here is the act of re-localisation or intentional localisation where 'business can carry on as usual, but with shorter supply and distribution networks' (North, 2010: 592) as a means of preparing the ground for immanent effects of peak oil (coal and gas)—a consequence of the material limits to our natural resource base (see Bridge, 2011). But rather than focusing on the future as catastrophic, Hopkins (2008) encourages us think

positively developing a convivial 'future-focus' to help plan a vision of how communities can become resilient (Feola and Nunes, 2013).

The success of the Transition approach, as Hopkins (2008) and others (Bailey et al., 2010; Barry and Quilley, 2009) have argued, is its distinctly positive vision of the future, offering both psychological resilience—and inevitably (physical) community-wide resilience. According to Hopkins (2008) one of the most practical approaches to visioning the Transition process is 'looking back over the transition' as though one has already achieved it and imagining how it was materialised. It is through this process that the movement offers a distinct ability to build resilience and empower individuals throughout local community (Wilson, 2012). Hopkins (2008) applies resilience as a central concept for the Transition Town movement with the aim of building the adaptability of community to external disturbances, and articulating this through Walker et al.'s (2004) definition of resilience:

> *"Resilience is the capacity of a system to absorb disturbance and reorganise while undergoing change, so as to still retain essentially the same function, structure, identity and feedbacks."*

Contextualising resilience through community, Hopkins (2008) looks to building resilience against the possibility of oil shock on the current political-ecological regime of accumulation and circulation (Bettini and Karaliotas, 2013). Hopkins's (2008) vision of resilience is based upon the localisation of infrastructure to the local scale, to offer a more 'diverse' and 'modular' system of supportive

infrastructures that are more connected with the natural world (Bailey et al., 2010). In this sense, Transition seeks to maintain the function, structure and identity of community, whilst simultaneously changing its supportive structures that maintain it.

Resilience have become a salient term in the social sciences over the past few years through its ability to be contextualised across various disciplines, starting in ecological systems analysis (Holling, 1973), and thereafter, applicable to socio-ecological interfaces in disaster management (Folke, 2006), economic geography and finance (Amoore, 2013), and finally social movements (North, 2010; Scott, 2013; Anderson, 2015). Hopkins' (2008) approach to resilience, reflects Folke et al.'s (2007) argument that in socio-ecological systems social dimensions of sustainability require more awareness of complex relationships with ecological systems. In this sense, rural actors and communities must be aware of the implications of adaptation on ecosystem services to ensure further degradation of the environment is minimised (Scott, 2013; Hopkins, 2008). In this sense, Hopkins' (2008; 2011; Bailey et al., 2010) vision of resilience incorporates a recognition of 'equilibrium resilience'—how a system can bounce-back and accommodate disturbances without experiencing system change—but also 'evolutionary resilience'—recognising the need to 'bounce forward' and make changes to secure the future of a given system or community (Scott, 2013; Hudson, 2010; Pike et al., 2010).

Galvanising community offers the prospect of building local resistance to change while developing a radical departure from oil dependency, creating new

transition pathways characterised by local resourcefulness and fewer ties to global circulations (Smith, 2011; North, 2010). Resilience, in Transition Towns, refers to maintenance of community while devising a simultaneous evolution of systems on which community is dependent through localisation of global infrastructure (Scott-Cato and Hillier, 2010). The ability of community to evolve, and exploit 'windows of opportunity' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987), reflect an opportunity offered by climate change to return to community and re-localise skills and infrastructures once synonymous with community, but also an evolution of contemporary society to offer a more sustainable future (Hopkins, 2008; Barry and Quilley, 2009). As Yusoff and Gabrys (2011) have discussed, imaginaries of the future cannot be reduced to pessimistic claims as they offer opportunities for 'seeing, sensing, thinking, and dreaming that creates the conditions for material interventions in, and political sensibilities of the world' (p. 516). These invisible threats, Anderson (2010) has argued, can be anticipated through *styles* disclosing imaginaries of the past, present and future and *logics* of how to *practice* future threats in the present. Determining the practical course of action is thereof tantamount importance for the successful utilisation of 'transition pathways' given the balance between social, economic and environmental capitals within a given place (Wilson, 2012). The Transition movement's take on resilience is epitomised by a collective call for adventure and social innovation, and a focus on developing distinctly alternative economies and spaces where transition can be practiced (Barry and Quilley, 2009). Every action is in response to the impending threat of climate change; the affective properties of taking action cannot be underestimated thereafter (Marres, 2010).

2.4.   Interweaving Narratives: Radical governance or governing radicals?

Since the turn of the millennium there has been a notable emphasis on 'governance' over 'government', with increasing stress in government reports on community autonomy and increased emphasis on third sector organisations (Bridge et al., 2013; Rhodes, 2007; Copus, 2014). An increasing emphasis has been upon helping civil society groups govern low-carbon transition from the bottom-up, rather than through more conventional top-down methods of (socio)-technical transition (Aiken, 2014; Seyfang and Smith, 2007). At the local level, the movement towards 'governance' has created networks of governmental actors with the private sector and third sector organisations such as voluntary and community groups (Taylor, 2007; Bridge et al., 2013). The increased emphasis, in the context of climate change, has been on encouraging community groups to kick-start transition, as reflected in a number of reports such as the *Community Energy Strategy* (DECC, 2014), David Cameron's *Big Society* speech (Cabinet Office, 2010), *New Localism* and *new parochialism* (Featherstone, 2013), and council policies to promote community groups like the Transition movement (Hopkins, 2011).

Reflecting the need for a multi-faceted response to climate change, and the role of local government in low-carbon transition, Hopkins (2008) has argued that building bridges with government is not only necessary for the success of Transition initiatives, but also plays an important role by leading by example and influencing town plans (Hopkins, 2011: 281-284). This is in light of contemporary processes of governance, which Hopkins (2008: 76) argued

'governments […] don't lead, they respond. They are reactive, not proactive.' This is reflective of Giddens' (2011) assertion that governments are unlikely to respond to invisible and intangible threats such as climate change. The role of Transition Towns is to plug this gap between the environmental movement and government, by 'saying to government: "here is our plan"' (Hopkins, 2008: 56). Bowles and Gintis (2002) have strongly supported this model, arguing that community (environmental) group participation as a mode of governance often increases as a result of the failure of governments or markets to adequately respond to environmental problems (Togler et al., 2010).

One of the clearest 'lock-ins'—that is to say the processes that lock communities on the pathway's to which they have become accustomed and dependent—is the UK political system and its structure (Wilson, 2012; Dryzek et al., 2003). Transition initiatives look to influence local government through its policies and utilising its local resources for change. But an inherent issue for local government, as Copus (2014) has explained, is that it is 'constitutionally unprotected from the political ideologies, policies, and priorities and […] caprice of central government' (p. 430). All of the functions of local government and the resources available to it are, to this extent, surplus to the powers of central government (Copus, 2014). According to Dryzek et al. (2003), even democratic processes, such as the UK electoral system, are often non-representational as the 'first past the post' system can create political barriers between the electorate and the legislature during their term of office (Norton, 2014). This in turn can affect the ability of communities to harness local government as a means of local resilience and low-carbon transition (Wilson, 2012). If we compare the structure

of governance between the UK and Germany, the governance structures of Germany have been particularly effective in giving a voice to local communities, generally allowing more resilient and self-sufficient transition pathways (Wilson and Wilson, 2001; Wilson, 2012). Yet in the UK, governance structures have been criticised for being less effective in overseeing sustainable transition (Dryzek et al., 2003). This is where Transition initiatives have notably stepped in to develop public support from the grassroots up. Building support around community initiatives Hopkins' model has been widely praised for generating plans for government to support and implement (Seyfang and Smith, 2007; 2010).

But while Transition initiatives offers a very clear, pragmatic response to the inadequacies of political institutions to put sustainability on the local agenda there are a number of clear—and some less clear—challenges to this approach. According to Aiken (2014), elision of 'local' and 'community' in populist rhetoric to form "local community" responses to climate change is particularly problematic, most notably because it can lead to great expectations at the local community scale. As Amin (2005) suggests, a community cannot be expected to foster empowerment for change if it is unable to control its own destiny through the command of sufficient resources. 'Building bridges to government' provides a solution to this problem, as it enables communities to access financial and environmental resources in the governments care (Hopkins, 2011). This has been particularly successful in Totnes, as Smith (2011) has noted, but as she goes on to outline, for many this is a risky solution as it could risk projects becoming co-opted or co-produced by the state. This is one of the major points to which the

question of politics is central, and to which this review turns its attention hereafter.

The Transition movement in Hopkins' own words is deeply political as 'it has the power to transform communities, economies, shift power back to the local encourage communities to own their own assets, and be more in control of their economic destiny' (2014). But if Transition is to achieve the kind of radical change it proposes, surely it must by definition break with convention and 'rock the boat' (Connors and McDonald, 2010: 566). This is a critique that emerged almost as soon as the Transition movement started to gain ground; ground made up precisely, according to Chamberlin (2009), because the movement is inclusive enough to represent the community's interest to local government. But, once again, this in itself is an issue. Chatterton and Cutler (2008) have protested that for a movement to be inclusive of the commonalities among different people, what can the movement offer that is in any way radically different? This in turn is likely to compact the bilateral action taken with local government, as consensus must be struck regarding what change is to take place, risking initiatives aims being co-opted by the states mandate. The danger of this approach is that remaining neutral over controversial case studies can allow government to pursue its own agenda at the expense of Transition initiatives, confining them to a post-political trap (Kenis and Mathijs, 2014a).

The coinage of terms such as 'governance-beyond-the-state' (Swyngedouw, 2005), imply that modes of governance taken on by grassroots movements are 'beyond' circles of polity, and a separation between government

and civil actors. But as Aiken (2014) has elaborated, the local scale is the scale at which government exercises its power. As Althusser (1984; 2006) has elaborated, the key function of ideology—especially as enacted by government—is to condition a space in which subjects may enact their subjection as though it were of their own free will (Rose et al., 2009). 'Community', as Aiken (2014: 14) has cautioned, is thereafter 'not a site removed or free from state power and state effects, but is a key site where the state can be seen to act.' Out of this one must ask whether action taken with the support of government operates out by the will of community actors alone, or is ascribed by government for its purpose(s) (Barnett, 2005). This is a question posed by Post (1993) regarding the paradox of democratic autonomy, and whether: autonomy is *attained* through the subjects' free will, or *ascribed* by the state. Barnett (2005) adopts a sceptical position over government, framing government as capable of ascribing autonomy as *if* it were an act of free will by the subject.

The government's interest in *ascribing* autonomy, according to a post-political perspective, is that it allows government to maintain a 'populist discursive regime' preventing universal claims being made against the 'green economy' (Swyngedouw, 2010; Oosterlynck and Swyngedouw, 2010). An example of this would be government backing of local community as a solution to climate change whilst simultaneously supporting unsustainable projects such as fracking—and in the process pacifying discord from environmental groups and securing UK energy flows and capitalist ideology (Aiken, 2014; Monbiot, 2015). In other words through 'dialogical forms of consensus formation' the government normalises the threat of climate change (i.e. capitalism can solve

problems of climate change through a green economy and markets-innovation) and can foreclose politicisation (Swyngedouw, 2010: 215; Žižek, 2011).

This question of free will to act is central once again to questions of politics and confrontation. A significant challenge for community development, as Pitchford and Henderson (2008) have discussed extensively, is the risk of community initiatives becoming incorporated into state responsibilities to provide services to which the government are less capable or inclined to fulfil. The particularity of this issue is that it can lead to the government's own agenda becoming incorporated into its practices alongside Transition initiatives (see Connors and McDonald, 2010; Aiken, 2014).

Localist rhetoric has become increasingly prevalent in government reports following increased emphasis on governance beyond state apparatuses. But with emphasis on community, Aiken (2014) elaborated how the extension of expectations to the local scale leads to high expectations of civil society groups, as if they poses the resources required to generate radical change. In the context of community and localism, Aiken (2014: 2) argued that:

'If it is indeed the case that "local communities" are expected to take the responsibility for and ability to respond to major challenges like climate change, then surely there is a need to look again at the role "community" plays in combating climate change.'

The use of rhetorical phrases such as "community" and "localism", as well as their elision in government and Transition Town discourses, imply a meaning that is not clearly articulated between the signifier—the spoken word or use of language—and the signified meaning—the conceptual meaning (Wood, 2012). 'Community' and 'local' can, thereafter, come to imply effort by the government to provide resources to environmental groups and not question the political stakes and affects of cooperation. In this case we need to question the intentions of both community and government. And above all what rhetorical phrases such as 'resilience', 'community' and 'local' come to mean in such contexts (see Aiken, 2012; 2014). Aiken (2014) stresses the importance of government through community framed through Foucault's (1978) notion of governmentality. As he notes, central to the process of governmentality is to govern without encroaching (directly) upon the autonomy or liberties of the individual, but instead to manufacture consent (Bröckling et al., 2011). Based upon this assumption, Aiken (2014) regards 'community' as a technology of government, through which to elide this with the local.

Governing beyond the state, as Taylor (2007) has demonstrated, is for the most part inscribed with government's agenda through the devolution of 'appropriate' responsibilities to the community scale, as well as internalising 'performance cultures'. But, according to Clarke and Newman (2012) the state has a guileful ability to 'alchemise' it's agenda through rhetoric. The act of 'alchemising' government policies—such as austerity—allows government to put a 'magical' spin on cuts to public services (Clarke, 2010). Government reports such as the 'Big Society' report of 2010 have been noted for their rhetorical

displacement of cuts to services as opportunities and social empowerment of citizens to take on services previously operated by the state (Kisby, 2010; Clarke and Newman, 2012; Newman, 2012). As Clarke and Newman (2012) articulated, government employ 'magical thinking' to their discursive articulation of cuts, spinning austerity into a moral—and even emancipatory—policy of sharing power and responsibility (Thompson, 1971).

Based upon these insights into government rhetoric—and the 'magic thinking' of the government's discursive repertoire around cuts to public services (Clarke and Newman, 2012)—insights into how governmentality is grounded at the community scale can reveal a great deal about how government *ascribe* autonomy to the local scale as a means of pursuing its own agenda (Bröckling et al., 2010; Barnett, 2005a). The ability of Transition initiatives to break with the community's path dependency is, thereafter, likely to be affected if initiatives seek to avoid 'rocking the boat' and confronting local problems that require more radical change (Connors and McDonald, 2010).

2.5   Summary: Transition and Politics

Literatures accounting for the identity and practices of the Transition movement have drawn upon a number of different avenues of political and economic theory to investigate the movement's discursive articulation of grassroots action (North, 2010; 2014; Scott-Cato and Hillier, 2010; Bettini and Karaloitas, 2013). A number of these literatures have focused on the Transition movement's apolitical, non-confrontational approach to local action, but while

these critiques have given highly accurate criticisms of Transition's focus on action, they have failed to critically intermesh their approaches. For example, while I would agree with Kenis and Mathij's (2014a) argument that Transition is in danger of post-politicisation, North (2010) and Scott-Cato and Hillier's (2010) arguments that local practices are more complex than *a priori* interpretations of local-scale action also stand. It is to this degree that analysis should be taken to account for the limitations of Transition's apolitical approach, but not limit this to their *a priori* focus on the local scale as inherent and a solution in itself.

Remaining apolitical in such a highly strung political climate, with significant debates in society revolving around economic growth, environmental degradation and sustainable development in the third world mean climate change is a highly political matter as it affects almost every aspect of life (Urry, 2011; Žižek, 2011). It is for this reason that with such a radical change proposed by the Transition movement there cannot be a simple consensus around community-wide transition; change has an affect. Matters of concern are no longer limited to the inner circles of polity; in this information age the consequences of action can scarcely remain outside contention and debate (Braun and Whatmore, 2010; Tønder and Thomassen, 2005).

Further critical attention is needed to analyse what is *new* and different about the Transition Movement's approach to taking action at the grassroots; and why people believe (or do not believe) remaining apolitical is considered more practical. Analysing what the challenges facing this approach at the local

scale require further critical investigation into how participants construct local-scale action and what this scale offers in itself.

2.6. Theoretical Framework

2.6.1. Radical Articulations:

In order to explore the different elements of the Transition discourse a rigorous theoretical framework is required to determine how the discourse is constituted as such, and not merely distinguishable through an essentialist premise that there may be attributes determinate of the transition discourse's identity (Glynos and Howarth, 2007). To avoid this positivist presumption of what a movement or ideology might constitute, I draw upon Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) post-Marxist discourse theory—and its subsequent school of thought—to analyse the constitutive *elements* (the not yet contextualised discursive building blocks) and *moments* (those differential positions articulated in the discourse) that go towards constructing the Transition discourse (Howarth and Stavrakakis, 2000; Žižek, 1989). Utilising these building blocks for discourse, we can start to distinguish how a grassroots environmental movement such as the Transition movement structures the 'discursive field' of political-ecological change. Therein this starts to build a picture of how the Transition discourse is constituted 'of a system of meaningful practices' to form the 'identities' of Transition subjects and their construction of concern for the environment and how to deal with it (Howarth and Stavrakakis, 2000: 3; Robbins et al., 2010).

The discourse theory of Laclau and Mouffe (1985) has had such an influence as a consequence of the framework that it offers for devising a 'sequence of events, experiences or action with a plot that ties together different parts into a meaningful whole' (Feldman et al., 2004: 148; cited Bettini, 2013b). Analysing the reproduction of discourse reveals the structuration of *elements* through *moments* where a *new* and seemingly more contextual articulation produces a new meaning to the population it represents (Stavrakakis, 1997; Laclau, 2005a). Discourse theory thereafter enables a method of analysis through which a social-environmental movement such as the Transition movement constitutes a new meaning or at least a new way of approaching the problem of climate politics. In this sense, the *element* constituting 'future focus' is clearly adopted by 'Friends of the Earth' (FoE) as well as the Transition movement, but the discernable difference would be constituted in the approach to responding to the problem. While FoE clearly adopt a grassroots focus through which to build a popular movement made up of initiatives across the UK, much like the Transition movement, their rationalisation of action is as a political lobbying and protest for institutional change. Transition initiatives, on the contrary, adopt an apolitical and non-confrontational method of re-skilling and building the future one would like to see through a more 'hands-on' approach (see Chapter 4).

But further to this devised framework, Laclau (2005a) and others (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985) have imparted a crucial critique of the construction of discourses. In order for a collective, group or movement that is constituted of different subjects to be held together it must be capable of assimilating divergent

meanings into a single whole or signifier held in common (Laclau, 2005a). To approach this from a more direct application of social movement theory, Melucci (1996: 1) summarises the conjugation of collective action around this central signifier very well, positing that movements 'speak a language that seems to be entirely their own, but [...] say something that transcends their particularity and speaks to us all.' In other words, movements like Transition form their basis of action around a language that invites us to act in a new and more practical way differing from conventional approaches to environmentalism but is capable of assimilating the discursive differences between participants through identification with a common signifier (Wood, 2012). In this sense, the enunciation of certain forms of collective action correspond to an 'empty signifier', the 'signifier without the signified', or in other words the movements' language that Melucci speaks of refers to an *equivocal* 'excess' through which certain key discourses do not articulate determinate meaning but 'quilts' the play of difference insofar as the signifier is not fully fixed (Laclau, 1996: 36; Žižek, 1989). The question thereafter—and as explored in chapter 4—is what form of discursive centre does the Transition movement hold that represents a radical and *new* form of action that is simultaneously able to appeal to such a broad population as observed over the last 10 years?

From a (linguistic) discourse perspective questions surround the ability of movements to form different meanings to different people while adhering to a coherent collective objective building popular appeal to civil society. (Environmental) movements are systems of collective action that operate through complex networks among different levels of meaning. Collective action

within movements, as Melucci (1996) elaborates, is contextual and embellished

through place specific relationships with external actors through which

'collective action takes shape, perpetuates itself or changes' (p. 4). This point is

critical as it refers to the contextualisation of collective action in different places,

and the ability of movements to adapt to different contextual pathways.

Essentially, this speaks of the ability of a movement operating at the grassroots

like Transition to adapt or change to local-specific demands which, in turn,

determines the success of measures taken to bring about change (Wilson, 2012;

Seyfang and Haxeltine, 2012).

2.6.2.   Re-analysing radical space, a pragmatic reading

'Place-making', according to Barnett and Bridge (2013), 'is presented as a

crucial dimension in cultivating and sustaining a pluralistic and democratic ethos

of democracy' (p. 1023). This is especially the case when it comes to negotiation

of radical change at the local-community scale, as there are different interests to

take into account as determined by the affect on local interest groups and

stakeholders. As elaborated in Massey's (2005) analysis of place, radical

approaches to community conceive of politics as being played out between a

'heterogeneous, unstable and necessarily antagonistic "we"' (Donald, 1999: 100;

Mouffe, 1993). Under this understanding of place-making movements are

'informed by ontologies of antagonism, abundance and lack' (Barnett and Bridge,

2013: 1023; Tønder and Thomassen, 2005). But as Barnett has frequently

contended, democratic space cannot be reduced to agonistic debate supplanted

over benign space; the play of politics within these spaces is far complex and

characterised by differential interpretations and interactions across space (Barnett, 2005b; 2005c).

Introducing an informed analysis of space based upon different interests and relationships across community space enables a more comprehensive analysis of space (Delanty, 2003). According to Barnett and Bridge (2013) a pragmatic conceptualisation of public spaces based on 'affected interest' addresses a more critical analytic lens for accounting for political interest based upon practices and actions across these spaces (Shapiro, 1999; 2003). Interpretations and the importance of different spaces to different publics will have a corresponding affect on the interests a group will have in a specific space, and thereafter the way that space should be used (Barnett, 2008; Marres, 2007). As Noortje Marres (2007) has elaborated in her account of public issue formation, engagement with objects and spaces within a given geographical area have profound political consequences on issue formation. This comes in light of new materialist philosophies (see Coole and Frost, 2010) that have uncovered the political 'affect' of objects on people's practices and concerns, as well as the ways we respond to problems of climate change by interacting in different spaces (Marres, 2010). 'Affected interest', as Dewey (1927) first discussed, refers to something where the outcome of an action has an affect on something of interest to a given group or person.

With this in mind, the interaction between space and the affect our political concerns have on the way space is practiced-in should be thought of in relation to the concerns of different groups and how they articulate concern for

different spaces. Without critical engagement with affect and its correspondence to public issue formation and how this is enacted in different spaces—whether public or private—has a profound correspondence to the affect action has on other public groups within these spaces. Put simply, the action of one or more groups in a space might have an impact on other groups operating within that space. Consequently, Barnett (2005a) has argued that post-structuralist ontologies centred on antagonism often fail to adequately describe the spatial dimensions of place-specific politics such as spaces of generosity and friendship within a community (see Miller, 2013).

Applying the 'affected interest' principle to Transition initiatives—articulated in Chapter 5—provides more critical edge for understanding the successful instigation of action across the community scale, and illustrates well the disjunction between garden spaces and more public and affective spaces of community energy projects. Furthermore, an understanding of material change (i.e. the materialisation of a renewable energy project) as having an affect on the articulation of action begins to challenge certain forms of action when certain limits become visible through a particular approach. In such a case, the failure of a particular political approach can lead to the re-articulation or re-politicisation of approaches to radical action (Mouffe, 1993; Melucci, 1996).

2.7.   *Summary – Political Formulations:*

With these theoretical insights in mind it should be understood that discourses have material inferences on the ability of movements to act and are

inherently characteristic of the way they seek to act. Hereafter, a discursive

analysis of the Transition Movement seeks to analyse the affect of these

discourses on the ability of participants to act at the local scale.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1.   Introduction: Qualitative Methods

This thesis utilises a number of qualitative techniques formulated into a mixed-methods approach in order to undertake rigorous analysis of politics in community environmental movements (Creswell, 2013; Wilson, 2012). Combining a number of complementary qualitative research methods—semi-structured interviews, focus groups, observation and critical discourse analysis—the qualitative research design attempts to critically explore the discourses and social practices of Transition Town members utilising Laclau's (2005a; 2005b) analysis of political-ideological discourse, as well as critical (linguistic) discourse analysis of interview transcripts (Wodak, 1989; Kress, 1990).

The empirical research I set out draws on a fairly orthodox framework of tried and tested qualitative techniques, to set a solid platform for a more theoretically ambitious exposition of interview data through Laclau's political discourse analysis in the following discussion chapters (Crang, 2002; 2003). Throughout focus group and semi-structured interviews many of the discussions were drawn to more complex visual and haptic sensual discussions of the Transition ethos and their personal environmental discourse (Rose, 2012; Breitbart, 2010). While this is a clear opportunity for further research, this

investigation concentrates its focus on discourse and identity exposed throughout the interview texts (Dryzek, 2005; Crang, 2003).

3.2   Positionality Statement – Exploring Environmental Discourse

Before setting out how this research project sought to uncover why individuals decide to join Transition initiatives, it is worth setting out a brief positionality statement to explain why I sought to uncover environmental discourses and to locate my own 'lived experiences' and 'embodied knowledge' within the project (Rose, 1997; Waitt, 2010). I sought to study why people join the Transition Town movement, and specifically why they seek to act apolitically, because of the movement's ability to contextualise itself throughout towns and villages in the UK. What struck me before I began the project in 2013—though I did not explore this theme—was why the movement had become so widespread and yet I and a number of colleagues had not heard of it, and thereafter to better understand what might be limiting the movement's growth and visibility at the community scale. Locating my own position within this research project, therefore, required space for the narrative of individuals to come out without imprinting my own opinions regarding successful action at the community scale and allowing transparency from collection of data through the exposition and writing of this text (Bradshaw and Stratford, 2010).

3.3. Semi-Structured Interviews and Focus Groups:

In order to collect high validity empirical data—that is data reflecting how discourse and meaning is 'ascribed to specific aspects of social and spatial life' by different populations (Mansvelt and Berg, 2010: 348)[3]—across all 3 Transition Towns semi-structured interviews and focus groups interviews were conducted, with each interview ranging between one and two hours (Longhurst, 2010; Dunn, 2010). Most intensive and extensive research was conducted in Transition Tynedale, as data was utilised that had been collected in the summer (July-November) of 2013 for a previous project analysing different environmental discourses between individuals within the group; this was with the purpose of exposing the different meanings associated with environmental lexicon and how this can lead to miscommunication. Interviews and group observation for this project continued throughout 2014 and 2015. Semi-structured interviews were also conducted across Transition City Lancaster and SLACC, in 2014-2015, to offer comparative data between all 3 Transition initiatives, and a wider range of interviews and personal contexts that influence discursive practice and political-environmental discourse. A table showing location and date of interviews is shown in Appendix 1.

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[3] It should be noted that questions surrounding the validity of qualitative data have been greatly debated, as qualitative methods offer an insight into a particular spatial and temporal context of a given event that often requires interpretation. Hence, validity refers less to a rigorous situation that can be replicated, but rather a snapshot of a particular subjects position regarding an event or object across space and time (Massey, 2005; Mansvelt and Berg, 2010).

3.3.1 Semi-structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews allow for a conversational style with more fluency, and required more reflexivity to guide the interview without constraining an adequate representation of the interviewee (Mitchel et al., 2008). As Dunn (2010) explains, 'the semi-structured interview is organised around ordered but flexible questioning' (p. 110). For this reason careful planning was required to ensure that questions regarding environmental discourse, characteristics and group structure and politics were open enough to allow interviewees to expand upon their experiences and opinions without questions decreasing the validity of the interviewee's account of the Transition movement (Longhurst, 2010; Dunn, 2010). To allow elaboration, 'open questions' were utilised to allow interviewees to expand upon their points and to provide information that was not previously considered. This also enabled the 'salience' of each particular issue to be explored in more critical detail (Bryman, 2012). Rather than focusing on structured questions, particular discursive points were explored in more detail. The role of the interviewee in a semi-structured format, as Dunn (2010) has outlined, is to guide and explore specific points in more detail with limited structure (Riach, 2009).

Interview questions—as shown in Appendix 2—were, for the most part, about the interviewee's 'personal attitude', 'normative standards and values' and political-environmental beliefs, though the standard format of these questions varied depending on interview situation (Bryman, 2012: 253; Dunn, 2010). All interviews began with a simple primary question—*What led you to join*

Transition 'X'?—to initiate discussion of the topic and allow the interviewee to outline an oral history of what led them to join their respective Transition initiative. As Dunn (2010) has explained, the purpose of primary questions is to open up the discussion of a topic, while secondary questions require more reflexivity in the interview process to prompt the informant to expand on a particular point (Bradshaw and Stratford, 2010; Longhurst, 2010). An example of an uncoded interview extract is given in Appendix 3.

In order to expand on points selected throughout the interview, this methodology drew upon Riach's (2009) critical reflection on the importance of *in situ* reflexivity during the interview process. Riach has argued that in face-to-face interview processes certain points—specifically 'sticky moments' where there may be unease or fragmentation in the coherence of the interview—should be explored in more detail to understand the multifarious and highly subjective nature of the interviewee, and the importance of this to establishing theoretical rigour[4]. Put simply, this refers to clarifying certain points of interest in the research process by creating adequate space for the voice of the participant rather than making rash assumptions in the interview process (Riach, 2009; Bradshaw and Stratford, 2010). This was essential in the process of interpreting environmental discourses and subjective interpretation of the Transition movement and environmental politics, as it requires opening up surface reality or identity (i.e. Transition Town participant), and focused in on the context

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[4] This is adopted from Bourdieu et al.'s (1999) extortion that in social sciences we should acknowledge ones location and habitus (i.e. values, attitude, social status, etc) rather than making assumptions. In this sense, it requires understanding the multiple perspectives to an issue, and these are highly subjective.

behind their environmental and political discourses as well as wider political-economic contexts (Crang, 2002; Nayak and Jeffreys, 2011).

Constructing a durable but rigorous interview process was essential to recognising multiple accounts of the same reality vis-à-vis 'real-time' reflexivity and an empathetic interview model that connects adequately with the interview subject (Dunn, 2010; Oakley, 1981). No assumptions were made of interview data despite accounts often being made of the same reality (Housely and Smith, 2011). As Laclau and Mouffe (1985) have argued, one cannot assume determinant ontic content to a particular discourse or ideology, which is why a non-essentialist account of ideology requires to discern of such differences post-structure (see Howarth, 2015). Clarified interviewing is, therefore, required to understand the different discursive interpretations of the Transition movement, and what central signifier constitutes the group's identity (Laclau, 2005a).

Designing and practicing semi-structured interviews were carefully considered to give adequate space for the interviewee to articulate their argument, requiring a 'critical inner dialogue' throughout the interview process (Adelman, 1981). This critical dialogue was important not only for mapping the interview while in action, but also for rearranging critical aspects of the interview design when certain questions were covered of where further elaboration was needed (Bryman, 2012; Longhurst, 2010).

Key events outlined throughout interviews were cross-referenced with secondary data gathered from local media, press releases and blog sources in

order to confirm the rigour of interview accounts, as well as to identify other key players and interest groups (White, 2010). These groups were primarily identified on account of their affected interest in particular projects (Barnett and Bridge, 2013). To offer an example, a number of interviewees discussed concerns raised for the fishing stocks as a result of the hydroelectric project, and these testimonies were cross-referenced (or triangulated) against secondary data sources for added rigour, such as press releases from the Tyne Rivers Trust, the Hexham River Hydro blog and local media coverage (Clifford et al., 2010; Creswell and Clark, 2007).

3.3.2   Focus Group Interviews

While the primary method utilised throughout the research process was semi-structured interviewing (discussed in the previous section), around 50% of the data gathered in 2013 was conducted in two focus groups with Transition Tynedale. Focus groups are usually subject-based discussions inviting the group to engage in discussion around a particular question or set of questions (Cameron, 2005; Longhurst, 2010). In 2013, focus groups were utilised for two purposes: (1) to engage with what Transition Towns are about, and how groups are generally composed; and (2) to engage with a debate regarding environmental discourses and how these discourses became contextualised in Transition Tynedale. Both focus groups operated on different levels, the first group (1) was more 'in-depth' to engage critically with the Transition movement, and the second group explored a number of group discourses (2) and was more

characteristic of a 'group interview' with a large turn out and extensive

discussion between 15 group members (Cameron, 2010).

Focus group interviewing is primarily utilised as a method for mapping

beliefs and practices within the Transition groups, to gauge the breadth of

discursive practices and discourses, and how these fit in with the identity of the

wider group collective (Barbour, 2007). For example, discussions allowed

gardening practices to be discussed extensively and how these related to

community and discourses on the future and resilience. The focus group

situation, therefore, offered a practical tool for open discussion and debate

between participants, allowing them to openly articulate their discourses and

open up the discursive landscape of the Transition Town movement (Longhurst,

1996; Cameron, 2010). These focus groups opened the way for further in-depth

discussion in semi-structured interviews, which purposefully followed on from

themes discussed in focus group interviews (Longhurst, 2010; Kitzinger, 1995).

As the focus groups explored a broad theme, and gathered inductive

information to define the parameters of semi-structured interviews and context

of group formation the purpose of the interviewer was to facilitate and moderate

rather than conduct and structure (Stewart et al., 2007). Focus groups were

therefore highly practical in gathering a broad range of information and

outlining themes in a short space of time (Cameron, 2010). Utilising key themes

discussed in focus groups involved the use of grounded theory to offer rigour to

the research design and focus research on key discursive practices (Charmaz,

2003; Winchester and Rofe, 2010).

3.3.3. Pilot Interviews and Live Action Research

Pilot interviews and observations in Transition Town meetings and events were made in all Transition Towns to determine the context and key themes prior to fieldwork (Bradshaw and Stratford, 2010). Transition Towns were selected in the Northeast and Northwest of England primarily for their proximity to one another and particularly—in the case of TCL and SLACC—because of snowballing in local events. In an initial recruitment drive at TCL's 'potato day' a passer-by referred to SLACC as *"that group [pause] I cant remember what its called [pause] I don't know whether it is still going."* This was a particularly intriguing comment as SLACC is the closest Transition Town north of Transition City Lancaster. As there appeared to be little cooperation between the two initiatives, interview participants were selected from both groups. In Transition Tynedle interviewees were recruited from monthly meetings, and as follow on interviews to research undertaken during my undergraduate dissertation.

Pilot interviews offered the ability to identify the appropriate research style and structure as well as allowing *in vivo* codes—the descriptive codes that reveal themselves as common phrases in the text—to be identified and therein the key themes to present themselves (Strauss and Corbin, 1990; Cope, 2010). This offered an opportunity to structure rigorous research questions prior to more extensive interviewing later on in the research process (Bradshaw and Stratford, 2010).

Action research and observational research methods were used throughout annual meetings, events and activities across all 3 Transition Towns to develop a rigorous data-set and a more comprehensive exposition of discourse and practice (Laurier, 2010; Breitbart, 2010; Stringer, 2013). Attending meetings and events enabled networking and snowballing in order to recruit interviewees as well as develop a broader analysis of each respective Transition initiative. Furthermore, active participation in and observation of meetings and events allowed 'sticky moments' (discussed above) to emerge over conflicts associated with collective action and the styles of action adopted in Transition initiatives (Riach, 2009).

3.4.   Observation and Reflexivity:

Observation techniques were drawn upon throughout the research process to 'complement' and 'contextualise' the interview process (see above) with an added layer of rigour (Kearns, 2010; Bradshaw and Stratford, 2010; Riach, 2009; Crang, 2005). Observational techniques were complementary insofar as they provided an additional context that could be cross-referenced against information provided in semi-structured interviews (Kearns, 2010; Dunn, 2010). This information can be used as added rigour, and to understand the difference between what is disclosed in semi-structured interviews and group meetings and Transition Town activities (Longhurst, 2010). Observation and participation in Transition activities were applied to Transition Town meetings, such as monthly meetings, annual general meetings (AGMs) and annual events such as film screenings and network events. By observing these

events I was able to observe the everyday activities of Transition groups and further contextualise the dynamics of each Transition group (i.e. the number of annual participants and group contentions). Observation techniques were also applied carefully to add further rigour to the interview process. With use of an audio-recorder observation of the reaction to certain questions was easier and the rapport between the interviewer and interviewee was more consistent (Laurier and Philo, 2006; Bradshaw and Stratford, 2010).

The semi-structured and focus group format, as Bradshaw and Stratford (2010) remind us, requires critical reflexivity throughout the process of interviewing in order to offer space for the interviewee to expand upon and contextualise the research questions. Reflexivity might be thought of in England's (1994) terms, as a self-conscious reflection throughout the research process in order to reflect on ethical and contextual guidelines (Dowling, 2010). Reflexivity in the research process can therefore be used throughout and after the data collection process. In being reflexive throughout the interview process one can more affectively engage with the context of the interviewee in order to be more critical and contextually suited (Dowling, 2010). Reflexivity also allows a rigorous reflection on transcripts in the process of coding and discourse analysis to understand 'sticking points' where controversial or uncomfortable subjects fragmented the interview process (Riach, 2009) and recognise the researcher's 'positionality' (see 'positionality statement') through self-conscious reflection on the conduct of the researcher and the social relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee (Dowling, 2010; Winchester and Rofe, 2010). Semi-structured interviews drew upon Alvesson's (2003) pragmatist

approach to conducting interviews through in situ critical reflexivity; this approach treats the interviewee too as reflexive and producing multiple realities. Though it is important to bear in mind that although this might provide a more introspective account of Transition Towns, Bourdieu (2003) stakes caution in the research process, and reminds the researcher of the subjectivity of representation (Nayak and Jeffreys, 2011).

3.5.   Ethical Conduct:

As Hay (2010; Israel and Hay, 2006) has elaborated in his various outlines of ethical practice in geography, it is important for geographers to remain reflexive and seek an accurate and fair representation of the interviewee or group of interviewees throughout the research process. Participants were asked a minimum of two weeks prior to interviews whether they would be happy to participate in the research project. This was to ensure that they had read an outline of the discussion and project details, an example is shown in Appendix 4. Once they have given 'informed consent' a comfortable interview location was determined – usually their home or a neutral location (i.e. a café) (Dowling, 2010). Interviewees were asked whether it would be ok for the interview to be recorded before the interview began, and that the information and identity would be kept anonymous with pseudonyms in place of their real names (Hay, 2010; Israel and Hay, 2006).

3.6.   Analysis and Exposition of Texts:

Analysis and exposition of empirical data was undertaken with use of two methods used frequently in human geography: coding (Cope, 2010) and (critical) discourse analysis (Wodak, 2013; Waitt, 2010; Dryzek, 2005). Interview data was transcribed from sound recordings, which were used throughout the research process. Transcribing and correlating interview data with observational methods noted throughout interviews provided an extra element to the coding of the texts to reflect the interviewee's reaction and movement throughout the research process (Cope, 2010; Kearns, 2010). An example of the coding process is shown in Appendix 5, which separates interview data into different categories with observational notes in an additional column.

Coding was an essential component of the process of textual analysis, allowing the organisation and evaluation of interview and observational data, allowing us to corroborate and 'make sense' of the data (Cope, 2003). Careful consideration was taken throughout the coding process not to be overly reductionist whilst making sense of large data sets (Riach, 2009; Cope, 2010). The process of coding divided the data set into 4 columns: full transcribed notes (1), descriptive code (2), analytic code (3), and observations and notes (4). All recorded notes were analysed to divide the data into significant and workable data through the descriptive and analytical codes (Cope, 2010). Descriptive codes are those that are obvious from the text, and can be easily extracted from the text in line with the research aims and objectives. In the case of this topic, discussion of 'politics', 'democracy' and 'governance' would be clear descriptive

codes. Analytical codes are less obvious but reflect a latent or underlying theme of the project. These codes are more likely to require extensive analysis and scrutiny of the text (Cope, 2010). The process of coding helps not only to develop a more practical process of managing the data but also allow connections to be draw in and between texts.

In order to think critically about the social context of transcribed data, adopting Laclau's (2005a) political discourse analysis, offered an exemplar critical framework through which to identify the individuals' prominent discourses in relation to group discourse—and how these become amalgamated into forms of collective action across the 3 Transition Towns studied (Waitt, 2010). Foucauldian discourse analysis enabled the 'discursive practices'—the social production of a given reality—to be extracted from the text. As Foucault (1977) elaborated, discursive practices are:

'[The] delimitation of a field of objects, the definition of a legitimate perspective for the agent of knowledge, and the fixing of norms for elaboration of concepts and theories' (p.199).

In this regard, the process of discourse analysis involved understanding both the power dynamics within the group and critically analyse the intent of these groups to govern Transition and the local scale (Waitt, 2010). Furthermore, textual analysis of policy reports and legislation with regards to devolving power to the local scale required extensive analysis of discourses used to fix particular

truths in society with regards to climate change and the autonomy of local (civil)

governance.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) was important to the exposition and

ordering of the text itself. This allows the seemingly unremarkable nature of the

text to be exposed and an account of the "production, internal structure and

overall organisation of [the] text" (Kress, 1990: 84) to be interpreted critically.

This allows the social processes latent to the text to be understood as 'signs', and

therein understand these as "motivated conjunctions of forms (signifiers) and

meanings (signified)" (ibid: 86)[5]. CDA was crucial to understanding the

underlying power relations and politics within Transition Towns. Key to

undertaking critical analysis of discourses in everyday language included the

examination of 'rhetoric' and 'presuppositional structures' where analysis of

intonations in the text are key to its contextualisation, analysis of word order –

for emphasis – and lexicalization when interview transcripts were analysed

(Kress, 1990). This critical perspective was also essential to understanding how

specific – privileged – discourses become legitimised and demarcated as

authoritative (van Leeuwen, 2007). CDA, therefore, offers a practical tool for the

critique of power structures, politics and privileged discourses, and is also aware

of the need for the analyst to be reflexive and recognise his/her positionality

(van Dijk, 1993; van Leeuwen, 2007).

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[5] It is important to note that Kress's (1990) provocation of the 'signifier' and the 'signified' is aligned with Saussure's reading of linguistics, whereas this text relies upon Žižek's (1989) flipping-over to the 'signifier' as holding the meaning and the 'signified' being the surface reality.

3.7.   Summary and considerations:

A number of considerations to take note of were the variations in the amount of time allocated to each interview situation. Many of the retired participants were able to give extensive amounts of time allowing a lot of information to be covered. Other interviewees, with full-time jobs appeared wary of the amount of time that was taken out of their day and were often keen to speed up the interview process. In order to overcome this the interview, in certain situations, had to be condensed and skip to critical questions, which may have an implication on the rigour and consistence of the interview (Dunn, 2010). One of the barriers to the analysis of each Transition Town group was that each monthly/annual general meeting was held on the same day and the same time (first Wednesday of each month) limiting the number of meetings I was able to attend and—thereafter—the ability to recruit participants.

To summarise, the process of qualitative research was carried out through semi-structured interviews and observational methods, with the addition of more extensive focus group interviews in Transition Tynedale, to form a solid empirical basis for the critical exposition of interview transcripts. Data was ordered and analysed with use of coding and discourse analysis methods, used extensively in social scientific study (Waitt, 2010). Textual analysis was essential to organising data to understand it through the theoretical lens set out in the theoretical framework. This provided the basis for a critical reading of politics of the selected Transition initiatives across northern England.

Chapter 4: Discussion 1

Asking what is new about a movement reveals a great deal about how it is trying to countervail discontents in contemporary society, and seek solutions to problems that have not been confronted by forms of institutional governance (Melucci, 1996). But while the following chapter explores, in the first instance, what is *new* and appealing about Transition, in turn it illustrates how the *equivalential* relation between individuals in the collective are the result of alienation by political institutions not meeting their different environmental *demands* (Laclau, 2005a). Thereafter, the following section explores the instability of Transition's identity and meaning to different individuals who seek action through it, and—in turn—looks to locate what differentiates the Transition movement from other contemporary environmental movements (see Stavrakakis, 1997).

4.1.   Transition: 'for the purpose of change'

While it would appear a fairly normative enquiry to begin the research process with, the question 'what led you to join Transition 'X'?' reveals a great deal about why individuals with different environmental discourses are drawn towards the same social-environmental movement, and what the Transition movement offers that is or is thought to be *new*. Putting forward this simple primary question allows us to discern of the gap between peoples' individual *demands* and interests—characterised by their discursive differences over what

they believe is the best course of action—and the collective *equivalence,* characteristic of collective action (Laclau, 2005a: 73-74). The Transition movement focuses on local community scale action, an element of the movement that has received a great deal of attention in the academic literature, but while attention in a selection of literatures has been drawn to *a priori* assumptions of the local scale this chapter seeks to illustrate how conceiving of acting locally is not as simple as de-politicising the local, as many interviewees were aware of its complexity and the skills required in the process of transition (Kenis and Mathijs, 2014a). There is no doubt that Transition Towns place a great deal of emphasis and operate their initiatives at the local scale (Bailey et al., 2010), but the claim that the 'master signifier'—the element around which collective action is articulated—of the Transition movement designates *localisation* and an emphasis on the *local* scale as its discursive centre was not as strong in interviews across Transition Tynedale, Transition City Lancaster and SLACC. Emphasis, as will be demonstrated, appears to draw a closer resonance with the naming of projects as 'Transition' and the importance of utilising community and skill to make material changes to the local environment.

The following section explores, in detail, environmental narratives and what is *new* about the Transition movement that is not offered in other contemporary environmental movements. According to Bailey et al. (2010) the Transition concept is made up of both 'new' and 'old' elements, so determining what really is new and not a merely borrowed from other environmental movements allows us to construct the master signifier that articulates the movements meaning (Stavrakakis, 1997). The master signifier is essential

because the significance of a movement cannot be put down to a rationalist dissection of meaning—the closed domain of the discourse—but the discourse is highly open to linguistic interpretation—that there is no determinate meaning to a discourse between a collective (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). Starting with the 'primary' question above, and to discern how the Transition movement constitutes its identity with such a broad range of activities and goals, and such a wide-ranging participation. This chapter therefore addresses the following question: *How does the Transition Town movement achieve a 'master signifier' capable of differentiating itself from other environmental movements whilst simultaneously unifying the discursive differences between its participants?*

4.1.1   Engagement with Community and Skill

Taking up the question of why interviewees joined the Transition movement reveals a strong concern for the conventional attitudes towards consumption and CO_2 emissions, as a result of the dominant regime of accumulation and circulation that society has become accustomed vis-à-vis globalisation (**Table 4.1**). This is not surprising, as *The Transition Handbook* refers to 'local solutions to global problems' (Hopkins, 2008: unpag), and particularly the impact global trade has on emissions and environmental degradation (North, 2010). But the main rationale for joining the Transition movement, as shown in **Table 4.2**, was emphasis on the practical approach to making change tangible. As Barry and Quilley (2009) have shown, the emphasis of the convivial take on the survivalist discourse resembles Homer-Dixon's (2006) argument for an *Upside of Down.* In this sense, *"making a difference*

despite society not moving forward as a whole", as Emily argued, embodies

Transition's practical approach. The idea that taking action collectively rather

than *"telling people to change"* as Adam discussed in **table 4.2**, characterises

Transition as a voluntary act as well as a proactive response to personal fears of

volatile climate change. Limited successful geopolitical negotiation and

compromise of emissions targets and—despite green lobbying—

acknowledgement of consequences of climate volatility on society, that unifies

the collective action of individuals in **table 4.2**. But rather than focusing on what

the problem is, and the enormous response required from political institutions,

the Transition discourse looks to emphasize how 'the person on the street' is

capable of building a more convivial future for their community (Hopkins, 2008:

133; Gibson-Graham, 2006). Transition, in this sense, proposes an alternative

take to solving environmental problems involving 'the people'—referring to civil

society—as a collective rather than lobbying government to set targets. The

following section explores how collective action is conceptualised in Transition

initiatives.

Table 4.1	
Olivia	We have had an insidious effect on the environment over time. It is the subtle way that we have affected it that has caused the great change. And this is detrimental to humans now. Something needs to be done about it! We are the only species, and the best at being able to control our future. This is the difference between short term, consumerist, and economically motivated growth, versus the frugal and long-term environmentalist philosophy.
Emily	The global trend is to move and grow. I feel that TT being structured as a local group and sustainable solution allows us to make a difference despite society as a whole not moving...
Oliver	I look[ed] across the valley and there is this wall of metal travelling across the valley and I thought wow this cannot be right. So I decided to bite the bullet and went to a film showing which was in 2010... and I thought – right – that is the sort of group I want to be involved in.

John	It is about becoming more responsible as a person. I used to commute a lot of my life; I used to commute great distances as well; I used to live my life thinking I will go where the work is. I came to Lancaster, found a car club and realised I could reduce my fossil fuel use. Transition is a buy-in to taking more personal responsibility.
Lucas	Transition was a way of engaging more people… I understand the idea of community and I wanted to maintain it… I think that the local community is less likely to make a stand against climate change.
Mary	Our strapline is local solutions to global problems, and that means a lot to me due to the collection of local solutions to these global problems. It is about living within your means. We don't think about all of the carbon that goes into producing everything we consume these days—and that's why Transition appealed to me so much.

Table 4.2	
Adam	How can you go to a politician and say you need to be friendlier to the earth. I think that people need to preserve theirs at the local level rather than the political, national and global. It is almost about creating a sphere for me to connect to the earth […] I don't like the idea of telling people to change; it doesn't do anything. I wanted to focus on more practical means of engaging with the environment.
William	I think for a lot of people there is an empowerment element to these projects. It is about not putting all of your eggs in one basket. It's more to do with approaching climate change at a level more ready to hand… This is how we become resilient.
Thomas	What I would say is that you can only change your world. I think you need to be realistic – otherwise you are worrying about things you cannot sort out. In my world it is about trying to make as many connections as I can… it is about trying to get stuff you need through these connections and if there is anything they need they can do it vice versa.
Lucas	Transition was a way of engaging more people… I understand the idea of community and I wanted to maintain it. I realised that the local level is a more practical level for action, although it is not necessarily political, I do believe that it is the correct scale at which to operate transition from… I think that we can each find ourselves.
Peter	Part of what drew me towards TT was the idea of 'resilience' within the Transition Narrative; it is scary that things like climate change and peak oil are going to, and are, bringing about so much change. Using [the] community level we can do at least something. The ideas of social unrest as a result of peak oil. No matter how small our actions are we can make a change to the environment for good.

The Transition Handbook makes specific reference to 'The Hands' as the

key medium to building (local) resilience (Hopkins, 2008). As Jenna, one of my

interviewees in 2013, argued: *"Transition allows me to apply what I know to*

making change." The movement draws strongly on empowerment, and applying

the skills people have to make local change rather than focusing on the problems

associated with their social conventions (i.e. consumption habits; see Shove, 2003; Hopkins, 2011; Bailey et al., 2010). Re-skilling local community, and re-localisation, appeared to draw upon the nostalgia of a number of interviewee's past experiences of community where *"people actually knew and spoke to their neighbours"* and where *"people had the skills to make things from scratch"*, as Thomas elaborated. As Oliver argued:

> *"In things like an ultrasound scanner, there will be one or two people who really know what is going on and you have a lot of people who are programming who do not know how the whole thing works. I think this is a failing of Adam Smith's production line […] Its not just about the carbon footprint but it is also about wellbeing at the local scale and reskilling people. We are all specialised today – there is nothing wrong with this – but we lose our own identities."*

This discussion of the modern production line, akin to the globalisation of trade and the spatial division of labour, resembles a de-skilling of community, to the point where our identities have been lost. The attractiveness of Transition culture is reviving these skills, and as Oliver put it, we have become *"too specialised"* to the point where we *"lose our identities."* This *"specialisation",* and associated loss of identity, corroborates with the post-industrialisation of western society, where commodities have been designed so the possibility of repair and maintenance is now foreclosed so as to maintain consumption trends (Verbeek, 2005; Graham and Thrift, 2007). Transition responds to this dilemma by reintroducing skills associated with the blue-collar work in rural communities

lost to the service economy, where maintenance of objects and materials is

possible (Scott-Cato and Hillier, 2010).

Box 4.1:	Contextualising Community
Community as place:	*"People often forget [that] the people are what make community."* (Logan)
Community as scale:	*"We have tried to get a number of communities involved across the community scale…"* (Karen)
Community as a process:	*"the whole idea of resilience is a strong community and strong communication in that community."* (Liam)
Community as a network:	*"[Transition] As a richer way of living… it brought in community as a way of connecting with people, and if you contrast that with the modern life…"* (Oliver)
Community as an identity:	*"the community needs to know what it wants and how it will achieve that."* (Ryan)
Community as an actor:	*"[Energy projects are about] methods of bringing it back to the community to be used to create resilience."* (William)

Before examining loss of community identity in further detail it is worth

clarifying community as a concept itself. This is important, as it is one of the key

concepts explored throughout interviews, and it relevant to Transition's

conceptualisation of re-skilling and taking action (Hopkins, 2011). Community is

not a simple concept as it can be applied to a number of ideological and

rhetorical ends that have both interchangeable and interrelated meanings

(Delanty, 2003), and as Raymond Williams (1976) has noted the term is highly

persuasive and can become an objective in itself, as sustainable or resilient

communities (Walker, 2011; Hopkins, 2008). Interviewees characterised

community in correspondence with all 6 *communities* specified by Walker

(2011), examples given in **Box 4.1** to illustrate the differential meanings. Both

Oliver and Thomas refer in the preceding paragraphs to community as

'identity'—the identity of the (place or locale) community in solidarity within

one another—and a 'network' of social relations between people that has been

lost. This is pivotal as it corresponds to Wilson's (2012) conceptualisation of

community resilience over time (**Figure 4.1**). Here past communities are

characterised by higher social and environmental capital—and the overall

community more resilient—because communities practiced more sustainable

forms of (subsistence) agriculture, and were more reliant on one another for

overall household consumption. The aim of Transition, according to Thomas is,

thereafter, to *"re-build these networks, and reclaim things like making shoes; we*

had skills here but it seems to be something that communities have lost."
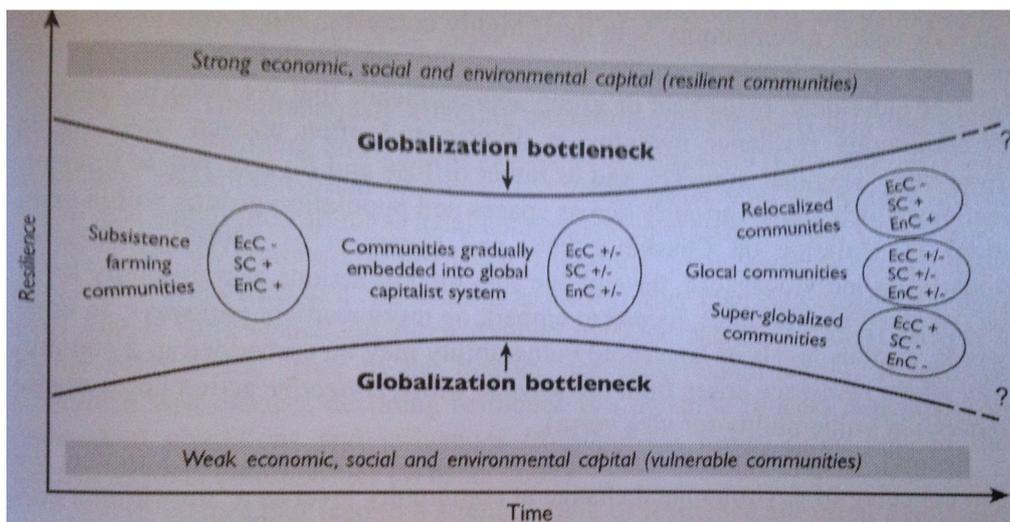
Figure 3.1: Community resilience over space and time. Wilson's (2012) diagram
outlines different communities that could materialise given the constraints of 'pathways
of possibility' determined by the transition corridor. (Source: Wilson, 2012).

The assertion, according to Thomas, that the de-skilling of community has led to a loss of identity hints at a bridge between community (of the past) and resilience, or even community as resilience. Thereafter, re-skilling allows people to *"play a part in community life once again"* (Logan). Oliver's reference to Smith's 'production line' alludes to our dependence on supportive infrastructures and environments, remaining invisible until malfunction or disturbance to normality (Mulhall, 2013; Graham and Thrift, 2007). This is the notion that we are "*dependent*" on supportive infrastructures and maintenance practices—largely invisible to us in everyday life (Harman, 2002). As Thomas discussed: *"we have lost the skills that were once part of the identity of community."* This reflects Hopkins (2010) assertion that we can use skills used in times of crisis—specifically the innovative skills utilised during World War 2—to re-skill modern communities that have become largely disconnected from the systems that support us (Wilson, 2012). Re-skilling, in this sense, refers to Heidegger's *zuhandenheit* (ready-to-hand), where interaction and utilisation of supportive objects make them more visible in everyday life. In this regard, Transition begins to unravel the surface reality of community from an unthematic dependence on socio-technical and environmental systems towards actively utilising them (Mulhall, 2013). Through recognition of dependency on the environment (natural and built) the tools of repair and maintenance become ready-to-hand (Harman, 2002; Graham and Thrift, 2007).

Retrieving the skills that have been lost at the community scale, as Gibson-Graham (2006: 158) argues, requires 'an ethos of engagement […] offering activities and events that promote receptivity' that goes beyond the

normative capitalist economy. The ability to develop practical action as solutions to the complexity of the global economic system, and the need to de-carbonise, as suggested in the Stern review (2007), albeit without successful adoption by the UK government, falls down to citizen action—by providing 'local solutions to global problems' (Hopkins, 2008)—and *"practicing what you preach"*, as Thomas posited. The Transition approach, according to John, is about *"identifying how we are distanced to it [climate change] and how we, therefore, find it hard to identify with it. We need to recognise how we can change things ourselves."* Emphasis, here, is on how civil society can take global problems into their own hands by taking action at the local scale. This is reflective of what Peter considered Transition's place of action: *"the immediate environment is what I can change."* But this also refers to the foregrounding of the decay of the environment into our own psyche and recognition of how civil society can learn to innovate and improvise to find solutions in their local-material environment (Petroski, 2006; Ingold, 2000).

The re-skilling of community refers to a revival of skills and adoption of new ones that can be utilised to 'repair' and 'maintain' the community-scale, such as gardening, information technology (IT), organisational and managerial skills and so on (Graham and Thrift, 2007). These are skills that allow Transition Towns to acquire certain invisible supportive structures to everyday life, such as food production and forms of exchange, for example (Hopkins, 2011; North, 2014). But enacting community, as a collection of skills, is essential to practicing Transition: community as an amalgamation of skills and dependencies (Gibson-Graham, 2006). As Adam summarised: *"The idea of telling people to change*

doesn't do anything. I set up the Transition group because it was about enriching

local communities, and harnessing the energy and skills of the community."

Recognising the importance of community as a skill is essential to Transition;

communities are not merely 'present-to-hand'—as an 'identity', 'scale' or 'place'

supported by national infrastructure—but should be understood as being 'ready-

to-hand' and as a distinctive way of acting 'hands-on' (Harman, 2002; Walker,

2011). To this degree we might conceptualise Transition's approach as one of

utilising *community as a skill* to build a network of dependency on skills close at

hand.

Sustainable transition through community, as Seyfang and Smith (2007)

argue, has become recognised as a more fruitful exercise for change than

individual forms of learning. Furthermore, Ingold (2000) recalls that enskillment

in hunter-gatherer communities learn skills from knowledgeable members of

community through forms of social learning; applying these skills as individuals

thereafter. Transition initiatives, in a similar application of skill and recognition

of our dependency on natural resources, acknowledges the importance of

returning to community models built upon subsistence of local actors rather

than far-flung institutions. Reflecting on his application of knowledge and skill to

improve local cycle infrastructure, Logan argued:

> *"I am part of the community practice and it makes me feel more a part of*
>
> *this town [...] I am passionate about improving transport [but] until we get*
>
> *more people involved in supporting the... structure we won't work.*

Transition is about getting people involved in the local infrastructure; this is how we will succeed..."

Recognising the threat of climate change, and the ability of different community actors to utilise their knowledge and skill towards a re-skilling and revival of more involved and participatory forms of community as a dependency can be understood as an essential element of Transition's ethos. Drawing upon community in all its manifestations (identity, actor, place, scale, network and process) Transition initiatives utilise community itself as a *skill* as well as a goal.

4.1.2. Beyond Survivalism: practicing a land ethic

Reclaiming and rebuilding community skillsets has been a crucial aspect of the movement's popularity (Seyfang and Haxeltine, 2012). As Yasmin argued, her rationale for joining Transition Tynedale was a moral-epistemological distinction between right and wrong: *"what got me interested in Transition Tynedale was knowledge of the right skills and not the wrong knowledge used to consume."* A parallel can be drawn here with Aldo Leopold's *Land Ethic*, in which a distinction is made between applying the *right* skills—'preserving the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community'—and what is *wrong*—the human as 'conqueror of the land community' rather than 'citizen of it' (Leopold, 1949; Robbins et al., 2010). Engagement with environment in the right way is an inherent property of the Transition Town movement. 'The hands' provide the means via a positive, solution-oriented response to peak oil and climate change (Hopkins, 2008: 133). Furthermore, the hands-on nature of developing skill

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recognises the importance of utilising these skills for support of human communities but also more inert skills that bring us closer to natural communities (Ingold, 2000).

The Transition movement adopts many of its characteristics from permaculture, a systematic method of agriculture usually developed around community. It aims to develop a diverse set of skills and works in a way that applies ecological principles in order to create diversity, and productive yield through the correct assemblage of plants (Holmgren, 2003; Hopkins, 2008). Emphasis is on interaction with nature and a physical interaction with matter, whether it is soil or materials for the purpose of sustainability (Hopkins, 2011; 2008). Gardening is a widely shared lifestyle choice, and many interviewees described the garden as a place of empowerment and connection to the earth, and the wider environmental movement. As Pamela discussed:

> *"I feel happier when I go to the garden with TT because I feel as though we make a difference, and we are able to connect with the earth. We are with like-minded people – we have a shared goal! When I was last there I was on my own but I felt part of the community. I appreciated that we all need to tend the land together."*

Again, this reflects the ability of the Transition movement to offer a space where practical action can be taken without the need for political confrontation, and the post-political managerial characteristics government has adopted to confront climate change (Swyngedouw, 2010; Žižek, 1999). This is a theme reflected in

recent debates within the Transition movement itself. Hopkins (2014) has responded to criticisms of the movement's apolitical attitude, arguing that the Transition movement fulfils a specific purpose, to build inclusive resilient communities. In his concluding remarks Hopkins (2014) posits that 'creating space for innovation and experimentation at the local scale' associated with radical change without becoming visible as political confrontation.

Insofar as Transition initiatives are apolitical they seek to offer a collective call for radical change irrespective and independent of the stalemate associated with the politics of climate-economy negotiations (Bettini and Karaliotas, 2013). The implication is conceiving of actions as being beyond politics in order to incorporate ethical practice in the environment. The ability to take action beyond unnecessary confrontation is a core tenet of the Transition movement's attitude towards building community resilience. As Emma has argued, emphasis should be on taking required action rather than finding differences: *"you should be true to yourself. The fact that they bring together like-minded people, who may be different but who walk the talk; people who do what they can."* Emma's understanding of Transition infers a materialisation of common concern. This reflects the survivalist 'urgency' to building community resilience, with knowledge of potentially catastrophic climate change (Barry and Quilley, 2009), and investment of these narratives in the materialisation of action. Building resilience through gardening in this respect can be considered a way of rooting the volatile but supportive substrate firmly to the ground, making catastrophic narratives of the future material by action (Clark, 2011; Levinas, 1969).

The ability to shape community towards a more connected understanding of the volatile earth is expressed through the material practices of interviewees (Clark, 2010; 2011). As Peter reflected: *"[Transition] is about being in the environment and feeling part of it […] and extending your care for it."* Isabel reflected a similar point: *"At a more profound level there is the sociological aspect to feeling empowered. They don't just have to watch the planet disintegrate if they are doing things".* Feeling reconnected to the planet reflects an ecocentric discourse beyond survivalism insofar as it adopts a radical and imaginative interpretation of society and environment (Dryzek, 2005). While Transition interviewees did not adopt misanthropic discourses like many green radicals, but appear to reside at a conjuncture between survivalism and deep ecology. As Peter went on to discuss, *"my reality comes from Native American stuff and the connection to the earth: reverence! […] I think people get involved in Transition Tynedale because they are able to appreciate the symbolic nature of the natural world and our fragility within it. I want to create change."* The emphasis on 'change' and the ability to become reconnected with the land reflects a 'materialist' discourse about reconnecting and doing something that is practical and can build a better world. Oliver made specific reference to Schumacher's (1973) notion of becoming a *"better man"* – as recognition of nature's value and our duty to impact on it less.

The ability to reconnect with the land, and extend ones morality into the natural environment, reflects not only an ethical conjuncture as one would expect but recognition of the Heideggerian background—or as Thrift (2004) has

put it recognition of the 'material substrate'—supportive of everyday life

(Graham and Thrift, 2007). As Peter discussed:

> *"Transition is about reconnecting the missing link between people and their*
> *environments. It is about experiencing a place and then attaching a value to*
> *it. Without valuing what you have there will be no future."*

The importance of the Transition movement, thereafter, is recognition of this

Heideggerian background behind everyday life and our dependence on it for

living our everyday lives. As Olivia discussed: *"I call it cognitive dissonance— we*

want to conserve the environment as it is but we are all still burning it up."

Recognition that the environment provides the 'material' or 'supportive

substrate' is essential to re-connecting the foreground—visible world—with the

materials we are dependent on—invisible world (Clark, 2011; Thrift, 2004).

Transition, in this respect, can be thought of as actively re-connecting with the

materials we are dependent on and maintaining the 'material substrate' (Graham

and Thrift, 2007).

4.1.3   (a)political transition?

Questions about politics were particularly critical in interview

discussions as these discussions presented 'sticky moments' of discussion in the

otherwise more fluent interview structure (Riach, 2009). In asking whether

Transition is in any way political Amelie was uncomfortable with being asked

questions about politics as shown in **Box 4.2.** This reflects the alienating affect of

politics insofar as the question appears irrelevant to local-scale transition. As Amelie expresses, *"I don't see the point of the question… Transition just does stuff where we look to make a difference."* Similarly, others have expressed this feeling of alienation, and a need to take action in response. **Table 4.3** presents a selection of quotes from Transition interviews, revealing a broad consensus around making change without the addition of politics. As the quotations figured demonstrate, the ability to practice one's lifestyle without the need for confrontation was of vital importance to Transition practitioners. Emphasis is on volition—the exercise of ones will—rather than influencing central circles of polity for change (McAdam et al., 2001). As Lucas argued:

> *"I realised that the local level is a more practical level for action, although it is not necessarily political, I do believe that it is the correct scale at which to operate transition from. I think that we can each find ourselves."*

This reflects a sentiment that by stepping out of spaces of politics one is able to open up new trajectories wherein transition is possible, and the conditions of possibility become seemingly open. Spaces, such as the garden, become places of 'empowerment', and above all the material practice of 'change'. It is *"about doing something on the ground that makes the difference you want to see"*, as William reflected, and *"its about getting your hands dirty."* Transition, in this respect, offers a radical alternative to 'conventional environmentalism', operating 'under the radar' of political confrontation and avoiding to reproduce ritualistic characteristics of protestation and campaigning characteristic of contemporary

environmental activism to provide more room for consensus and open up space for action or *"the Transition do-ocracy"*, as George described.

Taking local action by opening up space in communities and forming inclusive forms of action centred around people taking control of their own communities departs from not only contemporary political-ecologies but also mundane approaches to environmentalism. According to Hopkins (2008) Transition, represents a distinct rethinking of 'conventional environmentalism' (**figure 4.2**), where attention is drawn to 'targeted interventions' as opposed to 'blanket campaigning', 'the man on the street as the solution' rather than 'the problem' and adopting 'tools' for, and modes of, action rather than 'campaigning' and 'protesting' (Hopkins, 2008: 135). Adam reflects this argument, stating that a *'deeper connection'* must be struck beyond politicians *"be friendlier to the earth."* Furthermore, Peter argued that politics can be changed not through intervention but by using *"knowledge and skill"* and applying it to the local scale—and creating a better plan. Transition differs insofar as it aims to set the agenda and act upon it locally, rather than putting items on the political agenda.

Box 4.2: Discussion of Politics

(**Amelie**) *"What do you mean by political? Isn't green peace meant to be apolitical? They don't align themselves to any party."*

(**Ethan**) *"Every action has a reaction... You have a friend called Gabrielle who is a Marxist [pause] and he said that Transition is purely capitalist [pause] I mean he is a Marxist but nothing can be totally apolitical."*

(**Amelie**) *"I almost don't see the point of the question about politics. Because Transition just does stuff where we look to make a difference, we live in a world at the moment where we live out of our means and if we are ever able to develop solutions to this problem we need to cut down on excess and become sustainable... transition proposes a pathway that answers this question."*

Seeking solutions that do not divulge into politics are cast in a highly position light for the most part. The ability to act, as was spelled out across interviews recurred as central to the Transition ethos. According to Peter, *"at least through community it is possible for people to do something; this is something that I really believe in. If protesting isn't going to do anything, we can at least do something."* Peter's remark reflects on the alienation of political confrontation, as many other interviewees recalled (**Box 4.3**), but refers to the ability to do something in a more positive way. As Peter went on to discuss, *"recognising the awe you feel for the environment makes you want to protect it, and acting locally allows you to do something that isn't about what we don't want but building something that we want to see happen…"* This recalls a more positive vision that is about de-alienating people who care for their environment through constructing productive spaces. As Olivia commented in 2013, *"the idea that we could create a counterculture locally really appealed to us both."* The message appears to be that fighting alienation allows something altogether more productive for communities; as William recalled: *"something that isn't just about saying no!"*

Table 4.3	Apolitical Local Change
Adam	We must facilitate a deeper connection, an apolitical one. I think that it is here that we need to change and have different priorities. I think that the degree of change that I have come to need is a real fundamental shift within the natural world. I think that I can cause some local change. How can you go to a politician and say you need to be friendlier to the earth. I think that people need to preserve theirs at the local level rather than the political, national and global.
Peter	How can we change politics as a group? We need a plan of how to do things and I think this is better practiced at the local scale where we can utilise… knowledge and skills.
Liam	I originally decided to join Transition because it is local people doing things… and I was definitely disillusioned by politics. I think that campaigning and protesting is fine, and I do that. But I think that actually doing local action to improve the situation where you live is important […] We can use basic skills to change unsustainable aspects of our everyday lives.
Jessica	I think it is about the quality of connection with the person that is important… If you meet a politician with politics he will just meet you back with politics. I'd rather be doing something that is apolitical and along the same lines. I'd rather not have the huge anti-climax after the general election.

Conventional Environmentalism	The Transition Approach
Individual behaviour	Group behaviour
Single issue	Holistic
Tools: lobbying, campaigning and protesting	Tools: public participation, eco-psychology, arts, culture and creative education
Sustainable development	Resilience/relocalisation
Fear, guilt and shock as drivers for action	Hope, optimism and proactivity as drivers for action
Changing National and International policy by lobbying	Changing National and International policy by making them electable
The man in the street as the problem	The man in the street as the solution
Blanket campaigning	Targeted interventions
Single level engagement	Engagement on a variety of levels
Prescriptive – advocates answers and responses	Acts as a catalyst – no fixed answers
Carbon footprinting	Carbon footprinting plus resilience indicators
Belief that economic growth is still possible, albeit greener growth	Designing for economic renaissance, albeit a local one

Figure 18: How the Transition approach is distinct from other environmental approaches.

Figure 4.2: Hopkins' (2008) differentiation between 'conventional environmentalism' and 'The Transition Approach'. (Source: Hopkins, 2008)

Whilst Transition Towns adopt the local scale as the most practical places to develop transition, it is the unrelenting focus on this scale as a 'place of action' (Scott-Cato and Hillier, 2010), rather than *a priori* distinctions of the local scale, that is central to the discursive focus of interviews. Emphasis is on the ability to

materialise action through 'community', 'a land ethic' and ultimately the

materialisation of action offered through place—as a space intrinsically lived-in

(Castree, 2009). In Hopkins (2008) third theme 'The Hands' he outlines how

initiatives can move from 'ideas' to 'action' (p.133). It is this emphasis on the

'means'—forms of action—to an end that is essential rather than the end itself

'localisation'. Converse to Kenis and Mathijs's (2014a) empirical data, there was

no discernable focus on the local as inherently providing the means to an end,

but more like Adam's description as *"a place with shared resources and where*

people are reachable; the community of the surrounding area."

Box 4.3: Transition and Politics

"We all thought there would be the turning point with the Copenhagen Climate summit, and that there would be more top-down efforts to support transition; but no change. We all have different reasons for joining but we all have ideas about how we can make change."   (Emily)

4.1.4.   Moments of the Transition Discourse

The previous section exemplifies the rationales for joining the Transition

Town movement. Separating out these narratives into different *moments* that

constitute the 'differential positions' within articulation of the Transition

discourse must be used to clarify how the discourse holds unifying meaning that

is also capable of differentiating the movement from what has preceded it

(Howarth and Stavrakakis, 2000; Stavrakakis, 1997). This is a tricky exercise

because the Transition concept is so wide ranging and various different *moments*

have adjoined to form its conceptual basis.

Clearly, as explored across a number of literatures, the movement is engaged at the local scale. But different insights have been offered into the significance of local-scale action. For Kenis and Mathijs (2014a) the defining *moment* is localisation, forming the common denominator on the basis of the movement's decentralised approach. As Neal (2013: 16) has expounded, *"it appears to be the community and local context that has so effectively popularised Transition."* This is a highly logical conclusion seeing as the Transition movement is primed on the promise of 'local solutions to global problems' (Hopkins, 2008). But catchy straplines, as such, do little justice to the Transition movement's approach. *"[T]he real heart of transition",* according to Mason and Whitehead (2012), *"is the local initiative."* This is a highly agreeable statement, but such a central concept cannot be left as it is without further critical attention. This to say, while Born and Purcell (2006: 196) have argued that 'there is nothing inherent about scale', this does not mean that there isn't anything inherent about the way people act at different scales, most notably the local being the *"milieu"*, as Yasmin elaborated, *"in French 'environment' or 'milieu' means neighbourhood. The environment around you, and it is where we can actually act."* This point is pivotal, as the action Yasmin wished to take is enabled by proximity to others rather than the localisation being an *a priori* goal in itself. Hereafter, the local scale cannot be understood as the central *moment* in the Transition discourse, and the nodal point 'around which the other narratives are woven' (Kenis and Mathijs, 2014a: 181).

Local-scale action was described in humanist terms, as lived-in places where connections can be made. The importance of the Transition approach, as Jessica discussed, was that it offers *"a place where connections can be made."* This was similarly recalled in Isabel's articulation of local action as a *"places where [the focus...] is on people, and how they connect [...] creating a difference at the local level, and creating connections that can make differences."* Pivotal in these reflections is the importance of places as a *locale* where people live their everyday lives now, and have the ability, if willing, to take action. The local is described not only as places where people have opportunities to connect but also observe change, as William discussed: *"Transition is about creating a noticeable change."* These moments articulate the concept of 'local' into 'windows of opportunity' that can be acted on (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987). Thereafter, the local scale is no longer an empty category, but becomes significant as a place offering the opportunity to connect, act and create change.

As discussed in the previous section developing *skills* from within *community* is pivotal to the way Transition initiatives seek to constitute their approach to action. Collective action is part of a running process towards creating community, and community not only as more cohesive, but also as a skill in itself. Building community through Transition draws upon *elements* of communitarianism but seeks to utilise community as a supportive structure, more self-sufficient and aware of its own maintenance.

Revival of community as well as building a new community is one of the essential *moments* to Transition culture, as it refer to the revival of collective

skills, as discussed, but also the building of new forms of community that are more interconnected and aware of wider environmental change and thereafter pre-emptive. Thomas reflected this *sense of place* in discussion of local action:

> *"It brought in the body, the mind and the spirit. It allowed us to connect with like-minded people [...] I think you are aware of the world around you and you put more importance on the world around you."*

Action at the local scale is considered most conducive to opening up bodies to one another through an inter-corporeal susceptibility of the material history of the world. The rumble of the ground and the vulnerability of bodies to volatile climate change represent a collective mobilisation of community to make resilient the support substrate of the ground (Clark, 2011; 2010; Levinas, 1969). As Peter reflected: *"I want to create change. It's about survival and recognising the importance of human life within the balance of life."* Recognition of the balance between social life and the otherwise volatile planet is key to recognition of 'places of action' as the throwntogetherness of 'social' and 'natural' trajectories (Massey, 2005). This articulation seeks an extremely broad focus regarding political ecologies, as observed in green politics, which, as Jonathan Porritt (1984: 5) has argued, 'embraces every dimension of human experience and all life on earth [...] it goes a great deal further than in terms of political comprehensiveness than any other political project.' But Transition seeks to address each issue on a more manageable scale and with fewer procedural barriers. The critical *moment* thereafter is the rejection of political antagonism that has slowed the radical change *greens* wish to bring into fruition.

Of the characteristics of Transition culture that define the movement's approach most robustly, as discussed in section 4.1.3, the emphasis on remaining apolitical and acting without confrontation or political antagonism. As expressed in Emily's account of the political—shown in **Box 4.3**—failure of political institutions to adequately respond to climate change has alienated many environmental activists because little progress has been made in setting comprehensive carbon reduction targets. Transition—conversely—has been recalled for its practical and convivial imaginary of a future re-localised. As William recalled, this approach is *"a breath of fresh air"* as Transition's vision *"is not all just about saying no… Doing something on the ground… makes the difference you want to see."* George described this more optimistic ethos as *"the Transition do-ocracy"* as it seeks to empower people and spaces through practical measure for change. Fundamentally, the de-politicisation of spaces is discernably about what can be done without confrontation or stalemate rather than what cannot be, and has been commended for its experimental design for building local projects and transforming local spaces into 'places of action' (Scott-Cato and Hillier, 2010) *"where people can work the land"* (Emma). As the quotations in **Box 4.4** show, Transition approach is about delivering change without procedural constraints, but instead about demonstrating how local space can be given utility through *in situ* action. The shift of emphasis is from what 'they' (government) should do, towards what 'you' or 'we' (civil society) can do. This is the crucial *moment* wherein the onus shifts from telling the government what they should be doing towards realising the potential of collective action to

empower ones self. This spells out a shift towards apolitical, community-based reskilling as a way of de-alienating people and moving them towards solutions.

Box 4.4:   **Apolitical spaces of action**

The Transition approach is about:

> *"getting your hands dirty…"*   (William)

> *"taking control of your local environment."*   (Peter)

> *"acting through the garden is more empowering"*   (Emma)

> *"The transition view […] is about tweaking the way we live. That's how to take action…"*   (Lucas)

> "It is about making spaces useful with the help of community…"   (Jenna)

The *moments* described thus far do not invoke anything discernably new, or specify a new and alternative *green* approach to taking action. As Stavrakakis (1997) explored, the *moments* described in *Die Grünen* and the *British Green Party* manifestos (**Box 4.5** shows key moments of British Green party) designate highly specific approaches to politics, but do not offer anything new as the crucial proto-ideological *elements* that articulated within the family of nodal points are merely a re-articulation to give priority to being *green*. The Transition movement adopts similar *elements* but constitutes its difference insofar as *elements* such as 'decentralisation', 'grassroots democracy', 'ecology' and—crucially—'a-politics' are articulated into a 'chain of signifiers' (Laclau, 2005a; Žižek, 1989). But to form a coherent basis for these *moments* to become amalgamated into a collective call to act there must be a coherent signifier holding together this formation.

One of the interesting departures from conventional environmentalism and NSMs is Transition culture's utilisation of community as a skill beyond politics. Transition Towns de-politicise local space to bring it closer-to-hand and take control of certain aspects of the everyday supportive infrastructures. Proximity and dependency on the skills of local-community actors is utilised as a skill in itself allowing communities to de-alienate themselves of political struggles over climate change that utilise social media as a skill to form demonstrations to lobby and agitate government (Giddens, 2011; Giddens and Sutton, 2013). Transition inverts this to form collective action in ones own community through enactment of *skill*, *ethics* and *responsibilisation of individuals* rather than government, towards a time-space re-extension and closer-bound networks (North, 2010). While NSM have been characterised by unbounded forms of action across multiple scales and domains akin to post-industrial economies, Transition Towns seek to borrow from more skill-based industrial communities characterised by stronger community identity and skills close to hand. In this sense, the pivotal *moments* for Transition are centred on de-politicising the process of Transition so as to re-engage actors with *communal skills* that allows self-sufficient political ecologies albeit on a smaller scale. The Transition movement's answer to Dryzek et al.'s (2013) question—how do we respond to the wholesale collective failure of rationality?—is, thereafter, to practice at a scale where community can apply their knowledge and skill to resilience and low-carbon transition. And moreover, the aim is for this to be practiced without the procedural constraints of politics or political antagonism that are characteristic of more conventional of environmental movements (i.e.

Greenpeace) who lobby government (as well as big business) institutions for change (Hopkins, 2008; Rootes, 2014).

Box 4.5: **Key *Moments* of The British Green Party**

British Green Party:

(1) Take Climate change seriously (working to ensure global temperatures remain below the 2-degree 'safe' threshold.
(2) Phase out fossil fuels and nuclear energy.
(3) Investment in renewable energy technologies.
(4) Social and economic justice (increased public spending and taxation of top 1%).
(5) Right to free education.
(6) Increased public spending in (sustainable) Transport and to support the welfare state.
(7) Ensuring the stability of the National Health Service.

(Green Party Manifesto, 2015)

4.2.1. *Rethinking the Master signifier*

The preceding section explored the rationales for joining Transition initiatives, but rather than identifying everything through the local, interviewees reflected on *"skill"* and *"community*, *"environmental ethics"* and *"apolitical"* as the mainstay of the Transition ethos. These key concepts represent the Transition *moments* that begin to define the differential positions articulating the Transition discourse (Howarth and Stavrakakis, 2000). The upmost emphasis was on the ability to make practical change possible through connection and interaction with materials and the self-empowerment in response to the alienating effects of politics. Establishing what forms the discursive centre of dissensus with

'conventional environmentalism' requires a more critical engagement with the articulation of the Transition movement as something *new.*

While Transition clearly adopts a number of attributes from other environmental movements, most notably eco-villages, articulating the movement's identity in dialectic opposition to other forms of grassroots environmentalism is problematic as many of the adopted attributes are similar to other forms of grassroots environmentalism. Transition initiatives, in this sense, cannot differentiate themselves from other movements operating at the same scale and thereafter differentiate its *terrain of emergence*—the way in which the collective is constructed through political action—from other grassroots movements (Laclau, 2003). Both the eco-village movement and Transition Towns adopt similar characteristics centred upon decentralisation, community and eco-localisation, non-confrontation and both have taken a great deal of their inspiration from the publication of Schumacher's (1973) highly influential *Small is Beautiful* (Fotopoulos, 2002). The Global Eco-village Network adopts localisation as an inherent approach to globalisation's discontents, much like the Transition movement. As Benjamin discussed: *"A lot of the ground work was already set up for Totnes […] there were already lateral connections in the group, and a strong emphasis on networking."* To this degree, the *elements* that make up the Transition model pre-existed the movement's articulation. Furthermore, Ethan described the similarities between the Transition movement and eco-village movement in his rationale for joining, as shown in **Box 4.6**. Transition Towns, therefore, represent nothing new in as far as the movement operates at the local scale.

As I shall show in the following section, rather than identifying Transition through articulation of the 'local' as its 'master signifier.' The Transition movement articulates itself as *new* through the linguistic articulation of "Transition" as a signifier—denoting the enunciation of a word in the written or spoken form—of the 'change' people want to be able to bring about (Wood, 2012). The signified meaning of 'Transition' is very different from person-to-person through their interpretation of its meaning, but through this rhetorical displacement different *elements* acquire their new meaning, which in turn is de-contested by 'Transition'. Lucas illustrated this well in his discussion of Transition initiatives:

> *"Transition's aim is to provide a space action to take place irrespective of individual Party politics. Our group has 4 trustees registered in the Green Party, while the final member is in the Labour party. We try to keep politics out of it the best we can."*

The purpose of the Transition signifier hereafter is to provide a container for collective action that distinguished an identity but does not actually offer anything original.

4.2.2   Elements of the Transition Movement:

Care for the environment, radical decentralisation and the connection between society and nature have pre-existed the Transition discourse, and are traceable through radical discourses such as *deep ecology* and *ecocentrism* (Dryzek, 2005). The genealogy of the Transition movement emerged from permaculture, which shares discourses with deep ecology (i.e. interconnectedness and respect for the ecological systems). Furthermore, the Transition movement's acknowledgement and practical model for responding to future climate change shares in a convivial interpretation of the *survivalist* discourse (Dryzek, 2005; Bailey et al., 2010). As a number of Transition interviewees discussed, the relationship with sustainable gardening and food production is a core occupation of their initiatives. As Jenna discussed, what encouraged her to join Transition Tynedale was the relationship with 'the ground':

> *"I was particularly influenced by reading permaculture magazines, and I was interested in the Agroforestry network. I wanted to pursue permaculture. Kids don't know that carrots are from the ground. We have lost the fine balance between nature and man. Transition is about remaking this relationship."*

This discourse firmly asserts the importance of the Transition approach to connecting with the ground, and remaking the relationship with the land and nature. Whilst other discourses share this importance, acting embodies an approach that seeks to make change through interaction with the land. But this represents nothing new, as interactions with the land have long been observed in other movements such as the eco-village movement (Dawson, 2006), the incredible edibles movement, the agro-forestry movement, and other practices of eco-localisation (Albo, 2007).

Communitarian discourses were highly prevalent *elements* throughout interviews, associated with Hopkins' (2008) suggestion that 'small is inevitable' and that community is more desirable for the future (Barry and Quilley, 2009). As Liam reflected: *"for me my motivation is the community action element [...] the cause is worthy and I do believe that it is urgent, but the community aspect is most important to me."* As Stavrakakis (1997) has shown, decentralisation has been a key component of other leftist ideologies, most notably anarchism, but even some ideologies to the right such as libertarianism (see J.S. Mill, 1859 *On Liberty*). Emphasis on this *element* is stressed throughout the Transition discourse, discernable as a 'place of action' (Scott-Cato and Hillier, 2010). Decentralisation is a key signifier but not the master signifier of the Transition movement, as it cannot be homogenised into a surface reality, rather it is highly contextual and heterogeneous (Seyfang and Haxeltine, 2010).

Operating as an open and representative group at the local scale is essential to Transition's emphasis on democratic legitimacy (Connors and McDonald, 2010). This came across a great deal in Transition meetings where consensus and representation were often mentioned when placing items on the group agenda. While emphasising open democracy, attitudes towards group structure were evident over leadership and group proceedings in Transition City Lancaster, for example. As Amelie argued, *"there is little input from sub-groups to the steering group in TCL […] they have thrown out projects in the past."* As Benjamin discussed, *"a balance needs to be struck between discussion meetings and get things done meetings."* Different attitudes were raised over group structure such as *anarchistic greens* and those referred to as *"managerial"* greens, *"taking the lead on ambitious projects."* In order to 'quilt' the play of difference between these pre-existing *elements*, the nodal point must be capable of unifying the discursive difference in a manner that speaks to everyone (Žižek, 1989; Laclau, 2005b).

Acting at the local scale has long been a facet of other movements, which would mean the Transition Town movement represents nothing new. Transition's emphasis begins to develop new articulations, defining itself outside politics and political confrontation associated with conventional environmentalism, as a new articulation of the so-called *deep green* and *survivalist* discourses. One of the more original elements of the Transition ethos is the emphasis on remaining 'apolitical' as a means of environmental action. As William discussed:

"I do things for friends of the earth that are different. They are about trying to create support for campaigns and lobbying the government. Transition, on the other hand, represents something that is more about doing things rather than just campaigning. Campaigning all the time can be energy sapping. TCL was set up by Friends of the Earth and was about having something that is non-political; something that represents the community and is about making a noticeable difference there rather than campaigning to get a top-down solution."

While modern environmentalism has sought to lobby and influence a procedural change by putting climate change on the agenda, most notably through groups such as Friends of the Earth, Green Peace and the Green Party, Transition Towns focuses its efforts at the civil society level and creating transition at the community scale (Hopkins, 2008; 2011). What is distinctive about this is not the apolitical *element* in itself, as many movements and organisations aim to remain outside politics—such as local anarchist groups and conservation movement—but the articulation of this *element* to the centre of the Transition discourse as a means of de-politicising action. Remaining apolitical is regarded as a means of enacting transition without a need for confrontation or alienation (Connors and McDonald, 2010; Hopkins, 2008).

The ability to make change beyond politics and political confrontation is key to the Transition ethos, but while Hopkins (2008) outlines a mode of action about inclusion against division, this invites a number of highly varied discourses into the movement with highly differentiated interpretations of environmental

action and the Transition movement, as shown in **Table 4.4.** The nodal point

must therefore be capable of halting the play of difference through its

articulation, forming a cohesive basis for collective action (Melucci, 1996; Laclau,

2005b).

Table 4.4	(Selected) Transition Discourses
Adam	| Deep ecology | Permaculture & Herbalism
Peter	| Spiritual | Anarchism
Liam	| Community | Lifestyle
Logan	| Transport | Lifestyle
Jenna	| Permaculture & Agro-forestry | Creative design (environmental education)
Emma	| Gardening | Community
Lucas	| Community Engagement | Ecological modernisation
Emily	| Gardening | Politicisation
Ethan	| Anarchism | Alternative Food Networks
Amelie	| Alternative Food Networks | Localism | Environmental education
Thomas	| Deep Ecology | Localisation | Alternative Food/Currency Networks
Oliver	| Community group plan & Chaordic Management | Lifestyle Change
Isabel	| Permaculture | Food Networks

4.2.3. *The Privileged Element – Localisation*

Before articulating the master signifier in the section that follows, it is

worth clarifying interviewee's position and discussion of the local scale and its

importance to the movement. As both Neal (2013) and Kenis and Mathijs

(2014a) have posited, the Transition movement's core focus and discursive centre is articulated around the intentional *localisation* of infrastructures to the local scale in anticipation of the shortfall of global hydrocarbon consumption. But unpacking local scale action reveals not such a simple reading of local action as *a priori* providing solutions, but as a practical *"platform for change"*, as Emily argued, as well as *"a way of doing something that is not all on politicians and businesses […] its our everyday environment so it is the natural place to start"*, as Liam discussed. These statements reflect not a sense that the local provides the solution to the problem of climate change, but that it is a more practical starting point for change. According to Seyfang and Smith (2007) the local action, and particularly Transition's approach provides a highly practical model for influencing wider change, beyond the grassroots.

It is also important to bear in mind that the Transition Town movement is not isolated; it is a global network of initiatives operating alongside other local and regional actors (i.e. local government and NGOs) for wider change. Observing Transition meetings across all 3 towns presented a wide range of initiatives operating with local NGOs for advice and support, as well as aiming to work with local and regional government to influence town plans and transport policy (Hopkins, 2011). Insofar as the Transition movement itself is a global movement made up of members of civil society it is logical that action should materialise at the local scale. As Herod (2009) explains, the global is logically an amalgamation of the local—as the sum of its parts. Therein the lateral spread of the Transition movement from town-to-town along with other global

movements aims to build support and influence for the socio-technical transition (Bailey et al., 2010).

Discourses were not solely fixed to the local scale as providing solutions, as a fair number of interviewees argued that the local scale was not the only solution. As **Table 4.5** shows, a number of interviewees argued that while the Transition movement offered momentum and allows people to take action, it is not necessarily where solutions will be found. The local scale, in these accounts, refers to a 'place of action' where the process of transition can gain momentum, but Transition operates as a wider process of transition required in national policy (Hopkins, 2008; Scott-Cato and Hillier, 2010). In many accounts, Transition was discussed as *"not enough"* and highly *"dependent on national infrastructures"* (Ryan) but enacted the *"way forward"* to gain momentum and build from the bottom up. The Transition Town movement, as a movement operating outside politics, might therefore be thought of as societal transition at its purest; stripped of political factions and searching for solutions beyond the stalling bureaucracy of modern politics (Žižek, 2011; Giddens, 2011).

Table 4.5	Spaces of action beyond localisation
Liam	*Well I certainly wouldn't say that localism is the only way forward […] maintaining community is the most important thing for me at the local scale, but I don't think we will find solutions here. I take part in a lot of climate activism outside the group—this is more fulfilling.*
William	*TCL was set up by Friends of the Earth. It was about having something that is non-political. Something that represents the community and is about making a noticeable difference there rather than campaigning to get a top-down solution.*
George	*Transition is also about influencing government decisions at the local and regional scale. It is a platform from which we can begin to change from the bottom up.*

4.2.4. Change beyond politics: the Master Signifier

The failure of conventional environmentalism to effectively influence climate politics over the past 25-30 years is premised as a key element of the Transition ethos (Hopkins, 2008). Interviewees reflected similar disenfranchisement and alienation by political stasis. In an interview with Lucas, he asked: *"have you read Naomi Klein's latest book ['This changes Everything']? She argues that climate change is governed through Neoliberalism, and this is a result of the bad timing of environmental problems."* Similarly Karen argued: *"The whole political situation in national government doesn't seem to be engaged in climate change and I think there is an issue here that what we are doing is a reflection of the lack of action by the government."* These arguments reflect the lack of momentum to climate politics, which has been criticised in a number of best selling books including Naomi Klein's (2014) *This Changes Everything*. Rather than sitting idle to the prospect of climate catastrophe, or confronting the political system for change, the Transition movement seeks practical solutions, and to carve out places of action (Scott-Cato and Hillier, 2010). By enacting community, not as something inherent, but as a scale where change can happen and the 'conditions of possibility' can be opened up (Gibson-Graham, 2006). This, in turn, frees up Transition initiatives to think beyond catastrophic climate change towards materialising their own future-oriented visions. This is a central notion of the term 'transition' (Feola and Nunes, 2013).

It is true that localisation is central to the Transition movement, but this does not mean there is anything inherent about the local scale itself; instead it is

the possibility of collective action, and building community that offers the conditions for 'change' and 'materialisation' of action. The quality the local offers is a scale at which nature and society meet. Community is rested on the ground, a ground that has a threat of being uprooted, should the catastrophic imaginaries of climate change be realised (Clark, 2011; 2010). The emphasis is a return to connection with the ground and the skills that were once common practice in subsistence agriculture, as well as more modern information technology skills corresponding to the information age (Hopkins, 2008; Neal, 2013). The ability to 'prepare the ground' and build community resilience refers to a more connected and skilled discourse rather than a reliance on technological determinism for solutions (Heilbroner, 1967; Ingold, 2000). Action is taken at the local scale, as Lucas argued, because *"the local scale is less political."* There is nothing to say the local scale is any less political than other scales. But Transition utilised the local scale for its proximity, as a more material-oriented scale where people can act directly with objects and people; thinking beyond political confrontation to bring about 'transition' for ones self.

While we can say that there is nothing new about the Transition movement the positive, solution-oriented approach provides a space where individuals can pursue their own visions of action. As Liam discussed, *"Transition offers a space where people can bring their ideas, and we do what we can to support them."* The ability of people to bring their own ideas along and test them in local places means Transition itself brings nothing *new* but by not offering anything new it allows Transition to become what people want it to be. With this in mind Transition does not hold fixed determinate meaning but consists of

different *elements* in a structure. As the previous section showed, these elements are not fully fixed but through *moments* the movement is able to elevate 'community', 'skills', 'apolitical' and 'environmental ethics' as leading issues, differentiated by their naming as 'Transition' initiatives. Particular actions at the local-community scale only hold meaning thereafter because they are references alongside 'Transition'. The paradoxical consequence of linguistic utterance of 'Transition' is that the density ascribed to the term as a master signifier in-fact signifies nothing in itself; only operating as a central node to unify the discursive differences between participants in the movement (see Laclau, 2005a). Therein Transition operates as an empty signifier; a word only holding meaning signified by a single individual ('Transition is X') but essentially operating as a means of holding the collective together in as far as 'X' is always different.

The emphasis is on the Transition, or transformation, of towns from a dependency on oil to local resilience through energy descent (Hopkins, 2008). Emphasis, throughout interviews, was on *"doing"* and being *"hands-on"* and avoiding political engagement. As John discussed, *"Transition is about resources so a currency scheme is essential."* Towns are explicitly *named* 'Transition', but schemes become part and parcel of the initiative itself. Alternative currency schemes have pre-existed the Transition movement, as have eco-villages but because it is *named* 'Transition' the pre-existing *elements* are transformed into the Transition Town *moment* (Stavrakakis, 1997; Žižek, 1989). The *moment* Transition Towns open the possibility of solutions beyond the political stalemate of the past 25-30 years, the act of *naming* something 'Transition' provides the rhetorical foundations of a totality (Laclau, 2005a; Stavrakakis, 1997).

Transition—thereafter—articulates meaning to the disparate *elements* within contemporary environmentalism. Individuals within the group expressed different discursive interpretations of what Transition is about, but were unified through the *Transition* signifier. As shown below, different meanings were ascribed, but held together through the Transition discourse:

(1) We have lost the fine balance between nature and man. Transition is about remaking this relationship. (Jenna)

(2) Transition is about resources so a currency scheme is essential. (John)

(3) Transition is about building community so people will cooperate and collaborate with one another. (Isabel)

(4) Transition is about changing things on the ground (William)

In order to unite the inherent differences between individuals within the group, the 'master signifier' operates to articulate the internal *elements*. The *elements* include the variations of the survivalist and deep ecology discourses identified, as well as different discursive articulations of how to materialise change beyond politics. Discourses related to *deep ecological* interpretations of the nature-culture divide (1), alternative currency schemes (2), decentralisation (3), and apolitical grassroots action (4) are thereafter all articulated around the master signifier: *Transition* (Stavrakakis, 1997; Glynos, 2001). The point is that initiatives run under the Transition name could easily be from other eco-localisation movements such as the eco-village movement or an independent

eco-community, but naming them Transition appears to offer the difference for

Transition participants, as discussed in **Box 4.7**.

Box 4.7: **Group Discussion: 'Transition' Projects**

       This act of naming can be problematic for collective action, especially when judging the success of Transition initiatives. In a monthly meeting—as shown below—Transition Tynedale discussed the success of group, and whether 'spin-off's' at the community scale could be counted as part of Transition's success. This is clearly one of the questions that divide Transition initiatives, as some believe the pursuit of transition without participation under the 'Transition' name detracts from the group's visibility—making the success of the group in relation to the local community's sustainability hard to trace. Others discuss the importance of *"individuals empowering themselves"* and the importance beyond the collective: *"Transition is about what is here [points to heart]."* This is pivotal, as in these passages the act of naming something 'Transition' begins to realise its limits. That is that the collective act of Transition is only held together through the *naming* of the initiative as Transition (see Laclau, 2003). Laclau (2003) has taken this to illustrate the imagined community of collective action, and goes beyond Benedic Anderson's (1981) argument that communities where individuals have not met one another are imagined to argue that all forms of collective are in-fact imaginary.

<u>Transition Monthly Meeting (January 2015):</u>

Person 1 – I don't think we get many people involved in our meetings, we see them for 1 meeting and then they're gone.
Person 2 – I think they join the subgroups.
Person 1 – I'm not sure what they do.
Person 2 – 'J' hasn't been here for a while but she does the car club.
Person 3 – Some people do their own stuff but don't come to the general meetings.
Person 4 – People do what they want and do, for the most part, what they can.
Person 2 – We've had a lot of good things when we've had spin-offs.
Person 1 – I don't think we get many people involved in our meetings, we see them for 1 meeting and then they're gone.
Person 2 – I think they join the subgroups.
Person 1 – I'm not sure what they do.
Person 2 – 'J' hasn't been here for a while but she does the car club.
Person 3 – Some people do their own stuff but don't come to the general meetings.
Person 4 – People do what they want and do, for the most part, what they can.
Person 2 – We've had a lot of good things when we've had spin-offs.
Person 3 – That spin-off happened with people from the group – the one with the forest.
Person 1 – But we've got to ask ourselves: is that what we're about? Spin-offs? I sometimes feel as though it detracts from us.
Person 5 – People need to feed back to us. One of the heads of the school said didn't know where it came from.
Person 3 – I think it's about individuals empowering themselves.
Person 4 – I don't know the difference between these groups and myself. Does it matter?
Person 6 – Transition is about what is here [points to the heart].

Importantly, Laclau (2005) clarifies the ability of the master signifier constitutes a universality as well as a simultaneous horizon. This is because the master signifier—*Transition*—retroactively articulates the meaning of each *element*; this means it ascribes meaning that is not determined from the beginning by each *element* itself (Žižek, 1989). In this sense, there is no pre-determined way of acting at the local scale. This leaves the practice of action open to interpretation befitting the context of the initiative (see Seyfang and Haxeltine, 2012). For example, SLACC and Transition Tynedale have completely different organisational structures and approaches to action. While SLACC advocates involvement in planning decisions such as the Killington Wind Farm, Transition Tynedale is currently debating whether supporting and opposing local planning would constitute a politicisation of the group. As Bourke and Meppem (2000) have warned, discourses that hold such breadth can run the risk of becoming 'ideologically malleable'. Transition as a concept, thereafter, risks becoming workable into many different forms, holding different meanings and operating with different goals.

Given that the identities of individuals operate within the broadly defined *Green Ideology* but are unified around the Transition signifier, albeit with different interpretations of what Transition entails, it is necessary for Transition to hold a universal meaning while, paradoxically, remaining empty of any embodied fullness (Laclau, 2005a). As both Karen and Amelie discussed, other local groups were practicing a lot of similar action, the difference being the

naming of projects as either *Transition* or something else (**Box 4.8**). The point is that the only factor that differentiates Transition projects from other projects operating at the local scale is in the act of *naming* it. This illustrates the way the Transition *name* becomes representative of *moments* defined within the group (i.e. transition as change to...) but does not refer to general transition. Hence, the Transition signifier means nothing in itself, but functions as an identity through which to quilt the discursive differences within the group (Butler et al., 2000; Stavrakakis, 1997). Simultaneously, the Transition signifier operates as the *differentia specifica* from other forms of transition operating at the local scale. This is how movements are capable of 'speak[ing] a language that seems to be entirely their own, but [...] say[s] something that transcends their particularity and speaks to us all' (Melucci, 1996: 1).

Box 4.8: *Naming* Transition

"The thing I have a problem with in Transition is that they seem to want to classify projects as a Transition Project. For me 'incredible edible' is part of this transition movement; LESS is part of this transition movement. I like that Transition is present and likes that name but I now give time to other groups. I think Transition has its role and purpose but it should not just be to itself."   (Amelie)

"A lot of transition is happening, just not necessarily under the Transition name..." (Karen)

The ability of the 'Transition' signifier to remain open to internal differences—discursive difference—and simultaneously setting out a particular identity is achieved through a process of 'opposition to other groups', most notably for Transition Towns is the 'othering' of politics, as shown in **figure 4.1** (Griggs and Howarth, 2000). Transition interviewees were not necessarily against politics per se, but believed that it should remain outside the group

setting. The issue is that operating purely outside antagonism is almost

impossible, especially when a highly contentious process of (local) 'change' is

proposed. While I would not contend that 'Transition' is in danger of falling into

a post-political trap, Kenis and Mathijs's (2014a) assertion that it is the

movement's interpretation of the local as *a priori* is not reflected in empirical

data across these Transition Towns. It is the focus on 'materialising' change

without the necessity of 'the political' antagonisms that may result that is cause

for concern—primarily the *differentia specifica* of the movement being without

politics, and a sense that it leads to 'unnecessary confrontation' (Hopkins, 2008).

Hence, it is not an obfuscation of political processes that occur at the local scale,

but through the naming and enacting of transition itself—and the materialisation

of action—that the political is obscured behind this so-called apolitical action

(Žižek, 1999; Kenis and Mathijs, 2014a). By imagining how transition could

materialise through the collective re-skilling of community, as Hopkins (2008;

2014) has argued, there is no need for political antagonism and confrontation

with local or national government.

The will to build a resilient locale/community obfuscates the gap between

the desire for change and the necessity of the political (Žižek, 1999; Mouffe,

2005). One could, therefore, argue that it is not liberal capitalism's populist

containment of climate change alone preventing political confrontation with

Transition groups about how best to act but the groups themselves limiting their

innovative potential through the common belief that antagonism is irrelevant

and—on account of shared values—that action can be taken without any play of

antagonism. As Mouffe (2005: 73) has exemplified, 'there is no consensus

without exclusion, no we without they', in this sense, antagonism is necessary to reach any form of agonistic accord (Howarth and Stavrakakis, 2000). The role of the Transition signifier is not to eradicate antagonism, but instead, to render discursive contingency invisible (Glynos, 2001).

The process of *naming* something Transition, to refer to anything operated within the broad portfolio of the Transition movement, articulates the impossible target of unifying the collective differences inherent within the entire movement under one identity (Laclau, 2005a). As Laclau (2005a) discussed, this is an impossible yet necessary action of the 'master signifier'. The master signifier must achieve a fullness (or *totality*) required to articulate a new approach for the Transition movement, but based upon the discursive difference of individuals within the movement it must be empty (an *empty signifier*), as well as to incorporate the differences between Transition initiatives across different places and to incorporate the historically-contingent evolution of initiatives over time (Laclau, 2005a; Žižek, 1989). The 'incompletion' of the Transition signifier can be explained through the difference between Transition Tynedale, TCL and SLACC (**Table 4.7**). All are Transition initiatives and name their projects 'Transition', but all 3 adopt different approaches to action, and have evolved over time. TCL for example has evolved from a flat structure into a hierarchical structure with a steering group. Furthermore, SLACC petitions in local planning decisions, whilst Transition Tynedale regards this as politicised and out of sync with the Transition ethos. Whilst they all adopt different approaches and have changed through time, they retain the 'Transition' signifier as the nodal point around which the articulate action.

Table 4.6	Approaches to Transition by initiative	
	Structure	**Approach**
Transition Tynedale	Open structured meetings	Garden-centric
TCL	Open & Closed meetings	Sub-divided projects
SLACC	Informal Structure	Informal grassroots action/Petitions

4.3.   Conclusions – Matters of concern: Transition beyond politics

This section has begun to carve out the identity of the Transition Town movement through empirical data collected across 3 Transition initiatives. Considering the question 'what leads people to join the Transition movement?' It became clear that Transition Towns offer an alternative place of action, beyond the boundaries of politics. According to interview discussions Transition offers a place of action that is more connected to the ground insofar as it offers the proximity to act both interpersonally, as well as with the materials that we rely on for survival: natural or environmental capital (Wilson, 2012). But constituting the local scale as the master signifier, as Kenis and Mathijs (2014a) have, does not critically reflect on the process of transition operated in these spaces. Instead it was merely the act of *naming* a particular action 'Transition' that constituted the 'master signifier' of the movement. There is nothing specifically different about the Transition movement as an environmental movement, not even its 'othering' of politics as a barrier to practical action, which is widely adopted by other forms of eco-localisation such as the Global Eco-village Network (2015)

and unaffiliated community environmental groups (i.e. Isle of Eigg Trust[6]).

Hopkins (2014) has made explicit reference to this in his discussion 'Is Transition political?' wherein he outlines the importance of the movement remaining unmapped on the political spectrum to open inclusion to everyone. Rather than the local constituting a trap, it is clear that the de-politicisation of the Transition movement quilts over the contingency of political difference between Transition participants which leads to a sense of consensus rather than agonistic debate. This can materialise as a post-political trap as consensus is assumed rather than allowing 'the political' to be elevated to the level of representation (Kenis and Lievens, 2014; Rancière, 1999). The danger of this approach is that the Transition movement marginalises itself within spaces where political confrontation does not have to be enacted—the subject to which the next section turns.

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[6] The Isle of Eigg Trust (or alternatively Green Eigg) is an exemplar case study of sustainable community transition towards an almost self-sufficient renewable grid (hydro and wind), community volunteering and outreach, shared community spaces and land, and green education. While this is clearly a model of a close resemblance to that which the Transition movement seeks to develop, vis-à-vis its 12 steps, it is not affiliated with the movement, and pre-dates its emergence. The Isle of Eigg does hold 'muller' status with the Transition movement, but does not hold full Transition status.

Chapter 5: Discussion 2

5.1.   Materialising Transition: A discursive analysis of Gardening and Energy

This second discussion section starts with the following provocations: what is it about the act of gardening that embodies and materialises the fear of catastrophic climate change? And how stable is the 'Transition' master signifier should projects fail to materialise? Communal gardening and sustainable agriculture are common practice among grassroots environmental groups, from eco-villages and community garden schemes through to eco-church schemes and alternative food networks, these projects all aim to contribute to grassroots sustainability, but moreover embody a corporeal sensitivity to the precariousness of human and ecological systems given our footprint particularly since the industrial revolution 200 years before present (Seyfang, 2009; Straelhi, 2001; Berners-Lee and Clark, 2013; Clark, 2011). The materialisation of effective action to confront concerns for climate change and environmental degradation (including finite resources upon which we are dependent) is the key aim of all greens (Eckersley, 1992; Dryzek, 2005). As elaborated in the previous chapter, Transition differs inasfar as it seeks more practical, decentralised action without the alienating embrace of tumultuous political setbacks and antagonism over how best to act.

This section looks to analyse the Transition process, and particularly the importance of the successful 'materialisation' of projects to the Transition

approach. Focus is drawn, firstly, to the emphasis on the process of Transition

remaining apolitical and how this process, and its focus on materialising change

or *"doing something positive that [one] can notice has changed"* (William), invests

a great deal in the ability of projects to succeed. The second section then turns its

focus to the disjunction between 'empowering' spaces of gardening and more

antagonistic confrontations inherent to large-scale energy projects and the

reasons for these disjunctions. The third section then reflects on what happens

when projects fail to materialise, and the effect of producing a sense of rupture

between the stable present and the unstable future (Blanchot, 1987; Anderson,

2010). The final section draws upon critical reflections on projects and the

"garden-centric" orientation of Transition initiatives discussed in interview data

to establish a link between the 'Transition' signifier, resilience and scales of

'dependence' (and 'engagement').

5.2   *Material Discourse – Places of Action*

As discussed in the previous section, engagement with the (material)

ground at the local scale and enacting 'Transition' is central to the Transition

movement. Operating at the local scale, therefore, provides the means to practice

transition rather than *"wait for the rest of society to move"*, as Emily argued.

Emphasis on local solutions, according to Barry and Quilley (2009), draw heavily

on *survivalist* discourses, wherein the survivability of society, albeit at the

community scale, can be taken into the hands of local people through the 12

steps of Transition (Hopkins, 2008). It is an acknowledgement of the 'doomers'

discourses associated with contemporary peak oil narratives (Bridge, 2011;

Barry and Quilley, 2009) and emergence of dystopian narratives of 'collapse' and 'climate apocalypse' (Urry, 2013) that underpin the emergence of the Transition movement. The sense of existential 'fear', according to Bettini and Karaliotas (2013: 337), that 'is explicitly posited as one of the main reasons to support the argument towards eco-localisation of contemporary political ecologies.' It is this universal of fear expounded in apocalyptic narratives that Swyngedouw (2010) has argued is the crucial node through which the environmental narrative is woven. Acting at the local scale, thereafter, appeared to emerge as the moment of cure for the Transition Town movement.

Localisation of action, as interviewees reflected, represents a means of unravelling the complexity of the problem of politics, which indicates a reductionist quality to operating at the local scale. As Jenna reflected: *"Part of Transition is that we want to make change on a local level. The geographical area covered on a day-to-day basis is too great. It is too complex. Rebuilding communities on a local level is needed."* While it is acknowledged that a transition of the local scale is required, there is an *a priori* assumption that this scale is in some way less complex. The local is considered reductionist, and less complex than the great spaces that modern society has begun to consume in everyday life (see Harvey, 1989 *time-space compression*). In this case, eco-localisation is seen to offer a solution through *time-space re-extension*. The local scale is said to offer the opportunity to remain connected to the good flows, and severed from those considered damaging (North, 2010). But there is nothing inherent about the local scale, it does not offer a less complex place of action, and the complexity of

transition at this scale must not be underestimated (Born and Purcell, 2006; Shove and Walker, 2007).

The reduction of the complex and messy process of local transition can be observed in certain discussions of the 'Transition' process. Operating a transition, while focusing on what can be done, there is little expression of how projects will remove the pre-existing socio-technical regime. As Emma discussed:

"Transition means the more self-sufficient we get the less we can be held hostage to oil. I do think that Hexham can become a resilient town with all of the plans they have: cycling routes; a new car club; we have new plants for picking; we are building new energy initiatives; and so on."

While this account refers to the construction of Parallel Public Infrastructures, as Bailey et al. (2010) have labelled the localisation process, it simplifies the complex interconnectedness of the local scale into national infrastructures, to which they are dependent (Jones, 1998). Ryan discussed, *"no community is an island [...] we will always be reliant on national infrastructures."* Dependence on these wider networks and—specifically—supportive infrastructures must be a consideration in the transition process. This is because phasing in new systems and the removal of old ones is part and parcel of socio-technical transition (Geels and Schot, 2007). As Oliver argued:

"Big projects are not what most people in Transition are doing. The Hydro scheme was more of a spin-off, and the car club was a hand-out (from a local government scheme). I doubt that the car club would stand up on it's own merit; so this is what we are missing out on. We don't have local sustainable solutions at the community scale. How can we be resilient if we are dependent?"

This operates as a very important critique of assumptions about local scale action. Space, and the ability to act across the community scale, is constructed as homogenous in Transition discourse, referring to 'building community resilience' and frequently referring to 'your community' (Hopkins, 2008). But the simple fact is the communities are made up of heterogeneous actors and equally complex interactions across community space (Young, 1990). Whereas different places of action, within the theoretical boundaries of a given community settlement operate at different levels of 'dependence'—whether on local government, QUANGOs or NGOs for the success of an initiative—and 'engagement'—with other 'actors' at the local scale (Cox, 1998; Wilson, 2012).

5.3.   Notes on Community

Many of the arguments for action are explicitly focused on community, and its protection. But what is 'it'? And how is the construction of community problematic for the Transition Town movement? As Liam argued, for him *"the whole idea of resilience is a strong community and strong communication in that community. A community of people who want to improve things will create*

change." This expresses a sense of place and collective identity within Liam's

community. Community is instated as something that is inclusive of values, as a

normative expression of place as naturally cohesive (Young, 1990). Similarly,

Yasmin expresses community as more homogenous, as Transition Towns refer to

something at the community scale:

> *"It was in relation to my local community that made me want to join. It was*
>
> *about going across the energy cliff without feeling bad. I felt that here was a*
>
> *selfish community environmental group because it was going to make me*
>
> *and my community resilient through learning. And the rest of society would*
>
> *learn the error of their ways by the time they hit the shock."*

This subject of the action is community, and there is identification with

community as well, as though this scale is most likely to remain homogenous.

The 'my' community and 'me and my community' reflects a sense that there is a

collective 'we' and that the community is a place without antagonism. This

confusion is reflected in Lucas's evocation of 'the political' in community: *"local*

community is […] by definition less political." Donald (1999) has put this *a priori*

sense of cohesiveness in community down to our 'our [experience of…] the social

world as simply the way things are, as objective presence, because that

contingency is systematically forgotten' (p. 168).

Community cannot, therefore, be considered a place of action more

pragmatically assertive of material intervention. It is an ever-shifting place made

of different trajectories that must be identified and confronted (Deleuze and

Guattari, 1987; Massey, 2005). As Donald (1999) has argued, place—or lived in space—invokes questions of us living together, questions specifically of 'the political' and antagonism (Laclau, 1990). Community, while being political, does offer a space where people can come together and where 'chaos can be ordered' vis-à-vis the negotiation of space and its relative codification (Derrida, 1978; Massey, 2005).

The importance of place and the politics of place is its ability to invite social relations between different people and, through 'certain forms of sharing'—in this case sharing of values—identities can be moulded (Nancy, 1991: 40). It is the proximity community offers as a *locale* that Emma argued, *"bring together like-minded people, who may be different, but walk the talk."* This is central to the nodal point of 'Transition', the ability to enact the process through action at the local community scale – and develop places of action (Scott-Cato and Hillier, 2010). But community is not simply made up of open spaces in which to act, free of antagonism (Mouffe, 1993; Donald, 1999). There is no single hegemonic 'we', acting in the collective interest of people within our *locale*. Social movements open up different spaces in order to conduct collective action, and these include spaces of open and closed discussion (i.e. open meetings and oft closed steering groups), spaces where action is located—these can be more open or closed spaces of action (i.e. community gardens and energy projects) depending on how they are codified.

For the purpose of this study community can be divided into two different categories, based upon the use in interviewee language. Community is used interchangeably in interviewee language to refer to community 'as identity'—

referring to a specific collective with a shared discourse (Mouffe, 1993)—and 'as place'—referring to a territory or locale (everyday space; Castree, 2009)—which, based on its heterogeneity, is antagonistic (Mouffe, 2005). 'Transition' as the master signifier should be thought of as identity, as a 'community' within a community to separate different spaces of action—one being semi-private (group community) and the other public and varied (locale). But conceive of local community as a space composed of antagonism, as has been articulated in a number of accounts of radical democracy (Mouffe, 1993; Donald, 1999), has been criticised for neglecting the multiplicity of space, and for homogenising the enactment of action across different spaces. A notable critic of radical democracy Clive Barnett (2005a; 2005b) has outlined the importance of conceiving of spatial transactions and as affected interest—and the importance of concepts such as *place beyond place* (Massey, 2007).

The following sections in this chapter seek to differentiate the spatial attributes distinguished by cohesive, shared spaces of interest akin to garden spaces, and the more transactional, contested public spaces where energy projects are often located (Barnett and Bridge, 2013). Garden spaces, as will be elaborated, operate in 'spaces of dependence' allowing them to function freely, while energy projects—operating in transactional-public spaces—are more likely to intervene in the 'affected interest' of other actors at the local scale and therein require a 'scale jump' to engage with these actors to compromise and reach an agonistic accord (Cox, 1998; Donald, 1999).

5.4.   Two spaces of action: Gardening and Energy Projects

As projects are run community-wide, we are dealing with different spatial phenomena that reside within the ontological boundaries of the given community, such as public and private spaces (Massey, 2005; Young, 1990). The two different forms of action that I wish to analyse through a spatial lens are 'gardening' and 'community energy projects'. Both are integral to the process of 'energy descent'—the ultimate goal of *The Transition Handbook*—and refer to different states of energy, as either stored energy (in matter) or highly mobile flows of matter (Hopkins, 2008; Biel, 2014; Bennett, 2004). In order to analyse the difference between spaces within the contextual parameters of community, and the different spaces of 'Transition', which aims to be representative of community whist carving out change, I apply Barnett and Bridge's (2013) articulation of 'transactional spaces' and 'affected interest' to illustrate the political disjuncture between these two spaces (Dewey, 1927). I do so as a means of elaborating the spatio-political difference between spaces of gardening practiced and spaces allocated to (community) energy projects. The elaboration I hope to achieve is to show that 'spaces of gardening' remain within the 'affected interest' of the 'Transition' group, whilst projects operating in 'transactional' public spaces are more contested and often entail antagonism between local stakeholders (Mouffe, 1993). While garden spaces still involve an agonistic dimension, disagreements remain within the democratic will of the group and their own affected interests. This is because gardening is usually operated in semi-private spaces of action, insofar as they are designated to or owned by the group and often operates with a limited visibility to wider community. Energy

projects, conversely, operate outside group spaces that are either public or transactional. The challenge of public spaces, as Amin (2002) has argued, is that it requires a vocabulary that confronts the facts of difference insofar as it is open to different actors, interests and transactions running through these spaces. Analysing the characteristics of these spaces and how they have different affects on the materialisation of action by grassroots groups is thereafter a fruitful exercise.

5.4.1. *Gardening: Materialising Transition*

Gardening schemes and other growing activities are one of the most common characteristics of Transition initiatives. And this is not surprising as the first and most openly available form of energy is locked into food. Food, and the ability to grow it, in the simplest sense, is 'the condition for energising society […] because if society cannot be fed sustainably it cannot function at all' (Biel, 2014: 183). In a focus group conducted with Transition Tynedale in 2013, interviewees argued that starting in the garden is the most practical starting point for Transition, with explicit reference to this space as *"empowering"* (Mary) and *"a platform for change"* (Emily). As Olivia argued: *"my hope was that gardening would flow out from the group and more people in the local community would adopt the practice."* Gardening activities reside, in this respect, as the central call for change. References made to the materialisation of 'change', were commonly located in gardening activities. Furthermore, gardening also represents more visceral performance of change related to a deeper connection

with nature and the 'community' of environmentalism (Harrison et al., 2004). As Mary and Emma, respectfully, reflected in another focus group:

"I feel happier when I go to the gardens with Transition Tynedale because I feel as though we are making a difference, and we are able to connect with the earth and with people [...] when I was last there I appreciated that I was on my own but I felt part of the community. I appreciate that we all need to tend the land together."   (Mary)

"I agree that looking after the Transition Tynedale garden is a parallel with looking after the environment for the next generation [...] all these changes add up to make a difference."   (Emma)

Gardening in these statements is identified as an act of solidarity with the whole environmental movement. The act of gardening is representative of 'Transition' itself as it acknowledges solidarity and comradeship with the wider environmental community (Butler et al., 2000; Butler, 2005). The performance of gardening fulfils the dual purpose of inviting people to join the Transition movement and enact a fraternity with the wider environmental movement through a land-based ethic (Butler, 2005; Leopold, 1947).

To the extent that gardening offers the ability to *"act for change"* without incurring legal or (significant) financial barriers, it is an effective step in the process of transition. Furthermore, the ability to re-skill through gardening is a highly practical means of transition for the rest of community. As Emma argued,

"gardening can help people learn the skills and then garden for themselves at home. It is a practical step towards change." Gardens also offer a more practical step, in this respect, towards a process of community transition. As Liam discussed: *"gardening is something that everyone can get involved in, I can take my kids along to play around with their friends [...] I think we have changed the community [...] without Transition Tynedale the community would not have these activities. And it also offers new skills to local people."* This reflects the importance of remaining 'open' to community in order to remain democratic and apolitical, thus enhancing maximum participation in Transition activities (Connors and McDonald, 2010; Hopkins, 2011). The openness of gardening also provides the means through which to develop transition from, offering a practical platform for change.

Interviewees associated the garden space with productivity and recreation, and the ability to offer this to community was often regarded as a step towards reviving peoples' past experiences of gardening and subsistence agriculture. As George discussed in 2013:

> *"I have witnessed the mechanisation of farming. They have become more economically driven and less connected to the land. These places were a quagmire of muck, but sustainable. Now they are vast and mechanised – it is no longer about the land, it is all about economics. We need a reconnect."*

There are two clear messages to be taken from this statement: firstly, George refers to the destruction of sustainable agricultural production that was the norm in the past, and the mechanisation of nature; and secondly, he refers to a need to reconnect and thereafter return to sustainable food production that is more interconnected with the land. The process of re-localisation is a clear reflection of this need to reduce the intensity of food systems and reduce food miles (Hopkins, 2008; Scott-Cato and Hillier, 2010). This topic was the most common discussion in Transition meetings; as it was clearly the most practical area begin transition from. This is because gardening fulfils a dual purpose of creating practical change—through growing practices—and reconnecting with the land that contemporary society has become increasingly distanced and alienated from vis-à-vis the neoliberalisation of nature (Castree, 2010).

The ability to *"take control and make a difference"*, as Isabel argued, is among the most important aspects of Transition. As she emphasised, it is the *"sociological aspect"* of growing practices that make people feel *"empowered. They don't just have to watch the planet disintegrate."* Being able to produce something and take action, in this sense, adopts the convivial take on societal transition that Hopkins hoped to embody through Transition (Barry and Quilley, 2009). The return to productive and sustainable agriculture at the local scale was reflected on as important to the retired demographic. *"Dedicating more time to growing your own is something enjoyable, and seemed like a good challenge"*, as Karen discussed. But moreover, it is something positive and empowering, as it looks to *"reverse the decline of productive spaces [...] such as the orchards and*

gardens I grew up knowing" (Olivia). Rediscovering the social memory of skills in the past, and re-establishing these productive communal spaces was outlined in Hopkins' (2010) own PhD thesis. The use of memories of the past to make positive change in the present is essential to establishing sustainable spaces (Wilson, 2012). Remembering these *"sustainable, productive habits",* as Emma elaborated, was a highly practical way of applying skills to gardening and food growing.

But while Transition Towns refer to local-community transition and aim to open up gardening as a fraternal activity, these sites are for the large part semi-private spaces. Although gardens were referred to as 'community gardens', they are usually owned/leased by the group or the private landowners[7]. To this degree they operate in private spaces that are open to the public, albeit on selected action days. Enacting change in gardens, to this extent, does not operate in contestable transactional public spaces (Barnett and Bridge, 2013), visible to the whole community, but align more to the 'community' of the Transition Town group itself. As Logan recalled: *"these spaces need to be more visible to community."* This is important, as there are few barriers to the way these spaces are enacted if they are not visible to the geographical community. Though these spaces are also less likely to be contested on account of their popularity and continuity in British culture—as a nation of gardeners (see Wilson, 2012 *social memory*). It seems necessary that building a world within a world should be nurtured within a semi-public nursery before it is opened up to the whole

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[7] Both Transition Tynedale and Transition City Lancaster utilised space provided by separate organisations on their arranged action days.

community. This resembles the multi-level perspective at an intra-community scale, operating niches within semi-open spaces before seeking to intervene at the wider community scale (Wilson, 2012; Pitchford and Henderson, 2008). Building community, in this sense, requires building support in less visible spaces before attempting jumping to a scale visible to the whole community.

Gardening can be thought of as an exemplar space through which to begin the scaled-down society akin to building community resilience. The ability to interact with the ground with 'the hands', observe *"noticeable change"* and build positive change (beyond politics) epitomises Homer-Dixon's (2006) *Upside of Down* argument, where positive change can counter the threat of catastrophic climate change and societal collapse (Urry, 2011). These spaces can be conceptualised as 'places of action' that may not be productive of community-wide transition, but acting in these spaces allow small-scale changes to occur until 'windows of opportunity' can be exploited (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987; Scott-Cato and Hillier, 2010). In this respect, the practice of gardening and food production forecloses the possibility of vulnerability to the coming apocalypse as people are acting for change, always moving forwards and acting for change.

Gardens are therefore perfect places of action as they are quite literally fruitful places capable of materialising visible change. What must be stressed is that these spaces require little confrontation, and are therefore relatively free of antagonism. They act in semi-private spaces without confrontation over planning and have little affect on other community actors. They are therefore highly cohesive spaces suited to Transition culture's apolitical and non-

confrontational ethos, but the potential of community-wide change is limited

insofar as they are not 'transactional' public spaces visible and actively affecting

wider community. But there appears to be a disjunction between these spaces as

'community' garden's—acting largely in the interests of community—and large-

scale projects that operate within the spaces that publics way move across in

everyday life (transactional space). This is an area to which I turn attention next.

5.4.2.   Community Renewables: Risky Electric Dreams

Community-led energy projects have become increasingly popular within

the UK over the past 10-15 years, with well over 500 initiatives identified by

Walker et al. in 2007. This has been a transition increasingly popular in energy

policy aiming to encourage 'an environment where the innovation and ideas of

communities can flourish" (HM Government, 2009: 92; cited Seyfang et al.,

2013). The promise of a 'revolution in community energy' has been outlined in a

number of government reports, most notably the Community Energy Strategy of

2014 (DECC, 2014; see also Guardian, 2015). But even with the active support of

local government, these schemes are highly contentious especially with regards

to the investment of time and energy into the materialisation of grassroots socio-

technical transition (Seyfang and Haxeltine, 2012; Wilson, 2012). According to

ONS (2012) statistics, the Northeast of England has the fewest community

energy schemes recorded in the UK (**figure 5.1**). This section draws attention to

one such proposed scheme in the idyllic market town of Hexham,

Northumberland.
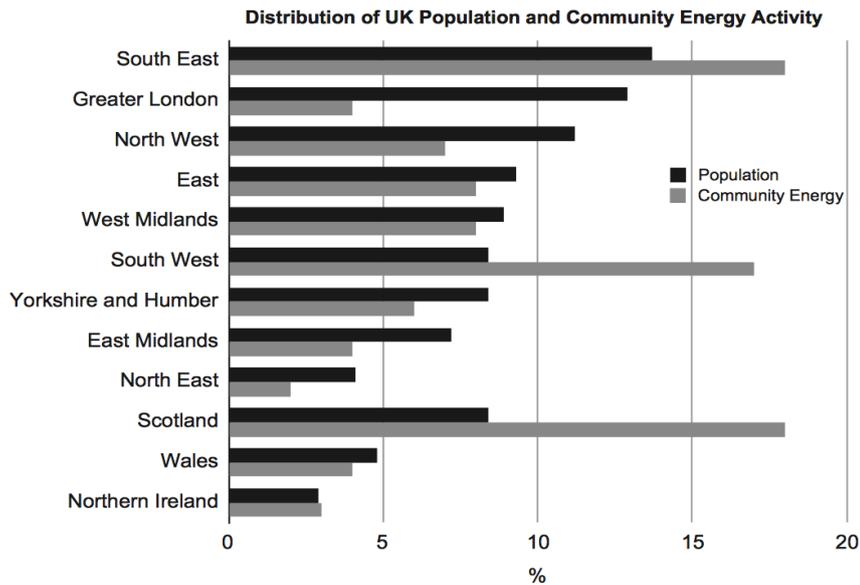
Figure 5.1: UK distribution of community energy schemes (grey) and population (black). (Source: Seyfang et al., 2013; ONS, 2012).

The Hexham River Hydro scheme was an ambitious energy initiative with the aim of developing a *"small-scale but high profile energy scheme that would have paved the way for ecotourism, education..."* and other local opportunities (Peter). As Emily discussed, the project involved *"a lot of skilled people [who] worked very hard"* but despite a number of successful bids for funding and planning applications, the scheme failed to materialise. A number of procedural barriers required through the planning process led to the *"the feasibility [taking] up most of the money we raised for the project"*, as George discussed. According to Olivia an inherent issue for the project was that *"there was no capacity in the group to pursue a project of this size."* This appears to be a basic problem of a lack of social and financial capital, which is essential to the successful propagation of transition pathways (Wilson, 2012). But with the project operating within a transactional space—a space open to community engagement and contestation—there are more barriers and actors likely to hold an affected interest in the interventions of the hydro project on the River Tyne (Barnett and

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Bridge, 2013; Latour, 2004). Hence, while gardens operate within semi-private spaces where the affected interest is favourable to Transition groups, the hydro scheme operated within a highly public sphere characterised as a 'space of engagement' between multiple actors all with different affected interests related to the utilisation of that particular space (Cox, 1998; Shapiro, 2003). The result of which is confrontation with local actors resulting in a play of politics.

The Hexham River Hydro project, operating in a space that is highly transactional—the historical Hexham Bridge and ecologically sensitive River Tyne—led to opposition and concerns from the Anglers Association, River Trust and a prominent local land-owner. Concerns were primarily over aesthetic affect to the bridge and the effect on aquatic ecology—particularly with regards to the salmon and upstream-downstream ecological quality (**figure 5.2**). As Olivia discussed:

> *"after the inspection [environmental impact assessment], it was realised*
> *that costs would be too high for the hydro scheme as there were urgent*
> *repairs needed to the apron of the bridge due to erosion. Northumberland*
> *county council said that they would put the hydro on, do the repairs and*
> *install the fish ladder. And that we would be able to recoup the bridge costs*
> *from the money generated by the hydro."*

The county council offered a lifeline to the hydro scheme in order to meet *'their renewable energy obligations – the EU 2020 obligations"*, as George discussed, but although this provided an immediate and practical solution for the project to go

ahead, as the council would be able to offer the financial backing for the project, offering a compromise with the fish ladder and restoration of the bridge, further concerns were raised. The instillation also presented a threat to the river's aquatic biodiversity and the aesthetic affect to the bridge led the local landowner—owning land adjacent to the bridge—to prevent right of access to the bridge unless the plans for the hydro project were scrapped. Hence, the right of access to the public space of action finally dictated the affected interest at the local scale.

Public issue formation led to contestation of the plans to develop a hydro project, despite the final barrier being a dispute over right of access to make repairs to the bridge and install the hydroelectric infrastructure on the bridge. As Olivia discussed, the contention was primarily a matter of *"the bridge being a wonderful, iconic example of how it has been cleaned up and there is fishing there. It is a great attraction."* The bridge was representative of a symbolic shift from industry in the northeast towards high quality environments for recreation and tourism. The affect of installing a turbine on the side of the Hexham Bridge would have an aesthetic affect to tourist interests—although it would also introduce eco-tourism, as well as having possible impacts on aquatic biodiversity, despite the environmental impact assessment revealing no damage to the immediate ecosystem.

It would appear that the highly 'transactional' nature of Hexham Bridge is what led to such a high degree of engagement between different actors at the community scale, and the possibility of political debate regarding the affects of

the Hydro on local stakeholders. The bridge as *"an icon"* and *"of historical importance"* is what gives the affected interest of local actors such gravitas. As Ryan illustrated, *"the river hydro is an example of where groups have been able to dominate the debate."* It is the affected interest of different groups around the importance of the bridge and river as either a public space of energy production, eco-tourism and education, and an historical site representative of a high quality, clean environment and aesthetic resonance with the town itself. Clearly taking action within transactional public spaces is more likely to involve engaging other community-scale actors who have an affected interest in change to these spaces (Shapiro, 1999). Change to these spaces thereafter requires engagement and negotiation with local actors, institutions and government (Cox, 1998), which as Mouffe (1993) has elaborated, is likely to lead to antagonism based upon the symbolic importance of communal spaces.

For the most part semi-private spaces of gardening are more likely to be practical for change as they are unlikely to have an affect on the interests of other actors within the given community, therein there is little likelihood of politicisation regarding garden practices within these spaces (Marres, 2010). The importance of Dewey's (1927) conceptualisation of 'transactional space' is the acknowledgement of the environment as having a distinct affect on the processes of democracy and politics. As Dewey has articulated, if activities remain circumscribed within spaces that do not have indirect effect on other actors, in this case the rest of community, they remain private (1927; Barnett and Bridge, 2013). Garden activities, in this case, cannot be considered as spilling over into the affected interest of the rest of community, as there is no direct or

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indirect affect on the public. Indeed, groups have been criticised for *"no engaging enough with the rest of community"*, as Logan has argued. Conversely, the proposal to develop community energy through a hydroelectric generator on the River Tyne is located in a highly transactional space of tourist and community interest, as selected documents indicated (**Box 5.1**). The point that I wish to push home is that use of spaces and the objects within them has a 'political' affect on publics engaging with them. There is a performative aspect of materialising change as objects produced, manipulated or interacted with in these spaces 'become invested with political and moral capacities' (Marres and Lezaun, 2011: 496).

Box 5.1:   Community interest – Hexham River Hydro

"Those concerned with the river environment and its ecosystem expect the following of all but the smallest hydropower installations: (1) full Environmental Impact Assessment, carried out in the context of the river catchment, not just the project site; (2) no impediment to upstream and downstream migration of fish and other freshwater biota; (3) minimal impact on water flows, maintaining natural flow variability; (4) vulnerable species and life-stages should be screened from entering the turbine(s)..."   (*Positional Statement;* Tyne Rivers Trust, 2013)

"Local Anglers and Lord Allendale were concerned about environmental quality checks and specifically the impact this would have on the local salmon runs up the river"   (Olivia)

Local newspaper interviews reported that Anglers were concerned about "insufficient monitoring" of the Salmon passage up to Hexham Bridge.   (The Journal, 2012)

"The bridge itself is a huge asset to the town; it is of historical importance"   (George)

To offer a brief summary, it is clear that the 'affected interest' of various actors at the (locale) community scale are more likely to be expressed when the project operates in 'transactional space', which also limits the success of these projects on account of their engagement with other local actors (Barnett and Bridge, 2013). Garden projects, conversely, operate in semi-private spaces,

referred to as 'community gardens' but often refer more to communities identifying with 'Transition' than the local community. It would therefore appear a fairly simple conclusion that 'garden' spaces are more likely to offer successful places to propagate action than action taking place within 'transactional spaces' of community, where it is more likely that different actors will have an affected interest (i.e. salmon fishing on the river). But the real potential for Transition initiatives to change community is through confronting and becoming visible in 'transactional' public domains. While both spaces operate at the community scale, the degree to which they are visible and affect the interests of other local community actors has consequences on the degree to which confrontation and politicisation are required.

5.5.   *Discursive affect of failure – Rupturing 'Transition'*

While to disjunction between spaces of gardening and energy projects may be characterised by different levels of risk and antagonism, the affect of project failure on Transition participants has assumed little attention in Transition literatures. Though Hopkins (2008) has advocated an iterative process of transition, and stresses 'learning from failure' as an essential step towards building community resilience, the affect this has on Transition participants cannot be merely stresses as a matter building psychological resilience (Hopkins, 2011). When large-scale projects fail, or the Transition approach fails to materialise sufficient change, this can have an affect on the ability of the group to identify and hold together around a common identity. Reflection on the success of energy projects throughout interviews revealed

poignant *moments* of rupture with the apolitical, non-confrontation and convivial process of 'Transition' as a practical mechanism for change (see Blanchot, 1987; Caputo, 1993). These *moments*—which emerged as 'sticky moments' in interviews (Riach, 2009)—reflected a deep sense loss of stability with the ground, where catastrophic narratives emerged out of the failure of transition to materialise change. One such instance when these *moments* emerged was in discussion of the failure of the river hydro project:

> *"We felt a great feeling of loss when the energy scheme failed [...] we were tied to its success..."*   (Olivia)
>
> *"I'm frightened of the future [...] I can imagine resource wars..."*   (Emily)
>
> *"If we can't act we are heading for inevitable catastrophe"*   (Alice)

The failure of ambitious projects to materialise is reflected in these *moments*, opening up the possibility of the demise of the community. These discourses reflect a rupture with the 'Transition' signifier, as the materialisation of practical action is essential to maintaining this discourse. This is one of the contradictions of the Transition discourse; it is based upon finding local solutions beyond the alienating effects of political confrontation, but neglects the way materials are invested with political capacities (Marres and Lazaun, 2011). Developing projects around 'the vision of a powered-down, resilience, relocalised future' is an essential step in building community resilience (Hopkins, 2008: 172). This convivial vision of the future is a crucial element through which to galvanise community, but neglects the effect failure can have on peoples' future focus. As Olivia discussed: *"Transition is supposed to be a do-ocracy [...] people don't want*

things to get in the way of progress." Transition operates as an alternative to political approaches allowing people to become empowered, but for this reason performing Transition also involves investing imaginaries of the future in the materialisation of change (Anderson, 2010; Marres and Lazaun, 2011). Project failure can—thereafter—have the affect of opening up catastrophic imaginaries of the future and the political stakes of failure.

It is this 'Fear' that Bettini and Karaliotas (2013: 337) have argued is the main rationale for supporting the 'eco-localisation of contemporary political ecologies.' Acting locally, as the Transition ethos proposes, represents the moment of cure, providing the ability to act at a more manageable scale—and as conventional Waldo Tobler's first geographical law dictates: 'near things are more related than distant things' (Goodchild, 2009). But asking interviewees whether they thought Transition initiatives were capable of achieving resilience to climate change emerged as another 'sticky moment' (Riach, 2009). This was a particularly abrasive question for a selection of interviewees, as the Transition approach failed to adequately confront their fears of catastrophic climate change. As Ryan discussed: *"I think Mike Berners-Lee's targets were very accurate from my point of view but then again it was also very pessimistic […] I'm not sure there is much we can do at the local scale [long pause]…"* This topic was pivotal as it challenges Transition's convivial take on taking positive action. In a similar discussion of global emissions and climate change, Jessica discussed similar of dismay over the enormity of creating resilience: *"It's a bit of a double-edged sword having Mike Berners-Lee here [pause…] I think his talk last year seemed to make us feel really bad. I felt afterwards as though you know: oh god how am I*

going to deal with this." Despite both statements reflecting on the accuracy of

Mike Berners-Lee's talks and book—*The Burning Question* (Berners-Lee and

Clark, 2013)—engagement with the possibility of societal collapse reflects a

moment where Transition as a form of collective action fails to address future

concerns, as well as comparatively more modest changes to the local community

scale—yet this is still a major challenge.

Re-politicisation, as Kenis and Mathijs (2014a) have crucially observed,

is a significant element the Transition model seeks to disjoin from its articulation

of action. Indeed, as Hopkins (2008) and others (Brangwyn and Hopkins, 2008)

have argued that part of ones personal transition is overcoming unnecessary

political and confrontational barriers to form a more cohesive set-up for

initiatives to be inclusive and decisive. The issue with this—as also observed in

Kenis and Mathijs' (2014a) empirical data—is that Transition participants

experienced either inaction by the group or projects being dictated by *"the usual*

suspects", as George argued. Unwillingness of the Transition set-up to recognise

antagonism within the group can have the effect of (re-)politicising the subject of

concern. The unwillingness of the Transition model to confront concerns in a

practical way led individuals to reflect on how *"ineffective"* they found

Transition's *"comfortable approach to climate change",* as Olivia went on to

discuss*, "we came to the conclusion that all these projects were missing the mark"*.

Re-politicisation takes place in the 'crucial moment between loss of sense' about

what the local scale offers 'and the attempt to remake sense' (Clark, 2011: 71). In

a number of cases this has led individuals to either leave and seek alternative

projects or seek additional activities in political movements such as Green Peace, the Green Party, Friends of the Earth, and so on. As Olivia concluded:

> *"The loose grassroots action thing, we concluded, had no impact [pause] deciding that it was more of a leisure activity than a transition. We thought that Transition would be a counterculture to the conventional system, where consumption is normal."*

The lack of difference created to conventional life in Hexham led Olivia and George to seek more established and political routes through the 'Green Party'. The failure of initiatives to counter the consumer culture is key, as George remarked *"Gardening misses the mark [...] Gardening is more of a leisure activity."* Following failure of a number of projects, Olivia and George became disenchanted by the *"lack of change"* through the grassroots.

But the crucial moment leading Olivia to re-politicise her approach to Transition, as she discussed, was re-engagement with the vastness and complexity of climate change. As she discussed:

> *"One of the turning points in TT was when we got Mike Berners-Lee at the Hexham debates and we all read his book. His book made me realise how important and how complex change is and [pause] how urgent it is. Though I feel as though it was a turn off for others in the group."*

Coming to terms with the vastness of the problem of climate change, it appears, is something not all Transition Town members are prepared to confront. Although urgency is a core pillar of the Transition approach—and its apolitical approach to taking action without confrontational barriers—once an initiative develops it appears the threat becomes (re-)normalised through emphasis on 'conviviality' and community-building (Barry and Quilley, 2009; Žižek, 2011). This stance became increasingly evident throughout interviews.

The re-emergence of 'apocalyptic narratives' through failure or confrontation with the prospect of abrupt, volatile climate change infers something that messes with one's plans and throws them off course (Clark, 2011; Butler, 2004). Recognition of the complexity and urgency required can throw Transition Town members off their course, as the result of material failure or a re-emergence of the scale of the problem into their psyche (Blanchot, 1986; Clark, 2010; 2011). The act of gardening can be thought of as the material embodiment of the catastrophe of climate change as it has *"the sociological [affect] to feeling empowered. They don't just have to watch the planet disintegrate if they are doing things that make them feel better; make them feel as though they're actually creating a difference."* as Isabel discussed. Resilience embodied in the act of creating and developing a material response to climate change, even if its chances of developing community resilience are limited. As Anderson (2010) has discussed space is important as preparing these spaces refers to the pre-empting and prevention of threats to liberal democratic life. The chance of failure allows 'apocalyptic narratives' to be opened up as phantasmagorical imaginaries of little success at the grassroots scale are re-opened. The local scale,

or at least actions made by Transition Towns, no longer holds the conditions of possibility open. Instead the desire for change can become re-politicised leading people to seek action that influences political change. Departure from Transition initiatives can be thought of as the partial emergence of the *objet petit a* that expresses the re-emergence of 'our deepest fears and around which the desire for change' (Swyngedouw, 2010: 220) is sought. While Transition draws upon survivalist discourse, the approach actively obscures 'future' discourses in the interest of *"psychological resilience"* (Hopkins, 2008: 84-89). Confronting ones desire for change can therein have the effect of re-politicising ones approach to action; in this sense the re-politicisation of the present occurs through imagining future climate change (Kenis and Mathijs, 2014b).

It is through this rupture with the material investment made towards building a resilient community (i.e. the failure of a project or challenge to particular forms of action) that can cause the re-emergence of apocalyptic narrative (Anderson, 2010; Anderson and Wylie, 2009). Material interventions can be considered as *practices* through which the future is made present as these actions are the materialisation of the anticipated future based upon calculating and imagining the future (Anderson, 2010). The logical imperative is, therefore, to act. But when actions fail, the apocalyptic narratives of the future become present in narratives of the future, where contemplation of the non-linear and volatility of the future is made present in narratives (Yusoff and Gabrys, 2011; Clark, 2010). The emergence of apocalyptic narratives is reflective of the profound rupture with the past—this is the difference between the stable present and the non-linear future—and the 'impossibility of recasting it into

positivity' (Clark, 2011: 73). To this degree ambitious projects can become articulated as *"too risky"* and *"naïve"* because they seek to materialise something that operates within highly contested public spaces.

The failure of Transition to *"meet the mark"*, and form a practical basis for community-scale transition, can have the effect of rupturing the master signifier for certain people, leading to the recasting of *moments* into new formations when people seek alternative trajectories. In the case of Transition Tynedale, a number of individuals opted to join different movements, or focus on alternative forms of action (i.e. the green party), following the failure of the hydro project. It is of central importance to the Transition discourse that projects are able to materialise, failure can therefore lead to the disenfranchisement of participants and a re-emergence of catastrophism discourses from behind Transition culture's convivial take on action (Neal, 2013; Barry and Quilley, 2009). But as the next section elaborates, the danger is not in attempting these projects that are likely to lead to *moments* where climate change appears too enormous to confront, but it is regressing into the dependent activities such as gardening that do not attempt to innovate and challenge conventional socio-technical arrangements.

5.6.   Small is resilient

Drawing closer attention to the scales of action, and by applying Cox's (1998: 1) analysis of 'the politics of scale', it is possible to differentiate garden projects, bike schemes, energy workshops, and similar forms of local action that

are largely uncontested and progressive as operating within highly localised networks and relationships that are depended upon for the realisation of small-scale projects, from those that must operate through 'jumping scale', and that necessarily require engagement with other local and regional *actors* (Cox, 1998; Smith, 1993). Most projects run within Transition Town initiatives, as shown in **Table 5.1**, operate within 'spaces of dependence' (Cox, 1998). This scale is defined by characteristics including 'localized social relationships upon which we depend for the realization of essential interests... they define place-specific conditions for our material well being and our sense of significance' (Cox, 1998: 2) and projects are dependent upon non-confrontation and easy networking at the local-community scale (Bailey et al., 2010). First and foremost, these projects are low-risk and are unlikely to collapse through disagreement or confrontation as they have little affect on other *actors* and stakeholders at the local scale. These spaces may remain relatively apolitical and uncontested while different affected interests are likely to come to the fore in wider community where people are more likely to have different world views in the running of their complex and diverse everyday lives (Robbins et al., 2010). Ryan acknowledged the complexity of wider community in Transition's pursuit of resilience, arguing that

"[Transition] could build basic levels of resilience. But I don't think that they could be raised to an ultimate level except in very small communities [...] only if you can produce food, (clean) water and energy at the community scale can you be sufficiently resilient to become off-grid."

Dependence	Engagement
Gardening Schemes	Hydro-scheme
Car Schemes	
Edible Hexham	
Collaborative energy efficiency schemes	
Bike Schemes	

Table 5.1: Showing projects operating in spaces of 'dependence' and spaces of 'engagement' (Cox, 1998)

The low-risk nature of many Transition projects has been understood as the inevitability of the voluntary nature of the movement, as Karen discussed: *"We have to maintain the energy and that is hard as it comes out of our spare time. [We] don't have enough people to run groups on a constant."* And as Oliver argued, *"Voluntary groups are great but they don't deliver the goods."* The problem with voluntary groups and small-scale projects, according to Oliver, is that:

> *"Most of the people in Transition are just doing a bit of gardening and tending their raised beds."*

The point Oliver seeks to illustrate is that garden-base projects develop with few barriers, and through "*dependence"* on other local *actors*, but larger projects as he went on to discuss require clear planning and engagement. The spaces Transition Towns operate in can, thereafter, be characterised as 'spaces of dependence' where the 'place-specific conditions for our material well being' (Cox, 1998: 2) are easily shaped and materialised. The local, in this respect, is a prime site for developing projects but are 'dependent' on other local actors for

their ability to operate successfully. In this sense, Transition Towns can be thought of as dependent upon networking and the social capital or volunteer numbers (Wilson, 2012). The question, thereafter, becomes: how do Transition Towns actually achieve a transition from high- to low-carbon communities if they are operating at a scale of dependence?

Larger-scale projects, as a number of interviewees argued, would be more capable of achieving transition but would require more focus and planning. According to Oliver, *"we need a plan, but there is no business plan for us […] we do not engage with people outside these specific volunteer groups."* Moving beyond the 'dependence' on local government and local volunteers to develop and maintain an initiative is difficult, especially when there is a variable volunteer turnout and skillset. The problem for many initiatives is that moving beyond dependency is a vital step of the Transition concept, as Hopkins (2008) places clear emphasis 'making it pay for itself'. But as Karen has argued:

> *"The reason we went with the CIC was that down in Totnes they say you should be able to make it fund itself, get employees and get stuff going from this and it will maintain itself as well. The problem is getting the money in the first place to start it all off. You have to put a lot of time and energy in the first place to actually get stuff rolling."*

Engaging with local *actors*, such as local government, planners and interest groups is a demanding feet for a volunteer group. As Olivia argued, *"a lot of energy was put into developing that hydro project, and I think Yasmin just got*

burnt out in the end.” The Hexham river hydro project required ‘jumping scales’ to engage with a number of local *actors* such as local planning departments, agencies carrying out environmental impact assessments, local interest groups including land owners, the Tyne Rivers Trust and the Anglers Association and local and regional government. Though the project was successful insofar as local government were willing to adopt the project, the right to access that was disallowed by a landowner preventing the project going ahead. The investment of time and energy into building a project is a major task for environmental groups, so when they fail to materialise, the investment can lead to the re-opening of apocalyptic narratives.

The re-emergence of apocalyptic narratives operates through the suspension of meaning to the Transition discourses articulation of action (Žižek, 1989). Or—in other words—the impression that Transition culture in its current form is unable to adequately address the need to make community resilient. It no longer signifies the distinct ability to move forwards and act beyond politics. As Olivia discussed in 2015: *“we decided it was more of a leisure activity than a transition […] it wasn’t capable of creating a counterculture.”* This refers to a rupture with the ‘Transition’ articulation that George and Olivia summarised in 2013: *“When I heard about Transition, all the links and knowledge of the environmental problems clicked together. The politics (of my wife), the agricultural (throughout my upbringing)…”* The different *elements* that articulated the identity of Transition for George and Olivia were suspended and become less meaningful within that articulation. The freeing up of these *elements* allowed

them to rearticulate them within a different movement (the Green Party) that George argued: *"has more likeminded people than Transition."*

The development of large-scale projects, in Transition Towns, goes beyond the ethos of resilience-thinking as it brings about the possibility of 'rupture' with the stabilising influence of the *Transition* signifier (Žižek, 1999). As Chandler (2014) has argued, 'in a world where constituted power is necessarily doomed to fail, all we can do is learn to fail better [and] learn to fail through not attempting anything too ambitious' (p.55). Following the failure of the Hexham River Hydro project individuals described the project as *"naïve"* and *"over-ambitious for the group to attempt such as large project."* The issue for many appeared to be the risk of the project to the group holding together, and indeed some members left following the project's failure. It is the negation of risk that is important to the 'Transition' discourse and the ability to build community resilience. Building large-scale projects that operate in 'transactional' spaces that are more likely to require jumping scales to 'spaces of engagement' would be capable of materialising community-wide change, but are risky and have the possibility of failing. Failure to materialise change would be at odds with the stability of the 'Transition' signifier, which could lead to rupture and the opening up of catastrophic narratives. The ability of projects to remain open to exploit 'windows of opportunity' should they come along is essential to the 'Transition' discourse (Scott-Cato and Hillier, 2010).

As suggested in the recent inundation literatures on resilience, resilience-thinking can be thought of as not attempting anything too ambitious in order to

avoid the risk of failure (Chandler, 2014; Evans and Reid, 2014). Thereafter, attempting low-risk activities, such as garden-centric projects, can be considered fairly stable but likely to provide psychological resilience insofar as people *"don't just have to watch the planet disintegrate"* (Isabel). Building resilience thereafter is as much about psychological change, as physical change. But by offering projects *"that at least do something, and allow people to do something in their own environment's",* as Liam elaborated, *"they can at least rebuild a sense of community."* Transition culture does not have to confront the political stakes of failure of disenfranchisement thereafter, and corresponds to Evans and Reid's elaboration of the 'resilient subject' as 'the surest embodiment of neoliberal thinking as it conforms to its guiding principle without questioning the political stakes of vulnerability' (2014: 37). This is not to say that Transition initiatives are neoliberal, but that by acting within the confines of non-political spaces, and without challenging conventional political-economic systems at the local scale, they fashion their own post-political trap.

Transition's goal, as Yasmin's interview already elaborated, is to make individuals ("me") and their local communities ("and my community") resilient to the affects of a future changes to climate and resource use. This refers to turning vulnerable subjects who have become naturalised within our stable and supportive socio-technical configuration—*"with people living idealistic lifestyles is seems that we cannot escape, it is easy to go to the shops and drive a car"* (Olivia)—into subjects resilient to changes to socio-technical infrastructure (i.e. moving on from dependence on the internal combustion engine) and climate volatility (i.e. variable weather and its affect on food production). The danger for

Transition is a naivety over the engagement required to become resilient subjects. Resilience, as Wilson (2012) has outlined requires strong skillsets, networking and engagement with other local stakeholders, and sustained social capital to manage these engagements. One of the corresponding outcomes of radical action is that it will have affects on other local stakeholders' interests, as radical action countervails normality to propose an alternative. But with an emphasis on non-confrontation and remaining apolitical and inclusive of community, action may—ironically—become confined to semi-private spaces where it is not contested. The compromise facing Transition initiatives is whether to remain within spaces characterised by non-confrontation and low-risk change, such as gardens, or seek more radical confrontational action in order to bring about change within wider community. The risk is that the Transition movement's focus on remaining apolitical and inclusive whilst seeking radical change becomes politically obscure, and necessitates practices that neutralise action of its critical edge. Operating in different spaces across community requires Transition to adapt to different forms of action, which if the movement is to build resilience, often requires subjects to attempt action that is confrontational and identifies more clearly the political rationale for action— which opens the possibility of support from like-minded people.

5.7.   Summary: Cultivating Resilience (& foreclosing failure)

As Anderson (2010) has argued, the importance of understanding the ontological and epistemological of pre-emption of apocalyptic threats, such as climate change or oil shock, matters to the way spaces 'are made and lived in the

name of pre-empting, preparing for, or preventing threats' (p. 777). This section has explored the complexity of spaces of action at the local scale through an analysis of gardening and community energy projects. While local action is acknowledged in a number of Transition literatures are more practical on account of proximity and visibility, one of the major issues for Transition initiatives is operating in public spaces as these spaces are not free from antagonism (Donald, 1999). Taking action in transactional public spaces is most likely to crossover with the 'affected interest' of other *actors* at the local scale, which makes breaking with 'path dependency' more difficult as it requires negotiation of these spaces (Barnett and Bridge, 2013; Wilson, 2012). Failure of these projects may, therefore, lead to rupture of the 'Transition' signifier which can lead to disenfranchisement and loss of identity with the Transition movement as the way forward; often leading to re-politicisation as individuals seek to find new ways of taking action (i.e. joining the green party). To this extent, taking action in semi-private spaces of the garden less likely to come into contention as these spaces have little if any crossover with the 'affected interest' of other *actors* at the local scale (Marres, 2007).

Taking action at the local scale must take into consideration the different spaces at the local scale, as these have profound effects on the ability of projects to materialise. Materialising action is essential to the Transition movement, as it has evolved out of the failure of politics to provide solutions thus far (Hopkins, 2008; North, 2010). Failure to materialise action at the local scale can therefore have a strong affect on individuals in these initiatives as they invest a lot of time in projects and their fruition, and as interview accounts showed, failure can lead

to *moments* where catastrophic narratives supersede convivial takes on local action. These *moments* are important as they indicate a re-articulation of ideological *elements* that make up a given movement or ideology into a new identity (Laclau, 2005a; 2005b; Žižek, 1989). Taking practical action may, with this in mind, limit the Transition movement to the garden, as these spaces are identified as being most practical for taking action—and therein foreclosing the possibility of failure by not attempting anything confrontational. As a number of interviewees argued, this raises questions of Transition's ability to develop a counterculture without a need for confrontation and antagonism—in other words politics.

Chapter 6: Discussion 3

Introduction:

This chapter focuses on the structural issues that emerge in and between Transition initiatives as a consequence of the movement's apolitical approach, and the difficulty of developing structures that do not recognise 'the political' and broader contextual differences between places. Empirical analysis across all 3 Transition Towns revealed that group structure and networking has been particularly contentious with a specific barrier being the way Transition Towns engage with community and engage in discussion and deliberation. This section, therefore, aims to show how the structure of Transition often fails to create the capacity for social change through disempowerment of individuals in the group vis-à-vis group structure, lack of structure, or a failure to engage with local actors to foster empowerment and the capacity for social change (Middlemiss and Parrish, 2010). Furthermore, there appears to be little, if any, interaction between Transition Towns themselves.

6.1.   Internal Group Structure:

Across all 3 Transition Towns analysed, internal group structure has been an issue for developing democratic means of representation, as well as operating an open environment for community participation. This section looks to explore a number of empirical cases where the structure of governance, far from being a more practical scale of action, has in fact become a barrier to 'participation' and

open discussion (Connors and McDonald, 2010; Haxeltine and Seyfang, 2012). As Barnett and Bridge (2013) have discussed, the 'all-affected interest' principle is well attuned to geographical understandings of democracy. With this in mind we can think of Transition's aim of creating community resilience as an 'affected interest' of the local community as it looks to reduce the vulnerability of community to adverse affect of climate change and peak oil (Hopkins, 2008; 2011). But opening the Transition group up to local community brings into question the identity of the Transition Town within that specific geographical area. *Do Transition Town's aim's overreach themselves to become as inclusive as possible with the consequence of losing identity, focus and coming into contention with other local groups?*

The identity of Transition Towns was a core concern across all 3 Transition Towns as a number of interviewees argued that there was a lack of focus within the movement, and thereafter within individuals Transition groups. As Oliver argued:

> *"I don't think there is an organisational structure set out. Hopkins talks about building group cohesion and being aware of the problems at hand but he hasn't set out a structure that should be broadly followed. I think that this is an issue – determining what the dynamics of the group should be."*

Oliver refers to the question of what sort of identity Transition portrays, and what form of model it provides to be followed by community groups adopting

the model. The issue here is that Transition Tynedale does not create an identity beyond the broad Transition concept, which has been criticised for it's breadth (Smith, 2011) and issues with the contextualisation of the Transition model between communities (Seyfang and Haxeltine, 2012). But by an equal measure, as Oliver argued: *"we have decided that we are an entity but there is no idea where we are heading with it [pause] there is no business plan for us".* There is a group structure following the Transition model, but there is no sense of direction. This is a dilemma for the Transition concept, as it aims to develop a broad model to allow widespread adoption and contextualisation (Wilson, 2012; Scott-Cato and Hillier, 2010), and yet groups also fail to develop comprehensive identity and foresight. This lack of identity and foresight can be attributed to the Transition model's community orientation. As Ryan has argued, *"I think… [communities] could build basic levels of resilience. But I don't think that this could be achieved except in very small communities."* Ryan points to the broad aim of the Transition movement only being practical on a scale smaller than the community level. This is because *"there are national infrastructures we need to account for… to achieve community resilience"* (Ryan), which indicates that the community scale requires too many resources for the Transition groups to achieve at the Town- or village-community scale (Wilson, 2012).

It appears from the criticisms of the Transition model, in Transition Tynedale, that it overreaches itself through its focus on 'inclusion against division' (Connors and McDonald, 2010: 565), and its fixation on the community scale as a scale of action (Hopkins, 2008). While Oliver reflected on the lack of identity in Transition Tynedale, he is also highly critical of the Transition model

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as a strategic niche. This is of key importance in the proliferation of the

Transition concept into the mainstream, as without a transferable model the

movement is likely to make little difference beyond its own path dependency

(Seyfang and Haxeltine, 2012). It is for this reason that clear deliberation and

discussion is needed regarding the focus and direction of each Transition

initiative—and one that utilises all available skillsets—towards breaking the

community path dependency (Wilson, 2012). This question of adequate

deliberation and utilisation of innovative potential across the group is another

concern raised in a number of Transition initiatives, particularly regarding the

structure of the group and the ability of individuals to voice their concern (Smith,

2011).

Voicing ones concern is a central tenet of the Transition movement as the

local scale is seen to be a more practical scale for discussion and implementation

of action. But, as has become an increasing norm in community groups, a more

formal structure is required to apply for government funding and for insurance

purposes (Bridge et al., 2009). The formal structure to these groups appears

counter-intuitive, as the Transition model refers (in step 11 of the *12 steps of*

Transition) to letting it go where it wants to go (Hopkins, 2008). Letting the

group go where it wants to go may be one thing, but being inflexible and

demanding administrative duties of volunteers is a highly contentious issue

discussed by interviewees. As Karen discussed in her interview:

> *"The reason we went with the CIC [community interest company] was that*
>
> *down in Totnes they say you should be able to make it fund itself, get*

employees and get stuff going from this – and it will maintain itself as well.

The problem is getting the money in the first place to start it all off. You

have to put a lot of time and energy in the first place to actually get stuff

rolling. Do people actually have the time to set up all of these initiatives… it

is hard to get the commitment and to find the time for all of these projects

rolling?"

There are a number of barriers to developing within CIC status. Firstly, for the

company to become successful and receive funding bids it must be

representative of community interests, which are often hard to demonstrate

with a highly varied turnout and a membership list representing a skewed and

extremely small demographic. Transition Town groups generally consist of

retired and/or older demographics, most of which were over the age of 60,

across all 3 Transition Towns[8]. Of the younger demographics, the availability and

turn out is highly variable within the single slot on the 1st Wednesday of each

month that almost all Transition groups adopt, limiting the number of skills and

resources available to Transition groups (Smith, 2011; see also Wilson, 2012).

The skills younger demographics offer are essential to the networking

potential of Transition Towns; this is what Wilson (2012) has described as

'social capital', which is essential to achieving grassroots social innovation

(Seyfang and Smith, 2007; Seyfang and Haxeltine, 2010). As Karen discussed:

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[8] Scott-Cato and Hillier (2010) have repudiated earlier remarks made in Transition literatures related to demographics of Transition Towns being largely made up of the over-60s and middle classes. Whilst this might not be the case in their empirical data, it is the case in Transition Tynedale, Transition City Lancaster and SLACC, and many other Transition Towns across the North of England. Smith (2011) recalls the lack of diversity to Transition, as a largely middle-class, elderly and highly educated.

"We decided to build up the TCL website but we didn't know how to use it so only John and Steve really post on it. John and Steve have been busy as well so the website has been neglected. It is hard for new people to get involved because of the volunteer issue; there are not enough volunteers with enough skills to maintain all of the activities to keep the group constantly functional."

The voluntary nature of Transition Towns, and the time constraints put on younger members who hold skillsets important for networking through websites and other forms of telecommunications involved in modern everyday life, makes Transition growth and spread very hard. It is the time constraints put on modern life that many interviewees argue limits the ability of Transition to develop momentum and grow group adaptive capacity and resilience.

Volunteering is an inherent issue for the Transition movement. Whilst the 'voluntarism' implies an action based upon free will, often in contention with doctrines of government, the Transition initiatives often impose measures limiting the free will and innovative potential of individuals (Hallward, 2015). As Amelie posited, in discussion of the group structure of Transition City Lancaster (TCL), *"we have had massive conflicts over projects such as the seed library [...] the steering group have almost become managers and are worried about the project affecting their name and it giving TCL a bad reputation".* The hierarchical structure of TCL has become highly contentious, as the 'steering group' have assumed a managerial capacity over Transition projects. But this raises a question about participation and democracy. The structure to the group does not

allow everyone to participate in local transition if a closed group is able to vet

projects. This is because TCL had originally assumed a flat structure but open

participation had not been practical for action, and more structure was needed

to develop practical action. According to Benjamin *"People started to override on*

another [... and] oppose one another due to emotional responses rather than ones

that will actually benefit transition." The challenge, according to Benjamin, is for

TCL to develop a compromise between open participation, which is conducive to

maintaining a credible group identity (Melucci, 1996), and co-opting duties to a

managerial working group finding its credibility through furthering the aims of

the Transition Town movement (Kenis and Mathijs, 2014a). The issue for

Transition groups is maintaining a balance between open participation and

democracy, and keeping to the guidelines set out in Transition literatures.

A prime example of the tension between open participation and looking

to Transition literatures for all the answers is evident in transition models

adopted in TCL and SLACC. While TCL has adopted a more formal structure with

managerial positions and vetting carried out by a steering group – as suggested

in *The Transition Handbook* (Hopkins, 2008) – SLACC has an informal structure,

where projects are more freely adopted within the group. Both structures have

led to problems, through the managerial nature of TCL and the loss of focus in

SLACC. As Amelie argued, one of the issues in TCL has been the assumption that

Hopkins *"is someone who has all of the answers"*. The issue with this supposition,

as Amelie and Ethan discussed in their interviews, is the ability of TCL to

contextualise itself and develop a more adaptive form of local governance. The

issue for Amelie, was the crossover TCL was beginning to make with other

organisations at the community scale, such as LESS. Benjamin described the evolution of TCL into a CIC as *"becom[ing] another NGO. I would say that they [Transition Towns] morph into something that is just conventional. Is it really capable of transition if it just maintains the same thing?"* Whilst TCL has adopted a conventional stance, these remarks reflect the conventional nature of the model, and its inability to move beyond the Transition guidelines, towards something more socially innovative. In this sense the path dependency is actually a Transition path dependency, which limits open democracy, and the potential for TCL to find its local niche.

SLACC, a Transition group located in Kendal, has emerged from more political routes, as a community activist group later taking on Transition status. But because of open participation in activities and the breadth of SLACCs aims, the group has fallen upon difficulties in turnout and focus. One of the key points that SLACC has been reflecting upon is whether, with the breadth of activities operated within the group, there is *"confusion outside the group as to whether we're a climate action group or a transition group"* (Lucas – mandate review). This is one of the points raised in Jessica's interview, as she recalled, *"People have left slightly in disgust […] at the activist side of the group"*. This is one of the key contentions in Transition, regarding the (re-)politicisation of the transition movement through activism. But as Thomas argued *"we didn't want to go out and make big statements to the public […] but we went out and managed a stall and engaged the public; it made people question their assumptions."* According to interview data, it appears SLACC have been successful in approaching and networking with local community, but the lack of focus on what the group aims

to achieve has led to low turnout. In this instance, a compromise has been made between developing an identity that clarifies SLACCs identity and goals that allows the group to be more flexible and politically active. Without the emphasis on SLACC being a Transition initiative it does not stress being 'apolitical', which often causes barriers to networking as it may show political bias towards a group such as the green party for example[9].

In the Transition Towns observed throughout this research, two opposing issues with group structure became clear. They either look to form a rigid structure that can limit the level of open discussion and debate, as in the case of TCL, or adopt a flatter structure that runs risk of failing to take decisive action and becoming politicised, in the case of SLACC. As Benjamin posited, there needs to be a compromise between open discussion and getting things done, and there need to be meeting structures to address both styles in each group. The need for an 'audit' process was mentioned in interviews with Oliver, Benjamin and George. As they argued, a group needs to know where it is going if it is to make a change. And particular importance was stressed with regard to other groups at the local scale. This insistence on knowing where the group sits in community, and where to focus the group's energy is of primary importance in setting a transition trajectory, as without having an idea of which direction the group is moving in and where it needs to put its energy, the group is likely to fail – especially its limited social capital (Wilson, 2012).

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[9] In a meeting with Transition Tynedale, cooperation with the Green Party—despite acknowledgement of shared values—was debated as it may show political bias, contradicting the group's apolitical ethos.

Community and participation have been identified as two problematic concepts for the Transition movement. It has been argued that groups look to overreach themselves by remaining inclusive of all in the community, adopting an rationale of 'inclusion without division' (Connors and McDonald, 2010) and communities of 'affected interest' (Shapiro, 2003), but through this they set about trying to cover all aspects of community life that are often the focus of other organisations, such as LESS and ESTA in the case of Lancaster and TCL. The issue with structure is a result of the 'Transition' signifier and its de-politicising effect. A steering group appears necessary as the group's goals are stabilised through the 'Transition' signifier—and providing assumed consent for guiding the initiative forward (Kenis and Mathijs, 2014a). It is this stabilisation—a sense of consensus through 'common concern'—that structure and management of a group is legitimised (Melucci, 1996). Hence, forming a steering group that has the power to determine the direction of the group without consensus acts in the interest of the common concerns of the transition group: to become resilient at the local scale.

These barriers to participation and experimentation compromise the innovative potential of Transition Towns to exploit 'windows of opportunity' and develop 'places of change' (Scott-Cato and Hillier, 2010). The argument that the local offers adequate space for experimentation is misrecognition of the local as holding inherent qualities and adequate resources to develop innovation (Born and Purcell, 2006). 'Experimental living', as Scott-Cato and Hillier (2010) argue, may be possible in some places that are adequately adapted already, but simply

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transferring a model from one place to another is complicated by political

differences, assumptions of consent within groups and contextual factors at the

local level that must be accounted for.

The ability of individuals within a Transition Town to voice their opinions

and concerns, but also to get things done and conduct practical action is an

essential component to carving out a transition pathway (Hopkins, 2008).

Getting the structural characteristics of the group sorted is, therefore,

tantamount to the success of an initiative; hence antagonism cannot be reduced

to pure negativity, as it often helps shape the direction, characteristics and niche

of the Transition initiative in its respective locality. As Mouffe (2001; 2005)

argues, antagonism is an essential component of democracy as it requires

acknowledgement of 'the political', an ontological dimension of antagonism. This

is not to say that antagonism is the only aspect of politics, but that it befits social

movements to open up disagreement in order to determine a practical means of

playing out political difference (Melucci, 1996). Finding a structure to enable the

adequate representation of different discursive positions, whilst getting things

done, is the model that Transition should look to achieve: to develop a legitimate

level of representation, whilst carrying out practical action. It is practical, for this

reason, to think of social movements as 'virtual singularities'. This is practical

because it allows us to think of the single group system as made up of

heterogeneous elements (in this case participants) capable of self-ordering and

compromising over how to move forward (Protevi, 2001). Groups are, therefore,

made up of agonistic collectives, and through this agonism the group shapes a

'parallelogram of forces' (Chesters and Welsh, 2006). This metaphor refers to not single but multiple forces at play constituting, in this case, the group. By thinking of the discursive differences and interests as these forces, forming the identity of the group is not a simple consensus, but must be defined through open discussion of what it is about. This is not to say that antagonism is all there is to 'the political', but that in order for the group to form a clear plan it should engage in debate to better apply the skills and knowledge of group participants.

6.2. Transition Towns and networking:

Networking was frequently discussed in interviews, as the Transition movement is a network of towns and looks to integrate within communities through networking with local government and other actors at the local scale. As Bailey et al. (2010) have acknowledged in their discussion of the characteristic spread of Transition Towns, the 'participatory methods, voluntary involvement, mass communication, and psychological persuasion' (p.596) of these initiatives have been responsible for the movement's rhizomic spread around the world. It is clear that the Transition movement has been extremely successful at spreading the movement from town-to-town across the UK and abroad (Hopkins, 2011; Bailey et al., 2010). But ability of a movement to spread does not guarantee its success within that particular area. In this section I hope to outline the issues Transition Towns may have with networking between Transition initiatives, and with other local organisations.

"Networking and connections", as Jessica posited, *"are the things that help you make a transition."* And as Thomas argues, it is through *"networks that we realise we can become resilient communities, as we need to draw upon one another to do these things and get certain things done. This is how you build a community."* The Transition Town Network's explicit mention of 'network' might, therefore, be thought of as an essential component to becoming a resilient Transition Town, but there are a number of barriers to networking inherent to the structure and politics of the Transition movement. Transition Towns generally hold monthly network meetings, with highly varied turnout (Smith, 2011). Over the past 3 years of analysis at Transition Tynedale, the turnout to the monthly general meeting has been varied in numbers but also in attendance from members due to other commitments, or through disenfranchisement (often due to a lack of action by the group). As Karen of TCL argued, the ability to recruit new people from the community is particularly difficult, as there are a small number of active members who have little time or skills to spare networking and recruiting new volunteers. The voluntary nature of the group is also an issue for networking, as the commitment people can make to the group is based on how much spare time they have; and those with network skills often lack the time to bring about change in a Transition group's network potential (see **Box 6.1[10]**). Karen and Benjamin's comments reflect a sense that Transition overreaches itself at the community scale, aiming to decontextualize skills into 'thin' initiative that spreads community-wide rather than concentrating on specialist areas. Initiatives do not hold the diversity of skills required to maintain an initiative,

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[10]* Chaordic organisation, as discussed in Oliver's interview, is a form of management Dee Hock coined to refer to a style that is both organised and unorganised in order to allow space for innovation, while observing the broader goals of an organisation (Hock, 1999).

and will thereby fail to alter the 'path dependency' of community resilience (Martens and Rotmans, 2002). This refers to 'transition pathways', a way of understanding the trajectory of movement (Wilson, 2012). According to Adger (2006) a resilient community must be capable of increasing resilience through economic, social and environmental capital from weak to strong – without which the community will fail. This is also an essential component of Middlemiss and Parrish's (2010) analysis of empowerment in communities: failure is an inability of people with limited power, resources and influence to create a capacity for social change.

Box 6.1   **Applying Skills at the community scale**

Without certain group members who know about IT... there are not enough volunteers with enough skills to maintain all of the activities to keep the group constantly functional. (Karen)

To keep it going you need to have a set of skills... They are looking at the wrong sort of skills like listening and looking to know how to work together. Transition's remit is very broad so what you get is a very thin set of initiatives, and this is especially the case in TCL.   (Benjamin)

I think one of the problems is that people are often told what to do in Transition projects. My approach instead was about setting in place the road map to allow people to approach activities using their own skills—I advocate a form of self-Chaordic management*   (Oliver)

We need more people with skills to reach out in community and make the group visible. We are reliant on a few people for a lot. It needs to increase its members so we have a lot of people applying what they know. We need more people doing a little bit rather than a few people doing a lot.   (Logan)

A concern for members of TCL and other organisations in Lancaster argued that there is an issue with communication between groups at the local scale. While TCL is a group built upon networking there had been little discussion over organisational focus. As Amelie recalled: *"Transition takes quite a competitive approach […] it is registered as a community enterprise […] TCL*

almost appears to be coming into competition with other groups that already have

an environmental focus." Benjamin acknowledges the same issues:

> *"Transition's remit is very broad, they have become myopic [...] there is no*
> *audit to show what is going on in these groups and to compare the different*
> *groups and what they are addressing, and thereafter, what need to be*
> *addressed."*

Transition's focus on 'community' creates a myopic focus meaning it looks to single-handedly develop local solutions. This focus on the entire community or local scale holds a lack of focus. Developing local governance, therefore, appears to imply a governance of all local transition through the TT model, but this is beyond the reach and volunteer numbers of most initiatives (Aiken, 2012; Smith, 2011). In an interview with Karen, she argued there are too few volunteers and too many sub-groups to maintain momentum of all of these groups and achieve all of their goals. Networking with other groups that are not under the Transition name are often disregarded; they do not fit into the *"Transition silo"*, as Benjamin has described. The insistence of the Transition movement not to take sides, and remain apolitical, far from enabling ease of networking, becomes a barrier. Whilst the TTN looks to include all political affiliations without bias, the inclusiveness means other organisations holding a political affiliation cannot

BOX 6.2 – Semi-structured interview with Karen

Lancaster it seems that TCL are too structured. We wanted to do this for the TCL food month. It was only food fortnight then and we were going to have other allotments, as well it would be advertised in the food fortnight brochure. If we didn't do it with the food fortnight we wouldn't have had insurance which is what we wanted... it became very tricky because some of the TCL people said that they would do it this time but not next time because we weren't TCL.

easily network with Transition Towns, as this would risk political bias. Networking is also limited through the structure and limited social and financial capital (Adger, 2006; Wilson, 2012).

The issue Benjamin and Amelie raise, of the Transition Town movement, and TCL, is that the breadth of local problems Transition seeks to find solutions to begin to overlap with other local organisations that it would be beneficial to work alongside. Ironically, it is the broad aims and openness of the Transition concept that limit their network potential. The problem at hand is the emphasis on the Transition group, over the Transition Town. Transition Towns aim to develop a strong group trajectory, and therefore adopt CIC or Limited status to encourage funding and financial management, rather than developing ties with non-affiliated transition groups that hold a common ethos. As Karen argued, in **Box 6.2**, the structure of the group impedes networking with other organisations. This is an issue with the development of a company structure within Transition Towns as it distinguishes the group from other organisations within a broad silo. This introduces a tension between Transition Towns as distinctive groups looking to occupy a distinctive political space at the local scale, and the open group. But clearly, the company structure is an issue for networking and working alongside other organisations as it can limit the growth of the Transition group, rather than the community as a whole. Transition trajectories, therein, require a greater level of consideration in order to understand the barriers CIC and Limited status have on their interaction and network potential with the community and other groups. Furthermore, as is the case in Transition Tynedale, the limited status of the group risks 'burn out' as the

extra administrative duties and limited social capital can take its toll on the

group (see **Box 6.3**; Middlemiss, 2008).

BOX 6.3: Semi-structured interview with Olivia and George

There is loads of funding floating around that aren't tapped into by local groups. The idea in Transition was that we became a limited company and that we would be protected by insurance, and that we shouldn't do the sorts of things that we used to do. For example, Peter was not allowed to touch anybody else's bike in a love your bike session. Risk assessments were needed for things. Giving away food on the market stall and apple juice had to be filtered correctly. And this process felt inhibiting to people trying to make a difference.   (Olivia)

It felt as though the Limited Company was the opposite of the Transition do-ocracy because we couldn't do things.   (George)

Then of course we had the directors who caused a lot of contention, because people felt as though they were being dominated and controlled. This was on top of the Hydro failing. Yasmin was taking all this flack and trying to make Transition a company [pause] I think she just got burned out. I think the activity and enthusiasm, which got to her [long pause] All I ever wanted this to be was an anarchic group where people talk together as a social group. Peter was keen on developing this because it was breaking away from his authority role.   (Olivia)

It is a common assumption in Transition Towns, that the group can

immediately develop practical action, but there are a number of barriers akin to

the administrative positions that are unpopular, as they require time,

organisation and professionalism. Liam acknowledges the lack of support for

directors' positions in **Box 6.4**. The issue with these groups being voluntary,

according to Karen, is *"people don't actually have the time to set up all of these*

initiatives, and it is hard to get the commitment and to find the time for all of these

projects rolling." It is the lack of consistency that lacks the momentum required

for projects to continue, and connections to me maintained. In TCL, the

commitment's many individuals have reduces the skillset available to the group

reducing the network potential with other groups. Karen asked: *"How do we*

network with other groups if we cannot get stuff together with groups in Garstang

and Morecambe?" As Karen went on to argue, the people with the skills and

contacts maintaining these networks often have other commitments reducing the ability of the group to maintain momentum and networking.

BOX 6.4: Semi-structured interview with Liam

Why did you choose to take on the director's role in TT?

Purely for practical reasons, I have no inclinations to be the chair. I am doing the bare minimum. Someone needs the position to make sure we are insured, but that is the only reason that I am a director. We needed 3 directors and nobody was standing for TT.

Transition Towns, according to Hopkins' (2008) *Transition Handbook*, should be capable of learning from success and failure, which also involves learning from the successes and failures of other Transition Towns across the UK (and abroad). Transition Tynedale has been particularly successful in adopting successful initiatives in food and growing initiatives, as well as adopting ideas for their energy group. Firstly, the 'incredible edible Hexham' scheme has been particularly successful in gaining support and funding from local government, by adopting skills and strategies on a trip arranged in 2013 to Todmorden, where the 'incredible edibles' initiative first developed (Incredible Edible Todmorden, 2015). In the annual general meeting, this initiative was recalled as the most successful project involving Transition in 2014 through its successful cooperation with local government leading to unmaintained town council flowerbeds being adopted, donation of planters by the town council, and the provision of equipment and other resources. In this case the non-confrontation connections made with local government allowed successful bids to be made to the 'community chest' fund, and the exchange of resources for community projects such as gardening. This successful example of governance operated through transition, built around 'resource exchange', 'self-organisation',

'interorganisational networks' between local actors – Transition Tynedale, community partnership and town council resources – and 'autonomy from the state' (Rhodes, 1996; Connors and McDonald, 2010).

Second, the Transition Tynedale energy group was able to develop successful energy workshops with the QUANGO 'Draught Busters', who offer advice on energy sustainability in homes. The energy group, according to Ryan, the project leader, was able to develop contacts through local government. Furthermore, by networking with other successful energy groups, Transition Tynedale was able to adopt a successful mode and develop adequate skills for informing local community of the benefits of insulation. This embodies Hopkins (2008; 2011) approach for 'reskilling' and networking at the local level. As Ryan discussed:

> *"In the case of draught busters we were able to do this through contacts with local government to find people who were interested in energy issues and they were able to put us in contact with companies who would provide this service. We were also able to draw upon other Transition Towns and what they had done, particularly transition Belsize, in London, who were able to offer advice, and we were able to find information through YouTube."*

Adopting a successful model and advice has been successful for the creation of Transition initiatives, and in offering a free service to the local community. But questions still remain about how much these schemes offer to the local

community in terms of the broader goals of Transition. This is something that a number of members have been particularly critical across all 3 transition towns – specifically the countercultural potential of Transition Towns, which is difficult to adapt between Trasnition Towns due to local contextual factors and the social, financial/economic and environmental capital available.

While Transition initiatives take a great deal of their inspiration from learning from the success (and failure) of Transition Towns such as Totnes, Bristol and Brixton, as models for currency schemes, democracy and structure, as well as political position (i.e. apolitical), these are model towns that have been able to develop a relatively linear transition pathway (Hopkins, 2008; 2011; Wilson, 2012). This linear transition is characteristic of the context allowing the transition 'niche' to grow into a successful and relatively resilient community, but as Seyfang and Haxeltine (2012) have described, the countercultural nature of transition 'niches', against the opposing forces of the predominant 'socio-technical regime' means the diffusion potential of Transition niches is difficult.

6.3.   The apolitical paradox:

Thus far, this section has discussed the importance of structure and identity to Transition Towns, but it is important to acknowledge, briefly, a possible barrier to initiatives on account of the conflation of their identity with the wider (geographical/scalar) community—and not the 'community' group. In this sense, remaining '[inclusive] against division' to everyone in the wider

geographical community can be problematic to the 'Transition' identity, as remaining inclusive of everyone at the community scale cannot hope to change without contending that something is wrong with the contemporary regime of accumulation and circulation.

Democracy and the open representation of the entire community are of central importance to Transition Towns, as community-wide resilience requires drawing upon the skills within community, and drawing upon the person on the street as the solution (Hopkins, 2008). At first, this would seem a highly practical means of recruiting action without the unnecessary antagonism between diverse political persuasions across the community. But, as a number of interviewees discussed, this in itself is a problem for determining the identity of the initiatives within a given area. As Oliver discussed: *"I think one of the problems is that Transition doesn't know what it is. And it hasn't got much idea where it is heading. They need a business plan. But you then exclude people who you would otherwise volunteer..."* This appears to present a dilemma for Transition between *"nailing your colours to the banner"*, as George has argued, and pursuing subsidiarity (Hurst and Bader, 2004) and deliberation (Gutmann and Thompson, 2004) with the most possible participants across the community scale, an openness that is essential to receiving 'official' Transition accreditation (Brangwin and Hopkins, 2008). The issue for political movements such as the Trapese Collective has been the unwillingness of the Transition movement to be decisive rather than seek approval from everyone (Chatterton and Cutler, 2008). As Chatterton and Cutler (2008) have argued, seeking the maximum level of approval could lead initiatives to merely maintain the status quo rather than moving forwards and

building the radical change required for transition (Connors and McDonald, 2010).

One of the issues for Transition Towns is that if they look to simultaneously open decisions into the public domain of community—in all its heterogeneity—to maximise participation and democracy, they severely diminish the ability to make decisions within the group with the legitimacy of those who identify with the 'Transition' movement (see Chatterton and Cutler, 2008). An illustration of this point was the discussion of whether Transition Tynedale's participation in planning decisions entailed politicising the movement, and whether this was representative of the wider community. As shown in **Box 6.5**, the key question is whether the movement is representative of wider opinions within the community. As this discussion exemplifies, there is a dilemma for the group between remaining 'open' and inclusive to the wider community, and making more radical decisions that differentiate their ideological terrain at the community scale (Butler et al., 2000). But while it is important to remain representative and democratic remaining open to everyone creates a barrier to real change, as Chatterton and Cutler (2008) have discussed. As Logan discussed: *"Transition wants to be representative of community, but while some of the core members are involved in [and] at the community level, the group isn't. Part of being in the community is acting within it, which involved being visible."* Logan reflects on the fact that being part of community is about being visible within it and putting your particular item on the agenda. This is not the same as being representative of community, as being representative of a

heterogeneous population perpetuates remaining indecisive (Connors and McDonald, 2010).

Box 6.5   **Transition Tynedale Meeting proceedings**

Person 1: As far as I can see, there is a broad consensus that people in TT are, in the case of most items, bringing up stuff about lobbying.

Person 2: I think we are best placed to work with other groups from the surrounding area.

Person 3: I'm not sure how effective we could be as a lobbying group; so working with groups that lobby might be more effective.

Person 4: I this it is an important point that we should all be seen to have an opinion about. I think we should, therefore, be discussing it!

Person 1: I don't think this would work as a group but I do think that we could use our own names for this purpose.

Person 5: I think 'B' summarised it well that if people want to voice their opinion they should actually come to the meetings. A lot of the people who claim they don't have a voice actually don't turn up.

Person 2: People get to vote about these things in a cycling forum. We could do something like that.

Person 6: To speak in the name of TT is an awkward matter because it would not be representative of people's actual opinions. As I recall the Quaker group up the road had issues with working with a campaign group because it took over and people actually didn't have a voice about action matters anymore. I don't want that for us.

Remaining legitimate through open participation may, therefore, perpetuate inaction as to be open to everyone entails remaining out of the antagonistic sphere of community that Mouffe (1993) has described (Donald, 1999). Being part of community is inherently antagonistic, and to become visible to community life, as Logan has suggested, requires decisive action that often requires negotiation, as he put it: *"Transition Tynedale needs to get involved in local community life… You cannot renovate the inside of a building if you're just standing around in the garden."* Being part of community requires negotiation as

an antagonistic 'we' rather than the fictitious solidarity of a single hegemonic 'we' that everyone can identify through (Donald, 1999; Massey, 2005). The paradox is therefore that the ability of individuals within the group to exercise their volition is in-fact negated through an openness to all those across the community scale – an inherently heterogeneous and politically differentiated group defined by location rather than through a collective identity (Massey, 2005; Walker, 2011). This point is perpetuated in the following passage discussing the use of local woodland: *"The problem with representing the group is that there isn't a group voice on the wood yet."* Individuals in the group reflected on their ideas of how the group could participate in activities such as *"coppicing"* and *"Agro-forestry"*, but emphasis was placed on unanimous consent and the openness to the whole community; consequently the group took no action. If Transition hopes to create change, it must look to build its foundations on an identity seeking to change community, which will invariably lead to confrontation. Identifying with the entire geographical community without any form of antagonism is unlikely to make change (Chatterton and Cutler, 2008), and searching for full consent rather than taking action is a point that many participants reflected on negatively. As Oliver discussed: *"Transition—I don't think it engages with these issues. Every small thing gets in the way."* Transition initiatives must, therefore, focus on building 'community as a process' (Walker, 2011), wherein community are free to participate in voluntary action, but through a conscious identification with the initiative's political identity—this is to say their position on community matters, including more antagonistic matters such as planning decisions. Hence, if a Transition initiative hopes to be inclusive and open to everyone at the community scale it is subsequently unable to take a

specific position that would other a specific segment of the population it aims to represent, and thereafter unable to develop a radical departure from oil dependency by way of a local transition.

6.4   Conclusions – Structural Problems & Solutions:

The local, in the Transition movement, as in the case of other grassroots movements, is considered a more practical scale for experimentation, and thereafter, social innovation (Gibson-Graham, 2006; Seyfang and Smith, 2007). But the symbolically loaded assumptions of the community scale as more democratic and as a 'place of action', cannot be separated from the inherent political connotations of space-time (Laclau, 1990). To this degree there is still a danger that operating in community is considered *a priori* to empowerment and social change (Born and Purcell, 2006; Middlemiss and Parrish, 2010). The local, is such an abstract category, and Transition Towns so multifarious, that they occupy such a variety of scales, places and group contexts that their evolution from group genesis to resilience is highly complicated (Smith, 2011; Haxeltine and Seyfang, 2010).

The internal group structure of Transition Towns was raised as one of the most contentious issues and complex features of setting up a successful initiative. It appears that there is a fine balance between developing a flat, open structure that is good for voicing opinions and concerns – therein embodying a democratic model of governance – and a hierarchical structure that is not open, but offers a managerial role to get things done. Developing a model where

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everyone can contribute and have their opinions heard is essential to the

Transition model remaining 'inclusive' and 'open' to discussion, whilst finding a

way of non-coercive guidance of the group without consent (Hopkins, 2011;

2008; Barry and Quilley, 2009).

Networking with other actors at the local scale (including local

government, NGOs and other community-scale environmental groups), and with

other Transition Towns is also highly varied and requires consistency and

dedication from volunteers to maintain links. Though, as shown in Transition

Tynedale, developing links with government and local government can be highly

beneficial to the development of projects and funding. It cannot be emphasised

enough that maintaining open participation and discussion is beneficial to

maintaining connections and developing networks with actors at the local scale,

as well as other Transition Towns (see Wilson, 2012; Hopkins, 2011). But while

government may offer potential to take on different forms of governance, as

noted in a number of literatures (see for example Taylor, 2007), caution is urged

over the way government use Transition initiatives to pursue not only transition,

but also the pursuit of their own (neoliberal) agenda—and most notably cuts to

public services (Clarke and Newman, 2012).

Chapter 7: Discussion 4

7.1.   'Building Bridges' to Governmentality:

Thus far we have explored the identity, limits and structure of the Transition movement model, but one of the most effective elements of the Transition movement has been the ability to 'build bridges to local government' (see Hopkins, 2008 *9th step of Transition*). Since the turn of the millennium an increasing momentum has been observed from centralised power towards the grassroots, as third sector organisations and grassroots environmental groups have sought increasing influence in civic matters (Rhodes, 2007; Bridge et al., 2013). The aim of these organisations has been to increase levels of social, environmental and economic capital, primarily at the local scale (Bridge et al., 2009; Wilson, 2012). Support from local government, as Hopkins (2011) has argued, opens a door to rapid localisation and economies and community resilience thereafter (North, 2010).

As Hopkins has outlined, in 2008 Somerset County Council took a leadership role in supporting local Transition initiatives throughout Somerset. However, Hopkins also acknowledges the way government were able to nullify such a plan in favour of a 'Medium Term Financial Plan', justified by cuts to local authorities following the financial crash of 2008 (2011: 282-283). This raises a noteworthy question for Transition initiatives, and the government's dedication to policy set out in such acts as the Climate Change Act (2008), Sustainable

Communities Act (2007) and Localism Act (2011). Does the increasing emphasis on localism, empowerment and community autonomy in-fact revolve around the government's economic agenda—and specifically austerity—rather than its pursuit of sustainable communities? And to what degree are Transition Town practices interwoven into the national government's policies on austerity and cuts to public-environmental services?

The following section explores the successful bridge between local government and Transition Tynedale's to develop a town-wide 'Incredible Edibles' scheme. This scheme has been extremely successful and widely praised by the local community, and while this section does not wish to question the integrity of the initiative itself, it questions the use of government rhetoric and technologies of power as a means *ascribing* self-fulfilling autonomy to Transition Towns, as opposed to Transition initiatives *attaining* autonomy for themselves (Barnett, 2005a; Bröckling et al., 2011). Attention is drawn to the wider socio-political context of austerity and cuts to 'back-office' services provided by local government prior to the global financial crisis (Hastings et al., 2015). Thereafter, this section questions whether the success of the project is a process of 'transition' or a 'transferal' of responsibility to voluntary organisations allowing government to 'alchemise' cuts to environmental services (Clarke and Newman, 2012; Taylor, 2007).

7.2.   From Material Intervention to Government Intervention:

This first section focuses on the interaction between local government and Transition Towns, drawing heavily upon Transition culture's recognition of action at the local community scale as 'material' and 'apolitical'. In Transition literatures emphasis is distinctly placed on the importance of operating free of politics and making practical, 'material' interventions through an emphasis on 'The Hands', as discussed in Chapter 4 (Hopkins, 2008). Action takes a highly material focus, and separated from politics. As William discussed:

> *"Friends of the Earth is about changing things at a political level, getting politicians to change things [...] Transition City Lancaster is about changing things on the ground, it is about doing things [...] it is about getting your hands dirty and doing something."*

This separation of the political and the local as a place of action where people can make material interventions, and where matter can be shaped and made sustainable out of the free will of collectives of a green persuasion, marks a notable shift from scales of politics to the local as a place of action (Scott-Cato and Hillier, 2010). As both William and Isabel reflected, the importance of *"changing things on the ground"* is the feeling of *"empowerment"* in light of the failure of intergovernmental summits on Climate Change, and *"the lacklustre response from UK government"* (Emily). The Transition approach can, therefore, be understood as a vehicle for 'governance-beyond-the-state' (Swyngedouw, 2005: 1994). As Jessica concluded, Transition is about *"cultural change*

regardless of what the government is doing; I think we are trying to do this here."
Emphasis on 'empowerment' is key to Transition discourses as making practical
action beyond politics reflects the 'urgency' to building local solutions (Barry and
Quilley, 2009).

But while the Transition approach is outlined as a self-organised
approach to empowerment at the community scale (Wilson, 2012), where the
antagonistic setbacks of political contestation can be left aside, commentators
have argued that we must be wary of the local as a site where government is
interwoven into civil society (Aiken, 2014; Copus, 2014). As Foucault (1976)
argued, material interventions in activities that influence community life (i.e.
environment and energy)—the interaction between 'man' and 'thing'—are a
matter of government concern, as materials have an 'affect' on people insofar as
they influence 'customs, habits, ways of acting and thinking' (Foucault, 2007: 96).
Through the analysis of a highly successful 'Incredible Edibles' scheme, in
Hexham, this section illustrates how the capacities of Transition Towns to
govern low-carbon transition are in reality interwoven into the government's
technologies of power (Bröckling et al., 2011). In so doing it explores how the
interaction between 'man' and 'thing' becomes a matter of government control
and how government look to influence the affect Transition initiatives have at
the local scale (Coole and Frost, 2010). This section thereby cautions the
Transition approach to *attaining* local power in as far as governments may
ascribe resources that limit or divulge from countercultural change—and in so
doing normalise initiatives as stand-ins for government cuts.

7.2.1. Case Study Background – Edible Hexham:

The Edible Hexham project was developed in 2013 following a Transition Tynedale excursion to Todmorden, where the incredible edibles movement was first conceived. Group meetings following the excursion were very positive about developing an Incredible Edibles project in Hexham (**Box 7.1**). The idea behind the incredible edibles movement is to (re-)use spaces that could be used for growing fruits and vegetables primarily for the purpose of educating local people on the importance of locally grown food, but also to provide communal areas where people can gather healthy, nutritious, sustainable food from its (local) source. The incredible edibles movement stress the importance of working with local organisations as a way of encouraging them to use vacant land. As well as working with local government for project grants and resources. In this sense, there are a number of parallels with the Transition movement's guidance on running initiatives (http://www.incredible-edible-todmorden.co.uk/home).

Transition Tynedale decided that they could replicate what Todmorden had achieved by developing an Edible Hexham project. The project was acknowledged in the Transition Tyendale 2014 Annual General Meeting (AGM) as *"the most successful project of the year"* as a result of its success in gaining funding from local government and the Hexham rotary club. Local government was also able to provide resources and designated areas where planting could be concentrated. The resources provided included raised beds and pea and bean plants, trees and compost. Space was allocated outside council offices, the train station and the tourist information centre, in the Wentworth car parking area

(the main car park in Hexham). The grant money awarded by local government

from the community chest fund provided the required funds for garden tools,

and fruit trees to pick from.

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Box 7.1   **Comments on Todmorden Trip**

"In 2013 a few of us went on a trip to Todmorden, and we decided that we could replicate what they had done there."   (Emma)

"Todmorden use the land productively, in a more sustainable way than conventional gardens. This is why it is so successful."   (George)

"Todmorden was very inspiring. We could do what they are doing in Todmorden, here in Hexham."   (Peter)

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As explained in an interview with Emma, who coordinated the Edible

Hexham project, *"we had a great deal of appreciation from the general public for*

planting on the disused beds. The only plants that had survived were the council

indestructibles." According to Emma *"There was a great deal of appreciation from*

the general public and local businesses" for planting over unattractive areas that

had been left untended and the soil was *"just clay."* The project was praised for

its successful funding bids, support from local government and community-wide

appreciation for the scheme. The effectiveness of the scheme was its ability to

adopt spaces previously untended or disused and bring them *"into fruition"*, an

example of raised beds is shown in **figure 7.1**. The scheme's success was its

transformative effects on these spaces. Bringing the spaces back into

productivity, and fundamentally being able to do produce something noticeable

without need for political confrontation.

Figure 7.1: An example of the Edible Hexham scheme's raised beds outside Hexham's council offices (Source: own photo)

7.2.2. Path dependency and Local Government:

'Building bridges to local government' is regarded an essential step—the 9th step of Transition—according to Hopkins' (2008) *Transition Handbook*; community groups would otherwise be limited in their actions at the local scale without government on side. But placing reliance on local government has been criticised in academic literatures as well as by Transition Town participants for precisely the same reasons Hopkins puts forward for adopting non-confrontational relations with government (Connors and McDonald, 2010). A number of participants have criticised the Transition movement's attitude towards consent and empowerment. As **Box 7.2** shows, working with permission of local government can be viewed as disempowering, and not truly embodying the countercultural change many participants want. Empowerment

was one of the common rationales for action, alongside lifestyle, community ethos and ideology. As the Transition Tynedale Director's Report stated in 2014:

> *'Local Solutions to Global Problems' describes how we in the 'Transition Network' believe that waiting for higher powers to resolve the problems causes by the exponential rise in carbon emissions is not enough."*

As this statement reflects, grassroots action is about making urgent change. But working with government without confronting their 'conventional' approaches to sustainability is regarded as a key barrier to transition.

The conventional approaches of government, as George and Olivia discussed—in **Box 7.2**—concerns 'path dependency', relating to endogenous social memory passed through a given community. This social memory structures the norms and conventions of that particular community. As Peter posited, *"Hexham is a middle class community which could limit the number of people interested in giving up their ways."* One of the key illustrations of path dependency in Hexham is its heritage and aesthetic. Hexham is a tourist destination, and thrives from its ancient Abbey, Castle Keep and 18th Century Bridge (Brown et al., 2012). The Hexham River Hydro project, as discussed in Chapter 5, raised a number of concerns with other local actors considered it a threat to fishing culture and to the aesthetic of Hexham Bridge. *"Hexham Bridge",* as George discussed, *"was a concern of Lord Allendale, [...] and the anglers association were concerned for the salmon going up the river."* The county council supported this project, as a means of keeping to its EU 2020 low-carbon

obligation, but the project had to be mothballed due to a refusal of access by a local landowner.

Whilst a number of interviewees regarded this project as *"over ambitious"*, the project would have been successful for both Transition Tynedale and Northumberland County Council developing local resilience, and meeting the EU green energy obligations (Seyfang, 2009; Klessmann et al., 2011). Balancing barriers such as path dependency whilst operating projects at the local scale is a key consideration that must be taken into account to achieve local resilience (Wilson, 2012). But, as I hope to show, operating within a given pathway can curtail the transition's desired trajectory away from 'counterculture' towards a greater 'dependency' on local government.

Box 7.2

I think that Transition here failed to sort of recognise what they could do about the various issues, and took a very comfortable route that would cause the least disturbance.   (George)

Disturbance to whom?   (Olivia)

Disturbance to themselves and the authorities.   (George)

At the moment they are very much working with the authorities but not really for change, and are maintaining the status quo [...] We thought we would be guerrilla gardeners and we could see a piece of vacant space and choose to garden over it. This was about making spaces useful.
(Olivia)

7.2.3   Governmentality and the wider context:

Analysing the Edible Hexham scheme from a Foucauldian governmentality perspective this section explored the way local government in-fact provides schemes with the freedom to pursue projects, as a means of

'transition' but their commitment to being 'green' is in-fact an act of 'transferal' of responsibility from local government to voluntary organisations and interwoven into government austerity (Bröckling et al., 2011). As I shall argue, local government are able to legitimise cuts through alchemising austerity measures vis-à-vis greater autonomy to environmental groups (Clarke and Newman, 2012). As Morison (2000) has discussed, the changing circumstance of society and civic life can lead to different 'technologies' through which the government look to exercise power. In this case, the changing circumstances of society are the 'age of austerity' following the global financial crash of 2008. And this allows the (local) government to exercise its power through the voluntary sector – or Transition Tyendale's Edible Hexham scheme (Taylor, 2007).

The wider context of politics was stressed in a number of interviews, whereas others were uneasy about discussing the wider political context. George and Olivia stressed the importance of considering Transition projects against the political backdrop of local government. As George argued, *"we have to think about local government and how it affects transition."* As discussed earlier, in Chapter 6, there is unease at intervening in political matters so remaining impartial and out of politics is regarded most practical for taking action. The problem with this attitude, as Benjamin put it is, *"they tend to treat the group like a silo"* not acknowledging other actors at the political scale. Forgetting the wider context was a core problem for more politicised Transition participants, as the Transition approach they recognised was not embodying a counterculture. As Olivia argued, *"in this comfortable valley of prosperity we are forgetting the bigger picture [...] Transition appears very comfortable with this."* Recognition of the

wider context is essential to critiquing the project success, and whether a transition pathway is being carved out. Elaborating on the 'valley' metaphor, Olivia claimed: *"well I think people here are aware that climate change could be catastrophic, but they then lank off because they don't see how they could make any difference to that."* This reflects the feeling that climate change had become normalised throughout the community; as George argued, *"this is because people don't want to engage with the kind of responsibility that would be in any way 'extra'-ordinary."* George argued that it was the *"apolitical approach of Transition"* that prevents *"the group confronting inaction... We were told not to go out and challenge why the Hydro didn't go ahead."* While this is not a problem associated with government, it illustrates how the movement's apolitical approach can contribute to the inertia of community path dependency.

Consideration of the Edible Hexham project in the context of the wider political economy and the pressure on (local) government(s) to adopt sustainable measures (Foxon, 2013; Giddens, 2011; Evans and Abrahamse, 2009) gives a better idea of how government is able to steer collectives through opening up freedoms that it simultaneously endangered to prevent power monopolisation (Bröckling et al., 2011). As George commented *"one level of government will just move costs onto the other [...] it is a mechanism for them holding their caps."* With cuts needing to be made in line with central government's fiscal deficit, local government (county/unitary/metropolitan councils and district/town councils) must make cuts backs, which as George noted often requires *"passing council services down between levels of local government."* During austerity measures, fringe services are those expected to be

cut first, which often includes environmental services related to the upkeep of

public spaces such as tending flower beds, and maintained rubbish collections

(Lowndes and Pratchett, 2012). As Olivia summarised, *"the problem is*

government completely neglect obligations to the environment when there is a

threat to their economy."

The return to austerity following the global financial crash of 2008 has

been marked by radical cuts to state expenditure as a result of the fiscal shortfall

from government borrowing (Stiglitz, 2013; Harvey, 2013). The ideologically

motivated debate over austerity has been marked by a discursive shift from

economic concerns, regarding the nitty-gritty of re-establishing market stability,

towards the political concern for who or what is responsible, namely

overspending in the public sector (Clarke and Newman, 2012). As Clarke and

Newman (2012) have argued, the success of post-financial crash politics,

particularly in the UK, has been marked by the political reworking of austerity as

a necessary (or even desirable) measure. But local government have been able to

capitalise on interweaving policy into their green obligations, such as developing

a sustainable economy, and satisfying local environmental initiatives by

transferring greater levels of 'freedom' into the hands of the 3rd sector (Bridge et

al., 2013; Bridge et al., 2009). This has been marked by the increasing emphasis

on the 3rd sector—and especially 3rd sector localism—over the past decade

(Vickers and Lyon, 2013; Scott-Cato and Hillier, 2010).

Prior to the financial crash the New Labour government had placed

increasing emphasis on the 'Third Way' and utilising the third sector especially

through community and through use of the community discourse (Bridge et al., 2013; Newman et al., 2004). Since 2000 an emphasis has been placed on transition from central powers of government towards (local) governance and social inclusion (Taylor, 2007; Newman, 2001). As Taylor (2007) has demonstrated, the emphasis of governance-beyond-the-state through devolution to local *actors* in the voluntary third sector, such as Transition initiatives, spaces created for these groups to act are still 'inscribed with a state agenda' (p. 314; Swyngedouw, 2005). Responsibility is given to local groups to take on local government services, whilst government still retain control through the 'imposition and internalisation of performance cultures that require 'appropriate' behaviour' (Taylor, 2007: 314).

Emphasis on 'community' in New Labour discourses and through the Transition Town movement has normalised the relationship between government and the voluntary sector. As Amin (2005) has argued, government rhetoric has led to a sense that community cohesion and social capital is a means of overcoming socio-economic and political barriers. As governance theory has shown, considering how the government governs actors is no longer a matter of strict 'social control' but rather a matter of steering particular individuals and collectives in their interaction between 'man' and 'thing'; between subjects and the objects they seek to utilise (Taylor, 2007; Bröckling et al., 2011). The ability of government to curtail obligations to both the environmental agenda and other policies—in this case grow—is personified in its contradictions in policy. As George Monbiot (2015) elaborated in a recent debate on climate change government maintain interests of disparate groups in society through paradoxes

in policy. This is evident in the paradox between the obligations to reduce CO_2 in the 2008 Climate Change Act, and to exploit as many minerals as possible from the UK continental shelf through the 2015 Infrastructure Act (Guardian, 2015; Infrastructure Act, 2015)[11].

Though this paradox does not relate directly to the Transition Town movement, it offers an example of the way government seek to satisfy different groups within society without compromising the growth of the UK economy (Monbiot, 2007; Klein, 2014). The significance of the national context is that local and national government operate within the legal principle of *ultra vires*, wherein the central circle of polity that is central government controls the budget and resources available to local government (Wilson and Game, 2002; Copus, 2014). Thereafter the affect financial crisis has on national policies has a strong influence on local government policy. The influence of national government on local allocation of resources and services as Bulkeley and Kern claimed in 2006 would lead to an increased emphasis on affecting rather than governing change.

This emphasis on affect is asymptotic of the emphasis on governance over government as governments exercise direct powers less so and opt to guide change (Bulkeley and Kern, 2006). As Hastings et al. (2015) have demonstrated,

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[11] Within the UK Infrastructure Act of 2015, section 41 entitled *Maximising Recovery of UK Petroleum,* the following statement is put forward in contradiction with the Climate Change Act of 2008: 'the "principal objective" is the objective of maximising the economic recovery of UK petroleum' (Infrastructure Act, 2015). This is in contradiction with the Secretary of State's obligation 'for the budgetary period including the year 2020, must be such that the annual equivalent of the carbon budget for the period is at least **[F1 34%]** lower than the 1990 baseline' (Climate Change Act, 2008).

services provided by local government, and considered more marginal services such as 'environmental maintenance' have witnessed a dramatic decline following the imposition of austerity measures by central government (see IFS, 2015). While certain assets are safeguarded, such as Hexham's Sele Park and Town Green, as they are essential recreational spaces, certain responsibilities have been passed onto voluntary groups such as Transition Tynedale and the Hexham Community partnership. As George discussed: *"The Sele Park and the town green are not passed down to the town council level because they are regarded as too important for the town level—and important to the Town's appearance. Areas such as the gardens and bowling green are maintained for their appearance."* Aesthetic appearances, as George discusses, are important to the town, and essential assets that must be maintained. But as he went on to discuss: *"any other areas of local environment were cut, because the town council doesn't have the capacity to cover these areas. The County Council and Town council don't have the funds, so nobody will take it on—but nobody really notices it."*

Cuts have led to services considered less vital, related to the general upkeep of environment being cut but local government, as tending flowerbeds, public litter collections and frequency of road sweeping have declined due to central government cuts. *"We used to have a litter picker"*, as Olivia discussed, *"but that person disappeared with no other service to fill the role."* The loss of public services maintaining the quality of the local environment has been a common feature across the UK between 2009-2010 and 2014-2015; environmental services observed a 4.5% increase per capita per year between 1997-1998 and 2009-2010 until a decline between 2009-2010 and 2014-2015 to

levels equivalent to 2000-2001 at (IFS, 2015), as austerity measures force local government to cut these areas dramatically. As George has discussed *"cutting these areas is far less visible and far easier to turn into a council PR stunt."* Government are most inclined to cut services that are invisible to the everyday lives of people in society; this is an inherent consequence of the blue-collar service class (most notably understood through the invisibility of cleaners; Bryson et al., 2004). Cutting road sweepers and litter collectors, as discussed in George and Olivia's account's of environmental service cuts, had no coverage in local media and awareness of such services was limited to local citizens in Hexham, yet the town council were able to turn the cuts into personal representation through a voluntary litter collection (**Box 7.3**). This had the effect of making services visible that were previously invisible and alchemising the cuts to appear more community oriented and cohesive between local government and civil society. Such procedures have been recognised in a number of literatures as a means of 'alchemising' cuts and transforming civic space into spaces of community action and empowerment, to make change for themselves (Clarke and Newman, 2012; Morison, 2000; MacKinnon, 2000).

With austerity measures leading to increasing cuts to local government expenditure, 'back-office' services such as those related to planning, environmental protection and general environment have received a disproportionate cut to shelter 'front-line' services for more socio-economically deprived groups (JRF, 2015). The result has been to place increasing reliance on fulfilling these services through the third sector and particularly voluntary organisations, such as Transition Towns. The increasing reliance on voluntary

organisations to fulfil 'back-office' roles like general environment was reflected strongly in Olivia's interview:

> *"I feel that Edible Hexham, at the moment, is a stand in for the inadequate maintenance of garden beds in Hexham town centre, rather than a project that suggests sustainability and resilience – instead it is about making it look nice for tourism."*

Regarding the scheme as a stand-in for the inadequate maintenance of garden beds suggests that contra to building local resilience the project is used as a stand-in for local government cuts to public environment spaces. If we take a geographical focus to the public spaces given over to the Edible Hexham scheme it becomes increasingly clear that the spaces have a strong tourist focus as they are positioned adjacent to the tourist information centre. As George discussed, *"Todmorden was successful because it needed to be. When you see productive spaces they are not pretty, but they work. What's going on in Hexham is pretty but not transition."* This benefits local government, as it is able to affect a the process of governance without great financial cost and responsibility, whilst Transition Tynedale is able to develop attractive spaces dedicated to consumption of locally grown fruit and vegetables.

Adoption of local spaces is beneficial to the Edible Hexham scheme and Transition Tynedale, as they play an increasing part in community life. But as Olivia discussed, it does not appear to embody any great change, as she argued:

We thought we would be guerrilla gardeners and we could see a piece of vacant space and choose to garden over it. This was about making spaces useful [...] I think it is a question of when we cease to be a counter-culture, as we did in the Guerrilla gardening. These local initiatives were what were described in Rob Hopkins vision. Are they really for change?

The question Olivia raises is whether Transition is a *"stand-in for the inadequate maintenance of garden beds."* Cuts made to environmental services, and the government's emphasis on social empowerment at the community scale and taking on responsibilities for civic services lead voluntary organisations to take on roles previously occupied by government (Bulkeley and Kern, 2006; Aiken, 2014). If we consider the extra responsibilities taken on by the Edible Hexham scheme in relation to government reports, such as David Cameron's 'Big Society' speech, the service cuts become interwoven into narratives of 'empowerment' held in Transition Towns and other grassroots groups. The result of government

involvement in Transition Town activities, as Ethan discussed, *"can, in some circumstances, limit what a Transition group can achieve [...] We need to aware of the wider context. Maybe in reality Transition is just supporting capitalism."*

The point Ethan raises is of awareness of the power government, or ideologies such as capitalism, have even on the actions of groups counter-cultural movements like the Transition Town movement. For Olivia and George Edible Hexham and the Transition movement's *"garden-centric attitude misses the mark",* and fails to develop a counter-culture to what went before (i.e. aesthetic features to promote tourism), and instead fills a hole left by the government's cuts to environmental services such as litter collections, road sweeping, maintenance of flower beds, and local sustainable practices. As George reflected: *"Is this Transition? No, it's... a case of transferring responsibility onto local groups."*

7.2.4. *Social Empowerment and Government Rhetoric:*

Discourses centred on local-scale empowerment are shared in rationale's for joining Transition Towns and in David Cameron's 'Big Society' speech (Cabinet Office, 2010), as shown in **Table 7.1**. In David Cameron's speech, as in Transition interviews, emphasis was on the 'local' scale, 'empowerment', and taking 'action' into ones own hands. *"Cutting the deficit",* as Cameron puts it, is rhetoricised as an opportunity to take action into society's own hands. This has the effect of interweaving voluntary organisations into austerity measures, and transferring 'responsibility' into the hands of civil society (ibid). Cutting the

deficit can, in this respect, be achieved through the 'self-responsibilitisation' of citizens to act (Rose, 1999; Dobson and Barry, 2005).

Big Society Speech (David Cameron, 2010)	Transition Towns (Transition Tynedale; TCL; SLACC)
"Local"	"Local"
"Communities"	"Community"
"Power"	"Change"
"Action"	"Environment"

Table 7.1: Most frequent codes/discourses, as used in 'Big Society' speech and Transition Towns (Transition Tynedale, Transition City Lancaster and SLACC).

Analysing the use of these discourses in **Table 7.1** more closely, and in relation to each other, reveals an interesting use of rhetoric in the 'Big Society' speech. While the predominant discourse in Transition Towns is related to empowerment and (respons-)ability to 'change' and do things without the setbacks of political confrontation, the 'Big Society' operates as political rhetoric through which to interweave the aspirations of voluntary groups into the Conservative party's 'age of austerity' (Cabinet Office, 2010). The performativity of language is central here, as Cameron refers to 'empowerment' and 'cultural change' towards taking responsibility for your local community. This is about allowing people to take action at the local scale and re-localising responsibility from top-down to bottom-up with emphasis on 'governance-beyond-the-state' as first established under Blair's New Labour government (Amin, 2005; Swyngedouw, 2005). But drawing on populist language and relatively empty discourses on 'community' and 'local' operates as a means through which to

alchemise austerity and create the fictitious consent of local actors (Laclau, 2005; Clarke and Newman, 2012). Emphasis on community as a figurative category for 'self-responsibilisation' (Rose, 1999) of the environment in-fact leads to a shift of the environment from state responsibility to local community groups (and volunteers). As Kisby (2010) has argued, the plan for the 'Big Society' 'made clear [David Cameron's] wish for community groups to run parks, post-offices, libraries and local transport services' (p.484). Essential to the pursuit of the austerity agenda was the interweaving of austerity into the redistribution of power vis-à-vis 'a culture of volunteering' (ibid: 484; Lowndes and Pratchett, 2012).

Edible Hexham offers a key opportunity for Hexham to fill the gap left by central government cuts to the environmental budget and their affect on regional expenditure, as shown in reports by Hastings et al. (2015) and the IFS (2015) (**Figure 7.2** and **Figure 7.3**). But whilst Edible Hexham was able to exploit the opportunity offered to them through local funding to develop these areas, Olivia noted that filling this gap diverts attention away from countercultural change:

> *"I realised that the sustainable way of gardening is actually to put things in the ground. Troughs are an affluent way of gardening, and not for growing on a scale that can feed people. You could say it's an educational tool but really it's all for show […] it ceased to be a counterculture as it wasn't for change."*

Rather than allowing groups to become empowered, as the 'Big Society' speech argued, Olivia argued the exact opposite. Government have provided resources as a means of fulfilling *"more aesthetic"* and *"tourist"* oriented gaps to make the town look better. From this perspective, the government are able to control the actions through the provision of resources and spaces that are of direct benefit to themselves. Through exercising this 'art of government' (Foucault, 2000), it is possible not only to alchemise cuts to 'environmental services' but also to guide and 'affect' change in the direction they wish (Clarke and Newman, 2012; Bulkeley and Kern, 2006).


Figure 7.2: This figure shows the changes (%age decrease) in real spending between 2010 and 2014 by local government per capita. Circled in red is the change in spending on Environment-Culture-Planning services per capita (Source: Hastings et al., 2015)**.**
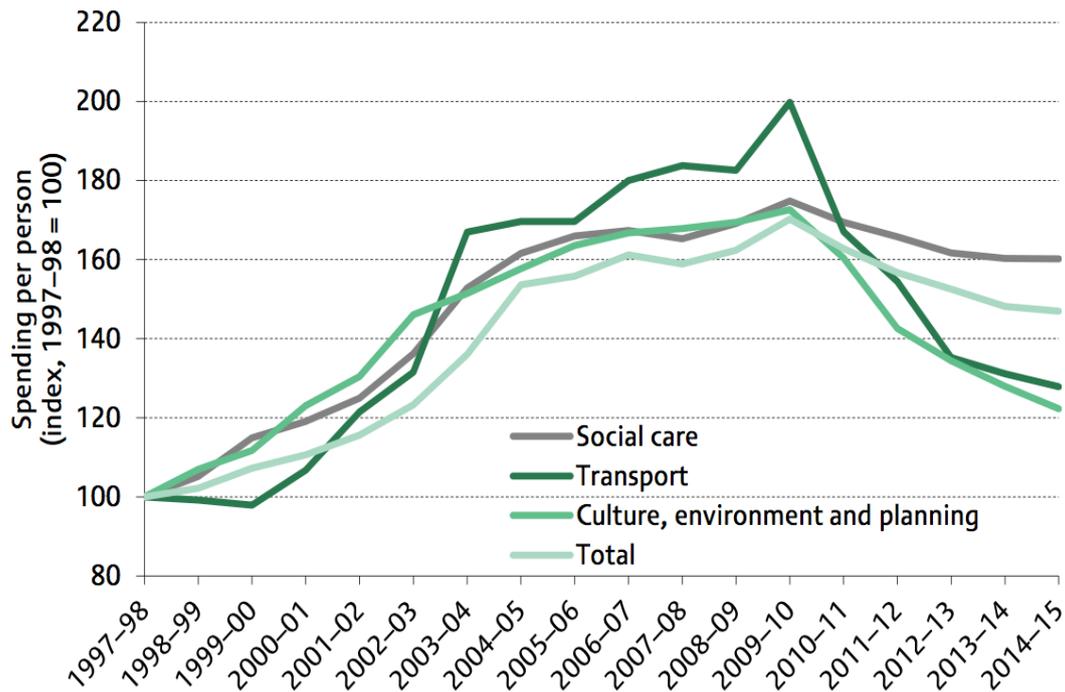
Figure 7.3: Central government spending per capita from 1997-1998 to 2014-2015. Culture, environment and resembles a strong decline from 2009-2010. (Source: IFS, 2015)

As Foucault (2007: 96) argued at the centre of the art of government is the 'complex of man and things […] 'Things' are men in their relationships with things like customs, habits, ways of acting and thinking' (Bröckling et al., 2011). Hence, the relationship between people and the resources available to them give them the capacity to act in particular ways. The art of government is the ability to influence the way they act. George illustrated this point in his discussion of the neighbourhood plan and resources provided to the Edible Hexham scheme:

> *"it is interesting that they [the town council] gave the troughs from the cemetery to the Edible Hexham scheme [but they…] threw out the local sustainability plan put forward by environmental groups because it was too broad and risked making them maintain the cemetery sustainably."*

Here, George indicates that resources are provided to the Edible Hexham scheme as a way of *"maintaining the appearance"* without the need to *"fund one person to do the job."* Edible Hexham, thereafter, provides an exemplar scheme through which to mask cuts to 'environmental services' and maintain the (aesthetic) appearance of the town by empowering voluntary groups to fulfil their objectives.

7.3.1. 'Transition' or 'Transferral'?

The question this raises for Transition Towns is whether such schemes create benefits for community-scale low-carbon transition or whether they are merely occupying a gap that was previously fulfilled as a local government service. Effective transition would imply that Transition Towns have been effective in establishing 'government through community' (Rose, 1996) as a means of local 'governance-beyond-the-state' (Swyngedouw, 2005: 1994), rather than operating as the 'affective' means of fulfilling government services in an 'age of austerity' (Kisby, 2010; Clarke and Newman, 2012). As Olivia questioned: *"Are we working for change or for the government."* In reflections from Oliver and Logan respectfully, they questioned the ability of Transition to break with its path dependency. As Oliver noted:

> *"[M]ost of the people in Transition are just doing a bit of gardening and tending their raised beds. The car club was more of a hand out – I doubt that the car scheme would stand up on its own merit. So this is what we're*

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missing out on: local, sustainable solutions at the community scale. How can

we be resilient if we're dependent?"

The dependency on government is a key characteristic of Transition. Remaining dependent has been criticised, as Olivia argued that it is *"highly conventional"* and detracts from *"the ability for the group to create a counterculture."* While Taylor (2007) has argued that within the context of globalisation it is impossible for the state to govern without the co-operation of other actors, these new spaces of governance still operate largely through the 'affected interest' of the state agenda. One of the potential problems for communities, as Amin (2005) has noted, is that citizens may be empowered but lack the means to control their own destiny or 'possess the autonomy to make and distribute resources' (p. 624).

The question of whether the Edible Hexham scheme is developing transition or is merely a pawn of local government is an impossible judgement to make with a high level of certainty. Though consideration for the wider political-economic context should be taken into account, and it is clear that local government are exploiting voluntary action as a means of plugging the gap left by central government austerity measures, the Edible Hexham scheme has been highly successful in gaining government funding and developing a scheme offering the potential for sustainable gardening and educating local community about locally grown produce. But does the scheme represent 'transition' or 'transferal' of responsibility from the government to local community groups?

7.3.2. Conclusion – Perpetuating the post-political

As I have articulated throughout this discussion of 'Transition', the importance of the movement is its aptitude at materialising change beyond politics. Insofar as this movement offers a distinct ability to change ones own locality, it is about social empowerment of the self. The ability to create projects that perpetuate the discourse are therefore essential, and achievable through garden schemes and community renewable projects, for example. Incredible edibles, no doubt, offer a practical opportunity to make use of spaces that have been untended following cuts to the environmental budget resulting from the austerity measures following the fiscal crisis of 2008 (Hastings et al., 2015). But the Transition discourse essentially rests on the ability of change to happen without the possibility of post-political normalisation of climate change in politics and society (Žižek, 2011; Swyngedouw, 2011). While the project has been particularly successful in materialising change with help from central government, these projects can become interwoven into wider context of the 'austerity', and thereafter the government's own interests (Newman, 2013).

The danger for Transition is that their narrative, centred upon the ability to materialise action at the local scale, becomes interwoven into central government policy on austerity, and the post-political normalisation of climate change in society—perpetuated by the relative inaction of the state (see Rancière, 1999; Žižek, 2011; Clarke and Newman, 2012). The ability of government to interweave their narrative into the voluntary actions of civil society groups such as the Transition movement perpetuates the populist

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preoccupations, consensus building and negotiation of government policy into a post-political management of interests around environmentalism (Kenis and Mathijs, 2014b; Mouffe, 2005). It appears, thereafter, that while Transition Towns seeks to differentiate themselves from conventional approaches acknowledging political confrontation, they instead develop an uncritical approach to politics with a distinct danger of becoming post-political and occluding the far-reaching social transformation it wished to create.

Chapter 8: Conclusion(s)

The rationale for this thesis was to scrutinise the focus on remaining apolitical in the Transition Town movement through the analysis of 3 Transition Towns in the North of England. Participants were engaged through data collection methods including interviews, focus groups and participant observation within meetings and events run within each Transition Town. Rigorous empirical analysis across these groups allowed the analysis of what holds a group together through a single identity despite discursive differences. Analysis pointed to the *naming* of action as 'Transition' projects, which allowed the group to form under a collective identity whilst retaining discursive difference and for initiatives to differ themselves from town-to-town. Another central node in the articulation of the Transition Movement was remaining outside politics (polity and political antagonism) and confrontation (with other local, regional and national actors) as a means of taking abrupt and effective action. But as noted a particular irony of this was that political confrontation is needed to remain visible to the community, as well engaging and compromising with other local actors towards transition of the community. Understanding the identity and limits of the movement are particularly pivotal, as—to put it bluntly—the Transition movement's goals are hardly simple. Transition seeks to create a 'world within a world' (Seyfang and Smith, 2007), powered down with radically re-networked flows of socio-technical, economic and environmental capital (Wilson, 2012).

By scrutinising 'the political' in 3 Transition Town initiatives (Lancaster, Kendal and Tynedale), the preceding chapters have examined the identity, limits and governmentality of the Transition Town movement. This examination has been with the principle objective of emphasising a need for critical reflection on and open expression of 'political' difference in Transition initiatives (Schmitt, 1996; Kenis and Mathijs, 2014a). The discussion was divided into 4 chapters exploring different facets of politics and particularly de-politicisation in the Transition movement. Utilising a discursive framework, Chapter 4 analysed the discourses and signifying practices of different individuals identifying with the Transition movement, as a way of establishing why people join the Transition movement. Interviewees largely identified with alienation by political institutions to deliver change, and sought to adopt more 'hands-on' community-oriented practices that adopt local-scale collective action. Emphasis, therefore, was on building community as a 'place of action' to foster social empowerment and change. Based upon the array of practices. But constituting *localisation* or the local scale as Transition's master signifier, as others have done (Kenis and Mathijs, 2014; Neal, 2013), fails to capture participants' utilisation of local action as a practical means of developing innovative projects from the bottom-up. The array of different initiatives experimented with at the local scale appears to provide a suitable answer to what is different about Transition. The act of *naming* a project 'Transition' provides the basis through which to hold collectives together, and act towards what appears to be a shared goal. There is nothing new about these projects, but stressing the ability to develop them without political confrontation and antagonism with government institutions

offers what appears as a different approach to sustainable transition. By calling a *naming* a project 'Transition' holds together the collective and—by quilting discursive differences among the collective—builds a more practical vision of community-oriented transition. Transition projects/initiatives—thereafter—only differ from other forms of environmentalism insofar as they are *named* Transition projects/initiatives. One such issue is that while projects seek a non-confrontational approach to action, this may supresses political difference which can in-turn lead to ineffective action, as the preceding chapter discussed.

Chapter 5 analysed the conceptual and practical basis of gardening, and community energy projects to show how these spaces differ depending on antagonism and affected interest of local actors as determined by the spatial characteristics of action. In so doing I differentiated practices of gardening as operating in semi-private spaces that are 'dependent' on normative socio-technical infrastructures, and the 'transactional spaces' where community energy projects are located (i.e. riverbanks for hydroelectric power), which usually come into contention with other *actors* with an affected interest in these spaces (Cox, 1998; Barnett and Bridge, 2013). Thereafter, this section outlined the effect of failure in rupturing the Transition signifier, leading to its re-politicisation. The section concluded with a brief analysis of how gardening embodies resilience-thinking as it enables the materialisation of change through growing practices foreclosing the possibility of failure by not attempting anything too ambitious (Chandler, 2014; Evans and Reid, 2014).

Focussing in closer on the characteristics initiatives with respect to their participants and engagement with the wider community, Chapter 6 explored the structure and democracy internal to and between Transition initiatives. This section, firstly, used interview accounts of democracy at the group scale to reveal some of the contentions over openness related to group hierarchy and organisation. Different models of group organisation were observed in interviews, such as hierarchical approaches with a steering group, which was contentious in TCL as interviewees argued that is prevented openness and disempowered individuals from setting up their own projects. Conversely, the same was said of open meetings that often led to little action being taken and compromise between participants. The challenge, as Benjamin and Oliver both discussed, was reaching a compromise between both approaches, and allowing individuals' skills to be put to good use in each initiative. These skills are essential to networking with other organisations at the local community scale. But devising an identity requires defining the initiative's political position on specific matters otherwise Transition's goals can become obscure. Limited communication between Transition initiatives reduced the capacity for networking with and learning from other Transition Towns, which was also limited by ICT skills for communicating with other groups. The main limitation for Transition groups, as this section concluded, was the paradox of remaining apolitical. The apolitical paradox becomes evident insofar as initiatives aim to remain so open that they often fail to address the wishes of individuals within the group itself, as this may run risk of either confrontation with individuals outside the group or has not received the full consent of every individual within the group. The paradox, thereafter, is that receiving full consent of either the

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community or everyone in the group creates barriers to practical action, and often leads Transition groups to follow a more prescriptive transition pathway rather than developing social innovation and radically breaking with path dependency (Seyfang and Smith, 2007; Wilson, 2012).

Finally, Chapter 7 explored the affect of building bridges to government on a successful Incredible Edibles project in Hexham. In a handful of interviews it was argued that incredible edibles was a stand in for the inadequate maintenance of garden beds following government cuts to environmental services. This raised an important question regarding the separate but interwoven narratives of austerity by national government and local-scale transition in Transition Tynedale. Government are able to use a discursive repertoire from cuts made to public-environmental services by filling gaps with voluntary action, and spinning these cuts as 'transition' as opposed to transferal of costs onto community environmental groups (Clarke and Newman, 2012). While it is clear that these projects open up opportunities for influence at the community scale from environmental groups like Transition, the government are able to reduce expenditure to environmental services despite their obligations under the Sustainable Community Act (2007) and Climate Change Act (2008) to sustainable transition.

All of these sections hold a common characteristic that—in an ironic sense—limits the success of the Transition Town approach: the commitment to remaining apolitical and non-confrontational. This is ironic as the Transition movement's decision to remain apolitical, which is a consequence of the urgency

to materialising practical action to the twin threats of climate change and peak oil, can limit the extent of practical action (Barry and Quilley, 2009). The limitations are an underestimation of what can be achieved in community without the political differences of individuals becoming pronounced, which often leads to re-politicisation, as non-confrontational approaches become limited to semi-private spaces. Furthermore, without defining a specific identity that differentiates the movement, there is little for community to identify with, making it harder for individuals to identify with what Transition actually stands for. Finally, recognition of the political consequences of action at the local scale requires questions to government about their own sustainable practices rather than allowing them to rely on support to local Transition projects alone.

Based upon the findings recorded throughout this discussion interviewee testimonies recall a concern for the identity of the Transition Town movement, and especially the failure of the movement to engage in political debate at the community scale. It is to this degree that Transition risks *'missing the mark'* insofar as cannot adequately define an identity that is visible to the local community, and that seeks to develop action that differs from conventional consumption trends. Failure to adequately define a radical departure from normative economic flows—and failure to define a transition pathway that people can set out visible and credible local-scale solutions to the normative socio-technical regime—runs risk of becoming interwoven into a post-political trap through neutrality in contentious local decisions regarding sustainability, and an uncritical approach to taking on services previously provided by the government (Mason and Whitehead, 2012). Hereafter, it makes sense that

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Transition Towns should remain out of party politics to maximise networkability and depart from proscription to party constitution, but this does not mean Transition initiatives should remain neutral over important decisions on sustainability, which require the thrust of the movement's discursive and ideological position as a 'green', 'grassroots' movement and so on to be clearly visible to the local community (Stavrakakis, 1997; Seyfang, 2009). If an environmental movement fails to adequately render itself visible and define how it seeks to depart from current political ecologies, the chances are that it will fall into its own post-political trap, as it will fail to unify adequate support against contemporaneous political ecologies.

8.2. *Avoiding the Post-Political: Learning from Experimental Urbanism*

If the Transition Town movement is to avoid the post-political trap, wherein it might fail to move forward, it must engage with more imaginative forms of experimentation beyond simple gardening. These are the sorts of action Seyfang and Smith (2007) have called for when praising grassroots movements for their ability to develop socially innovative forms of action. Most notably, the forms of adaptive governance that have been pushing adaptation (and resilience) furthest have been forms of experimental urbanism, where the city has been used as real-world laboratories to situate forms of experimentation (Evans, 2011; Grimm et al., 2008). Rather than seeking to take placeless detachment to political difference, Evans (2011) calls for a more experimental form of governance at the local scale that acknowledges and incorporates difference as a form of investigational adaptation. Hence, reversing Neal's (2013) observation of

ruralisation of the urban within the Transition movement, the Transition

movement requires investment into forms of experimental adaptation developed

in vibrant contemporary urban spaces—such as guerrilla gardening and knitting,

and appropriation of local spaces through experimental design (Gunnerson and

Holling, 2002; Harvey, 2012). New forms of urban experimentation refer to

practices of *attaining* autonomy through experimentation rather than allowing it

to be *ascribed*—and limited—by the state (Barnett, 2005a; Hou, 2011).

In this sense Transition Towns should be pushing for an urbanisation of

the ruralist imagination; drawing upon political difference in radically new forms

of innovation. Rather than imagining gardens in the future, the Transition

movement should be engaging in a much more experimental and radically

alternative imagination of the future—one that is not prescribed in the 12 steps

of Transition (Connors and McDonald, 2010).

8.3. *Opportunities for Further Research*

Opportunities for further research might include a quantitative analysis of

the successful growth of Transition Town initiatives to determine the extent of

their success at the local scale since gaining Transition status. Research into

community resilience is important as there has been a great deal of coverage in

media and academic journals of the growth of Transition initiatives and other

grassroots schemes, but a quantitative analysis of the growth and success of

Transition initiatives at the local scale has not been explored. Despite the

continued growth of the Transition movement, many initiatives fail to gain

sufficient attention for their initiatives at the local scale, and thereafter break with the community's 'path dependency' (Seyfang and Haxeltine, 2012). A UK-wide analysis of participation in Transition initiatives would benefit from Wilson's (2012) quantitative analysis of social, economic and environmental capitals to determine levels resilience developed by Transition initiatives (**Figure 8.1**).
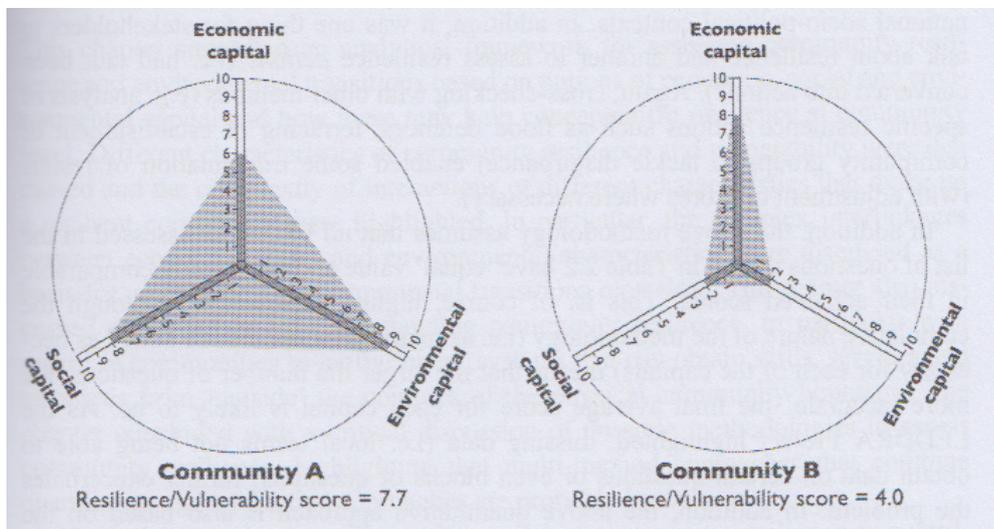
Figure 8.4: Example of quantitative model of community resilience based upon varied levels of social, economic and environmental capital (Source: Wilson, 2012).

8.4. *Final Remarks – Opportunities for Transition*

There are opportunities to learn from some of the innovative methods devised through *experimental urbanism* (Kullman, 2013) to encourage more Transition Towns to move beyond the prescriptive Transition steps (Hopkins, 2008) towards more experimental means of engaging and identifying their initiative's position within the geographical community (Massey, 2005; Walker,

2011). Rather than remaining apolitical, Transition should be encouraged to express political difference and actively challenge (local) government policy on the environment in order to make itself visible at the community setting. This is not a call for Transition initiative to adopt a party politics, but to identify its political position in the community to encourage people with similar views and aspirations to join the movement. 'The political' difference, or radical imaginative position, of the Transition movement should be made clear in local community, and that should involve embracing discursive difference to designate what Transition stands for rather than aiming to be all-inclusive at the expense of falling into obscurity. In this sense, Transition Towns need to recognise the importance of 'community as a process' (Walker, 2011), whereby the future needs to be envisaged first before active steps are made to build new 'transition pathways' (Wilson, 2012).

If Transition is to show people how a powered down future can be more desirable it needs first to define a recognisable identity that is visible to the local community, and utilise the skills and visions of individuals in the movement to build a resilient and functional community, rather than potentially confining the movement to a post-political trap, fiddling in the garden while Rome burns.

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Appendix:

Appendix 1: *Interview Chronology (and location)*

Name	Date	Location
Meeting	--/06/2013	Transition Tynedale
Focus Group 1	--/07/2013	Transition Tynedale
Meeting	--/07/2013	Transition Tynedale
Meeting	--/07/2013	Transition Tynedale
Focus Group 2	--/08/2013	Transition Tynedale
Olivia	--/08/2013	Transition Tynedale
George	--/08/2013	Transition Tynedale
Alice	--/08/2013	Transition Tynedale
Jenna	--/08/2013	Transition Tynedale
Peter	--/08/2013	Transition Tynedale
Emily	--/08/2013	Transition Tynedale
Mary	--/08/2013	Transition Tynedale
Meeting	--/09/2013	Transition Tynedale
Adam	--/09/2013	Transition Tynedale
Meeting	--/10/2013	Transition Tynedale
Meeting	--/11/2014	Transition Tynedale
Lucas	--/11/2014	SLACCtt
John	--/11/2014	TCL
William	--/01/2015	TCL
Isabel	--/01/2015	TCL
Ethan	--/02/2015	TCL
Amelie	--/02/2015	TCL
Benjamin	--/03/2015	TCL
Jessica	--/03/2015	SLACCtt
Thomas	--/03/2015	SLACCtt
Karen	--/03/2015	TCL
Roger	--/03/2015	TCL
Olivia	--/03/2015	Transition Tynedale
George	--/03/2015	Transition Tynedale
Oliver	--/03/2015	Transition Tynedale
Emma	--/03/2015	Transition Tynedale
Liam	--/03/2015	Transition Tynedale
Ryan	--/03/2015	Transition Tynedale
Logan	--/03/2015	Transition Tynedale
Meeting	--/05/2015	Open Event (Lancaster)
Benjamin	--/06/2015	TCL

Appendix 2: *Interview Questions*

1. What led you to join Transition 'X'?

2. Are you involved in any other form of environmental movement or activism?

3. What is it about the Transition movement or your initiative that is most appealing to you, and you approach to taking action?

4. Is there something *different* [added emphasis] about Transition?

5. What does Transition 'X' offer that other environmental movements lack?

6. Does environmental activism appeal to you and your approach to taking action?

7. Is Transition a more open and representative approach to taking action?

8. What makes the Transition Town approach more practical?

9. Does the movement have characteristics that allow it to gain more momentum that other environmental movements?

10. Is Transition 'X' at all politicised, and should it remain this way?

11. Should the Transition movement become more political?

12. How does Transition 'X' compare to Transition Town Totnes? Has it been able to build a clear approach, and transition pathway?

13. Does Transition 'X'—and the Transition Town movement—engage well with local community?

14. What is the most practical scale(s) of action of action, and why?

15. How would you define resilience?

16. Can you imagine the future of your community? (Can Transition make it resilient?)

17. Can there be 'local solutions to global problems'?

Appendix 3: *Uncoded Interview Extract*

Interview (Transition City Lancaster) – 23rd February 2015
Interview with Ethan and Amelie (both present throughout the interview):

What drew you towards Transition Towns as an initiative?

- (**Ethan**)
- So how to start with before.
- I learned about Transition when I went to UEA (university of east Anglia)… and I did a module on sustainable consumption, this is where I first heard about it.
- But the thing is that I spent my 20s travelling around eco-villages and sustainable communities… and every time I was returning to Greece, to my home, I was feeling a cultural soak when returning from an eco-village. And I really felt that something was missing from society, and that life in an eco-village is so much better.
- So when I heard about Transition I really thought this is it, this is taking the eco-village out of the eco-village and putting it into towns. So this got me very excited about the transition idea… and of course I was really into permaculture.

So what drew you into permaculture?

- Well for this I have to go even further back.
- Agriculture was my first degree and from this I was interested in organics and from that I was interested in organics, and this really worked into the eco-village idea with sustainable agriculture.
- All of this 'bio-dynamics' and 'anthroposophy'…
- Anthroposophy is based on the rules of Steiner… Rudolph Steiner who was from the Waldorf School.
- I then did my dissertation for my masters… so I used social practice theory to look at transitionaries and looked at how they might upscale agriculture… I looked at community gardens and the practice of food growing in domestic garden, and having decorated gardens with flowers.
- And from UEA I came up to Lancaster and we became members of Transition Lancaster.

So did you both meet at UEA?

- (**Amelie**)
- So we met in Norwich at a permaculture project actually.
- And more or less we ended up together a year later

- **(Ethan)**
- We then ended up coming to Lancaster together with my masters.
- I then topped up my masters into a PhD.
- I was interested in urban agriculture so I decided to do a masters here.
- But I never finished the masters because the company decided to upgrade me to the PhD.

What led you to join Transition Amelie?

- I ended up coming here with Ethan as we had a bet on. Whoever got their PhD first would move there. So Ethan got his PhD and we moved up to Lancaster.
- And because I had so much time while I was trying to find a job in Lancaster… because I was unemployed at the time, I decided to fill my time with activities that I was interested in.
- I started by doing after school activities, and I did permaculture activities…
- There was no chance I was going to get an allotment, as there are such long waiting lists for them that I decided to try and find a garden share scheme.
- I went to potato day and I said I wanted to set up a garden share project, and TCL said that I could do it but I would have to come to the food group, and set up the project.
- But my background was that I studied climate science and environmental science, and I was aware of the movement… but I was always highly critical as the transition movement is highly middle class…
- So Lancaster is the first time that I became engaged in TCL…

So would you say that Norwich was more middle class?

- No I think they're the same… most Transition initiatives are the same.
- The middle classes and retire middle class are able to support themselves and therefore dedicated time to these projects.
- It is these middle aged and middle class people… that are fine, there is a role for all people.
- This Transition group seems to be doing a lot more for people in Lancaster. Transition Norwich on the other hand is already saturated insofar as there is already a diversity of groups and green organisations in the city… it has a much more mixed demographic.
- Lots of other things are already happening in Norwich that you don't have to be part of the Transition group to get involved.
- Transition is more of a catalyst in Lancaster than in Norwich.

- In Norwich I was more involved in the university and there seemed to be an active engagement between the university and the town.
- My role was more in the town in Lancaster, so I found the Transition group in Lancaster more important for linking people up to different things. **{Interview Continued}**

Appendix 4: *Interview Outline For Participant Approval*

Research interviews at Transition Tynedale

As many of you may know I undertook interviews and focus groups in Transition Tynedale in 2013 as part of my undergraduate dissertation, which focused on (ontological) difference in environmental perceptions with regards to the environment. As of October I have moved onto studying a Masters by Research and PhD (1+3) at Lancaster University studying Transition Towns in the UK.

The focus of my masters (this year) is to understand local-scale governance as operated in Transition Towns. For the purpose of this investigation I will be breaking to project into 3 primary aims: (1) to study politics within Transition Towns – whether Transition can be constituted as apolitical; (2) to study rhetoric in government reports with regards to devolving more powers to communities and whether 'spaces of (effective) governance' are opened up in the process; and (3) in the final section of the investigation I look to explore what the possibilities are for Transition and Governance in the future by focusing on 'what climate change can do for us?' insofar as it connects 'greens' in a sense of global solidarity.

For this investigation I would be most grateful for the chance to have an interview (more of an in-depth chat) with Transition Tynedale participants, exploring these 3 themes as well as individual contexts about why you joined Transition.

Many thanks,

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Appendix 5: *Coding Table*

Coding Table (Cope, 2010)			
Interview Text	**Descriptive and Categorical Codes**	**Analytical Codes & Themes**	**Observations**
I learned about Transition when I went to UEA (university of east Anglia)… and I did a module on sustainable consumption, this is where I first heard about it.	First heard of TT movement in UEA.	Education—salience of the Transition movement	Ethan and was living in a highly insulated shared eco-house, with edible plants growing in the windows and rainwater harvesting on from the roof.
But the thing is that I spent my 20s travelling around eco-villages and sustainable communities… and every time I was returning to Greece, to my home, I was feeling a cultural soak when returning from an eco-village. And I really felt that something was missing from society, and that life in an eco-village is so much better.	Lifestyle approach. Travelling around eco-villages.	Eco-village lifestyle important to Ethan. 'Cultural soak': sense that society is missing out one eco-village culture.	
So when I heard about Transition I really thought this is it, this is taking the eco-village out of the eco-village and putting it into towns. So this got me very existed about the transition idea… and of course I was really into permaculture.	Transition regarded as similar to eco-village movement. Gardening & Permaculture.	Transition Towns like the eco-village movement but up-scaled and re-contextualised.	
So what drew you into permaculture?			
Well for this I have to go even further back. Agriculture was my first degree and from this I was interested in organics and from that I was interested in organics, and this really worked into the eco-village idea with sustainable agriculture.	Interest in agriculture & sustainability.	Interest in Agriculture links science and philosophy (i.e. permaculture philosophy).	
All of this 'bio-dynamics' and	Deep Green and	Deep Green discourse	

'anthroposophy'.. (Anthroposophy is based on the rules of Steiner… Rudolph Steiner who was from the Waldorf School.)	Scientific methods	links higher education learning to practice at local scale.	
I then did my dissertation for my masters… so I used social practice theory to look at transitionaries and looked at how they might upscale agriculture… I looked at community gardens and the practice of food growing in domestic garden, and having decorated gardens with flowers.	Interest in gardening and grassroots social movements.	Learning about social movements in East Anglia reflected positively on Ethan's lifestyle.	Looks across to Amelie .
And from UEA I came up to Lancaster and we became members of Transition Lancaster.	Moved to Lancaster for PhD—and joined TCL.		

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