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# In Transition: The Politics of Place-based, Prefigurative Social Movements

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In Transition: The Politics of Place-based, Prefigurative Social Movements

A Dissertation Presented

by

EMILY E. HARDT

Submitted to the Graduate School of the  
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of

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## DEDICATION

For Carson, Katie, and Will

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## ABSTRACT

### IN TRANSITION: THE POLITICS OF PLACE-BASED, PREFIGURATIVE SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

MAY 2013

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The Transition movement is a grassroots movement working to build community resilience in response to the challenges of climate change, fossil fuel depletion, and economic insecurity. Rather than focusing on the state as a site for contestation or change, the movement adopts a “do it ourselves” approach, prioritizing autonomy and prefigurative action. It also places importance on relationships and community in the context of local places. It is open-ended and characterized by an ethos of experimentation and learning.

Transition shares these place-based and prefigurative features in common with many other contemporary movements, from the Zapatistas to alternative globalization movements, to popular movements in Latin America, to most recently the Occupy movement. Though often not seen as “political” by conventional definitions that understand social movements in relation to the state, I argue that Transition’s choice of practical, place-based forms and commitments is an ethical-political one, based on the state’s failure to meet crises of our times, and it has political effects.

In exploring the movement in its own terms, this ethnographic study of the Transition movement in the northeast US demonstrates the ways in which activists are locating power and possibility in the local and the everyday. Operating in the terrain of culture and knowledge production, the Transition movement is engaged in an effort to shift subjectivities and social relations, and to resignify power, security, economy, and democracy. Paying attention to the Transition movement's specifically place-based, prefigurative features provides a better understanding of the potential of this approach and its political significance. It also sheds light on tensions, which in the US context include challenges in addressing racism, inequality, and the neoliberal state.



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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

In a church annex building in the tiny town of Brooks, Maine, about thirty people gathered for a “Training for Transition” workshop on a chilly October day in 2011. The group included a farmer, a website developer, a corporate trainer, a recent high school graduate, a retired social worker, and a carpenter, among others. They came to learn about what the announcement for the weekend-long event described as “a community engagement model for responding to economic instability, lower energy, and a changing climate.” Though they came for various reasons, they were united by an interest in transitioning away from fossil fuels and toward more resilient communities.

The conversation that morning started with a few people raising concerns about fracking, and later people voiced concerns about the privatization of water around the world, including in Maine. Soon the conversation turned to capitalism and the problems with unlimited economic growth. Where the agenda went from there was as notable for what didn’t happen as for what did. There was no planning of rallies, marches, or teach-ins. There was no discussion of legislators’ positions or citizen lobbying campaigns. Instead, the agenda next led into a group visioning exercise, where people envisioned what their daily lives and communities might be like after a successful transition away from using fossil fuels.

Life without fossil fuels represents a dramatic change from our current ways of clothing, feeding, transporting, and housing ourselves, and from the bases of our global economy. The Transition movement seeks to make this almost-unimaginable

change in our daily lives and in our economy community-by-community, spreading virally and sharing knowledge and information across countries and continents.

Through local projects such as planting gardens and nut trees, organizing potlucks and skill-shares, and promoting local businesses and currencies, the movement aims to appeal to and involve everyone, regardless of ideology, political affiliation, or previous civic engagement.

From organizing a tool lending library in Northfield to starting a farmers market in Putney to building root cellars in Montpelier to running beekeeping workshops in Wayland, Transition initiatives throughout the northeast US are engaged in bringing neighbors together through place-based, hands-on projects. While vegetable gardens, chicken coops, and potluck dinners are neither new nor particularly radical, this “ordinariness” is central to Transition’s politics. By conceiving of their efforts as open, inclusive, and above all *local*, Transitioners are enacting a politics of place that is at once adaptive and utopian, practical and political. The movement seeks to build community resiliency to prepare for climate disruption, energy constraints, and economic uncertainty. Transitioners argue that it is desirable to end use of fossil fuels because of climate change, and inevitable because of the limits on energy resources (often called “peak oil”).

Communities are the privileged sites for engagement and transformation in the Transition model, which asserts that individual action is not enough to confront the challenges we face, and assuming that government responses will be “too little, too late.” Neither working against nor within existing systems, the emphasis is on building an alternative, through self-organized practical projects in areas such as

food, transportation, and energy. Rather than seeing government as a target or looking to it for direction, the movement starts from its own vision of a desired future, sometimes, but not always, seeking to enlist politicians, town councils, and the like in their effort.

The Transition movement sees itself as a new kind of movement – “a social experiment on a massive scale” – open-ended, non-hierarchical, networked, and aiming to transform our everyday lives. These values, commitments, and forms of organizing are not unique to Transition. Many social movements around the world today are, as Wendy Harcourt and Arturo Escobar observe, “engaged in a new kind of politics that often emphasizes the local, the cultural, the present, and the possibilities of other ways of being” (2005, 14).

From the Zapatistas in southern Mexico who gained widespread attention beginning in the early 1990s to more recent movements around the world, scholars have noted that contemporary movements are tending toward an emphasis on autonomy, inclusivity, networking, non-hierarchy, and openness.<sup>1</sup> Activists in these movements seek to organize in ways that reflect their values and ultimate goals. There is often a focus on creating alternatives and inspiring hope, as evident in that “Another world is possible” has become a frequent refrain of many contemporary movements, from the World Social Forums to the Occupy movement and including Transition. As indicated by the visioning exercise described above, Transition emphasizes an open-ended effort to build alternatives locally, in community.

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<sup>1</sup> In fact, the Transition movement has drawn inspiration from the Zapatistas (Hopkins 2008) and from complexity theory (Hopkins and Lipmann 2009), though it is most firmly rooted in permaculture, a system of design based on mimicking relationships and processes observed in the natural world (more on these influences below).

What are we to make of this movement with such ambitious goals, humble manifestations, and unconventional methods of organizing? If Transitioners are not engaging in politics in our usual understanding, and are not seeking to gain power to influence the governmental process, what is the expected path to successfully change collective life – to get from the current economic and political systems to significant adoption of the alternatives they are creating and promoting? How do Transitioners understand the efficacy of their actions?

According to our usual conceptions of social movements – defined in relation to the state or in terms of identity – the Transition movement might be seen as a lifestyle movement or dismissed as not matching the scale of the problems. Often movements that are focused on “building an alternative” are not seen as political. By focusing on the adaptive and practical aspects of the Transition movement, however, critics and scholars are missing a lot. Transition’s choice of practical, place-based forms and commitments is an ethical-political one, based on the state’s failure to meet crises of our times, and it has political effects. This dissertation explores the political significance of place-based, prefigurative social movements and the knowledge they are producing about social movement efficacy through an analysis of Transition initiatives in the northeast US.

### **Social Movement Scholarship**

Since the emergence of numerous large-scale protest movements in the 1960s and 1970s, scholarship has proliferated on what counts as a social movement, what are important areas for inquiry, and how to assess the efficacy of movements. Prior

to this increase in scholarly interest, social movements were largely viewed as manifestations of collective frustration and psychological stress, and were not considered political (McAdam 1999, 7). Two major streams of thought emerged to challenge this view: resource mobilization (RM) theory and new social movement (NSM) theory.

Rather than labeling social movement actors as deviant or pathological, the resource mobilization approach, which developed primarily in the US, held that social movement participants were rationally pursuing their interests in a system that was not adequately including them. Given the inequities in society and the political system, however, social movements only emerged and achieved success, in the RM view, when they had access to resources, most often from outside the aggrieved group (Jenkins 1983 and McAdam 1999). In contrast to the previous focus on individuals, RM scholars emphasized the importance of social movement organizations for obtaining resources and on movement structures for mobilizing capacity (McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald 1996).

Scholars influenced by the RM paradigm further developed a related body of scholarship, referred to as political process theory (PPT). PPT scholars sought to extend the analysis of the role of social movement organizations, and also to look at factors external to the social movement, in the wider political sphere. They contended that movements emerged when opportunities opened up in the political system. Doug McAdam's *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930-1970* (1999), for example, outlines what he sees as causal factors for the rise of black insurgency in the US: political opportunities that opened up between the 1930s

and 1960s, the internal organization of the movement, facilitated by pre-existing institutions, and external sources of support and funding. Thus, political process analysts built on the RM insistence that social movements were a form of politics, but distinguished themselves from earlier scholars by considering a wider range of structural conditions and the interrelationship between political contexts and organizations.

Over time, PPT came to include other factors as well, largely in response to critiques that it was “overly structural and contain[ed] rationalistic biases” (Morris 2004, 236). In particular, the model assumed that social movement organizations automatically mobilized people based on pre-existing grievances when political opportunities became available. Critics argued that this was an oversimplification of a complex process, denying the role of both human agency and culture (Goodwin and Jasper 1999). Political process scholars subsequently widened their lens to include culture, recognizing that “mediating between opportunity, organization, and action are shared meanings and definitions that people bring to their situation” (McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald 1996, 5, quoted in Morris 2004, 235). The concept of ‘framing’ was used to explain “the ways in which collective identities ar[i]se, as well as interpretive, discursive and dramaturgical practices that shap[e] movement participants’ understandings of their condition and of possible alternatives” (Edelman 2001, 291).

Thus, a consensus emerged within the political process model, the predominant approach to the study of social movements in the US, that purported to account for movement emergence and outcomes through the concepts of mobilizing



structures, political opportunity structures, and cultural framing (McAdam 1999, ix, Morris 2004, 234, and Edelman 2001, 291). Some of the leading proponents of this approach, McAdam, Tilly, and Tarrow, however, continued to modify their framework, agreeing with critics who saw “the classic social movement agenda as overly structuralist” and arguing that “the heart of explanation ought, instead, to be found in processes of social construction...[and] an understanding that each of the key variables in action is inextricably intertwined with the others” (Flacks 2003, 100). “We have come to think of interpersonal networks, interpersonal communication, and various forms of continuous negotiation – including the negotiation of identities – as figuring centrally in the dynamics of contention,” they wrote, outlining their modified approach in *Dynamics of Contention* (2001, 22).

At the most basic level though, social movements in this formulation continue to involve a group challenge against a power holder (Tilly 1999, 257). As Sidney Tarrow explained in the influential *Power in Movement*, “Power in movement grows when ordinary people join forces in contentious confrontation with elites, authorities and opponents” (1994, 1). Particular importance is placed on challengers’ relationship to the state, as it is the political system that “determines whether movements are able to develop in the first place” (Morris 2004, 235). As movements are seen to be targeting political institutions and authorities, movement success is judged based on their impact on government policy or legislation (Giugni 1998, 385).

Many of the critiques that prompted political process theory to include culture came from scholars associated with new social movement (NSM) theories.<sup>2</sup> While

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<sup>2</sup> Following Buechler (1995), I refer to new social movement theories (442) as this term is applied to a variety of approaches rather than forming a unified field.

RM scholars were advancing understandings of social movements in the US, a contrasting stream of social movement thought was developing in Europe. Influenced by movements of the 1960s and 1970s, including feminism, environmentalism, and gay and lesbian liberation, theorists such as Alain Touraine and Alberto Melucci sought to explain the emergence of movements that did not conform to Marxian explanations of class struggle and structural contradictions. The post-industrial context in which these movements emerged, these scholars maintained, gave rise to movements based on post-materialist values and concerned with identity, culture, and meaning (Darnovsky, Epstein, and Flacks 1995, xiv).

A significant contribution NSM theories made to the study of social movements was highlighting the role of identity. Actors in the new social movements self-consciously created and asserted identities, aware of the “power relations involved in their social construction” (Cohen 1985, 694). Further, these scholars conceptualized identity formation as an ongoing process. Rather than assuming that identity and interests are predetermined by one’s structural location, NSM theorists have shown that part of the work that social movements perform is the creation of collective identities and identification of or formation of group interests (Buechler 1995, 442). Melucci was particularly influential in this regard, “problematizing where the ‘collective actor’ came from rather than treating it as a given empirical fact” (Conway 2006, 9).

In addition to identity, culture was a key component of NSM theory. Many of the movements were aimed at transforming dominant cultural codes (Goodwin, Jasper, and Poletta 2000, 72), and producing cultural codes was seen as an important

component of all contemporary movements (Fischer 1997, 18). NSM scholars demonstrated that “social change is accomplished in face to face relations, at the level of personal identity and consciousness, in the household and neighborhood, whether or not such change is enunciated in public policy and macro-level power relations” (Darnovsky, Epstein, and Flacks 1995, xiv). Thus the outcomes of “new” social movements cannot be assessed in relation to the political process or institutions, as they are aimed at broader societal and cultural transformation (Flacks 2004, 137).

Whereas RM scholars focused on structural aspects of social movements, and paid particular attention to movements in relation to the state, then, NSM brought in culture and the role of identity. In place-based, prefigurative movements such as the Transition movement, however, the primary focus is neither the state nor identity. Far from being an isolated case, the Transition movement is similar to many social movements around the world today, “favor[ing] a style of politics that emphasizes the principles of autonomy, nonhierarchy, self-organization, and the like” (Escobar 2008, 258).

These prefigurative, network aspects have garnered little attention in the social movement literature to date and not much is known about what these organizing forms and commitments mean for social movement politics and democracy. We don’t readily understand how to approach the political significance of collective action that is not primarily focused on instrumental goals and outcomes. This study of the Transition movement presents an opportunity to re-examine what a social movement can be and points us in the direction of paying attention to the effects of *how* movements operate, and what their effects are at the level of everyday

practice, in addition to their instrumental goals and outcomes. As these movements require us to focus our attention on everyday practice, cultural politics, and ways of being and relating, our understanding of the effects of social movements is expanded beyond both institutions and identities.

As the Transition movement shares many distinctive features in common with other 21<sup>st</sup> century movements, this study will deepen our understanding of many contemporary movements. Not only has attention to movements that can be characterized as place-based and prefigurative been lacking, these aspects have been neglected in the study of social movements in general. The values, priorities, and daily practice of movement actors are reflected in *all* social movements, regardless of its form or focus. Thus, a greater understanding of prefigurative movements will further expand our understanding of social movements overall.

### **The Transition Movement**

The Transition movement is an ideal case for studying these questions, as it is explicitly both place-based and prefigurative. “What would it look like if the best responses to peak oil and climate change came not from [the state], but from you and me and the people around us?” Transition asks (Hopkins 2011a, 13). In *The Transition Handbook*, Rob Hopkins, widely known as the movement founder and most visible spokesperson, lays out the four key assumptions underlying Transition:

- That life with dramatically lower energy consumption is inevitable, and that it’s better to plan for it than to be taken by surprise;
- That our settlements and communities presently lack the resilience to enable them to weather the severe energy shocks that will accompany peak oil;
- That we have to act collectively, and we have to act now;

- That by unleashing the collective genius of those around us to creatively and proactively plan our energy descent, we can build ways of living that are more connected, more enriching and that recognize the biological limits of our planet (2008: 134).

The unprecedented converging crises of the environment, energy, and the economy give people the opportunity, according to the Transition model, to be a part of something historic-feeling: an extraordinary shift away from using fossil fuels. Creating the resilience to deal with predicted shocks and the ability to live without fossil fuels is the essence of the Transition movement. Rather than working against existing systems, Transition emphasizes “community-building and collective action as a pre-requisite and benefit of learning to imagine and pre-figuratively practice what it means to live in a low-carbon economy” (Haxeltine and Seyfang 2009, 6). Though climate change and peak oil were the initial motivators, it is recognized that there are many reasons that people get involved, with economic uncertainty now seen as one of the key reasons why we need to collectively end dependence on fossil fuels and “shift our support to an economy based on social justice, resilience and protection of the biosphere” (Hopkins 2011a, 35).

Rather than central plans or coordination, each local Transition initiative develops projects and priorities based on its particular place and scale. There are central themes that have emerged throughout the movement, however, such as “local energy generation, local food production, farmers markets, community gardening and composting, designing and building eco-housing; local currencies, personal development work, skill-sharing and education, recycling and repair schemes, car-sharing, and promoting cycling; supporting energy demand-reduction through self-help clubs, and so on” (Haxeltine and Seyfang 2009, 6). While the emphasis on

developing resilience in very practical ways is in some ways reminiscent of back-to-the-land movements in earlier decades, as one observer noted, “If there is a guiding romance in the movement, it would be less the self-sufficient rural life, than the engaged town or neighborhood, rich in human contacts and cooperation” (Comstock, *Huffington Post*, 2010).

The Transition model encourages people to catalyze community connections and collaborate on issues of common concern. It prioritizes seeking common ground, inclusivity, and engaging every sector of a community. The goal is to move beyond self-identified sympathizers or activists to involve a significant proportion of the population. Local groups are encouraged to draw city council members or local representatives into their efforts as early as possible in the initiative, as a strong relationship with city government is seen as crucial to success. Throughout the process of engaging local government, however, Transition groups are encouraged to engage on their own terms as a Transition initiative is a citizen-led effort, which will only flourish with widespread grassroots support and participation.

Part of how the movement seeks to spread virally and engage diverse populations is by being attractive and fun. The emphasis on using creativity to work toward a positive future is one feature that sets the Transition movement apart from more traditional groups addressing climate change and peak oil. Attention is paid to the role of emotion in individual and societal change, and there is intent to promote positive visions of the future – to use inspiration, rather than fear, to motivate. The movement does not shy away from information that might be upsetting or disturbing, however. A key commitment is to offer “a clear explanation of where humanity finds

itself based on the best science available” (Hopkins, *Transition Culture* (blog), June 4, 2010).

The Transition movement’s priority of building strong relationships and thinking and operating holistically can be traced to its basis in an ecological design approach called permaculture. A contraction of both “permanent culture” and “permanent agriculture,” the term was coined by Australians Bill Mollison, a forester, naturalist, and teacher, and his student David Holmgren. Mollison and Holmgren began in the 1970s to identify the principles that made the systems they observed in nature and in indigenous cultures both productive and sustainable. Following on “practices used by indigenous people all over the world,” Mollison and Holmgren worked to apply these principles to designing human landscapes and agricultural systems that would generate as much or more energy than they consumed (Starr and Adams 2003, 27; and Hemenway 2009, 5-7).<sup>3</sup>

Permaculture seeks to move beyond sustainability toward regeneration, arguing that humans are an integral part of the ecosystems of the planet and that with thoughtful observation, creativity, and intelligent design, we can have a beneficial impact, rather than negative or even neutral one, on our habitats. The goal is to design “ecologically sound, economically prosperous human communities” (Hemenway 2009, 6). Rather than being a technique or a discipline in itself, permaculture is an approach that uses whatever tools or strategies are most available and helpful to design beneficial, healthy relationships. The focus is not on objects, but the

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<sup>3</sup> As Starr and Adams point out, “Traditional peoples have been refining their self-sufficient agricultural and social systems for upwards of 10,000 years, providing full employment and avoiding poverty” (Starr and Adams 2003: 28). As more and more non-indigenous people are interested in indigenous practices and knowledge, there are many opportunities for collaboration and solidarity as well as appropriation and knowledge theft.

relationships among them and on the whole system rather than its component parts. Permaculture principles include things such as: use small and slow solutions; use edges and value the marginal; and design from patterns to details. Since Mollison and Holmgren began writing and teaching permaculture, the approach has spread worldwide and the principles have been used to design everything from buildings and farms to community groups and refugee camps.

Rob Hopkins was teaching permaculture in Kinsale, Ireland, when he and his students began working on a plan for the town to end its dependence on fossil fuels. He later moved to Totnes, England, and along with Naresh Giangrande, Sophy Banks, and others, further developed the idea of a “Transition Town.” As Hopkins writes, though it started with permaculture, “Other people started getting involved and bringing pieces from systems thinking, psychology, business development and the power of the internet to spread ideas” (2011a, 21). Through ongoing practice and reflection in Totnes, they have developed multiple iterations of the Transition model and launched an international network of initiatives.

Transition is part of a much larger and more diverse stream of movements centered on relocalization, community resilience, and alternative economies. The 1970s environmental movement in Europe and North America was deeply influenced by E.F. Schumacher’s “Small is Beautiful” philosophy (Barry and Quilley 2009, 8), and the “back to the land” movement of the time combined environmental concerns with experiments in sustainable living.<sup>4</sup> Starr and Adams trace this intellectual lineage more broadly, citing Rousseau, Gandhi, anarchism, and indigenous cultures as

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<sup>4</sup> Other thinkers and writers that have influenced these movements include Kirkpatrick Sale, Helena Norberg-Hodge, and Wendell Berry, among others.



influences on contemporary autonomous movements, including those dedicated to relocalization or “delinking” from the global economy (2003: 22).<sup>5</sup>

Hess points to the Post Carbon Institute’s launching of a Relocalization Network in the early 2000s as a key moment in the latest “iteration of environmentalism and localization,” which he called “[c]onsiderably more pragmatic and less utopian than some of its historical predecessors.” “Here the focus is less on building new types of community than on shifting existing cities and towns toward local self-reliance in food and energy,” he writes (2009, 7). The Relocalization Network ceased functioning as a project of PCI in 2009 and the local chapters were integrated in the Transition movement. More broadly during this same time period, the local food movement and community-supported agriculture have grown significantly, as well as attention on and support of locally owned businesses.

From the deliberate application of permaculture principles, along with the more diffuse and implicit influences of complexity theory and other sources of inspiration, to designing an organizing model and a social movement, Transitioners are constructing knowledge about activism and social change, and redefining social movement efficacy. The permaculture-based model starts from an interest in the particular, foregrounds process, and also pays attention to the work of “hearts and minds,” all features not common in dominant organizing approaches in the contemporary US. Rather than a commitment to a predetermined end, the movement prioritizes autonomy and self-determination. Instead of a central governing body, the model encourages information sharing and coordination among independent, self-

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<sup>5</sup> As Kumar (1996) writes, “Gandhi’s vision of a free India was not of a nation-state but a confederation of self-governing, self-reliant, self-employed people living in village communities, deriving their right livelihood from the products of their homesteads” (419).

organized projects. The model is frequently referred to as “open source,” in that it is made freely available with the intention that others take ownership of it, shape it, and put it into practice in their own contexts.

The Transition movement is self-conscious about experimenting with these forms and commitments in an effort to create knowledge about effective social change and organizing that is neither state- nor identity-focused. As Hopkins writes, “these extraordinary times into which we are moving extraordinarily fast demand new tools, both practical and thinking tools...as we stand on the verge of the monumental changes that peak oil and climate change will impose, to have confrontational activism as the principal tool in our toolbox is profoundly unskillful” (*Transition Culture* (blog), May 15, 2008). The model thus encourages experimentation and adaptation, seeing the movement itself as an iterative learning process.

In its goal to be self-organizing, open-ended and non-hierarchical, and with its holistic, pre-figurative commitments, what is the Transition movement learning about social change? What are the challenges particular to horizontal forms of organization and commitments to inclusivity? What sort of knowledge is Transition producing about effective organizing? How is efficacy itself being re-defined? What other cultural meanings are being unsettled or re-imagined by the movement? Further, what knowledge is Transition producing about contemporary challenges and alternative possibilities of democracy and economy?

The place-based, networked, prefigurative nature of the Transition movement means that it is not easily evaluated by traditional measures. Though the movement does have implications both for relations with the state and for identity, neither of

these are primary. Analyzing the Transition movement requires paying attention to the politics of everyday life, cultural politics, and knowledge practices. I therefore look at the effects of the Transition movement on social relations and political subjectivity, as well as the instrumental outcomes. I pay particular attention to how Transitioners themselves understand their actions, understanding the movement not as a fixed entity but as constituted by ongoing negotiations and contradictions. I also address the challenges particular to this UK-born movement in the US context.

The Transition movement, as a movement that seeks to create alternative systems, relationships, and institutions more than challenge existing institutions or powerholders, is operating with an alternate view of social movement efficacy. Like many “localist” movements in the US and around the world (see Hess 2010; Reid and Taylor 2010; Holland, et al. 2007), rather than emphasizing their citizenship in a certain polity, Transitioners highlight belonging to a specific locale, and seek to assert independence from the globalized economy. What is being sought is the ability to meet personal and communal needs locally, in relationship, independently of the current economic and political system.

### **My Research, Methods, and Positionality**

After its start in the United Kingdom in 2006, the Transition model quickly spread throughout Europe, as well as around the globe. Initiatives are now underway in over 35 countries, including Chile, Japan, Brazil, and Canada, with the most activity in Europe, Australia, and the US (Crinion and Hopkins 2011, 4). There are currently over 125 groups in the US recognized as official Transition Initiatives. With

the majority of them on the west coast or in the northeast, there are official initiatives throughout the country, including in Oklahoma, Kentucky, Texas, Ohio, and Illinois (TransitionUS.org, accessed November 26, 2012). Hundreds more US communities are organizing under the Transition Towns banner without official status, and every state in the country is represented in some way in the movement.

Among the dozens of organized Transition initiatives in the northeast there are six official initiatives in Vermont, three in Maine, one in New Hampshire, and eleven in Massachusetts (TransitionUS.org). During 2011 and 2012, I visited many of these initiatives, including in Newburyport, Jamaica Plain, Northfield, and Wayland in Massachusetts; Putney and Montpelier in Vermont; and Keene, New Hampshire. I also attended weekend-long workshops, called Training for Transition, in Charlotte, VT, Belfast, ME, and Cambridge, MA. I participated in a New England Transition and Resilience Gathering with Transition practitioners from around the region. I conducted over forty formal interviews, sat in on nearly a dozen meetings of steering committees, enjoyed many potlucks, participated in skill-shares, working group meetings, lectures, and film showings. When I was not engaged in participating in Transition events physically, I stayed connected to initiatives and leaders through Facebook, Ning, occasional conference calls and webinars, and frequent e-mail newsletters and discussion lists.

The northeast US presents a great opportunity to study the Transition movement. There are many initiatives in varied contexts (rural, suburban, and urban, with different economic bases) in close proximity and in conversation with one another. There is a long tradition in the northeast of environmentalism, utopian

experiments, small-scale agriculture, and also of pride in the area's democratic history and traditions, such as town hall meetings. Transition initiatives are likely to be very different in other parts of the US, though further research is needed to understand how Transition is developing in distinct cultural, economic, and geographic contexts.

I focused primarily on the well-developed and active Transition initiatives in Montpelier, Vermont, Newburyport, Massachusetts, and Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts. Each of these initiatives provides a unique lens on the Transition movement in the US as they are developing in quite distinct contexts. Transition Montpelier was one of the first official initiatives in the US, organized in 2008. Montpelier is a small capital city in the midst of smaller towns in north-central Vermont, with a predominantly white, mixed-class population, also known for being politically progressive. The small size, rural character, relative homogeneity, and history of progressive politics of Montpelier are not unlike Totnes, England, where the Transition movement began.

The original initiators who started the effort in 2008 still make up part of its sizable leadership team, though they have added quite a few other people as well. Transition Town Montpelier (TTM), as it's known, holds regular potlucks and boasts many semi-independent working groups. Because there are many other efforts related to sustainable living and alternative economies already underway in the area (indeed many people living there came as part of the "back to the land" movement of earlier decades), the group sought to fill niches not already being filled and focuses primarily on "reskilling" (learning skills for a low-carbon life, such as food

preservation, sewing and mending, scything, seed saving, etc.) and disaster preparedness (namely flooding and loss of electricity). When I started studying Transition Town Montpelier in 2011, the group already had a significant record of accomplishments in terms of holding events and starting working groups. Based on my conversations with others in local government and community organizations, they were well known and highly visible in the area.

Transition Newburyport, on the eastern coast of Massachusetts, provided another perspective for my study. Newburyport is an affluent, mostly white suburban town north of Boston. In contrast to Montpelier, I did not find many efforts similar to Transition already underway in the town, nor is there a strong history of sustainable living or community organizing. Tourism is a significant part of Newburyport's economy, and many people commute to Boston for work.

The first official initiative in Massachusetts, Transition Newburyport has developed slowly but steadily over the past several years. Two of the first initiators remain central to the initiative while the rest of the steering committee has turned over. The initiative has strong connections to the local Congregational church and has focused on awareness raising, by hosting film screenings and talks, as well as on community building through potlucks and the like. In the past couple of years, the group has been deepening and building the initiative through edible gardening groups and small groups set up for study and mutual aid.

Jamaica Plain is a densely populated urban neighborhood within Boston. The population of 37,000 is over half people of color, with Latino/as making up about one-third of the neighborhood's population. The area has a strong history of

community involvement and progressive activism. Gentrification is a central concern as there has been a dramatic increase in home prices over the last decade and census data show the population becoming more white.

The initiators of JP NET, or Jamaica Plain New Economy Transition, are primarily a seasoned bunch of activists, some of whom are affiliated with the Institute for Policy Studies, of which JP NET is a pilot project. Though JP NET was just getting started at the beginning of my research, over the past two years they have built a vibrant following, hosting monthly potlucks, planting vegetable gardens and an orchard on city-owned land, and even beginning the initial steps of developing a local currency. JP NET sees part of the importance of what they are doing as creating an urban model of transition for the US.

In addition to my role as researcher, I have been personally involved as an activist in the Transition movement, working with others to start an initiative in my own city of Somerville, MA, during 2009 and 2010. This past experience helped inform my understanding of the movement and shaped the questions I was interested in exploring. The fact that I was recognized as an “insider” by many in the Transition movement undoubtedly helped facilitate my access to interviews, as well as participation in events and meetings, and helped me establish trust and rapport with interview subjects (Blee and Taylor 2002, 97). Similarly, my perspective and relationships with those in the movement are not separate from my positionality as a white, middle-class woman from and living in the US.

I used a combination of research methods to carry out this study, including interviews, participant-observation, and use of documents and archives, including

online discussions, web pages, and e-mail lists. This triangulation of methods allowed me to gain a full, nuanced picture of the range of activity that makes up a Transition initiative and the Transition movement in the northeast US. Relying primarily on participant observation and interviewing enabled me to grasp “lived experience, ...the meanings embedded in everyday life, ...[and] motives and emotions” (Lichterman 2002, 121).

In Montpelier, Newburyport, and Jamaica Plain, I attended two to four meetings of the initiating or steering group in each location as well as five or more public events or working group meetings. I conducted interviews with as many of the members of each initiating or steering committee as possible, roughly twelve to fifteen semi-structured interviews in each site in all. I sought to interview a diversity of people in terms of sex, race, age, class, and previous activist experience. In Northfield, MA, Wayland, MA, and Putney, VT, I observed two to three meetings or events and conducted roughly two interviews per site. I also conducted interviews with people involved in Transition in some way in Keene, NH, Barre, VT, Burlington, VT, Cambridge, MA, and Portland, ME. At the national level, I interviewed two staff people of Transition US, based in California, as well as national-level activists in religious, environmental justice, and permaculture contexts who have had association with the Transition movement.

Through my conversations with these interview subjects, I gathered their experiences with the Transition movement, how they see it and what their leadership and organizing practices are. I asked about their motivations for participating, and their past relevant history, and how they gauge the success or meaning of their efforts.



I also interviewed individuals not actively involved in or identified with the Transition movement. Speaking with those not involved in Transition, but who work with groups in one capacity or another, helped me to understand the wider effects and limitations of the local Transition initiatives.

I studied books, articles, websites, and other materials produced by Transition movement leaders and participants, which provided important background information and understanding of the Transition model and movement origins. I also gained valuable insights on the Transition movement from the articles, blogs, e-mail postings, and interviews with Transitioners. Many people active in the movement are scholars, writers, and observers of social movements who have also been reflecting on the Transition movement and their own efforts. In fact, it is hard to draw a distinction between “scholar” and “activist” in this research project. In keeping with understanding social movements as knowledge-producers (more on this in Chapter 2), and combined with the growing recognition among scholars of social movements that through our work we contribute to “creating or ‘performing’ the worlds we inhabit,” I see my research as part of a broader collective effort alongside many other scholars and activists within and outside of the Transition movement (Gibson-Graham 2008, 614; also Casas-Cortés, Osterweil, and Powell 2008).

The Transition initiators and activists in the northeast US are a diverse group in some respects. There are savvy, well-connected veteran activists as well as those who are brand new to civic or political engagement. Some work for major corporations and others make a modest living in the informal economy. They are young and old, religious and secular, back-to-the-landers and suburban homeowners.

Like them, I am deeply invested in the creation of alternatives to our current economic and political systems and I, too, am embedded in the contexts of environmental crisis and economic insecurity (Scott-Cato and Hillier 2010, 870).

In 2008, looking for a way to integrate my interests and concerns about both economic justice and climate change, I went to an evening talk in Cambridge, MA, on something unknown to me at that point, Transition Towns. That night I was struck by the contrasts to other environmental and social justice organizing with which I was more familiar. Transition was as ambitious and cultural as it was small-scale and pragmatic. Its holistic approach, combined with the way in which the movement was generating considerable excitement in the northeast US and around the world, was hopeful to me, and I was intrigued by its seeming openness, contradictions, and paradoxes.

Much has happened since I first learned about Transition Towns over four years ago. Scientists' predictions about our climate-disrupted future are becoming ever more dire, while the effects of climate change in the present are all around, from floods in Vermont to droughts and wildfires in Texas, to most recently Superstorm Sandy. "Tar sands" and "fracking" have become household words as more and more unconventional, riskier fuel sources have been developed. We've been reminded of the risks associated with our energy sources by accidents at Fukushima and the Deepwater Horizon.

At the same time, the Occupy movement and the climate justice movement (most visibly spear-headed by 350.org) have brought much greater attention to the economic and environmental crises. Transition too has been growing and evolving.

Throughout my study, there has been much more Transition activity in the northeast US alone than I could closely track. My dissertation is necessarily limited then, but hopefully it captures and contributes in some way to the processes of “becoming” of this contemporary movement. I aim in this work to explore the Transition movement on its own terms, not in comparison to more typical organizing forms. I respect and appreciate Transition’s “social experiment” and as J. K. Gibson-Graham writes, “To treat something as a social experiment is to open to what it has to teach us, very different from the critical task of assessing the ways in which it is good or bad, strong or weak, mainstream or alternative. It recognizes that what we are looking at is on its way to being something else and strategizes about how to participate in that process of becoming” (2008, 628).

## CHAPTER 2

### LOCATING THE TRANSITION MOVEMENT IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL MOVEMENT SCHOLARSHIP

Beginning with the Zapatistas, through alternative globalization movements, the related World Social Forum processes, and popular movements in post-2001 Argentina and other countries around the globe, scholars have observed that contemporary movements are emphasizing autonomy, inclusivity, and openness. Alongside more traditional practices, movements are increasingly making use of networking, non-hierarchical forms, and flexible structures. They are attempting to create a multitude of alternatives rather than pursuing a single agenda, encouraging diversity, and experimenting with direct democracy. These movements can be called “prefigurative” in that they seek to organize in the present in ways that are consistent with future goals. Autonomy, networks, and place are central to the aims of the movements and to their forms of organizing.

A diverse body of scholarship is emerging analyzing these contemporary movements. In addition to charting the multiple forms and the ways they are playing out within movements, scholars are raising critical questions about the effects of these movements with respect to capitalism, neoliberalism, and democracy. Scholars have also begun exploring ways of approaching the study of these movements and looking at how activists themselves understand the efficacy of the movements.

In this chapter, I explore the significant themes raised by scholars of contemporary movements, which are useful in understanding the Transition

movement. While there is already a growing literature on the Transition movement within the context of sustainability and grassroots environmental efforts,<sup>6</sup> it is also important to understand Transition as part of the larger globalization-era social movement trends. Placing Transition in conversation with other contemporary movements that have similar forms and commitments can help activists recognize areas of overlap and potential solidarity, as well as increase possibilities for learning from one another. Making explicit the differences among various activist strategies can also help Transition supporters and critics alike to better understand one another and the trade-offs involved in various commitments and strategies. Further, understanding the commonalities between the Transition movement and many anti-globalization movements and grassroots movements around the world can help bridge the typical divide between “environmental” and “social justice” concerns. In sum, this chapter both locates my research within the broader context of scholarship on contemporary movements and advances our understanding of the Transition movement.

### **Self-determination and Autonomy**

Scholars are increasingly exploring autonomy as one of the key features in many contemporary social movements. Böhm, Dinerstein, and Spicer observe that autonomy “usually involves a struggle for self-determination, organizational self-management and independent social and economic practices vis-à-vis the state and capital” (2010, 17). Starr and Adams further clarify what unites these movements

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Michael Peters, Shane Fudge, and Tim Jackson, eds. *Low Carbon Communities* (2010); Phillipa Wells in *Interdisciplinary Environmental Review* (October 2011); Peter J. Taylor in *Local Environment* (April 2012); and Gerald Aiken in *Geography Compass* (2012).

that are “referred to in varying contexts as *agrarismo* movements, separatist movements, anarchist movements, or by explicitly calling themselves ‘autonomous movements.’” These movements, they write, reject “reformed versions of capitalism, the state, ideology, or any other intermediaries separating social problems from direct action in the space of everyday life...assert[ing] that communities can find the solutions to their problems within their own cultural traditions and collective talents. Unlike the New Left, contemporary autonomous movements reject the seizure of power as a strategy just as surely as they reject the elusive politics of mass struggle; instead they work towards a ‘revolution of everyday life’ (Starr and Adams 2003, 29).<sup>7</sup>

Many theorizations of these contemporary movements start with or were inspired by the Zapatistas of southern Mexico and “their ongoing ethical project of self-transformation, their continual search for ways to exercise power, and their freedom to act, which arises from practices of autonomy and self-determination” (Gibson-Graham 2006, viii). In *Change the World Without Taking Power* (2002; 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 2010), theorist John Holloway begins with the premise that both political theory and 20<sup>th</sup> century revolutionary experience have shown us that “the world cannot be changed through the state” (2010, 19). This compels the reimagining of revolution as “not the conquest of power but the dissolution of power” (2010, 20). The struggle against this power-over at its root is a struggle for self-determination and dignity.

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<sup>7</sup> Starr and Adams go on to explain of these movements: “As George Katsiaficas documents, these movements appeared first in an autonomous version of the traditional class struggle movement of Autonomia in the late 1970s in Italy. Then, as Autonomia began to decline in the 1980s, the far more diverse form of the Autonomien first arose in the metropolises of Germany. Similar movements have since emerged in other areas of Europe, South America, North America, Asia and other parts of the world. The best-known and most influential of these newer autonomous movements is undoubtedly the Zapatista movement, based in the southern Mexican state of Chiapas” (2003, 29).

Following his reading of the Zapatistas, Holloway argues for taking dignity as a central principle for radical, transformational politics. He writes:

That is surely what they [Zapatistas] mean by dignity: the rebellion that is in all of us, the struggle for a humanity that is denied us, the struggle against the crippling of the humanity that we are. Dignity is an intensely lived struggle that fills the detail of our everyday lives. Often the struggle of dignity is non-subordinate rather than openly insubordinate, often it is seen as private rather than in any particular sense political or anti-capitalist. Yet the non-subordinate struggle for dignity is the material substratum of hope. That is the point of departure, politically and theoretically. (2010, 158)

Thus, Holloway's revolution begins from everyday lived experience and fundamentally challenges the state as a privileged site for political action and change (221).

Another movement theorist, Raúl Zibechi, argues in a similar vein, starting from the "cycle of struggle and insurrection instigated by the Bolivian people in the year 2000" (2010: 1). "[J]ust as Zapatismo shed light on a new way of doing politics beyond the state in the 1990s," Zibechi argues, "the Bolivian movements show us that it is not only desirable to build power beyond the state, but also possible" (2010, 1). "Although a good many revolutions have improved people's living conditions, which is certainly an important achievement, they have not been able to create new worlds" (4). Instead, building emancipatory social relationships "within our own territories" is the revolutionary path offered by Zibechi.

Several scholars of Argentina's post-2001 movements similarly write about the role of movements in creating new social relationships and cultivating individuals' autonomy, or "potency" in Zibechi's conceptualization. Marina Sitrin (2005) looks at the emphasis on "horizontalism" common to neighborhood assemblies, *piqueteros*, and autonomous movements. She quotes one activist, Emilio:

“Horizontalism begins when people begin to solve their problems themselves, without turning to the institutions that caused the problems in the first place” (38). “*Horizontalidad*,” she explains, “implies democratic communication on a level plane and involves – or at least intentionally strives towards – nonhierarchical and anti-authoritarian creation rather than reaction” (3). Sitrin describes the movements as prefigurative, in that “they are engaged in the more immediate politics of everyday life, creating the future in their present” (4-5). Sitrin maintains that horizontalism, together with self-determination, is creating changes in values and subjectivities, which cannot be measured through institutional politics, but in dignity and everyday life.

Svampa and Corral (2006) reach similar conclusions about the neighborhood assemblies that they study. They identify several characteristics that make them novel political expressions. First, they maintain that the neighborhood assemblies were spaces for organization and discussion that was seen as distinct from the usual forms of political representation. These spaces allowed for self-organization and privileged equality, horizontality, and direct action. Second, they involved forms of action that fundamentally challenged the status quo, asserting that there were alternatives. Svampa and Corral highlight that this “return[ed] to individuals their capacity to become genuine actors in public life” and helped to build solidarity and trust, which had been eroded through neo-liberalism (118).

These and similar studies that focus on activist commitments to self-determination and network forms of organizing have been critiqued by other scholars who argue that these movements are being overly romanticized. As one scholar



observes, “In practice, activist networks involve varying degrees of centralization and hierarchy,” and “the absence of formal hierarchical designs does not prevent, and may even encourage, the rise of informal hierarchies” (Juris 2008, 18). Likewise, Holloway’s argument has received much criticism for ignoring the ways in which even the forms of democracy practiced by the Zapatistas are not free of some degree of hierarchy and control (Löwy 2003). “Democracy means that the majority has power over the minority,” one critic writes, “Not an absolute power: it has limits, and it has to respect the dignity of the other. But still, it has power-over” (Löwy 2003, 177). Further, Holloway’s abandonment of the state (and liberal democracy) as a site of struggle has been criticized for being naïve and potentially dangerous, a dismissal of a potentially powerful strategic space and creating an opening for totalitarianism (McNaughton 2008).

Böhm, Dinerstein, and Spicer offer a more sympathetic caution to scholars of autonomous movements, arguing that “autonomy cannot be seen to be detached from accumulation processes of capital, nor from liberal democracy, nor development. Rather, it is intertwined with these modes of social life, which autonomous movements seek autonomy from” (2010, 24). Particularly significant to this study of the Transition movement in the northeast US, they also point out that often “autonomy movements deliver what were previously state services and ensure the governance of a population” and “[in] North America the restructuring of the neoliberal state has relied on a shift in the provision of services from the state to either the private or non-profit sectors (Rhodes 1994; Leys 2003)” (Böhm, Dinerstein, and Spicer 2010, 25). The authors cite critics who “have pointed out how discourses

of autonomy actually amount to a tacit agreement with neoliberal politics of slimming down the state” (26). In their final analysis, however, Böhm, Dinerstein, and Spicer maintain that “autonomous practices are rarely completely captured by existing institutions. This means they continue to produce the possibility of resistance and change” (27).

### **Networking**

For many of the movements discussed above, an emphasis on autonomy and self-determination is coupled with connections to other groups via decentralized networks. Scholars have observed that movements are increasingly networked across the globe, linking with activists in other regions, coordinating actions (Starr and Adams 29), and creating “counter-hegemonic transnational spaces” (Alvarez 2004, 199).

Many scholars are studying the ways in which activists are using Internet communications technologies to enable the growth of transnational networks and create conditions for new forms of organizing. Jeffrey Juris, in *Networking Futures* (2008), maintains that the anti-corporate globalization movement can be understood as a social laboratory, innovating new social movement forms, norms and practices for a digital age (Juris 2008, 296-297). These practices “involve a dual politics, constituting tactical infrastructures for intervening within dominant political spheres while simultaneously prefiguring alternative, directly democratic worlds” (296-7). Horizontal networking, Juris argues, is an effective political organizing tool and strategy “in a world characterized by increasing global connectedness, transnational

communication, and technological innovation” (296-7). Simultaneously, these networks are also prefigurative in that they provide a model of and experience in “open access, direct democracy, and grassroots participation” (296-7).

Juris presents a detailed ethnographic look at the Barcelona-based Movement for Global Resistance and other related and overlapping transnational networks. He concludes that the anti-corporate globalization movements are distinctive in several ways: transnational communication and coordination networks play a key role in strategy and tactics (58), media is highly important, not only the instrumental production of visible, theatrical images, but also the “horizontal, directly democratic process through which actions are organized” (58), and, thirdly, the AGM “provide[s] spaces for experiencing and experimenting with direct democracy, grassroots participation and alternative forms of embodied sociality within daily social life” (59). Juris argues that it is new digital technologies that have enabled activists to develop organizing strategies that are consistent with their political values and ideals: “the historical tension between directly democratic organization and political effectiveness, while not obsolete, can now be more readily overcome,” he writes (290).

More recently, Juris, along with his colleagues Carles Feixa and Inês Pereira, has proposed that “anti-corporate globalization movements can be understood, in analytic and theoretical terms, as ‘new, new’ social movements involving the rise of a new wave of contentious action and its associated characteristics” (2009, 425). While acknowledging that many features of these movements are “old,” they maintain that these “new, new” movements “straddle the frontier of physical and virtual space,” in

that the AGM is largely “situated in globally networked space, like the neoliberal system” it opposes (426-7). The network organization, characterized by “loose, decentralized groups” makes up transnational ‘movement webs’ (Alvarez 1998). They involve local, regional and global levels of action (438) and are dependent on a host of communications technologies, through which “resources and knowledge continuously flow” (427).

Network organization has also been seen to be a key component of the World Social Forum process. Beginning in Brazil in 2001, these forums are organized through and with a goal of creating open space, horizontalism, and participatory democracy. Boaventura Sousa de Santos (2006) argues that the World Social Forum constitutes a critical utopia, creating space for alternatives to neo-liberal globalization. The WSF, Santos maintains, represents an “exploration of new modes of human possibility and styles of will, and the use of the imagination to confront the apparent inevitability of whatever exists with something radically better that is worth fighting for, and to which humankind is fully entitled (Santos 1995: 479)” (Santos 2006, 10). It is the openness of the WSF process that Santos sees as a crucial aspect of its novel utopianism (11). “The other possible world may be many things, but never a world with no alternative,” he writes (2006, 12). Santos also highlights other distinctive features of the WSF that are connected to network organization and processes: its rejection of hierarchical leadership, commitment to equality combined with a recognition of difference, autonomy, and non-conformity, and “demo-diversity” (diversity of democracies) (35-45).

Thus, from allowing for more horizontal forms of relating to enabling diverse alternatives, networking is a key aspect of the prefigurative organizing strategies in many contemporary movements. They are prefigurative in that they are enacting in the present the “kind of social relations and political cultures they are struggling to nurture,” “[r]ather than constantly deflecting their political aspirations to some distant future, as often required of traditional leftist movements” (Osterweil 2005a, 182). As Graeber writes of what he terms the ‘globalization movement,’ “in North America, especially, this is a movement about reinventing democracy...It is about creating and enacting horizontal networks instead of top-down structures like states, parties or corporations; networks based on principles of decentralized, non-hierarchical consensus democracy. Ultimately, it aspires to be much more than that, because ultimately it aspires to reinvent daily life as whole” (2002, 9).<sup>8</sup>

Many contemporary activists and scholars are looking for new models for understanding the features and possibilities of networking in 21<sup>st</sup> century movements. Some have found promise in complexity theory and related fields originating from the natural sciences. These scholars are employing concepts related to networks such as self-organization, strange attractors, heterarchy, and nonlinearity to describe the complex phenomena of social movements (Peltonen 2006; Chesters and Welsh 2005, 2006; Escobar 2004, 2008).

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<sup>8</sup> It is useful here to return to Zibechi, who points out that “For over a century, anti-systemic movements have developed their organizational structures in parallel to capital, the state, the military, and other institutions of the system they fight...[they] seem to have two sources that ultimately spring from the same genealogy: the military machine of the state apparatus and the Taylorist organization of work. Both share the creation of a centralized and unified body separate from everyday life in order to lead society, impose homogeneity from outside, and shape it according to the wishes of those who occupy the space above” (2010, 45).

In “Other Worlds are (Already) Possible: Self-organisation, Complexity and Post-capitalist Cultures,” Escobar argues that progressive social movements should consider using cyberspace as a model for network forms of organization and resistance, striving for self-organization, non-hierarchy, and the ability to learn from feedback (2004, 353). Anti-globalization movements, he maintains, are already demonstrating the potential efficacy of these forms of organization, as they have shown the power of emergence and collective intelligence (2004, 354-355). Particularly in large protest events, the AGM has had effects beyond the sum of its parts.

Chesters and Welsh (2005 and 2006) take the complexity analysis of the alternative globalization movement (AGM) much further. They argue that the AGM (they include the World Social Forum in this broad category) cannot be understood using mainstream social movement theories that “operate within the conceptual confines of the nation-state” and focus on “collective identity as a mechanism of expressing political claims or grievances” (2005, 189). Instead, in *Complexity and Social Movements: Multitudes at the edge of chaos* (2006), using Deleuze and Guattari and Melucci, among other theorists, they offer an analysis of the AGM using the concepts and insights of complexity theory (189). Chesters and Welsh maintain that the AGM exhibits characteristics such as adaptability, dynamism, and self-organization, characteristics of complex systems which arise from “nonlinear interactions between diverse individuals, groups and movements in processes of encounter, deliberation and exchange” (204). This is enabled by the AGM’s emphasis on self-determination, diversity, relationship, and process. They call

attention to the fact that the physical encounters involved in the AGM (protests, *encuentros*, etc.) are closely linked to the widespread use of Internet communications technologies (192).

It is important to note that though the rise and spread of Internet technologies has opened up new possibilities for decentralized organizing and renewed scholarly interest in these forms of organizing, they are not new. Among other antecedents, these forms can be traced to feminist movements around the world. As Alvarez observes, “Feminist theories and feminist activists coming from many places – prominently from Brazil/Latin America and India/South Asia, in the case of the global WSF meetings held between 2001 and 2005 – have been an organized, if often largely un- or underacknowledged, presence in the AGMs and the WSF and have struggled mightily to ensure precisely the ‘logics of difference, horizontality, and dispersion,’ long-time feminist trademarks now often celebrated as a ‘novelty’ of the globalist ‘left’” (2005, 254).

Similarly, Osterweil notes that the prefigurative politics characteristic of the AGM are “closely related to, and in effect coconstituted by, the work women’s movements, their critiques, and their presence in local and international politics over the last three decades” (2005a, 180).<sup>9</sup> Gibson-Graham has explored the ways in which alternative understandings of politics and social change developed out of

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<sup>9</sup> Osterweil goes on to note that she uses “the term *coconstituted*, because ultimately these women’s movements are themselves products of the influence and inspiration of various movements, events, and political experiences from around the world, some of which are not necessarily considered women-based or predominantly feminist.” For an excellent analysis of democratic politics within US social movements, see Poletta, *Freedom is an Endless Meeting* (2004). Poletta writes of how the US civil rights movement, building on Gandhian nonviolence and other traditions such as Quaker witness, “combined practical organizing with a vision of radical social change, sought local gains while exposing to the nation the injustices of Southern apartheid, and treated participatory decisionmaking both as a strategy and as an end in itself” (199).

second-wave feminism. “Whereas formerly politics was seen to involve large groups of people or small numbers of highly influential individuals organizing to gain power to create change,” they write, “second wave feminism initiated a politics of local and personal transformation – a ‘politics of becoming’” (2005, 130).

### **Place-based Movements**

Just as the feminist antecedents of many of these forms and commitments are often overlooked, conventional analyses often devalue or deemphasize the fact that the same movements that are actively networking with others around the globe also are often characterized by a commitment to and rootedness in place. Wendy Harcourt, Arturo Escobar, and their collaborators in *Women and the Politics of Place* (2005) show how many women’s struggles around the world centered on bodies, environments, and economies are often enacting a prefigurative politics. Many contemporary movements around the world, they observe, “are engaged in a new kind of politics that often emphasizes the local, the cultural, the present, and the possibilities of other ways of being. For these movements, not only the content but also the process and the very form of politics are of consequence” (14). Harcourt and Escobar argue that many of these struggles are creating a new form of politics that challenges “the dominant patriarchal and globalocentric narratives of neoliberal globalization” (15), generating “new possibilities of being-in-place and being-in-networks with other human and nonhuman living beings” (3).

Within the *Women and the Politics of Place* framework, Harcourt and Escobar employ the concept of a “meshwork” which highlights the simultaneous place-based



and global aspects of these movements (place-based globalism as Osterweil calls it). Place-based groups “engage in dynamic vertical and horizontal networking, connecting among themselves and with others in places far and near, across cultural, political, racial and ethnic divides” (2005, 14). These meshworks “tend to be nonhierarchical and self-organizing” and “involve two parallel dynamics: strategies of localization and interweaving” (12-14). “The sense of globality one sees emerging out of the many so-called global movements is one that does not search for universal validity or an all-embracing global reality, no matter how alternative;” they write, “but one that seeks to preserve heterogeneity and diversity, even as, and precisely through, new kinds of alliances and networking.” (14).

In *Territories of Difference* (2008), Escobar extends many of these analyses. In contrast to the profusion of literature that ascribes power to the global, Escobar maintains that a politics of place remains important. “The politics of place can be seen as an emergent form of politics, a novel political imaginary in that it asserts a logic of difference and possibility that build on the multiplicity of actions at the level of everyday life” (67). Through his study of Afro-Colombian activism and *Proceso de Comunidades Negras* (PCN) in the Pacific region of Colombia, Escobar discusses networks, cultural politics, and knowledge production. He shows how the region has been constructed as such through biological and geological history and development, as well as the cultural-political practices of social movements (31).

Similar to the idea of “meshworks,” Escobar identifies two strategies of localization that contemporary movements such as the PCN are engaging in: place-based strategies rooted in a specific locale and culture, and network strategies that

“enable social movements to enact a politics of scale from below” (32). He writes of “flat alternatives,” consistent with but going beyond the concept of horizontality. Flat alternatives encompass practices such as self-organizing networks and thinking in terms of multiplicities, becoming, in-betweenness, and micropolitics instead of binarisms, totalities, laws, and ideologies (296-297). Tracing the various networks that the PCN is a part of and constitutes, he highlights the role of “decentralization, resilience and autonomy” (276). These place-based, networked strategies and practices of social movements are critical in opening up alternatives to the current social, democratic, and ecological crises of the world today, Escobar maintains. “Besides their material and political goals, movements such as the PCN contribute to widen the field of the possible” (310), he writes, and “might indeed be constructing conditions for reexistence” (311).

Constructing alternatives, in local places, to contemporary globalized ways of living is also at the core of what Starr and Adams describe as relocalization or autonomy strategies. They write that these movements are one strand of anti-globalization movements, alongside radical reform movements and people’s globalization or “globalization from below.” (Starr and Adams 2003, 19-20). “Drawing on Rousseau, Gandhian development, anarchism, indigenous culture, and village anthropology,” (22) these movements focus on local economic institutions and production outside of global markets and/or work toward local political systems that reject “reformed versions of capitalism, the state, ideology, or any other intermediaries separating social problems from direct action in the space of everyday life” (29). Starr and Adams argue that scholars who dismiss these movements as

“romantic” are ignoring the empirical record that demonstrates “the impressive material accomplishments of local experiments in reducing inequality and immiseration while protecting the ecological base” (22). We have a lot to learn, they maintain, from autonomous movements that are “engage[d] in a highly adaptable framework of insurrectionary experimentation” (42).

### **Knowledge Production and Complexity**

As Starr and Adams imply of the many autonomous movements in their global survey, and as in Escobar’s study of the PCN, the focus on alternatives and radical possibility in many contemporary movements often goes hand in hand with a self-conscious dedication to knowledge production. Of the Afro-Colombian struggle, Escobar writes that a priority has been constructing “*pensamiento propio*,” or “autonomous ways of thinking, being and doing” (2008, 263). The PCN activists, Escobar maintains, articulate alternative ways of knowing and being which hold promise for advancing their political projects, from their position of “colonial difference that has to do with blackness or indigeneity and with living in particular landscapes and ecosystems” (13).

Similarly, the “other worlds” that World Social Forum activists assert are possible and the alternatives being prefigured by the alternative globalization movement require new ways of knowing and new understandings of the world. Within social movement studies, particularly within anthropology and science and technology studies, there is a growing recognition that movements should be seen as knowledge producers (Casas-Cortés, Osterweil, and Powell 2008, Escobar 2008, and

Hess 2010). Political scientist Janet Conway observes that “Knowledge production is central to both the making and meaning of social movements” and she argues that this knowledge is “central to defining and waging wider social struggles and to the forging of any genuinely democratic future” (2006, 21).

In *Praxis and Politics: Knowledge Production in Social Movements* (2006), Conway explores the tensions over strategy and knowledge production within Toronto’s Metro Network for Social Justice. She describes competing understandings of power and change in the network as some activists shifted away from an “exclusive or primary preoccupation with the state as a source of power and (progressive) change” and toward “a different kind of struggle premised on a different kind of agency,” based in civil society (134). In addition to their usual tactics involving protest and direct action, these activists began working on knowledge production, aiming to envision possible alternatives to neoliberal globalization. Pursuing this agenda led them to give importance to “a cultural politics premised on building people’s critical capacities through dialogical and democratic processes” (134).

As Conway observes, “To privilege knowledge production, and with it, capacity building and cultural politics, is in considerable tension with conventional notions of struggle, revolution and utopia on the left” (134). While most modern leftist struggles, including socialism, have rested on logics of centralization and hierarchy (Escobar 2004, 349-350), this vision of social movement efficacy rests on

an alternative understanding of power: “diffuse, democratic, rooted in people’s collective agency and emerging from the bottom up” (Conway 2006, 134).<sup>10</sup>

Casas-Cortés, Osterweil, and Powell argue that “the inability to recognize knowledge-practices as some of the central work that movements do has made it difficult for social movement theorists to grasp the actual political effects of many movements.” (2008, 20). They use the term “knowledge-practices” to highlight the “concrete, embodied, lived, and situated character” of knowledge (20). Similar to Conway, these authors demonstrate how these effects “include not only immediate strategic objectives for social or political change, but the very rethinking of democracy; the generation of expertise and new paradigms of being, as well as different modes of analyses of relevant political and social conjunctures” (20). Analyzing social movements as knowledge-producers, then, requires a conception of cultural politics.

### **Cultural Politics**

As discussed in Chapter 1, new social movement scholars brought culture into a central place in the study of social movements and demonstrated that culture was an area in which and through which many movements aimed to effect change (Williams 2004, 92). In the mainstream US study of social movements, scholars also integrated culture into their understandings of social movements, primarily looking at how

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<sup>10</sup> Conway points out that the way in which “knowledge” is understood in contemporary movements has been deeply influenced by second-wave feminism. “Central to the eruption of the second wave of the women’s movement was an explicit critique of hegemonic knowledge as patriarchal,” she writes (Conway 26). Instead, feminists paved the way for valuing knowledge based on experience, bodies, emotions, specific contexts, and situatedness – challenging objectivity and drawing attention to the everyday as sites of power and contestation.

activists use symbols and meanings to advance their interests (Williams 2004: 93). More recently, building on this work, as well as studies of popular culture and conceptions of culture in anthropology, scholars have integrated a more nuanced understanding of culture into the study of social movements and advanced the concept of cultural politics. To understand the prefigurative, seemingly ‘apolitical’ nature of the Transition movement, theorizations of cultural politics are useful.

In *Cultures of Politics/Politics of Cultures* (1998), Sonia Alvarez, Evelina Dagnino, and Arturo Escobar’s conception of cultural politics follows from an understanding of culture as “a set of material practices which constitute meanings, values and subjectivities” (Jordan and Weedon 1995: 8, quoted on p3). Though not often recognized in mainstream studies, social movements, regardless of if they are self-consciously “cultural” or not, have effects in shaping cultural meanings, including what gets defined as political itself. “Culture is political because meanings are constitutive of processes that, implicitly or explicitly, seek to redefine social power,” Alvarez, Dagnino, and Escobar write (7). Through the cultural interventions of social movements, dominant meanings and political cultures can be unsettled, contested, and transformed. Taking into account these insights opens up our understanding of social movements and their effects. Not only is it important to assess the instrumental outcomes of social movements, but also to look at their impact on everyday practices and discourses, which have implications for social relations, citizenship, and democracy (11).

This cultural politics approach is central to the *Women and the Politics of Place* project discussed earlier. As Harcourt and Escobar write, “The political

struggles being elaborated by women are both vying for more access to the domain dominated by men as well as attempting to change the very terrain on which we consider politics and political change to happen. In a sense ‘body politics’ – politics around the body, home and environment- beyond pursuing concrete changes also works to validate issues and perspectives that were previously considered to be non-political, or private, distinct from the social public domain. The politics of place in the public sphere not only consist of efforts, through governmental or NGO means, to participate in, or influence, institutional politics, but also to illuminate the political nature of culture. Culture is political precisely because meaning, and the power to produce or determine meaning, is constitutive of our lived experiences as well as our analyses of them” (2002, 11).

Osterweil has shown how the concept of cultural politics is key in understanding the World Social Forums. She demonstrates how the split between the “horizontal” and the “vertical” at the WSF, and some observers’ dismissal of the practices of “the horizontal” in the AGM more broadly, is due to an overly narrow definition of politics as policies, institutions, and economic practices. She argues instead for a “cultural-political” approach to understanding contemporary movements. Following from the activists themselves, whose “analysis recognizes that it is in the terrain of culture and micro-practice that the hegemonies of the current economic and political regimes are maintained,” she argues that scholars need to understand the daily, the cultural, and micropolitical as key to many contemporary movements practices and goals, and as political (2004, 498-499). An “effective politics,” according to this analysis, “must not only work to change existing policies

and economic agendas, but must also seek to oppose neo-liberal capitalist globalization in all of its iterations: from the individualistic, atomized and controlled human subjects it produces; to its monopoly on value and elimination of difference in all spheres of life; to its dependence on mono-cultural and hegemonic logics” (503).

This analysis of one strand in the anti-globalization movement is useful in understanding the Transition movement as well. A cultural-political approach is necessary to study the Transition movement as it also works in the terrain of social relations, resignification, and the everyday. Despite noteworthy scholarly attention on the cultural politics of the AGM, we need more understanding of relocalization and related movements, which are often not as visible but are increasingly ubiquitous. A cultural-political approach is useful in understanding Transition on its own terms and helping to translate movement meanings and practices.

Further, though the Transition movement is not usually understood in the context of other contemporary place-based and anti-globalization social movements, placing Transition in conversation with these other movements and within the scholarly debates about them helps us to understand the contradictions, meanings, and possibilities of the Transition movement more fully. It is also important to make the connections between these dispersed and disparate movements explicit, to forge bases of solidarity among these movements that share the “courageous, creative, and elusive rethinking of politics, economics and culture” (Reid and Taylor 2010, 2). As Reid and Taylor attempt to do in their own work of critical social theory, this can serve to make visible this “great diversity of spontaneous, mostly local refusals of neoliberal globalization – a myriad of small-scale push-backs against the



transmutation of everything into infinite, displaced transactability in global markets”  
(2010, 2).

## CHAPTER 3

### “DO-IT-OURSELVES” ACTIVISM

#### Introduction

“I have no impact on a federal level, or on a world level. I have an impact locally. Here’s a place where I can work for things being better for all of us. This is where I want to put my energy. Period.” (Transition Northfield, MA, member)<sup>11</sup>

“Keep it local. Keep it on that scale and then we can really do it. And then we can start hoping again, for something you feel like you really have the power to accomplish. That is really the core of what appealed to me in Transition.” (Transition Wayland, MA, member)

The locally focused, prefigurative strategies of Transition represent a marked departure from state-focused social change strategies. Though the Transition initiatives I studied in the northeast US are remarkably diverse, they consistently prioritize place-based, prefigurative action and organization and do not embrace government as a vehicle or a target for creating change. Critics have argued that the movement, by encouraging a local focus, shirks responsibility for confronting global problems. Transitioners, one detractor commented, “are coming together, looking into the face of apocalypse...and deciding to start a seed exchange or a kids clothing swap” (Steffen, worldchanging.com, 2009).

Does Transition’s emphasis on local, place-based action signify a retreat from progressive politics? Is it defeatist, as some critics claim, or is it a different route to empowerment and efficacy, as the Transitioners quoted above believe? In seemingly “giving up” on government solutions, does a locally-focused politics collude with a

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<sup>11</sup> Unless otherwise identified, all quotations are from personal communications.

politics of privatization and deregulation, or help to foster grassroots democracy that has been eroded in an era of neoliberal globalization?

In this chapter I explore these questions and the politics that follow from Transition's commitments to self-determination, autonomy, subsidiarity, and networking. I consider the implications of these non-state-focused forms within the movement itself, as well as in the complex political terrain in which the movement operates. I argue that understanding the Transition movement on its own terms, with its alternative understandings of social change efficacy, allows critics and proponents alike to better assess the successes, contradictions, and challenges of the place-based, prefigurative politics of the Transition movement, as well as similar movements, from the Zapatistas to Occupy Wall Street.

### **Globalization, climate change, and “DIO” activism**

Over the last four decades, globalization, which has become shorthand among its critics for economic restructuring, free-trade agreements, and “the extension of corporate power around the world,” (Juris 2008: 6), has brought sweeping changes to the politics and economies of local communities across the US. At the same time, these trends have contributed to worsening environmental conditions, and both the severity of and the awareness of problems like climate change have increased dramatically. It is in this context, “in response to the State with its alliance to global business interests, exploitation of nature and mandate of perpetual economic growth, which appear to be the drivers of climate change and peak oil” (Crinion and Hopkins 2011, 19), that the Transition movement emerged. “Underlying the global Transition movement is a reaction to a loss of trust in national government's ability to take

action on climate change and their inability to provide significance at a local level,” Crinion and Hopkins write (3). As Naresh Giangrande, one of the co-founders of Transition Town Totnes and developer of Training for Transition explained in an interview:

The political process is corrupted by money, power, and vested interests. I’m not writing off large corporations and government, but because they have such an investment in this system, they haven’t got an incentive to change. I can only see us getting sustainable societies from the grassroots, bottom-up, and only that way can we get governments to change. (Griffiths 2009)

Or, as a Transition Town Montpelier steering committee member said, “The truth is, politics is all about playing games. And I don’t have time for games. I want to get something *done*.”<sup>12</sup>

In place of primarily acting through government to change collective life, Transition puts emphasis on local communities as sites for engagement and solutions. Again, as Crinion and Hopkins explain, “Transition initiatives offer a tangible and easily accessible alternative to the State’s inability to act in a manner other than proposing...that business as usual can continue indefinitely, with renewable energy replacing conventional energy and the planet can sustain continued economic growth (Holmgren 2003)” (2011, 4).<sup>13</sup> The decision to not look to government to solve

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<sup>12</sup> After the failure of attempts to reach international agreements or to pass US climate legislation, these views are not uncommon among US environmentalists. For example, the Executive Director of an environmental grant-making organization told me, “the government has failed us...the philanthropy world put zillions of dollars in the hands of the Big Greens...to work on national policy, first pressuring Bush and then trying to get Obama. And it has all failed...The amount of money that has been thrown away for people to debate their two extremes and not budge at all, it has been an incredible waste of money...yes, some of the federal policy has helped, but it has not done nearly what people thought it was going to do...it’s all been co-opted by big money interests.”

<sup>13</sup> In the US up to this point, even using renewable energy to carry out “business as usual” is politically out of reach. This difference in the contexts of the US and the UK will be discussed in Chapter 4.

problems, but instead to adopt a “do it ourselves” approach then, is a strategic one based on a view that “politics as usual” is not working to address contemporary crises.<sup>14</sup>

Transition seeks to develop people’s capacity to act on what they are interested in – their own vision of ‘the good life.’ The model emphasizes starting where you are, to influence the local area where you live. It is a key message of Transition that you do not need permission from anyone to act. “You don’t have to be an expert. You don’t have to have credentials. Somehow that is striking chord with people,” a Transition US staff person told me. Again, this is presented as a pragmatic response to the acknowledgement that if we wait for government action, it will be “too little, too late.” As stated on the Transition Network (based in UK) website, “in general these initiatives are not asking for permission to start this work - they’re just getting on with it, sharing their successes and failures, their hopes and fears” (accessed September 21, 2012). The website goes on to explain,

We’re not saying that national governments are irrelevant or that institutions like businesses aren’t important - we know they’re all vital. What we are saying is that for most people, their own local community is where they can have the quickest and greatest impact. Our hunch is that when the governments see what communities can do in terms of this transition, it’ll be easier for them to make decisions that support this work.

As discussed in the previous chapter, locating power and possibility within the community rather than the state is not an uncommon attribute of social movements globally. As Starr and Adams write of autonomous movements broadly, these

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<sup>14</sup> Similarly, Conway writes that for social justice activists in Toronto, the “reorientation away from exclusive or primary preoccupation with the state as the source of power and (progressive) change was a conclusion drawn from hard political experience.” After “set-backs and defeats on multiple fronts despite growing campaign, lobby, and protest efforts,” activists, she writes, “began to consider the merits of a different kind of struggle premised on a different kind of agency” (2006, 133-134).

movements “work towards a ‘revolution of everyday life’” (2003, 29), looking for solutions within the community itself. Zibechi, writing about Bolivian movements focused on control over water and gas beginning in 2000, argues that to privilege state-centered social change strategies, “implies putting ourselves in a position of incapacity – like putting ourselves into a hole that ‘someone else’ will get us out of, or so we hope...the mobilized society is no longer the subject responsible for the changes – this role is passed on to the state, or the organization/party, or the various combinations of both” (5).

Other examples of this orientation in contemporary movements abound. In explaining the absence of demands from the Occupy movement, Jonny Gordon-Farleigh, editor of an online activist magazine writes, “those who make demands expect an agency, authority or expert to implement them. Today’s protestors are appealing to themselves, not governments, for social change.” He goes on to say, “the disproportionate fixation on Washington and London produces mere spectators who can only rely on financial and political elites to save them and who can only be disappointed and failed by them” (*STIR*, accessed September 28, 2012). A quote from Sitrin’s study of Argentinean neighborhood assemblies, *piqueteros*, and autonomous movements likewise illustrates a turning away from government and institutions and toward an approach emphasizing looking to one another for power: “Horizontalism begins when people begin to solve their problems themselves, without turning to the institutions that caused the problems in the first place” (2005, 38). Many activists around the world, then, are prioritizing prefigurative politics,

with an emphasis on self-determination, autonomy, and subsidiarity, over state-centered strategies.

### **Self-determination & subsidiarity**

In the Transition movement in the northeast US, I found that these commitments are at the forefront of organizing and how people understand their efforts. Under the broad banner of creating a more resilient community, Transition initiatives strive to provide inspiration and support for community members to do what they are interested in doing, giving priority to cultivating self-determination and autonomy over more instrumental goals. As one leader in Jamaica Plain put it, “I think the conceptualization of it as a citizen, neighbor-based initiative, getting people connected with whatever it is that attracts *them*, that *they* are energized by, is just so right.”

This is in some ways a pragmatic strategy, as evident when a leader in Putney told me that successful Transition initiatives wouldn’t happen “if people feel they’re being told what to do, or they’re being talked down to, or you’re trying to elbow them into fitting into your own agenda.” “It can’t be any top-down stuff,” she said, “there can’t be any telling people what they should think is important. It just doesn’t work.” Similarly, Hopkins warns Transition organizers, “Telling others they ‘should,’ ... is almost always patronizing and inappropriate and is more likely to cause resistance than change” (2011a, 127).

Rather than being directive then, Transition seeks to attract, inspire, and empower with a positive, solutions-oriented approach, “help[ing] people feel change is a real possibility” (Hopkins 2011a, 78). Transition’s practical and local focus

provides people with an accessible path to “meaningful things to do, where they have a sense of agency and autonomy as opposed to waiting for someone else to do something,” as a JP NET initiator remarked.

In addition to being pragmatic, the core principle of self-determination is also prefigurative, a reflection of Transition’s vision, values, and ultimate aims. Providing opportunities for people to “voice what they think, and to act” was identified by many Transitioners I spoke with as a goal in and of itself. Closely connected is Transition’s principle of subsidiarity, or “self-organization and decision-making at the appropriate level” (Hopkins 2011a, 78). “[T]he intention of the Transition model is not to centralise or control decision making,” Hopkins writes, “but rather to work with everyone so that it is practiced at the most appropriate, practical and empowering level” (78).

These principles follow from Transition’s basis in permaculture and attempt to model the movement on the way natural systems self-organize.<sup>15</sup> Citing popular scientists of living systems such as Fritjof Capra, Humberto Maturana, and Francisco Varela, the Transition model starts from the idea that “the key characteristic of a living network is that it continually produces itself...It is produced by its components and in turn produces those components” (Capra, quoted by Hopkins and Lipman

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<sup>15</sup> Hopkins (2008 and 2011), Hopkins and Lipman (2010) and Crinion and Hopkins (2011) list many other influences on the movement, especially with reference to the commitments to self-determination and subsidiarity: “the ‘wiki’ approach to collaborative information building (Leadbeater 2009), the ‘leadersless organization’ approach (Brafman & Beckstrom 2008), resilience science (Walker & Salt 2006), insights from how self-organisation works in natural systems (Maturana & Varela 1992), ‘despair and empowerment’ work and ecopsychology (Macy & Brown 1998), ‘learned optimism’ (Seligman 2006), the science of happiness (Layard 2006), the concept of ‘pattern languages’ (Alexander 1977), the power of the internet to enable ideas to spread virally (Shirky 2009), Chaordic organizational design (Hock 1999) and the design-led permaculture concept (Mollison & Holmgren 1990, Holmgren 2003)” (Crinion and Hopkins 2011, 5).



2010, 14). In permaculture terms, then, the goal is to create structures that are both robust and stable enough to be supportive, and flexible and open enough to allow for emergence and self-organization.

In terms of social movements, this means finding ways of organizing and organization that provide room for autonomy and self-determination, while still supporting individuals in taking collective, purposeful action. Forms of organization that emerge organically are seen to be more effective than those that are imposed from above or outside, and temporary, flexible structures are prized. These organic, transitory organizational structures enable “a community to engage with local issues and take action when needed and also to maintain fluidity wherein the participants are free to engage with a variety of issues they are compelled by” (Crinion and Hopkins 2011, 14). In this view, each person’s unique interests, abilities and, contributions are significant to the “collective genius,” with the whole being greater than the sum of the parts.

Experimentation with open and non-hierarchical forms of organization is increasingly widespread among contemporary social movements. “Movement actors work to build horizontal, flexible, and often temporary forms of political organization that in and of themselves enact – in the present and in place – the kind of social relations and political cultures they are struggling to nurture” Osterweil writes (2005a, 182). For example, People’s Global Action, which emerged from the Zapatista-called *encuentros*, has been called a “decentralized non-organization” (Starr and Adams 2003). More similar to Transition is the Resilience Hub of Portland, Maine, a project inspired by permaculture and addressing climate change and

economic insecurity without adopting the Transition name or many aspects of the model. As an organizer said, “what has worked well is that we are not a ‘group.’” She uses the word “thinstitution,” a combination of “thin” and “institution,” to describe their attempts to have enough attention to process and infrastructure to keep things participatory, inclusive, and transparent, but not so much that there is more attention on process and organization than on (what is seen as) the work itself.

The features of the Transition model intended to maximize self-determination and facilitate subsidiarity, and thus to foster conditions under which self-organization might occur, include its emphasis on practical projects, as well as specific practices and forms such as initiating committees, open space, and working groups. Being place-based and having a “bias toward action,” as a Transition Putney initiator put it, facilitates a looser organizational structure. Not everyone has to have the same political analysis to be able to contribute and lead, and not all projects need central coordination. In an effort to encourage openness and distributed leadership, Transition suggests the concept of an initiating group for leadership in the early stages of a Transition initiative. A group of people interested in starting Transition in their community begin the work of forming partnerships, raising awareness (about climate change, peak oil, and the end of economic growth), launching practical projects, promoting reskilling, etc., while also attempting to inspire others to take an active role and organize around what interests them. The ultimate goal is that the initiative will become self-organizing, relying on horizontal coordination, but not have a central leadership body responsible for guiding or managing the entire

initiative. It is thus recommended that the original initiating committee plan for its own “demise” at the outset.

Another key way that decentralization and flexibility are designed into the Transition model is through working groups. These are small groups, focused on a very specific project or issue. The working groups are most often formed through a practice promoted by Transition called open space. Consistent with commitments to self-determination and subsidiarity, open space is a method of group process and learning wherein the facilitator “constantly turn[s] the freedom and the responsibility back to the participants” (Owen 2008, 39).<sup>16</sup> Rather than an agenda and process set by a facilitator, participants themselves offer topics for discussion and self-organize into small groups, allowing people to identify and connect on issues or projects they are interested in. Participants take responsibility for their own learning experience. Open space has been one of the organizational hallmarks of the World Social Forums and related forums.

Outside of monthly potlucks and community-building and educational events organized by initiating committees (discussed further in Chapter 4), organizing through emergent, decentralized working groups is the primary form that Transition initiatives in the northeast US are taking. Transition Town Montpelier, for instance, has helped to start (partially through open space events) at least twelve working groups, including a root cellar group which has worked to both construct root cellars and produce a how-to video, an “energy descent action plan,” or EDAP, group working on a possibilities for Vermont to end reliance on fossil fuels, and a “heart

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<sup>16</sup> See *Open Space Technology: A User's Guide* by Harrison Owen (2008) for a detailed history of the concept and practice.

and soul” group, addressing the emotional and interpersonal aspects of a transition to a low-carbon economy. Two of the most active and visible working groups are the Village Building Convergence, which puts on an annual event that is part community celebration and part workshop and skill-share for sustainable living, and the APPLECorps, or Association for the Planting of Public Edible Landscapes for Everyone (discussed further in Chapter 4). Both groups function very independently of the TTM steering committee, and there is little attention to ‘branding’ them as part of TTM.

Similarly, the Transition Putney initiating committee sees their impact on this rural Vermont town of 2,600 primarily through its support of the self-determination of others. Through experimentation, the initiating committee developed the practice of holding community forums on specific topics brought up by community members. One of the central features of the Putney initiative, an initiating group member told me, has been providing a structure for people to find support for their own ideas, “to create some...discussion and action in areas they are concerned about and interest them...if it fits the [Transition Putney] vision, which is pretty broad.” “We don’t feel we have to own these projects,” he said, “our job to listen to folks...help each other get them started.” The Transition group, responding to needs or interests expressed in the community, have helped organize forums for discussion and action on topics ranging from aging in Putney, the running of the local food shelf (or food pantry), and starting a farmer’s market.<sup>17</sup> It also led to the establishment of a community garden

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<sup>17</sup> For more information, see “The Transition Movement in Putney, Vermont: Building Social and Economic Resilience, With a Focus on Putney Farmers’ Market” by Sombat Moontha, Paper 2547 (2012).

with sixty-five plots. One organizer told me that the Transition effort “has really changed the town.” Consistent with the emphases on self-determination and capacity-building, he related, “People are saying ‘we can do this ourselves – we have the expertise and the collective genius. We can make happen what we want to happen.’”

In a short period of time after their inception, the Transition initiatives in both Montpelier and Putney engaged dozens of people in practical projects, started multiple working groups, and gained widespread visibility and attention. Transition Newburyport, in one of the more affluent suburbs on Boston’s north shore, is similarly experimenting with small groups and decentralized leadership but did not meet with early success and has been moving slowly in comparison. Rather than focusing on self-organizing working groups, after a couple of years of educational and community-building events, Transition Newburyport is now starting small, time-limited groups called Resilience Circles,<sup>18</sup> primarily centered on study of contemporary crises, mutual aid among members, and taking social action, as a complement to Transition. The initiators found that their monthly potlucks brought a lot of new people in, and brought people together, but didn’t develop new leaders. Resilience Circles do seem to be bringing what one initiator calls the “next generation of leadership development” to the initiative. “What we’re doing is not awareness raising but community building. We now have a group of people who identify and relate about what needs to happen. Leadership is much more diffuse now.”

JP NET is a younger initiative and in a much more populated, diverse area than Montpelier, Putney, or Newburyport. JP NET is also placing a high priority on

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<sup>18</sup> Resilience Circles are “small groups where people come together to increase their personal security through learning, mutual aid, social action, and community support.” They are a project of the Institute for Policy Studies. See <http://localcircles.org>.

supporting self-determination and autonomy and attempting to catalyze self-organizing action. Using monthly potlucks focused on various aspects of community resilience, the JP NET organizers invite guests from the community (not “experts” from outside the community) doing transition-related things, such as raising chickens and working to legalize backyard chickens in Boston, local business owners working to sell locally-produced products, urban farmers and composters, organizers working to fight gentrification, etc., to share their experiences. Afterwards, there are breakout groups where people can join a working group already in progress, or propose an idea for a new topic they would like to talk with others about. There is also frequently the option to join a breakout group to discuss generating topics or themes for future potlucks, which opens a door to greater engagement, leadership development, and potentially self-organization.

One of JPNET’s 2012 monthly potlucks was focused explicitly on the aim of supporting people in taking action on their own ideas. “How does change happen? What inspires us to do it?...How can JP NET and the broader community support more Change-Making?” asked the e-mail announcing the potluck. “Whether you've been making change happen for decades or are just dreaming of getting started, JP NET wants to support you and your ideas. We’ll finish up the evening with a group brainstorm about what JP NET and the wider community can do to support Change-Makers” (e-mail, September 24, 2012). So far, some of the most prominent working groups are on public food production (both gardens and orchards) and developing and assessing measures of resilience.

Putting these commitments to self-determination and distributed leadership into practice is not without challenges. Many groups are struggling with getting to a

place where the “demise” of the initiating group is feasible. In many of the initiatives I encountered, a small group of individuals, a steering/initiating committee and in some cases people committed to a project of a working group, were doing the bulk of the work and spoke of feeling “burnt out” and of difficulties in cultivating and sustaining new leaders. Both Transition Town Montpelier and Transition Putney members, for example, are now struggling to maintain the momentum their initiatives developed at the beginning. Several leaders in both areas spoke of challenges related to burnout and difficulty in fostering truly decentralized leadership. These challenges are certainly not unusual in a voluntary organization, but nor are they inconsequential. Lots of people have talked about needing leadership training, needing more facilitation and organizational skills. As Starhawk observed, “One of the challenges I’ve seen in the model is that it’s very much about bringing people together and organizing communities, but they don’t start out with much of a strong or sophisticated understanding of process or decision-making or what processes to use....I think many Transition groups have recognized that and started to do more training and drawing on other people’s skills around them” (personal communication). Transition US is consequently increasing offers of training in these areas.

Another challenge is that because supporting self-determination and autonomy – giving people opportunities to take action meaningful to them – are considered goals in and of themselves, determining what fits within the “Transition vision” and how to prioritize potential projects can be challenging. “The Transition vision” is often presented as a given, but in fact each group constructs this in ongoing processes

of negotiation. As one Transition Town Montpelier participant told me, “Somebody brought up once at our meeting...[that they] wanted to get a ban on plastic bags. [The response was] ‘No, that’s not what Transition is’...when somebody said that, I was like ‘You’re not the arbiter of Transition.’” It is a continual process of contestation and negotiation that defines what “Transition” signifies in all of the local initiatives and in the movement overall.

Living out commitments to decentralization and horizontalism is often very difficult as well. As Juris observes, “activist networks involve varying degrees of centralization and hierarchy,” and “the absence of formal hierarchical designs does not prevent, and may even encourage, the rise of informal hierarchies” (Juris 2008, 18).<sup>19</sup> Among Transitioners, there are varying degrees of access to resources, both material resources and the time and energy to be able to do unpaid Transition work. The Transition leadership model has been referred to as a “do-acracy” – those who do the work make the decisions.<sup>20</sup> Though this can be a seemingly practical and fair approach, the individuals who ‘do the work’ are partially determined by larger social forces, which can raise questions about accountability and inclusion. While many Transitioners, from Rob Hopkins to people I spoke with in the northeast US, believe that outside funding for Transition initiatives will make them less effective and

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<sup>19</sup> A classic articulation of this is Jo Freeman’s essay about the feminist movement, “The Tyranny of Structurelessness.” She writes, “the idea of ‘structurelessness’ does not prevent the formation of informal structures, but only formal ones.... For everyone to have the opportunity to be involved in a given group and to participate in its activities the structure must be explicit, not implicit. The rules of decision-making must be open and available to everyone, and this can happen only if they are formalized” (153).

<sup>20</sup> This is not unlike what happens on other voluntary, loosely structured organizations. As Poletta writes, “It only made sense in their own organization, as the SNCC staff put it, the ‘people who do the work make the decisions.’” (205).



resilient over the long term, the fact that many people work at paid employment so much of the time, and there is little support for the unpaid work of caring for children, elders, and others, limits the ability of volunteer Transition work to be distributed among many people, and thus this is a limit on more horizontality and diversity. The fact that the majority of steering and initiating committee members are in their 40s, 50s, and 60s is also a reflection of our society's overall systems that are biased against leadership of young adults and young people, as well as older people. Further, some Transition initiators have access to resources ranging from meeting space to interns to paid staff time through pre-existing positions and relationships within educational and non-profit institutions. Positions of status can also lead to differential public recognition of Transition efforts. While the resources in question may not be seen as that significant, they do make a difference in a predominantly volunteer movement and it is important to question the ways in which the distribution of resources within the Transition movement reflects the gender, race, and class inequalities in our society.

Though it is not without challenges, supporting people in self-determined action, and distributed, flexible organizational structures are key for Transition's non-state-centered politics. Transitioners' efforts to support others in their own "change-making" is not *pre*-political. In other words, it is not just a necessary step on the way to campaigning, lobbying, or protesting. Likewise, temporary, decentralized organizational structures are not a way to make-do until more formal and lasting institutions can be established, but are aims in their own right. Rather than seeking change through a pre-determined agenda, instrumental goals, and organization

building, then, Transitioners are attempting to provide avenues for nurturing dignity and self-determination, similar to the analyses of movements from Chiapas to Argentina discussed in the previous chapter. As in Osterweil's analysis of the AGM, Transitioners are engaged in "creat[ing] other ways of being, not as a secondary or bonus goal but as part and parcel of the[ir] politics" (2005a: 183). This "long-term orientation to capacity building and cultural transformation," Conway writes, rests on "an alternative perception of power – a kind of countervailing power that is diffuse, democratic, and rooted in people's collective agency and emerging from the bottom up" (Conway 2006, 134).

### **Networking, self-organization, and the Transition meshwork**

Self-determination, subsidiarity, and networking are not only important for capacity building and self-organizing in individual Transition initiatives, but also for the role these local 'nodes' play in the broader, global, self-organizing movement. While groups are firmly rooted in specific places and focused on making changes in daily life, they are also networked across the globe. The concept of "meshwork," developed by scholars within the *Women and Politics of Place* framework, provides a useful way to understand Transition in this regard. The idea of a meshwork "is meant to suggest that place-based groups often do not work in isolation. Rather, they engage in dynamic vertical and horizontal networking, connecting among themselves and with others in places far and near, across cultural, political, racial and ethnic divides" (Harcourt and Escobar 2005, 14).

Similar to the alternative globalization movements and many other contemporary place-based movements, networking and information sharing is a

central component of the Transition model, and one way that many Transitioners understand the efficacy of their actions. Naresh Giangrande, writing in *The Transition Companion*, stresses its importance:

Being part of this network means we can create change much more quickly and more effectively because we can draw on others' experience and insights. Those engaged in Transition are learning in many different settings. The learning is chaotic and emergent... This is a real-time, real-life social experiment, with learning and growing together in many different places and cultures, made possible by the sheer number of initiatives and modern communications. (2011, 285)

Transitioners understand their networking in a way similar to Chesters and Welsh analyze the alternative globalization movement using complexity theory (2005 and 2006), and Escobar suggests that cyberspace and complexity can provide a model for movement self-organization, non-hierarchy, and the ability to learn from feedback (2004, 353). In addition to explicitly drawing on the Internet and complexity theory, as Harcourt and Escobar note, this combination of forms and commitments exhibited by place-based, prefigurative movements, “suggests a certain feminist understanding of being, doing, politics and globality” (2005, 14).<sup>21</sup> Placing importance on “liv[ing] and work[ing] *today* consistently with their political visions for *tomorrow*,” Osterweil writes of the feminist-inspired prefigurative politics of the AGM, “Movement actors work to build horizontal, flexible, and often temporary forms of political organization that in and of themselves enact – in the present and in place – the kind of social relations and political cultures they are struggling to nurture” (2005a, 182).

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<sup>21</sup> I found that feminism, sexism, and gender were not often discussed within the Transition movement at the local or international level. Though this was not the focus of my study, my impression was that when women or feminism were discussed it was most often in relation to the contributions to the “inner work” aspects of the Transition model or related to likely increases in domestic violence and feminized poverty as a result of economic instability/deterioration.

Though many critics have dismissed local places as sites of potential transformation, Gibson-Graham (2006) has critiqued the totalizing discourses of globalization that discount the efficacy and power of the local. “The globalization of a feminist politics did not involve organization at the global scale to challenge global structures of patriarchal power,” they remind us. “Ubiquity rather than unity was the ground of its globalization” (xxvii).

Unlike in many state-centered social movements, therefore, Transition does not operate with a federated model and Transition US does not play the role of channeling the grassroots activism toward specific national goals. Networks in Transition do not even play an aggregating role like they do in many other autonomous movements such as the AGM. While not pressuring targets like in the AGM though, these networks do serve important functions within Transition. First, these networks play a central role in visibilizing the movement and inspiring action in other places. Networks also provide paths for cross-fertilization, experimentation, heterogeneity, and learning.

The Transition Network and Transition US (a California-based nonprofit, referred to as the national “hub,” “that provides inspiration, encouragement, support, networking, and training for Transition Initiatives across the United States” (TransitionUS.org accessed January 12, 2013)) both promote internet-based sharing and networking, primarily to encourage feedback and learning. Both Transition US e-newsletters and Rob Hopkins’ blog feature regular updates, or “Round-up[s] of What’s Happening out in the World of Transition.” Almost half of the criteria that are suggested for local groups wishing to become “official” Transition initiatives relate to

sharing information and networking, including several focused on having a web presence: to have and maintain a regularly-updated website for your initiative, to “write up something on the Transition US blog once every couple of months,” and “for your group to give at least two presentations to other communities (in the vicinity) that are considering embarking on this journey – a sort of ‘here’s what we did’ or ‘here’s how it was for us’ talk” (TransitionUS.org accessed August 21, 2012). It is clear that there is high value placed on communication, networking, and the sharing of experiences among local initiatives.

Because of the multiple levels at which Transition operates, and the many ways to plug into the movement, most Transition participants are active exclusively or primarily at the local level, very few are involved at primarily the national or international level, and some participate at multiple levels. In the northeast US, there is a great deal of variation in how much Transitioners are connected internationally, nationally, and regionally through blogs, e-mail lists, and social networking sites. Some Transitioners I spoke to saw internet-based connecting as a low-priority activity or as a distraction from their local efforts. Some, however, placed a high value on sharing information and experiences with the broader network. “Since there are people all over the world doing stuff, why not have an ear to the ground about what are they doing, what are their successes, what are their failures, how did they rethink and do something differently?...That seems important to me,” recounted one Transition initiator in Keene, NH. Similarly, a Transition Town Montpelier steering committee member said, “I think for the [local Transition] leaders, it works really well because it’s connected to the rest of the world. There’s this big global network,

and that really was needed in Vermont, more of a connecting the individual to the larger movement.”

Further, recognizing the importance of the internet for decentralized, less-hierarchical organizing (similar to Juris’s analysis of the AGM), this Vermont Transition organizer went on to say “When you think about successful mass movements in the past, there are these leaders that bring a lot of people together and that’s hugely lacking. So unfortunately, we don’t have that, but we have this viral web internet thing that brings everybody together. So in one way it’s cool that there’s no leader to shoot down.”

In addition to ‘virtual’ connecting, there have been many grassroots efforts of Transitioners to gather in person for reflecting, learning, and sharing ideas. These have included a Transition Vermont gathering in 2009, annual Village Building Convergences organized by Transition Town Montpelier in since 2010, a New England Resilience and Transition gathering in Boston spearheaded by JP NET in 2012, and multiple gatherings of western Massachusetts initiatives.

Thus, visibilization, cross-fertilization, and learning are all happening through networks in the northeast, nationally, and internationally. Based on my interviews and observations, I found several things that I believe are supporting this to happen in the northeast US, and ways it could be happening more. Despite being “bottom up” on a national level in many respects, Transition US does control who can be official Transition trainers and how the movement functions regionally and nationally. Greater transparency and decentralization in these specific areas could help the US

movement function more in line with the movement's overall commitments to horizontality and flexibility.

Many local Transitioners do not see connections and communications to other efforts as part of their work and instead are focused almost exclusively on their own community. A more balanced approach can prevent local initiatives from becoming insular. Similarly, the initiatives that were connected to other, non-Transition resilience-building activities and efforts in their communities and beyond seemed to me to be the most vibrant and thriving. Recognizing and strengthening solidarity with resilience-building efforts such as environmental and social justice organizing (even when some translation might be required) is a way that some groups are contributing to cross-fertilization and working toward bridging race and class divides. For example, JP NET has successfully collaborated with many organizations that are not under the Transition umbrella but share common purposes. Just as particular locales run the risk of becoming overly narrow, the Transition movement as a whole will suffer if individual groups do not recognize that they are part of a much broader movement that they can learn from and help shape. Both of these are important because only in meshworking across localities and other forms of 'transition' is there potential for "counter-hegemonic transnational spaces" (Alvarez 2004, 199).

The concept of meshworks not only refers to networks, but also highlights the difference of each node in the network and the resulting plurality overall. Harcourt and Escobar explain, "Meshworks involve two parallel dynamics: strategies of localization and of interweaving. Localization strategies contribute to the internal consistency of each particular point in the network, as well as making it more distinct

from the rest. Interweaving, on the other hand, links sites together, making use of and emphasizing their similarities” (13).

One of the most striking findings in my research is how different the Transition groups look from place to place, even within the northeast US. As experimentation and attention to local history, culture, economy, and ecology are designed into the model, and autonomy is encouraged, initiatives look really different in different places. Groups develop their own priorities, messaging, and ways of organizing that make sense in their particular locale. This is “by design” and seen as part of the strength of the Transition movement. “That’s the other lesson, which of course was implicit in the model right from the start. It’s going to be different in each community,” reflected one Montpelier initiator. “The two very active transition initiatives in Vermont are Montpelier and Putney. And I think the differences between them reflect the different communities as much as the particular people involved.” For example, Montpelier is home to many efforts that could be seen as transition-related, whereas Putney did not have as many pre-existing organizations building resilience. This led Montpelier to “specialize,” in a sense, in the things that were not represented in their area – re-skilling and disaster-preparedness. Transition Putney’s efforts have covered a broader range of topics, from aging in Putney to hunger to local businesses. JP NET is operating in a very different context from both Montpelier and Putney and the priorities of that group are reflective of the neighborhood’s larger, more urban and more diverse population. Public transportation, gentrification, youth development, immigrant rights, and economic development have all been topics of concern for the Jamaica Plain group. As a



participant at the regional gathering observed, “There’s no such thing as a blueprint for what works. It is not one size fits all.”

The point is to provide a set of principles and tools that are supportive, while allowing for emergence and self-organization. Experimenting is happening not only to create new ideas that others then learn from, but because effective solutions will look different in different places and the goal is to generate and try out many, varied alternatives. To quote Crinion and Hopkins once more, “This diversity in turn creates resilience for the Transition field as experiences are shared through the network” (2011, 18). Or, more in the language of the AGM, “heterogeneity is seen as a necessary and constitutive element of worlds to be created. It is considered the basis for a new modality of being that is itself inherently opposed to authoritarianisms and universal logics of all sorts” (Osterweil 2005, 183).

Transition’s emphasis on supporting difference and heterogeneity is considered a crucial element in doing activism differently. In using horizontal, flexible, and temporary forms, Transition is trying to avoid the formal, static, top-down forms that are seen as characteristic of problematic contemporary culture. Instead, they are trying to create adaptable, learning, redundant, distributed leadership and networks. Through organizing practices that prioritize self-determination, subsidiarity, and networking, the Transition movement seeks to both create a self-organizing movement and foster changes in subjectivity and social relations.

### **Relating to Government in a Neoliberal Era**

If Transitioners are emphasizing self-determination, autonomy, and networking as forms of creating social change that do not depend on the state, what, if

any, role do they see for local, state, or national government? In the Transition model as articulated by Rob Hopkins, the role of local Transition initiatives is both to engage local government and also to create “a culture where currently unelectable policies can become electable” (Hopkins 2011a, 53). “Transition is not about a retreat from our need for engaged and visionary government; rather, it is designed to inspire that leadership,” he writes. Many people I spoke with in the northeast US expressed similar views on Transition’s role in influencing government and political leaders. Speaking about state-level representatives, one Vermont Transitioner told me, “as a responsible citizen, it’s part of my job to...try to guide the work of my elected leaders. So I try to do it in the most fun and engaging way. And ultimately, what I’m interested in is cultivating leaders...who are willing to speak the truth about what’s going on.” Similarly, another Vermonter posted this on a discussion board: “I don’t view Transition as a retreat from, or alternative to, political engagement; in my view Transition is an optimistic head start on the kinds of activities that all communities will undertake, on their own terms, when politicians are forced by the people to act. If politicians need examples of how to transition, we can show them. We can demand of our governments: no more excuses, no more lies.” Both of these quotes are illustrative of Transition’s emphasis on building grassroots democracy with responsive elected representatives, or creating the conditions for the kind of action they want, rather than working within the system for instrumental goals.

The path to influencing local government is more straightforward. An interviewee in Massachusetts expressed faith that the Transition model would lead to productive influence in local government: “You hold a Great Unleashing [event] with

200 to 300 to 400 people from your town, your politicians are going to sit up and take notice. If you form a bunch of working groups on chickens and bicycle paths and...weatherization, that's going to end up impacting local policies. It can't not."

As mentioned above, the initiatives I studied are remarkably diverse. Despite the commonality of not having government as a primary focus, there is no common position taken with respect to the relationship to the national, state, or local governments. Some groups are prioritizing relationship-building with local leaders over a more instrumental agenda. In Maine, for example, the Belfast Area Transition Initiative (BATI) organized a bus trip to Saint John City Market in Canada to learn about a city-owned, year-round marketplace selling locally made products and locally produced food. They invited Belfast town officials to come along, with no explicit agenda other than building relationships and learning. BATI organizers reported that one of the most valuable outcomes of the trip had been starting to have real relationships with these officials, built on sharing a common, fun experience together, which they felt was new and unique to Transition.

In Boston, JP NET has engaged more directly with local elected leaders. One of the most visible and well-attended events the Transition group has organized has been the annual State of the Neighborhood Forum. Held at the local high school, this event has drawn over 200 people each year since 2011. Local elected officials, including Boston City Council members, state senators, and state representatives, are invited to speak on a panel, followed by time for questions and answers, followed by break-out sessions on topics ranging from gentrification to public transit to local businesses. The purpose of having the elected officials is not to pressure them on a

specific issue, or to build an alliance with them to achieve instrumental goals. Rather, it is primarily to expose the elected leaders to the concerns and vision of the Transition group and to start a community conversation, which is ideally led by the issues and vision of the community members rather than by the politicians. Having local politicians speak is also intended to draw people to the event, so that then they can engage with their neighbors about the kind of future community they would like to live in and work toward.

Not all groups are interested in engaging with local government in the same way, however. Some Transition initiatives have attempted to take advantage of local government's inability to solve problems (due to lack of resources or willingness) as an opportunity or opening to further their aims. In Transition Town Montpelier, the city needed to replace some trees in a park but didn't have the money to do it. TTM stepped in with an offer to plant fruit and nut trees there. This scenario is not unusual, as Bohm, Dinerstein, and Spicer point out, as "[in] North America the restructuring of the neoliberal state has relied on a shift in the provision of services from the state to either the private or non-profit sectors (Rhodes 1994, Leys 2003)" (25).

In Northfield, MA, one working group is starting a low-wattage radio station to be used for communication in the event of an emergency. Because of the town's close proximity to the Vermont Yankee nuclear power plant, each resident is entitled by law to an emergency radio and batteries. The Transition working group is raising awareness about this existing resource, and working to establish their own radio tower that would be used to communicate information in a disaster – such as which

roads are passable, where phone and electricity service can be found, etc. Another working group of Transition Northfield has started a tool lending library. They have located it at the waste transfer station, so the head of the Dept. of Public Waste has been involved and the town has devoted public resources for the building and electricity. In this way, they are partnering with local government, but they expressed feeling independent, and avoided seeking approval or involvement from the elected select board to make it happen. Rather than organizing to ensure that the city provides a service they want, these Transition groups are doing it themselves, though with the help of government resources.

Unlike some of the other “localist” movements in the US, then, Transition is not explicitly confronting neoliberal globalization (see Hess 2009). In that way, it could be seen as complicit with a neoliberal agenda. To quote Bohm, Dinerstein, and Spicer again: “This link between the practice of autonomy and recent policy making is sharpened by some critics who have pointed out how discourses of autonomy actually amount to a tacit agreement with neoliberal politics of slimming down the state” (26).<sup>22</sup> One could also see their lack of confrontation with the political-economic system as collusion of sorts. By looking for opportunities and following the path of least resistance, for example, they can take advantage of spaces created by governments’ failure to address basic community needs.

Though there are differences from place to place, perhaps most significantly, Transition’s non-state-focused approach is opening up a conversation and

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<sup>22</sup> They also point out that discourses of autonomy can be co-opted. “[I]t becomes clear that discourses of the autonomy of local communities do not point completely beyond development,” and in fact, “contemporary development discourses actually seek to harness it – at least as a legitimating discourse” (Bohm, Dinerstein, and Spicer 27).

experimentation within initiatives and in the broader movement about how to most effectively engage with government. As Starr and Adams write about autonomous movements, they do not allow for “an escape from politics into a pure space of self-determination. Rather, autonomy is an antagonistic political demand... This has the advantage of creating a new site for political struggle and a new way of thinking and doing politics” (28). Instead of seeking wins from government or protesting, Rob Hopkins (quoting Ken Jones) has said that the Transition movement is about “changing the climate, rather than winning the argument,” and this is the long-term approach that most initiatives in the northeast US are taking with respect to government.

Though Transition initiatives in the northeast US are at the very early stages of figuring out relationships to government, my research hinted at questions that initiatives may have to confront as they develop and become more successful. As Naomi Klein advised Rob Hopkins, “I think we have to engage with our political structures to the extent that we can, but if we pretend that our political differences don’t exist and that we’re all friends in every arena, then we erase very real systems of oppression” (2011b). Though for the most part my discussions with Transitioners in the northeast focused on their local efforts, some raised concerns about government actions that cannot really be separated out from local issues. One Transition Town Montpelier participant asked, “even though we’re trying to create alternatives on the community level, will we just let the government take fifty percent of our taxes for defense?” As she highlighted, war and militarism are not explicitly addressed by

Transition, but do have everything to do with fossil fuel use and community resilience. Again, to quote Naomi Klein,

If you look at all of the studies around which countries are the most vulnerable to climate change – the countries that top the list, it's not just about geography, it's about the fact that we understand that countries are most vulnerable to climate change if they don't have public infrastructure to deal with disasters. The fact that we're investing so heavily in military and border control at the same time we're cutting infrastructure – it's a choice about how we are going to deal with climate change.

Though these are questions and issues that the locally-focused Transition initiatives in the northeast US have not yet been engaged with, it is not unthinkable that the movement will have to address these issues down the road, particularly if it grows in size and geographic diversity.

Though there are ambiguities in the Transition movement's local focus in the context of global crises, that does not negate the movement's work in enacting a cultural politics that challenges many facets of contemporary capitalism. The movement is working to “produc[e] meanings that shap[e] social experience and configru[e] social relations” (Alvarez, Escobar, and Dagnino 1998, 7, quoted in Conway 2006, 12). For example, rather than leading to a “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” ideology as in neoliberalism, or a “bunker” mentality such as in the survivalist movement, Transition's emphasis on personal responsibility and autonomy is accompanied by an assertion that we're all in this together – we will succeed or fail not by our individual efforts, but collectively. In attempting to develop ways of organizing that promote alternate ways of being and relating to one another, Transition is trying to shift people's self-definition away from “the individualizing and economizing terms of the market” (Alvarez, Dagnino, and Escobar 1998, 22). As

Naresh Giangrande said in an interview, Transition “completely contradicts the image of human nature in the media, portraying it as greedy and selfish, competitive, nasty, and unsocial. That’s a self-fulfilling prophecy. We’re setting up the reverse” (Griffiths 2009).

The Transition movement is attempting to move society away from meeting our needs primarily through consumption and toward meeting our needs through our own production and through networks of relationships. Power in this prefigurative movement, as in the root of the word, means being able to *do* things – as an individual, the ability to grow and store food, to make clothes, to fix and repair things. As a community, it means the power to rely on and take care of one another and determine the future together. This presents a challenge to the dominant capitalist narratives in our society. It challenges the axioms that growth is good, that individualism is the way to achieve security, that people are valuable to the extent they are productive. Transition is attempting to resignify the concepts of development, security, and the good life. In speaking about the frequency of Transition Putney’s events, for instance (the group logged 130 events in its first year and 160 in the second year), one initiator said, “You have to keep it in front of people so they can really see how they can live into a new paradigm. There are so many other messages that it’s hard to make the shift unless it is frequent enough.”

While Transition’s politics is about subjectivity and social relations, it is also embedded in people’s daily material lives. As Harcourt and Escobar relate, this is similar to women’s place-based politics around the world (2002, 11). In addition to pre-figuring through its organizing practices, Transition is prefiguring post-carbon



lifestyles and economies. “Rather than ‘waiting for a revolution’ to transform a global economy and governance system at the world scale,” Transition initiatives are engaging their communities in this physical transformation in the present, at a local scale (Gibson-Graham 2005, 130). From starting local businesses, to community-owned renewable energy projects, to promoting barter, time-banks, local currencies, and home production, Transition is working to build viable, collective alternatives to the globalized economy by creating resilient local communities and economies.

Like the Putney Transition initiator who was able to tell me the increased percentage of the town population with access to growing their own food since they started the community garden, Transitioners are judging their efficacy by the tangible changes taking place in their communities. In Jamaica Plain, there is an active working group dedicated to measuring “resilience indicators.” The working group’s 2012 Annual Report describes what these are: “What a community needs to be resilient are things like reliable local food supplies, renewable energy sources, affordable housing, and communal responsibility for the welfare of all members” (e-mail Feb 9 2013). In a sense, the group is measuring both autonomy from fossil fuels and the global economy, and more subjective indicators. Beyond assessing concrete progress, this project is intended to “spark conversation about the meaning of community resilience,” and to help people envision the changes they would like to see in their community. Projects such as this work on multiple levels: they are meant to inspire, engage, work toward the creation of multiple, diverse alternatives, and as Starr and Adams show, they also play an educational role. “New economic institutions such as community currencies and public markets are a means of popular

economic education, in which modernized people learn old techniques of local production and trade and become empowered to make decisions about relationships between the economy and social issues,' they write (2003, 25).

Therefore, developing multiple, tangible possibilities for ways to transition away from fossil fuels, neoliberal globalization, and the growth economy is one of the main tasks that Transition sees for itself, in addition to creating a model for engaging people in that effort. The material and economic transition away from fossil fuels is seen as inextricably connected with the social and cultural transition and the prefigurative means to bring it about. As Conway writes of cultural politics, “‘the cultural’ and ‘the material’ and the relations between them [are] mutually constituting,” and the meanings and practices are inseparable (2006, 12).

Transition’s focus on material daily life and social relations also contributes to “redefining what counts as political.” Harcourt and Escobar point out that though “body, home, environment and the social public space...are often dismissed as private and unimportant site of struggle, when they are politicized they challenge many of the most fundamental assumptions of dominant and global discourses” (2002, 11). In Transition’s focus on food, transportation, housing, family, community, livelihood, etc., is “an implicit challenge and renegotiation for what is discussed and valued in public.” (9).

J. K. Gibson-Graham argues that “The practice of the community economy is a fluid process of continual resignification, discarding any fantasy that there is a perfect community economy that lies outside of negotiation, struggle, uncertainty, ambivalence, and disappointment, discarding the notion that there’s a blueprint that

tells us what to do and how to ‘be communal.’ Indeed, it is a recognition that there’s no way *not* to be communal, *not* to be implicated with one another, that recalls us to the political task of ‘building a community economy’” (2006, xv). A discussion among JP NET steering committee members on the possibility of starting a project on urban chicken coops is illustrative of this point. One member highlighted that it is important, in his mind, that people understand that there’s a connection between orchards, chickens, affordable housing, and climate change. Another person made the point that what makes it a Transition project is that they would be helping people get chicken coops *together*, not as individuals, thereby building multigenerational relationships, educating people about systems and ‘closing the loop’ with respect to resources and waste, and eventually leading to income generating opportunities. It is within these contexts that Transition’s practical projects take on political significance. Along with a mending circle or a bee keeping class is an analysis that recognizes that the current economic and political systems “are both manifested in and dependent on various cultural elements, including subjectivity, social institutions and social relations, the unspoken rules that govern the micro-practices of daily life; as well as the cultural logics such as progress, individualism and identity” (Osterweil 2004, 498-499).

## **Conclusion**

“We surrender our power to governments at our peril,” Rob Hopkins writes. In turning away from the state and instead toward self-determination, horizontality, and the creation of tangible alternatives as sources of power and possibility in a

perilous time, the Transition movement is engaged in a place-based, prefigurative politics similar to many other contemporary movements around the world. “The new movement politics has de-centered the state and its institutions... the state is no longer the uniquely privileged space of progressive politics,” Conway observed a few years before the emergence of the Transition movement (2006, 136).

There are real challenges and contradictions in putting these forms and commitments into practice, as in any social movement, but it is helpful to understand that they are the result of Transition’s ethical/political choices, and are not only aimed at adapting to climate change, resource constraints, and economic insecurity, but also challenging the systems at the root of our contemporary crises. Transition groups throughout the northeast US are experimenting with promoting autonomy, horizontal organizing, and a diversity of local solutions and forms of organization. Transition initiatives are helping people take on active roles in creating alternatives, connecting around and building a common understanding of contemporary problems, visiblizing a certain set of local solutions, and connecting these efforts into a larger, hopefully self-organizing, whole.

In *The Transition Companion*, there is a quote from Wendell Berry, Kentucky farmer, scholar, and cultural critic:

to draw in our economic boundaries and shorten our supply lines so as to permit us literally to know where we are economically. The closer we live to the ground that we live from, the more we will know about our economic life; the more we know about our economic life, the more we will be able to take responsibility for it. (2011, 54)

In Berry’s narrative, like the Transition movement’s, “relocalizing” and locating responsibility in ourselves and our communities rather than the state are the starting

points for power and potential change. In this context, the Transitioners quoted at the beginning of this chapter and others working locally throughout the northeast US are understood to be engaged in politics rather than retreating from it. In this context, the Transition movement is recognizable as a place-based, prefigurative politics with efficacy grounded in a long-term, cultural-political project of nurturing subjectivities, social relations, and everyday practices that offer alternatives to our current political-economic systems.

## CHAPTER 4

### “WE’RE CHANGING THE WORLD, ONE POTLUCK AT A TIME”<sup>23</sup>

#### **Introduction**

Throughout New England, in small rural towns, suburbs, and dense urban neighborhoods, my participant observation took me to numerous potluck dinners – in church basements and fellowship halls, and community rooms of town hall buildings, senior centers, and libraries. Some things were similar from place to place – such as an effort to minimize waste with reusable cups, plates, and utensils. Other things, such as the food people brought, varied from one potluck to another. In Jamaica Plain, one was likely to find chicken and rice purchased from a local Latin American restaurant after work, while in more rural Montpelier there was a high proportion of homegrown and home-preserved food, with fermented vegetables, freshly-laid eggs, and venison chili on offer at one potluck.

The ubiquity and consistency (most initiatives host them monthly) of these potlucks are indicative of the centrality of relationship building to the Transition movement. While the potlucks often had an educational component (either awareness raising or re-skilling), or an organizing component (forming working groups), one of their main purposes was to foster relationships among people with a common connection to a geographic place. Unlike meetings, potlucks generally do not have instrumental aims, nor do they have a well-defined structure of roles. They are more casual, intimate, and relational. In addition to sharing food and conversation, many Transition potlucks I attended featured additional methods of building relationships

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<sup>23</sup> Slogan of Transition Sebastopol, California.

and encouraging a sense of community, such as music jams and small group discussions.

Potlucks and other community social events are not the only method Transition initiatives use to promote relationships. Building place-based relationships and networks is a primary purpose of Transition's practical, hands-on projects. Though tangible physical projects (such as planting fruit trees, starting a tool lending library, and building root cellars) represent steps toward the physical capacity needed for a low-energy future, more importantly they are intended to bring people together and spread Transition's vision of a fossil fuel-free future. "Your initiative must, from an early stage, roll up its sleeves and start making things happen," Hopkins writes in *The Transition Companion*. "A Transition initiative with dirt under its fingernails will gain credibility, and the sight of things changing is a great way of attracting new people. These early projects should be engaging, uncontroversial and photogenic" (2011a, 146).

Collaboration is another method for promoting relationship and network building common among Transition initiatives. "Collaboration is key. Link to what is already happening," advised a participant at the New England Transition and Resilience Gathering. A Montpelier steering committee member related to me his group's success in "making use of existing networks," "that's the beauty," he said, "because our stuff is not controversial really, so any group could sign onto it. There's dozens of groups that we've worked with."

Attempting to be uncontroversial – "inclusive" in Transition's words – is central to how Transitioners understand their efficacy. Though holding potlucks, planting community gardens, and partnering with a local church or civic group are

very humble social change methods and seem to be the antithesis of “changing the world,” these methods actually follow from Transition’s view of the immediacy, severity, and systemic nature of the converging challenges of climate change, resource depletion, and economic crisis. Inclusivity is presented as a pragmatic imperative. Hopkins writes that inclusivity “is one of the key principles simply because without it we have no chance of success” (2008, 141).

In this chapter I explore this aspect of Transition’s prefigurative, place-based politics and the beliefs of efficacy that it is based on. I argue that Transition’s practical, local forms and commitment to inclusivity support novel place-based relationship building (what I call “social ecologies”) while also allowing for accessible entry into the movement and paths for future expansion. I also explore the challenges of this approach, which include internal tensions and difficulty in overcoming racial, class, and other divisions in the US context. Transitioners see efficacy in their work to strengthen local social ecologies in both building an alternative and in responding to expected disasters. They believe that strong social relationships in the context of local places provide a basis for transformation and grassroots democracy and that it lays the groundwork necessary for effectively responding to extreme weather events (and other crises) in a time of climate and economic disruption.

### **Openness and Inclusivity as a Social Movement Strategy**

Hopkins states that, when developing the idea of Transition Towns, he was attempting to overcome the classic problem faced by the permaculture movement, as



well as many other ‘green’ movements – of being on the sidelines, not seen as central and having marginal impact, and only engaging those who already identified with the values and aims in some way. Hopkins explained his thinking in an online interview:

In the green movement you often find that the ideas that need to be scaled-up very quickly across society...are actually niche and fringe and quite happy to be niche and fringe...Transition, then, was originally designed as a Trojan horse that you could chuck permaculture in... We deliberately didn’t start out with saying whose fault it was that we are in this mess, but rather that we are all in a mess, what are we going to do about it? (*STIR to Action*, accessed September 27, 2012)<sup>24</sup>

This approach is what has drawn many people I spoke with to the Transition movement. While not rejecting or dismissing the importance of other forms of activism and organizing, they see it as a distinct approach, one more likely to reach more people in the contemporary US. “I think the idea that we can do something other than agitate politically is huge for many people,” a Transition leader in Jamaica Plain told me. “There are many people who will not get involved in political campaigns – they’re too cynical, or they just don’t like it. It’s not everybody’s style of work. Solutions are where you can see something happen.”

Reaching beyond “the choir” was a familiar theme I heard from Transitioners in the northeast US. One interviewee critiqued what she termed “the sustainability crowd” for operating from an attitude of “Why can’t everybody be where I am?” In contrast, she, like many others, sees in the Transition movement’s openness an opportunity to engage more, and more diverse, people in transitioning to a lower-carbon way of life, without them needing to adopt a “green” (or any other) identity.

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<sup>24</sup> Starr and Adams similarly point out that Bill Mollison, one of the founders of permaculture, had a “vision of separation from, rather than collaboration with, existing political economic systems” (2003).

Some Transitioners with a background in more typical or state-focused organizing explicitly connected their motivation for doing Transition work with the current context in the US, marked by increasing economic inequality and political polarization. US society, as the Transitioner quoted above explained, is “now deeply split” and “a lot of people...think that the government is the enemy.” She related that her decision to embrace the Transition model was connected to what she saw as a “breakdown” in “the basic idea of democracy and citizen.” “I felt like I couldn’t keep doing politics and political organizing in the same way. That in order to bring us together, to have a real democracy, we have to reconnect across these ideological lines...And I’m not making a defense for government, I’m making a defense for democracy and citizen power to hold government leaders accountable.”

Another Transition initiator reported being asked by non-Transition organizers “Isn’t this distracting, getting people to form cooking cooperatives or something? Isn’t that a huge distraction from locking the doors of Monsanto?” His response to them, he told me, is “you’ve got less than 1% of the population even aware that they could conceivably, or should block the door of Monsanto. So what’s your strategy for [everyone else]?” Thus, practical, place-based projects and relationship building are seen by many in the Transition movement as a way to involve previously un-engaged people and extend the influence of the movement. Transition’s goal is “to facilitate a degree of dialogue and inclusion that has rarely been achieved before” (Hopkins 2008, 141). “Although Transition is trying to do something that is profoundly political,” Hopkins says, “I think it is important that we work as hard as we can to come in under the radar as much as possible, and maintain an open dialog with people

from a wide range of positions and try to find common ground with people as much as we can” (Post Carbon Institute podcast, 2011).<sup>25</sup>

Focusing on solutions, meeting people where they are, and prioritizing process over outcomes are all features of Transition’s efforts to be inclusive. Often presented as a pragmatic approach to organizing, uncontroversial community potlucks and practical projects are meant to provide people with an easy entry path into the movement. In highlighting a common connection to the same geographic place and a stake in its future, Transition seeks to bridge differences and engage people. By being about a local place and relationships, it seeks to open up belonging to the Transition idea and actions to people who don’t identify with environmental causes or groups. As one JP NET steering committee leader put it: “no one doesn’t belong. By virtue of the fact that you are a breathing human being, who lives in this place, you’re part of this initiative. Whatever you want to do is part of this initiative, if it’s in service of trying to help us prepare for energy descent and coming dislocation.”

Starhawk, an author, direct-action trainer, and permaculturist who has served as a consultant to Transition US said of the movement, “It doesn’t have a high entry price – you don’t have to define yourself a certain way, you don’t have to take a lot of risks to be a part of a Transition group – you really just have to show up and join.” Indeed, creating a sense of belonging is part of the aim of Transition – belonging to a place and a network of relationships of other people in that place. Part of creating a sense of belonging and engaging in ongoing conversation and engaging with

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<sup>25</sup> In the Transition Companion, Hopkins cites several models of organizational design that influenced the development and evolution of the Transition model in this regard: “including Chaordic, the model that underpins Visa, where ‘belonging’ to an idea is made as simple as possible, with a simple purpose and a set of principles, which, if you agree with them, means you are part of the larger process, and also Parecon, The Natural Step and the Viable Systems Model” (2011, 77).

difference is an emphasis on creating positive alternatives rather than taking a stand against something. Highlighting what they are *for*, rather than against, was a commonality in the groups I studied. For example, three of the communities in my study – Putney, VT, Keene, NH, and Northfield, MA – are located near the Vermont Yankee nuclear plant, which was frequently in the news throughout my research. There was a legal battle over the plant’s future between State of Vermont and the plant’s owner Entergy Corp., and in 2011 radioactive leaks were discovered to be contaminating local waterways. Vermont Yankee is seen as a controversial and divisive issue and all three of the Transition groups in the area have avoided taking public stands on the issue. As one leader of Transition Putney explained,

we're not about being against anything. What we're about is being for what we believe in. So we're for alternative energy. We're not against nuclear energy...and that makes people feel a lot more comfortable than if you say, 'I'm against what you're for.' And it's a very different dynamic. And you know, it's hard enough to be inclusive without setting yourself up in opposition to other groups of people in town, which is automatically going to be exclusive.

Many people believe that their efficacy in part comes from being positive and not working against things.

How are these strategies of inclusion working? Though the majority of the Transition initiators I encountered had done some activism in the past (primarily either environmental or economic justice), I did find a significant subset of leaders in local initiatives who indicated that it was Transition’s apolitical approach that facilitated their entry. One steering committee member told me when I asked how she got involved in Transition Town Montpelier, “I have *not* been an activist. This is really my first serious foray into anything like this...I really want to guard my sense

of ‘No, I’m not an activist. I’m just an average citizen.’” She went on to explain that she felt this way because she saw activists as being *against* something, whereas she “want[s] to work *with*, and collaborate and cooperate.”<sup>26</sup> A Transition Putney steering committee member told me she “veer[s] away from politics” and had previously avoided climate change or energy issues because “it’s a topic I’ve found really scary. It’s not one I’ve wanted to learn too much about because I find it so disheartening.”

The stories of the people quoted above, along with other people I spoke with, indicated to me that Transition’s attempt to be open and accepting is having success in providing some people a vehicle to act with others on these issues, despite reluctance to do so previously.<sup>27</sup> Many people also related to me stories of neighbors, friends, and acquaintances who had not previously been involved in local politics or community issues, but who they were engaging through specific practical projects or through a sense that something “new” was happening in town. Though not activists, these people were already sympathetic to climate and energy issues, however. What about people who hold different political positions or ideologies?

Some local Transition leaders I spoke with thought that the strategies of practical inclusion were bearing fruit in their communities in terms of enabling relationships and engagement across political divisions, though these endorsements

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<sup>26</sup> Another Transition leader in VT similarly did not identify as an activist and told me that activists are “people you want to avoid at a party,” implying that activists push their own agenda without listening or engaging in mutual conversation.

<sup>27</sup> Rob Hopkins similarly notes, “My experience is that many of the people engaging in Transition are not, mostly, the same people that engaged with permaculture, they tend to be a more mainstream crowd, many of whom do not have a background in environmentalism, although of course this differs from place to place.” In “Responding to Sharon Astyk on Permaculture and Transition,” *Transition Culture* (blog) July 3, 2009.

were much more qualified. In Keene, New Hampshire, one leader told me, “The Transition movement's vision does seem to appeal to an increasing number of people in my town, including people all across the conventional political spectrum.” He related that he had helped plan an event in collaboration with the local Rotary Club, and went on to say,

I just recently got asked to speak to the local chapter of...Daughters of the American Revolution...and I'm being asked by more and more churches in town to sort of engage what is the role of faith in Transition and things. And so to me it seems like there really is that possibility of drawing lots of people who might not spend that much time together in ordinary partisan politics, but this is a way to create something that's sort of intriguing and exciting to people. We're at very early, early stages...but I do see it happening more than in than I think often happens in other forms of activism.

I encountered differences among Transitioners in how realistic they thought it was that local efforts could bridge political divides in the US. “Is there a localized movement that has a critique about the kind of economic growth model that is really the dominant religion in our culture, that brings in people from the right side of the political spectrum?” asked one local initiator. “I’m not sure if the Transition movement is really successfully bringing in people who think differently,” he said, adding, however, that he still thinks, “it’s a worthwhile experiment.”

Another area in which “inclusivity” does seem to be meeting success is in collaboration. As noted previously (and as hinted at in the quote about Keene, NH, above), collaboration with existing groups and networks, including civic groups, churches, business associations, etc., is highly prized and prioritized in the Transition movement. This is seen as a way to engage more people in the Transition vision, and these relationships are also valued for their own sake. One Transition initiator I spoke with in western Massachusetts, noting the history of communes in that area that

had not been sustained over time, remarked, “They isolated themselves. To be successful, you have to be connected to people who aren’t like you. I think that’s why Transition Towns can work where the communes didn’t.”

Rather than networking with other groups in an effort to “scale up,” many Transition initiatives use collaboration as a way to “simply” (seemingly apolitically) build relationships. As one Transitioner observed, the goal is not to be an umbrella group, which he likened to the canopy in a forest, “but we need to be the mycelium,” he said, “connecting underground.”<sup>28</sup> Collaboration thus contributes to the important goal of building and strengthening networks of relationships in local places. In Keene, New Hampshire, a group of people interested in starting a Transition initiative recognized that there was already a lot happening in their town of 25,000 that was contributing to building community resilience. Rather than calling themselves “initiators” then, they formed a “taskforce” and sought to act as connectors. They focused on matters of civic concern and tried to promote and link efforts already taking place in Keene.

In Montpelier, one of the larger projects that has developed from the initiative is called APPLE Corps, or Association for the Planting of edible Public Landscapes for Everyone. This working group of Transition Town Montpelier began by converting sections of the Vermont State House lawn into fruit and vegetable gardens. As stated by the APPLE Corps, “[the name] reflects our belief that the presence of vegetables, herbs, fruit and nut trees in public spaces can help educate people about local food, while enhancing food security, and feeding those in need”

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<sup>28</sup> Mycelium (the vegetative part of a fungus) has gained popularity among many permaculturists and others in large part due to Paul Stametz’s book *Mycelium Running: How Mushrooms Can Help Save the World* (2005), documenting how fungi can break down carbon-based pollutants and aid in bioremediation.

(2011 Fact Sheet). The fact that these are practical projects and that people don't have to agree on the reasons why they are important has meant that the group has been able to form unlikely alliances. In addition to the prominent location at the State House, they have developed a partnership with one of the largest private employers in the area, National Life Insurance Company, including installing and maintaining vegetable gardens on their lawn.

Collaboration and networking is not without complication for groups that are attempting to fly under the political radar. One of the first questions an emphasis on collaboration raises is *who* it is appropriate to collaborate with. Collaboration is something through which groups are attempting to define themselves as apolitical, or political. Transition Wayland, MA, has embraced working with the climate change group 350.org for example. The initiators of Transition Wayland decided that since climate change is a major concern of their group, it made sense to be a part of 350.org's worldwide day of action, "Moving Planet," in September 2011. They actively organized around and played a key role in the Boston-area's "day to move beyond fossil fuels."

Transition Wayland was the only initiative that I found that had wholly and publicly embraced joining 350.org's efforts, however. Initiatives in Vermont, the home state of 350.org and home of a related statewide group (350 Vermont), had connections with the climate change group, but attempted to publicly remain separate. An organizer for 350VT reported, though, that individuals who were also involved in Transition made up about a quarter of those involved in 350VT.



With the emergence and prominence of the Occupy movement in the fall of 2011, US Transitioners were confronted with a decision of how to relate to a movement that shared many of the same values and commitments, but was more clearly identified as “political.” On the Transition US e-mail list, there was a spirited debate with a range of viewpoints and stories, from groups wanting distance from Occupy to those closely allying with their local Occupiers. In the northeast, no collaborations with Occupy emerged immediately, but in June 2012, the Village Building Convergence, affiliated with Transition Town Montpelier, collaborated with the regional Occupy movement to put on their third annual a weekend-long gathering and skillshare. On the agenda were workshops about edible mushrooms and composting along with nonviolent direct action training. There were also workshops that explicitly bridged both movements, including one on horizontal organization and another titled, “Skills-building or Building Power?” In almost all of the Transition groups I studied, navigating the tension between being open and inclusive and standing for certain principles is an ongoing issue.

### **Community Building and Social Ecologies**

Transition’s commitment to inclusivity is not easily recognizable as a social movement strategy from the perspective that defines social movements as challenges to power holders. The movement’s foregrounding of non-controversial practical and social projects has been critiqued by many on the left, arguing that Transition is failing to offer a political-economic analysis and avoiding engagement with the root causes of the problems, namely capitalism and corporate-led globalization (Trapeze

2008). Though the Transition movement rejects the state's promises that economic growth and neoliberal globalization will provide security and prosperity, in contrast to traditional left organizing that has sought to challenge neoliberal globalization by uniting like-minded people across distance,<sup>29</sup> initiatives seek to build relationships, including across lines of political difference, in a local place. They envision a world in which people's basic needs are met close to home, through collective production and mutually beneficial relationships rather than consumption and economic growth. A commitment to inclusivity, or building community and strengthening the social ecology of a place, is central to accomplishing this transition and is both a means and an end in itself.

While critics maintain that the movement is "adaptive," which is equated with acceptance and resignation, I argue that far from being defeatist, this is another aspect of Transition's practical and prefigurative politics. The primary way Transitioners understand their efforts is as an open-ended process of building relationships and community connections, or what I call strengthening the "social ecology" of a local place. These efforts are seen as useful in preparing for coming crises, but also as an organizing strategy and a prefigurative politics to bring about cultural shifts over the long-term.

Beyond the seeming distinctiveness of "noncontroversial" practices,<sup>30</sup> Transition's prioritizing of place-based connections and social ecologies is part of an

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<sup>29</sup> See, for example, *Transnational social movements and global politics: Solidarity beyond the state*. J. Smith, C. Chatfield, and R. Pagnucco (1997).

<sup>30</sup> One example in the literature that is similar is Amory Starr's analysis of "alternative consumption" from a social movement perspective. She argues that the local food movement can be usefully understood as a social movement that is "hegemonizing a new cosmology (or paradigm) of food production, distribution, and consumption" (2010, 7). Though people participate in Community

overall cultural-political approach that has resonance with other contemporary movements, from the AGM, to popular movements in Argentina, to Occupy. Whereas many other contemporary prefigurative movements, such as the globalization activists that David Graeber writes about, “have been putting enormous creative energy into reinventing their groups’ own internal processes, to create viable models of what functioning direct democracy could actually look like” (2002, 9), Transition looks outward, emphasizing neighbor-to-neighbor connections, with a high priority on engaging an ever-wider circle of people. While doing so, Transition is attempting to embrace diversity. Similar to Santos’ analysis of the World Social Forum, openness and diversity are valued for their own sake: “The other possible world may be many things, but never a world with no alternative,” he writes (2006, 12). Having multiple, diverse, redundant connections and networks or relationships is a key goal of Transition initiatives.

When I asked Transitioners about their hopes for their local initiative in the future and how they would evaluate the success of their efforts, more than anything else, “community building” was the reply. “What I keep coming back to,” one Transition initiator in Northfield told me, “is that at the base of Transition Towns is building community. That’s the foundation of it. Without that you don’t have anything. It’s all about the relationships between the people who happen to share this particular geography.” In Putney, a steering committee member told me, “Honestly, for me, and for the whole group, it’s all about community building. That’s where it begins and ends.”

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Supported Agriculture (CSA) “for a variety of reasons, which we might judge to be politically inadequate,” she maintains, “through participation their politics expand to embrace more issues promoted by the CSA framework” (14).

Transitioners described local initiatives as “a long conversation” and “a conversation that is open ended.” One person invoked the image of “weaving webs of relationships,” and an initiator of the Jamaica Plain initiative said one of the main things Transition is about is “reweaving the social fabric of being in a relationship with each other.” These images and metaphors imply that the goal is sustained engagement and meaningful, mutual relationships. The outcome is not determined and there is an emphasis on process over product. Transitioners are judging their efforts by how many people are engaged in building community resilience *together*, particularly across lines of difference. Like ecologists assessing the health of an ecosystem, people are looking to see how many relationships exist and how strong they are, and how well diverse parts of the community system are connected.<sup>31</sup> Community, then, is an essential part of the place-based, prefigurative politics that the Transition movement is enacting.

For Transition initiatives, strengthening social ecology is a necessary preparation for predicted climate disasters and economic shocks to come. Webs of local relationships will enable people to respond to disasters more effectively, they say. When a flood washes out roads or a snowstorm knocks out power, knowing which house has a back-up generator or which neighbor might need assistance goes a

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<sup>31</sup> In their 2011 article “Adapting to peak oil and climate change: Lessons from the Transition Movement,” Rob Hopkins and Geographer Jonathan Crinion discuss the impact of Transition initiatives in terms of “social cohesion.” It is social cohesion that “creates an enduring and resilient infrastructure with foresight potential and adaptability.” “Social cohesion is about creating community participation and freely giving ones time for the greater purpose of the community. By encouraging unfunded local altruistic mutual cooperation, it is hoped the community as a whole develops stronger social cohesion, resilience to shocks and the ability to embrace transformation... In the face of crisis, the long-term primacy of resilient social cohesion far outweighs the short term financial gain and distraction acquired through neoliberal directives and funding” (14).

long way toward an effective response. As in natural systems, dense and redundant connections allow for resilience.

*In Transition 2.0*, a film produced by Transition Network in the UK, features stories of communities working together to reduce their fossil fuel use, build clinics, and strengthen local economies, and also shows communities responding to disasters. As a reviewer wrote, “Here are initiatives who are undergoing the shocks of climate change and the collapse of top-down infrastructure. Here is Japan after the nuclear disaster, New Zealand after two earthquakes. Transition groups that had already been working together were able to respond collectively to the crisis” (Du Cann, *STIR to Action*, 2012).

Likewise, a collective response to an energy and economic shock is the subject of one of the most popular documentaries shown by Transition initiatives. *The Power of Community: How Cuba Survived Peak Oil* focuses on The Special Period in Cuba, following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Within a short period of time, Cuba lost half of its oil imports and the majority of its international trade. Rather than finding fossil fuel substitutes for Soviet oil shipments, the film depicts that Cuba recovered by shifting its agriculture and economy away from fossil fuels as much as possible. The movie shows Cubans promoting permaculture, organic farming, urban agriculture, renewable energy, and bicycling, and thereby collectively accomplishing a significant transition to a lower-carbon way of life and economy.

Strengthening social ecologies to prepare for floods, droughts, and rising oil prices is also part of an organizing strategy. Many Transitioners believe that in time, as the crises of climate change, peak oil, and economic instability worsen, their ideas

and practices will be more accepted and more widely adopted. In *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (2007), Naomi Klein gives a critical account of economist Milton Friedman's strategy for spreading free-market ideas and policies. Speaking at a Transition conference in the UK, and suggesting that this strategy can be adopted towards different ends, Klein quoted Friedman:

Only a crisis - actual or perceived - produces real change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around. That, I believe, is our basic function: to develop alternatives to existing policies, to keep them alive and available until the politically impossible becomes the politically inevitable.

Several of the activists I interviewed related this view in explaining the potential efficacy of their efforts (sometimes, though not always, based on having heard Naomi Klein speak or having read *The Shock Doctrine*). For example, a leader of the JP NET group explained his view of the work they are doing:

I kind of think that our job... [is to] learn some lessons, build best practices, try to apply it to lots of different subcultures, and then be ready. You know, be ready when the earthquake and the hurricane and the drought all sort of whack people over the head enough that they're sort of like, "Huh." Or the next economic shock or whatever. Then I think it's ready. We're preparing it to go viral essentially is how I think about it.

Disaster preparedness is also seen as a way to successfully carry out depoliticized community organizing. As another JP NET leader voiced,

I think one of the best organizing inroads right now is civil preparedness for disasters, because we're going to see so many more disasters. Whether it's earthquakes from fracking, or unimaginable snowfalls that knock out electricity, or tornadoes or fires or floods, we're just going to see more and more of it...I think to say to people "Wouldn't you like to feel like you could be a resource in your neighborhood if something desperate happened? And how do we prepare? And what should we be preparing for? And what do we need to do?" Those are great Transition questions.

A Transition Town Montpelier steering committee member offered a strikingly similar analysis:

I really feel the most passion around truly neighborhood [level action]...it's so empowering, and it's the way to reach people beyond the choir... [It] started really occurring to me that people would be more open to emergency preparedness – anybody would be – than this Transition thing and climate change...if it was emergency preparedness in your on neighborhood...“What do we need to do as neighbors? How can we empower ourselves and create a really good thing out of this?”

Thus, far from being only adaptive, there are multiple levels of significance of disaster preparedness in the Transition movement.

Though an expectation of increasing climate and economic shocks underlie the movement as a whole, Transitioners I encountered expressed a range of views about how they think fossil fuel depletion, climate change, and economic uncertainty will play out, from a gradual transition to a quicker and more complete collapse (often termed the “collapsitarian” view). These views are not uniform within initiatives and there is variation between the groups overall in this respect. Both Montpelier and Jamaica Plain appeal to people’s lived experience of the changes in our lives, though in Montpelier this is more likely to be about recent frequent floods and in Jamaica Plain it is more often about rising prices and a deteriorating economy. In Newburyport, MA, and Charlotte, VT, organizers expressed that their wealthy neighbors felt more insulated from the changes, and had more of a stake in the status quo, which they thought made it harder to engage people in Transition. Along with appeals to personal experience, sources of knowledge about climate change, peak oil, and the economy in Transition are often based on popular authors such as Richard Heinberg (peak oil), Sharon Astyk (peak oil and food), Bill McKibben (climate

change), David Korten (new economies), Chuck Collins (wealth inequality), Naomi Klein (corporate globalization), Charles Eisenstein (capitalism, money, and debt), and Michael Shuman (local economies). Groups also frequently show documentaries as ways to educate and inspire people to get involved. Most often in the northeast I saw showings of *The Power of Community: How Cuba Survived Peak Oil* (2006) and *The Economics of Happiness* (2011).

In addition to practical preparation and a pragmatic organizing strategy, Transition's commitment to inclusivity and elements of disaster preparedness are also prefigurative. Though not naming it "cultural politics," Transitioners do see what they are doing as political and different from state-centered or instrumental activism.<sup>32</sup> People who I spoke with in the movement see their efforts not as a replacement for other kinds of political engagement, but complementary, appealing to different people and with different goals, but serving an equally necessary purpose. As one Transition trainer told me when I asked about how she saw the importance of state-focused action, such as a national cap on carbon,

Keep going, keep doing it. But I'm recruiting people that they will never get [in the movement for a carbon cap], and people who are going to change things on the ground that are going to help implement that carbon cap. And they're going to change the political mindset of their town by organizing neighborhoods... That's politics, the personal and the political.

Expressing that state-focused action is necessary but not sufficient is similar to Osterweil's argument about segments of the AGM focused on changing policies: "these campaigns are critical parts of opposition to neo-liberal globalization," she writes. "However, the problem is that, for the most part, their politics go no further.

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<sup>32</sup> Despite attempts to "fly under the radar" politically, I did not encounter the view from Transitioners themselves that it is apolitical. Even the few Transitioners quoted earlier that do not want to be seen as "activists" indicated by their statements that they felt a tension in maintaining that position.



They work against policies, but do not acknowledge the systemic, cultural, or micropolitical aspects that make possible the existence and enforcement of these policies. As a consequence, the alternatives they posit tend to rely on and reinforce the current political culture” (2004, 502). Similarly, in the Transition movement the desired changes are understood to be more systemic and cultural than could be accomplished through a focus on a single campaign or policy.

Operating on micro-political terrain and changing culture is seen as important in the Transition movement, including through activist practices. Transitioners see part of their movement efficacy in knowledge production. Through prefigurative organizing, Transition initiatives are developing knowledge-practices that contribute to unsettling dominant political cultures. As an activist in Vermont expressed it: “civil disobedience is great for big, punchy charismatic stuff – we need a law changed, we need leaders changed. But we still have to figure out a different way of living on the planet. And that is what Transition is doing...if what we need to do is ultimately reinvent the ways that we live, we need to reinvent the ways that we protest and make change.”

This approach is not unlike the one taken by many contemporary movements from Latin America to Occupy Wall Street. One function that community building and networks of relationships play in these diverse movements is providing a basis for new meanings of power and security. Transition is attempting to shift these concepts away from static commodities to be obtained from government or corporations, to collaborative works-in-progress that are built, from the bottom-up, through relationships. This is true both in the ongoing crises of capitalism and environmental devastation as well as in more acute crises such as natural disasters.

Transition is not the only movement trying to resignify these ideas. As Starr and Adams relate:

Rejecting the false dichotomy of reformist or revolutionary notions of social change, these movements guide us to begin looking beyond centralized power...as an important agent of change and begin looking to each other as sources of power. As Pablo, a jubilant insurrectionary marching with an Argentine *cacerolazo*, teaches, “security used to be in the bank, and insecurity was in the streets. Now insecurity is in the bank...And security is in the streets, with our neighbors. (2003, 42)

Likewise, after widespread flooding and damage caused by Superstorm Sandy in the New York and New Jersey area in the fall of 2012, Occupy Sandy Relief emerged from Occupy Wall Street in order to carry out assistance efforts, particularly through promoting mutual aid.<sup>33</sup> As one Occupier interviewed said, “We’ve been building neighborhood assemblies and community support networks...so this relief is a natural response for us, where communities band together to reach out and support each other” (*Huffington Post*, November 5, 2012).

Mutual aid disaster recovery as a social movement practice is also significant in that it is an example of these movements “putting action before ideology” (Starr and Adams 2003, 29). Movements like Transition, Occupy, and others attempt to avoid creating narrow definitions of what it means to belong to the movement or contribute to the effort. Transition’s appeal for inclusivity is echoed by Occupy’s “We are the 99%.” Both movements cast a wide net and prize concrete experiences of solidarity. “If people are isolated and disconnected and don’t have a personal experience of solidarity,” a JP NET initiator told me, they are less likely to support movements that appeal to solidarity in the abstract, for national health care, for example. “If you’re

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<sup>33</sup> There is a long history of “solidarity not charity” efforts in responding to natural disasters, for example Common Ground Relief in New Orleans. Though it is beyond the scope of my research, it would be interesting to study the history of relationships between political movements and disaster response, including tracing the history of appeals for “mutual aid” as a means for disaster response.

isolated, disconnected, and just watching cable news, you're going to fall for all kinds of bullshit. You're going to get very afraid. And so I think a connected, less fearful base is necessary to have good outcomes on a political level." Another interviewee expressed a similar analysis when she explained, "as people deteriorate economically, the stress level and their capacity to take in new information and rethink and question what they've been taught gets smaller. And people are stressed. So Transition arrives with a bunch of solutions to that. One, it's helping people relax by doing practical projects in their communities that improve the quality of their life." She continued: "Secondly, it's building relationships in communities where people can have conversations just like our democracy depends upon."

Several Transitioners I spoke with connected their work of building social ecologies with democracy. The vision is of participatory, grassroots democracy at the local level. One Transition initiator in Putney told me, "this is grassroots democracy taking place where people say, 'I want a better economy in this town. You know, I want to localize the economy. I want to build resilience within my own community so that when these things happen, we're able to eat and take care of one another.' And people are stepping forward and using their collective genius to make it happen." A Transition initiator in Keene included "participatory democracy" alongside sustainability when describing the vision Transition is working toward. Though it is not at the forefront of the movement's messaging, in conversation with many Transitioners I found that they understand their work in many ways as contributing to democracy by building local relationships and promoting community engagement.

Transitioners also see social ecologies as contributing to the possibility of socio-political transformation. "Transition is using personal conversation and

relationships to help us transition to a new paradigm,” said one Transition initiator. He described one hallmark of the new paradigm as “thinking about what would serve the whole community.” This hope that I found expressed by some in the Transition movement in the northeast US – that through conversation and relationships, experiences of solidarity and mutual aid, particularly across lines of difference, social change can be facilitated – is similar to how Conway describes the role of coalition work in the Metro Network for Social Justice. “This theory of knowledge suggests that in coalition, through dialogue, negotiation, practical acts of solidarity and ongoing political collaboration,” she writes, “subjectivities can be transformed – not toward uniformity, but toward greater capacity of producing fuller, more adequate knowledges with which to change the world in ways responsive to the diverse needs and desires of the many rather than an elite few” (31). Conway convincingly demonstrates the ways in which this epistemology “of partial, positional and situated knowledges,” builds on feminist theory and practice. She writes that feminists, “Drawing on experiences in coalition politics, . . . have argued for the possibility of dialogue among partial knowledges, mutual learning, expanded solidarity and concrete collaboration that does not require either perfect knowledge or perfect agreement” (137).

This is similar to views of democracy in Transition and connected to why the movement places such high priority on inclusivity. Transition is not working toward uniformity in that the main goal is not for everyone to share a common identity, to join a specific organization or campaign, or to join together under the Transition banner. Instead, openness and inclusivity are valued as a way of changing people’s behavior without changing their minds or identities, facilitating (it is hoped) a move

to a different way of life and ultimately, a different worldview. The movement builds on connections to a local place as a starting point to forge alliances that in practice create alternatives to neoliberal globalization.<sup>34</sup> As J. K. Gibson-Graham observes, “A community economy is an ethical and political space of decision, not a geographic or social commonality, and community is its outcome rather than a ground” (2006, xv). “The new democratic imaginary places a premium on practice,” Conway writes. “It is through practice that the movements are producing the knowledges they need in the making of another world with the space for many worlds within it. Through countless concrete initiatives, experiments and projects, and reflection on their successes and limits, the movements learn, teach, change, try again” (Conway 2006, 137-38).

### **Challenges and Contradictions**

Transition’s experiment in an inclusive politics of place is not without challenges and contradictions. As Harcourt and Escobar remind us, “we cannot ignore the fact that there is no such thing as a ‘pure’ or easily definable place” (2002, 12). One of the first decisions faced by many Transition initiators when starting out is “what is local?” In the initiatives I encountered, settling on a geographic definition on which to base their initiative was not a major point of contention or an obstacle to starting. Constructing what constituted their local “place” was a process that usually happened fairly easily, whether they made a decision to build on already-existing traditions of a “hub” city, such as Transition Town Montpelier, or a decision such as

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<sup>34</sup> Hess writes that the “use of local identity as a basis for building coalitions is widely recognized, and it appears in other sorts of grassroots coalitions in the United States, such as ones that have emerged between Western ranchers and environmentalists (Weber 2003)” (2010, 9).

Belfast Area Transition Initiative to cast a wide net in this sparsely populated rural area, or JP NET to demarcate a specific area of Boston, recognizing that it is an artificial boundary but also that they are limited in what they can take on.

A connection to a specific place, however, does not automatically create a bond among individuals or groups, nor does it erase significant lines of difference. Decades of neoliberal policies and ideology, economic inequality, racism, political polarization, and the current drive for energy independence (which is rooted in a much more long-standing ‘frontier ethos’), all present challenges to US Transition initiatives, especially with respect to the strategy of “inclusivity.” In attempting to work around some of the limits of state-focused and oppositional politics, the Transition movement is confronting many barriers and tensions, particularly in the US context.

One of the most central and explicit tensions for Transition groups in the northeast US is negotiating between being inclusive and non-alienating while at the same time raising awareness about climate change and energy and economic uncertainty, as most groups seek to do, or at the very least being associated with a movement motivated by these issues, which is the case for some Transition groups. Climate change and energy issues are significantly more politicized in the US than the UK. As a Transition Town Montpelier steering committee member put it, “climate change in and of itself is considered, unfortunately, a leftist activity or priority.”

Most people are very interested in figuring out, in a realistic and nuanced way, how to hold, as one Transition organizer said, the “paradox of being explicit but

inviting.” As another person explained to me, “You don’t want to come from a space of despair. You want to come from a space of possibility, the grand adventure, and hope. And yet, you also want to balance that with acknowledging that we can’t be complacent and the challenges are real and that this is going to require a huge amount of effort, right?” I found that groups in my study took very different positions on the spectrum of emphasizing raising awareness or trying to be seen as apolitical.

Transition Town Montpelier (TTM) does not shy away from being upfront about the motivation, and urgency, of their efforts. Each potluck, skill-share, working group meeting or other event hosted by TTM begins with an explanation of the purpose – highlighting the contexts of climate change and peak oil, which they see as part of a strategy to raise awareness. For example, the following is taken from the minutes of a working group meeting:

The Fiber Arts etc Group involves reskilling – learning those skills that our grandparents took for granted. This group will focus on and promote the teaching and practice of such skills as spinning, weaving, mending, darning, quilting, felting, sewing, knitting, etc.

*We recognize that we need to relocalize production of our clothing and bedding which presently comes from far away and is dependent on fossil fuel for transport and assumes that other parts of the world continuing production, which may not be the case over time. We need to care for what we already have and learn to sew, mend and recycle.*

The Fiber Arts etc group is a Working Group of Transition Town Montpelier, whose mission is to create resilience in our communities by reskilling and relocalizing, *in the face of fossil fuel depletion, climate change, and economic instability.* (e-mail, March 12, 2011, my emphasis)

Regarding inclusivity, the leaders of TTM recognize that their positions may turn some people off. “I don’t think that will always be possible to [include everybody]

while moving us in the direction that we need to go as fast as we need to get there, but I would like our first posture to be looking for ways to do that,” one leader told me.

One city official I spoke with argued that the approach of being upfront about creating resilience to prepare for future climate, energy, and economic shocks limited the potential of Transition to be truly inclusive and therefore to engage many new people. Unlike an asset-based approach to community engagement, “You don’t get through the door if you don’t think climate change and peak oil is a problem” she said, and thus, “the Transition group has tended to be the choir...the folks who would be working on this anyway... these aren’t the Rotary Club members.” Similarly, one group in Burlington, Vermont, that was forming for a similar purpose as Transition was considering *not* adopting the Transition name, which they saw as too identified with left politics.

Other groups, such as Northfield, Mass., are less upfront about why they are promoting community connections and a more localized economy. Group leaders reported that they feel that they have been successful in engaging people who have not previously been involved in politics or in the community, but that it has been challenging to try to appeal to a broad spectrum while also promoting change. “There is a tension and it keeps coming up and we have to keep addressing it,” one leader told me.

For the US Transition movement seeking traction across political party identification and ideological lines, the intensification of political polarization in recent years represents a significant obstacle at present. As Theda Skocpol writes, “As late as the mid-2000s...the possibility remained that most Americans – including



a clear plurality if not a bare majority of Republicans – could converge on the view that global warming is very threatening and government must act to address greenhouse gas emissions” (2013, 73). This has changed considerably in recent years due to the fact that “Climate denial got disseminated deliberately and rapidly from think tank tomes to the daily media fare of about thirty to forty percent of the US populace” (2013, 83). Skocpol’s research demonstrates how partisan differences on environmental issues have grown sharply over the past decade.

The US context is not only marked by widespread denial of global warming, there has also been a rise in discourses of “energy independence.” When *The Transition Handbook* was published in 2008, it advocated for using peak oil as an awareness-raising strategy and argued that the business-as-usual global economy would come to an end regardless of outside pressure, because of its dependence on fossil fuels, which would increasingly become prohibitively expensive. In just a few years, however, the development and implementation of new “extreme energy” technologies (such as fracking, tar sands, and deepwater drilling) mean that global capability to burn fossil fuels far exceeds what scientists warn are the tipping points for maintaining a livable climate.

The discourse of energy independence is in line with the historical ‘frontier ethos’ in the US, which is another difference from the UK context, which, as a small island nation, culturally has a greater recognition of limits. Many individuals and groups in my study voiced that the UK-grown Transition model needs to be adapted for the US context to be able to create meaningful change here.<sup>35</sup> The much larger

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<sup>35</sup> Michael Brownlee, co-founder of Transition Colorado and a Transition Trainer, has argued that the particular US context, which he defines as “a deep disconnection from the natural world, from life

size of the US, in geography and population, as compared to the UK, is one factor mentioned that makes Transition a challenge here. The US has also experienced suburban sprawl over the last thirty years (Holland, et. al. 107). As one interviewee observed, “the UK really – outside of London – is a lot of towns. You know, sort of dense settlements with some surrounding countryside and farmland, which is a completely different landscape from the United States, which is mostly exurbs and suburbs and sprawl...endless strip malls and sort of a bland lack of township.” These contexts are not removed from decades of neoliberalism advanced by both mainstream political parties in the US. As Naomi Klein said to Rob Hopkins in an interview about the differences between the UK and North America, “free trade has been rammed down our throats so aggressively and it’s been a big political battle. We are locked in with these trade deals so the idea that we could do relocalisation in a depolitical way in the North American context is...a bit of a fantasy I think” (2011b).

The US is also marked by economic inequality more severe than in the UK, which, along with legacies of genocide and slavery, and continuing institutionalized racism, make getting from valuing difference in the abstract to enacting a politics that in practice respects and encourages diversity difficult. The Transition groups in the northeast US are predominantly (though not exclusively) white and middle-class, in both leadership and participation.<sup>36</sup> This is not surprising as the broader relocalization

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itself... nowhere more dramatic or more devastating than right here in the U.S.” will require “plac[ing] the Sacred at the very core of our work and at the center of all our activities” in order to be successful and sustainable (2010). Though Brownlee’s argument is well-known among those who follow Transition US and Hopkin’s blog, *Transition Culture*, closely, this is not an argument that I found reflected in Transition initiatives in the northeast US.

<sup>36</sup> For discussion of race and racism in other contemporary US movements, see Juris, Ronayne, Shokooh-Valle, and Wengronowitz, “Negotiating Power and Difference within the 99%,” in *Journal of Social, Cultural and Political Protest* (2012); and Starr, “How Can Anti-Imperialist Not Be Anti-

movement in the US is a largely white and middle class movement. As Hess writes, “Localism is not a poor people’s movement. Rather, it articulates a middle-class radicalism in the global field of antiglobalization movements” (2010, 17). The Transition model itself was developed in a middle class context in the UK, and Hopkins’ stated intent was that Transition would be a “de-tox for the West,” implying that its anticipated “audience” was generally middle class. After all, there is a consistent positive correlation between fossil fuel consumption and income.

Reaching middle-class Americans is therefore a key aim. One initiator I spoke with emphasized the importance of reaching middle class US-ers for political reasons as well. “It’s the disconnected, angry, and collapsing middle class Anglo culture that needs this stuff,” one initiator told me. Referring to the shrinking middle class as “the anxious class,” he observed, “The collapsing middle in any modern economy is the most volatile political dynamic. And if the collapsing middle is going Tea Party, you know...” Another Transition participant saw potential in Transition to organize middle-class Americans in a new way. A long-time activist, she related to me, “This idea of ‘Let’s get ready for when It’s gonna be difficult’ is the first time I’ve ever seen that you can get Americans to just step back and say ‘Oh my God. Look how unprepared I am to live with less, to live in community’ rather than ‘I can live my own individual life, I can take care of everything myself,’ which is almost part of our country’s middle class privilege.” So engaging middle class Americans in a movement that presents an alternative worldview and collective solutions, as well as leading them to consume less of the world’s finite resources, are important goals of this middle class movement.

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Racist? The North American Anti-Globalization Movement,” in *Journal of World Systems Research* (2004).

In the US context, however, there is a tension between the model's biases toward reaching middle class Americans and recognition that in order to truly be effective in building place-based, local resilience, a Transition initiative must engage with the whole community. In my interviews as well as in meetings and gatherings, people frequently highlighted race and class-based divisions and economic inequality as challenges to successfully implementing the Transition model in the US. As one woman at the New England Transition and Resilience Gathering stated, "We are not going to be resilient if we maintain the same race and class structures we have now." Indeed, as Hurricane Katrina, Superstorm Sandy, and other "natural" disasters have shown, structural racism and inequality set the stage for an extreme lack of community resilience. Further, research has shown that greater income disparities lead to poorer air and water quality and more equal incomes are correlated with more protective environmental policies (Ash, Boyce, Chang, and Scharber 2012).

Developing a more diverse (by race and class) movement was a stated aim of the majority of the Transitioners I met in the northeast US. Interviewees often asked me if I knew of success stories of initiatives working across race and class divides. In every open space event I attended, there was a topic group discussion called on race and/or class. Many people I spoke with highlighted some of the specific biases in the model or barriers for the movement. One initiator told me,

I think that people like Rob [Hopkins] have just sort of taken certain things for granted about basic decency, about a basic safety net – things that we cannot assume for this country. And so that means that we have to think about this more and not just have certain implicit assumptions, but figure it out explicitly. So we do talk about social justice...I'm not afraid to speak up on various things that might be peripheral or seen as somewhat peripheral to the Transition movement.

Another interviewee observed that for many people, growing one's own food can be "painful because it's a reminder of the subsistence background they may have come out of, or their parents or grandparents." In a Transition workshop in Maine, participants discussed the ways in which none of us are immune to the pressures toward greater consumption exerted by classism. Similarly, a Latin American immigrant involved in Transition Somerville observed that there were significant pressures on immigrants to the US to adopt the predominant consumption patterns here in order to present a certain class status.

In many respects it is often white middle class US-ers who have the privilege to voluntarily, without risking serious consequences, embrace a low-carbon lifestyle, which in effect is adopting a lower standard of material living and in many cases also downward economic mobility. Many people also observed that the racism and classism that most white middle class US-ers unconsciously bring with them to this work represents another barrier. As one person put it, "White people's cluelessness makes it hard to work together. Poor people and people of color don't want to show up and be treated with condescension." Along with optimism about the future and knowledge of navigating systems, being middle-class in the US also often means being raised with habits of superiority, individualism, and entitlement, along with a learned blindness to privilege and oppression.

Starhawk reflected that Transition's white and middle class make-up is a result of the way in which deep structural racism in the US means that "it's really hard to find [the leisure or the optimism to think about something like Transition] if you're in the middle of an inner city black community where the big issues are often

around police violence and gang violence, and you feel like you're fighting for your life everyday – it's hard to take a step back from that and go, 'well maybe we should be thinking about transitioning away from fossil fuels.' Mostly you're thinking about 'how do I get a job and feed my family'" (personal communication).

A Transition leader and trainer from a predominantly African-American community in Pittsburgh, PA, said to me of his efforts to facilitate mixed-race and mixed-class Transition groups:

You've got white intellectuals and they're pushed [outside their comfort zone] because they don't get to drive it. They're part of the process. And you've got poor, disenfranchised people who get involved and they don't realize their power *to* drive it. So, what I'm trying to figure out is how do you marry those two groups in a way that they share ownership of the process and no one group feels dominant as a result of their intellectual or financial wherewithal.

Similarly a Trainer from western Massachusetts saw potential in the model to avoid playing out race and class dynamics that have been typical of middle-class environmental movements in the past: "By doing it neighbor to neighbor as opposed to 'we're the sustainability experts,'" you avoid "all of that judging and all of that conscious class and superiority stuff, the intellectuals who read the books and see how bad things are getting and then try to go out and...don't know how to partner." She went on to say, however, that "even though the model is the best that I've experienced for diversity work, it doesn't end up being that in a lot of communities." Not only in Transition, she sees the ways in which, despite intentions, "We recreate hierarchy. We recreate exclusion. We recreate individualism," as "a challenge for all social change movements."

It is difficult to address these dynamics without talking about them explicitly, though, and as many people have pointed out, in the US context to *not* speak of racism, classism, and inequality is to at best be irrelevant to many people of color and poor and working class folks, and at worst to collude with oppression. As Transition groups purport to be representing the interests of “the community,” it is vital that people who have been marginalized by dominant culture are not once again made invisible in that representation. Yet talking explicitly about racism and classism has not been a central part of Transition. As Starhawk told me, “I think the Transition movement...it’s part of maybe being a bit more overtly political like looking at having an analysis around racism...and gender discrimination and other sorts of discrimination...how that feeds into things like the way we look at the earth and the reason that we’re able to continue these destructive patterns. And having economic programs that actually offer something to the people who have been the most disenfranchised.”<sup>37</sup>

Though racism and classism are increasingly being addressed by Transition US, anti-oppression is not a top priority for the movement at the national or international levels. In addition to the dangers of reinscribing systems of oppression, the fact that Transition is a largely middle class movement and that this is not often made explicit and reflected upon leaves the movement vulnerable in certain respects.

As Rob Hopkins quoted science fiction novelist William Gibson, “The future is

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<sup>37</sup> Starhawk also said, “The other thing I think is that Transition groups...might look around and say ‘well what are the issues in our community that people of diverse backgrounds or colors or races or economic backgrounds are looking for help with or looking for support around. How do we actively support them?’ That’s often a much better way to make alliances” (personal communication). Transitioners in the northeast US frequently mentioned this as a good way to proceed, but I did not witness a sustained effort to do this as a primary strategy.

already here, it's just not very evenly distributed.” The futures that Transition groups are preparing for are already playing out dramatically in parts of New Orleans and Detroit, and less visibly in many other places across the country. A white, middle-class movement will have a harder time developing effective solutions to problems that they are more insulated from and a harder time overcoming things like individualism that have a stronger hold on middle-class, white cultures than many other cultures. Thus, the Transition movement overall would benefit greatly from working cross-class, cross-race and cross-culturally.

The Transition movement is not static, however, and in this area there is a lot of experimentation. Many groups are looking at the divides in their communities, whether they are based on race, culture, class, or other lines of difference. Jamaica Plain New Economy Transition (JP NET), in Boston is actively and intentionally experimenting with the Transition model to find a way to make it more successful in diverse, urban US communities. Though the individuals in the initiating group are nearly all white and middle-class, they are attempting to broaden the relevance and leadership of the initiative, and building relationships with Latinos who make up a sizable part of the community. As one JP NET leader told me, “We’re not going to get to where we want to go if the organizing committee is all white.” She explained, “our biggest obstacle is the divide in JP, between white middle-class progressive folks and folks of color and of less means. That’s not news to anyone – it’s really clear. So how do you start this initiative in a way that doesn’t recapitulate that?”

JP NET is trying many avenues to answer that question. It is very conscious about appealing to a broad, diverse base, and is explicit that the current status quo is



not working for most people. Their messaging focuses primarily on the rising costs of food and fuel and preparing for economic uncertainty. The guiding question as they organize is “what are the dimensions of people’s economic life that we can make a difference in?” They hold regular monthly potlucks, with diverse themes and speakers intended to be relevant to and engage a broad range of community members. They have also held bilingual (Spanish and English) community meetings on the theme “Rising cost of Food and Fuel: Are we Ready?” JP NET is intentionally working to develop Transition work in a cross-class, cross-race way.

Transition Putney, Vermont, has also tried actively to bridge divisions in the mostly white, rural town. “Our core organizing group is very aware that there are segments of the Putney community that aren't participating, and it's a divide that seems to break down along socio-economic lines. That's going to be a big focus for us going into our second year of existence – how to bridge that gap and help the people who are missing feel that they have a place in Transition Town Putney.” Transition Putney has engaged in projects around a paper mill that is a large employer in the small town, but also a source of local pollution, has been actively engaged with the town’s food pantry and raised awareness about hunger in the area, and has hosted events intended to build alliances across cultural divides such as a skillshare on deer hunting.

Transition Trainers in the northeast US have added their own sections on economic inequality to the curriculum developed in the UK. They are experimenting with integrating economic justice issues (US and international) in the training curriculum with the climate change and peak oil issues that have been central. For

example, one Transition Trainer has worked with the Center for Popular Economics to incorporate awareness-raising on the widening income distribution gap in the US and historical trends related to wealth inequality and personal debt.

In Barre, VT, once the hub of a thriving granite industry that has now collapsed, local community garden activists have collaborated with Transition Town Montpelier to build a tool shed out of cobb (a mixture of mud and straw) and old, repurposed granite bricks. They are addressing the area's high unemployment and high crime rate through community gardening. "This is the kind of thing that we need to do – get back to basics – community, food, being a part of something," they told me, similar to many Transitioners. They also related to me that the project collaborating with TTM helped to strengthen their community. The only group of Transition initiators I encountered that described themselves as primarily poor was the Belfast Area Transition Initiative (BATI) in Maine. Recognizing that potlucks, with an expectation of bringing food to share, present a barrier to many people, this group instead holds weekly drop-in gatherings at the local co-op.

As noted previously, Transition initiatives are different from one another and reflect local differences in contexts. I found that economic insecurity and inequality are bigger issues for groups in rural Maine and in Jamaica Plain, Boston. Though efforts are uneven and a lot of work remains to be done, many local Transition initiators and activists have put questions of justice, racism, and classism at the forefront of their local efforts and are experimenting with using a place-based, prefigurative approach to building a cross-race and cross-class movement.

## Conclusion

Connecting people in the context of specific places – or strengthening the social ecology of a community – is both a strategy and an end in itself for Transition initiatives, to prepare for coming crises, to create alternatives in the present, and to work toward a “different way of living” on the planet and with one another.

Transition emphasizes inclusivity and openness, attempting to reach beyond “the choir” and also to prefigure the type of inter-dependent community and local economies they seek to create. It is an integral part of Transition’s pursuit of change focused on local places and communities, rather than through the state.

During a discussion at a New England Transition and Resilience Gathering organized in the fall of 2012 by JP NET, a participant remarked, “We live in this strange time period when we don’t have to depend on our neighbors.” It is only by exploiting fossil fuels, Transitioners point out, that many people in the US have reached the unusual position of *not* needing our neighbors, of being disconnected from place in a myriad of ways. The Transition movement believes that this “strange time period” of lifestyles and economies fueled by cheap, easy energy is coming to an end. Embracing and preparing for this reality, they argue, is an opportunity for more connected communities, resilient cultures, deepening of democracy, and social, economic, and cultural transformation.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSIONS

#### **Transition Politics**

Like many other contemporary movements, Transition is engaged in building a politics in the present, at a local, “human scale”: “a scale at which one can feel a degree of control over the processes of life, at which individuals become neighbours and lovers instead of just acquaintances and ciphers, makers and creators instead of just users and consumers, participants and protagonists instead of just voters and taxpayers” (Kirkpatrick Sale, quoted in Hopkins 2008, 143). I was motivated to carry out this study by a desire to understand the political meanings, effects, and significance of these place-based, prefigurative social movements. In the context of economic uncertainty and injustice and unprecedented environmental crises, how do we understand movements that promote seemingly “ordinary” local, practical action and relationship building? Through an analysis of the grassroots Transition movement as it is developing in the northeast US, I explored the politics of movement commitments to autonomy, inclusivity, and flexible, open organizing forms. Though many of Transition’s activities – from learning together how to construct root cellars, to planting public vegetable gardens and fruit orchards, to holding potlucks and skill-shares – do not conform to our usual understandings of social movements, I argue that these activities are best understood as ethical-political choices that are both practical and prefigurative, meant to build alternatives in the present and to bring about social change in the future. Though Transition initiatives are not seeking

change through reform or revolution, the movement does have political effects and implications for understandings of community, economy, citizenship, and democracy.

Scholars have most often defined movements in a way similar to Charles Tilly's formulation: "At a minimum, social movements involve continuous interaction between challengers and power holders" (1999, 257), or as Sidney Tarrow writes, "Movements mount challenges through disruptive direct action against elites, authorities, other groups or cultural codes" (1994, 2). Even when acknowledging that many aims and effects of social movements are cultural, scholars often employ the concept of "culture" in a static and structural way. This had led scholars to assess movement strategies and efficacy according to their instrumental aims and outcomes, with fewer conceptual tools for understanding social movements not centered on the state or identity, such as Transition.

In order to better understand how Transitioners themselves understand the efficacy of their actions, and to learn about how the movement's place-based, prefigurative politics are being deployed and developed on the ground, I chose to do an ethnographic study of Transition initiatives in the northeast US. I focused on those in Newburyport, Jamaica Plain, Northfield, and Wayland, Massachusetts; Putney and Montpelier, Vermont; and Keene, New Hampshire. In my research I also attended weekend-long Training for Transition workshops in Charlotte, VT, Belfast, ME, and Cambridge, MA, and participated in a New England Transition and Resilience Gathering held in Boston. Through over forty interviews, observation of more than ten steering committee meetings and one retreat, and participant-observation at potlucks, skill-shares, working group meetings, lectures, and film showings, I

gathered a significant amount of information about how the Transition movement is taking shape in the region and came to understand how movement participants themselves understand their efforts. I also drew on sources such as e-mail lists, newsletters, blogs, conference calls, and websites.

To better understand Transition's politics, I contextualized it within literature on other contemporary movements with similar forms and commitments, which is the subject of Chapter 2. From the Zapatistas, to alternative-globalization movements, to popular movements in Latin America and around the world, to the recent Occupy movement, scholars are engaging with and theorizing the many movements that are operating in the terrain of culture and knowledge production, placing importance on micropolitics and social relations, and seeking to prefigure the change they wish to see. Scholars are analyzing the ways in which many contemporary movements are bypassing the state as a site for contestation and change and instead prioritizing autonomy, direct democracy, and openness. These movements are rooted in local places and networked with one another – “place-based yet global.”

Likewise, Transition locates power and possibility not in the state but in local places and communities. It is a power that is “diffuse, democratic, and rooted in people's collective agency and emerging from the bottom up” (Conway 2006, 134). In Chapter 3, I address Transition's commitments to self-determination, autonomy, subsidiarity, and networking. As governmental solutions to contemporary crises appear to be out of reach, Transitioners instead are organizing to make changes in the present, in local places. As a Putney initiator put it, “People are saying ‘we can do this ourselves – we have the expertise and the collective genius. We can make happen

what we want to happen.” Local Transition groups in the northeast US are encouraging this sense of possibility and supporting people in doing what they are interested in doing, attempting to cultivate self-determination and autonomy rather than prioritizing more instrumental goals. Transition initiatives are also organizing through temporary, flexible, horizontal, and emergent forms and structures such as working groups. These forms are both practical and prefigurative. At their best, they allow space for experimentation, learning, and self-organization to occur and contribute to new subjectivities and social relations. Putting these commitments into practice is challenging, however, and the broader contexts of inequality and oppression oftentimes lead to the recreation of hierarchies and rigid relations within the movement.

Networking, information sharing, and learning are also a part of this decentralized organizing strategy. Transition groups are connected to one another and to the broader network, which serves to strengthen and visibilize the movement. Through efforts toward flexible and horizontal organizing, the Transition movement is working to create multiple alternatives and trying to prefigure new subjectivities and social relations. Transition’s practices are also embedded in everyday material life. Though not directly confronting the state, the Transition movement seeks to create local alternatives to the current growth-based, globalized economy. In part through practical projects, the movement is trying to contribute to broader cultural change, shifting subjectivities from consumer to producer, away from individualism toward interdependence, and attempting to resignify concepts of security and the good life.

Another aspect of Transition's attempt to create material, social, and cultural alternatives through local action – a commitment to inclusivity – is the focus of Chapter 4. Attempting to reach beyond self-identified sympathizers and across lines of difference by promoting openness, relationship-building, and focusing on solutions is a key part of how Transitioners understand the efficacy of their place-based practices. Transition groups use potlucks, practical projects, and collaboration to provide people with an easy way to enter the movement and to form networks of connections in local places. These are seen as pragmatic, and also relationships and networks are valued for their own sake. Strengthening social ecologies, or cultivating diverse, dense, redundant connections in local places, is a key aim for Transition initiatives. This is seen as necessary for preparing for coming climate and economic disruptions, as providing a basis for potential organizing at the local level, and contributing to changing culture and encouraging grassroots democracy over the long-term.

In practice, there is a real tension between being inclusive and non-alienating while at the same time raising awareness about climate change and economic insecurity. Likewise, there are contradictions in being uncontroversial while promoting social justice and equality. The effects of decades of neoliberal policies and ideology, economic inequality, racism, and political polarization all represent significant challenges in putting this strategy into practice in the US context. As an ongoing “experiment,” however, there is opportunity for the movement to continue learning from these challenges and build a relevant and effective cross-class, cross-race movement for local resilience.



## Studying Place-based, Prefigurative Movements

In laying out the rationale for their book *The Subsistence Perspective* (1999), feminist scholars Maria Mies and Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen write of the model of the “rich countries” they live in,

we do not accept this model of wealth any more. We do not accept it not only because it cannot be generalized for the rest of the world, but more because of the destruction the pursuance of the concept of ‘the good life’ leaves behind: destruction of nature, of foreign peoples, of people’s self-reliance and dignity, of children’s future, of anything we call humanity. We know that the perspective ‘from above,’ aiming at permanent growth of goods, services and money, cannot lead us out of the impasses this system has created. A radical break with the dominant paradigm and the search for a new perspective, a new vision, are necessary. (1999, 3)<sup>38</sup>

Instead of seeing a lack in the subsistence perspective, Mies and Bennholdt-Thomsen argue that there can be dignity, power, abundance, and happiness that result from an individual or a community being able to “to produce and reproduce their own life, to stand on their own two feet and to speak in their own voice.” They write that making this shift in how we understand subsistence “requires that people – particularly women, stop devaluing their own – their own work, their own culture, their own power – and stop expecting the good life to be handed down to them by those ‘on top.’” (5). One of the lessons Mies and Bennholdt-Thomsen draw from the subsistence perspective is to not underestimate the importance of control over “the capacity of communities to produce their life without being dependent on outside forces and agents” (5).

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<sup>38</sup> Starr and Adams discuss *The Subsistence Perspective* more fully in the context of their review of scholarship on autonomous movements (2003).

In a sense, though using different language and approaching from a different angle, this is the task that Transition has set for itself. Though economic growth, globalization, and fossil fuels have “freed” many people from local places and much of the work of reproducing their daily lives, the Transition movement asks (mostly) middle-class people to reconsider ideas of the good life, security, economy, and democracy. It attempts a shift in perspective as striking as the one advocated for by Mies and Bennholdt-Thomsen. As Hopkins writes, just as Transition is a push away from climate change, peak oil, and economic insecurity as it is also a push *toward* “clean air, beauty, sunshine, rediscovering each other, community and celebration.” “This is a key shift in our perception,” he writes, “The difference between change that feels like being torn away from something and change that feels like moving toward something is huge. This is the approach Transition takes. It suggests that collective intentional transition could lead us to a far better place than where we are today. Who’s to say that the world we see today is the best we could ever do?” (2011a, 39).

The Transition movement does not offer simple answers for how we are to get from our current systems to economies and lifestyles that do not depend on fossil fuels and unlimited economic growth, nor does it pretend to know exactly what post-carbon, post-growth societies will look like. The movement seeks to figure this out in practice, in hundreds of communities around the world. It does this primarily by being about local places.

As Harcourt and Escobar write, “Re-embedding politics in place...also means locating discussions and activism squarely and deeply within all of their contextual complexity” (2002, 11). It is “by being place-based, and...thinking

about...something as big as a transition from a fossil fuel economy and a globalized economy [to] something more localized,” as one Transitioner put it, that the movement finds power and possibility. Many people I spoke with were at their most passionate about Transition when describing the potential of the “contextual complexity” of a place-based politics. They see the distinctiveness and power of the model and movement in its commitment to and focus on local places. The following quotes from three of the individuals I interviewed are illustrative:

The Transition movement...is willing to face the huge set of challenges that all the other environmental movements wanted to kind of limit and to draw a circle...around how much they would take on because it's too hard. Transition gets beyond that because it says we're about a place. We're about a community of people. So, it's our relationships and it's our ecosystem that we need to work with.

It gets very practical when you talk about how to create a thriving, local economy that meets people's needs, that provides not only the jobs but the goods and services...you're having to think kind of holistically. It's not just 'how do we save this one particular species?' It's sort of, 'how do we figure out a way to live that includes transportation, that includes energy, that includes food, that includes how do we make decisions together and what do we value.' That I think...has the potential to intrigue people that it'll feel like an activism that's richer and deeper and more to the point of what we're facing [than] single issue campaigns about saying 'no.'

It does involve people taking a step back and analyzing 'where is our society and how do I fit into it?' And that taking a step back is uncommon, even in most activist elements, which are very reactive...If you were talking to students in Egypt, they're in a position where they get to rebuild their whole society. Well, in a sense, so is Transition Towns. And how do you do that? I can't think of any other place where people have posed the question in such a way to help that.

Whereas local places in this era of neoliberal globalization are most often seen as limited – a scale of action to be overcome or transcended – the Transition movement sees place and community as sites of potential. As is evident in these quotes, a focus

on local places is seen to be a path toward more meaningful, systemic, and holistic change. What follows from this commitment to and rootedness in place is a movement politics that embraces the cultural, is open to learning, values relationships, and uses stories and practical projects to point to alternatives.

In this dissertation, I have attempted to understand and relate the ways in which this place-based, prefigurative politics plays out and to understand the ideas of efficacy underlying it. To do so, I have relied on “the visions and goals of movement actors, as they express them” (2008, 25). As Casas-Cortés, Osterweil, and Powell remind us, to approach movements with preconceived definitions and omit the perspectives from within the movement itself “fails to acknowledge that movements are often challenging the very definitions of what in fact constitutes the social or political” (2008, 25).

Like many contemporary movements that “explicitly defy any simple economic or political-institutional approaches to global social change” (Osterweil 2005a, 181), the Transition movement’s place-based, prefigurative forms and commitments challenge scholars and observers of social movements to reconsider how we approach the study of movements. First and foremost, the Transition movement calls on scholars to pay attention to the local as a potential site of transformational politics. Following J.K. Gibson-Graham and scholars in the *Women and the Politics of Place* project, it is necessary “to render ‘visible and intelligible the diverse and proliferating practices that the preoccupation with capitalism has obscured,’ to highlight the ‘power of place as a site of economic diversity and potential, rather than a colonized node in a capitalist world’” (Alvarez 2005, 250).

Considering the Transition movement in its own terms also requires us to adopt a cultural-political approach. As I have demonstrated in this dissertation, Transition shares many features in common with other contemporary movements operating in a cultural-political terrain. Transition's politics emphasize the "importance of organizational form and structure...plac[e] a high value on diversity and multiplicity...[work] towards disrupting dominant truths and creating new narratives and notions of value," and "try to tell new stories and create new meanings about social reality" (Osterweil 2004, 504).

In addition to Transition's attempts to organize through decentralized and flexible structures, valuing diversity and openness, and generating alternatives, are part of Transition's politics. Transition initiatives are actively creating alternative stories of the future, through projects such as the Belfast Area Transition Initiative's *Transition Times*, a fictional community newspaper of 2021 that the group published and distributed to the entire town. As visioning and storytelling are part of Transition, it compels us to look at the role of movements in generating alternatives and reimagining futures. As Osterweil observes, "how we think and narrate the world has everything to do with how we live it" (2004, 504).

Taking the perspectives of Transitioners seriously also challenges us to understand the "becoming" of social movements. "Transition has not arrived as a fully formed, completely developed model that you just plug in and everything magically transforms. It is created by the many thousands of people doing it, wherever they are," writes Rob Hopkins (*Transition Culture* (blog) July 3, 2009). To

understand movement politics, it is important to look at trajectories, processes, and relationships rather than moment-in-time outcomes in a static way.

Likewise, a Transition initiator in Keene described Transition as “a learning movement.” The experimental and learning aspect of Transition is not important only because of the results it is producing or might produce. The processes of experimentation and learning are significant in and of themselves and are part of the movement’s prefigurative politics. Initiatives around the world, in myriad cultures and contexts, are trying things out, coming up with new solutions and new questions, in a contradictory, never-completed process. Through internet-based discussions and in-person gatherings, Transitioners constitute the movement and these actions are a part of the movement’s aims and effects, not separate from them.

Through these processes, Transition is producing knowledge about social change and different ways of living with one another and one the planet, different ways of engaging in economy and democracy. It is also necessary then, to consider social movements as knowledge producers. As Casas-Cortés, Osterweil, and Powell write, “the inability to recognize knowledge-practices as some of the central work that movements do, has made it difficult for social movement theorists to grasp the actual political effects of many movements” which “include not only immediate strategic objectives for social or political change, but the very rethinking of democracy, the generation of expertise and new paradigms of being, as well as different modes of analyses of relevant political and social conjunctures” (2008, 20).

Transition’s politics is embedded in daily, material life. “Transition initiatives are based on a dedication to the creation of tangible, clearly expressed and practical

visions of the community in question beyond its present-day dependence on fossil fuels,” Hopkins and Lipman explain. An integral part of Transition is, as J.K. Gibson-Graham writes, creating a “communal space” where “individual and collective subjects negotiate questions of livelihood and interdependence and (re)construct themselves in the process” (2005, 133).

Transition seeks to be a “de-tox for the west” both in terms of lessening our dependence on food, fossil fuels, etc. that come at the expense of other people and the environment, but also in terms of attenuating the subjectivities, social relations, and worldviews that underpin our current political and economic systems. Whereas it might be easy to dismiss Transition’s efforts to prepare for floods, energy shocks, and food insecurity as only adaptive, or similarly, to see Occupy Wall Street’s work to organize Sandy relief as tangential to its main goals, to do so would be to miss a key part of what the movement is trying to accomplish and how. Transition embraces a politics of “world making” (Escobar 2008, 296) that must be addressed from a cultural-political approach, and acknowledging movements as knowledge producers. As Osterweil writes of similar movements, Transition’s place-based, prefigurative politics offer “a corrective to the dominant ways of understanding and pursuing sociopolitical change” (2005b, 79). They do so by “evad[ing] and work[ing] against all tendencies to closure, unity, harmony – the modes of Western Capitalist Modernity – to make room for new and different sense of beauty and goodness” (2004: 505).

## **Limitations of the Study and Suggestions for Future Research**

As discussed above, the Transition movement is complex, multivalent, and in process. Researching the vibrant, quickly developing Transition movement in the northeast US provided me with more opportunities to observe and participate in movement activities and more access to potential interviewees than I could take advantage of. Because of the size and diversity of the movement, I was not able to investigate and include all of the information that might be relevant to my study. Though I had the advantage of being able to study multiple initiatives and learn from the differences and commonalities among them, the trade-off was that I did not immerse myself into one initiative over a long period of time, which would have allowed me to understand its practices, meanings, and effects in greater depth.

Further, it was necessary for practical reasons to draw a boundary around the “official” Transition movement and limit my study to those organizing under this banner. I do not intend to give the false impression that such a clear separation actually exists between the Transition movement and other movements concerned with relocalization, climate change, social justice, and the like. In actuality, Transition initiatives do not exist apart from these other movements, though separating it out and focusing on its particular characteristics and practices allowed for analyses that otherwise might be obscured.

Even with a somewhat narrowed focus on the “capital T” Transition movement and on the northeast US, I was not able to include all of the aspects of the Transition movement that I would have liked to. I focused on the aspects that are most salient in organizing efforts in the northeast US, which does not at this time



include the movement's work related to what it terms "inner transition." This aspect, focused on the personal and relational issues related to transitioning away from fossil fuels, is a key part of Transition's "analysis of capitalism as itself embodied, relational and micropolitical," and its work to address the ways in which "contemporary subjects learn how to behave and be in the world through embodied micropolitical practices" (Casas-Cortés, Osterweil, and Powell 2008, 36).

There are many possibilities for fruitful future research on the Transition movement, then, as well as on the broader relocalization movement. These movements, as far as I know, have not been studied from a specifically feminist perspective or with a gendered analysis. Similar to how Osterweil describes the Italian global justice movement, though in Transition "there is an undeniable degree of overlap between feminist concerns, forms of organizing, and definitions of the political," "women's *actual* participation and presence" is not being discussed or critically reflected upon (2005a, 179). Especially as women are more likely to be the first and hardest hit by economic and other crises, these are critical issues for Transition. Further, the local is not inherently empowering or unproblematic. As Sonia Alvarez cautions in the conclusion of *Women and the Politics of Place*, "There are clear 'dangers of place-based strategies when they involve women,'" and the local can also be oppressive "for lesbians, gays and transgendered people, and for those from ethnic or racial groups who are not dominant 'at home'" (2005, 255). Pointing to just such dangers in a transition context, one fictional depiction of a post-peak-oil, climate-disrupted world portrays women in subordinate roles, where a low-carbon

society is equated with a pre-feminist society (See Kunstler, *World Made By Hand*, 2009).

Sharon Astyk, a writer on issues of food, climate change, and peak oil, observes that the steady devaluation of subsistence and domestic work over the last century has led us to “plac[e] all value on ‘public’ labor, ‘public’ political acts and industrial life” (27). Building on the historical (and patriarchal) public/private distinction, this trend “has been enormously profitable,” she writes. “McDonald’s, Wal-Mart and Monsanto are just a few of the thousands of corporations that got rich providing services people used to do for their loved ones at home for free.” It is not by chance then, Astyk observes, that “we’re deeply invested in the notion that private actions have minimal consequences” (27). As Transition’s forms and commitments do place importance on the private and the local, *and* many of the practical aspects of the Transition movement involve work that has historically been done by and associated with women, it will be crucial to examine assumptions and practices around gender, home, community, and domesticity within the Transition movement.

Similarly, race, class, and economic justice issues in the movement deserve greater attention and critical study. “I don’t think localism is intrinsically benign,” one Transition initiator pointed out. “You can develop a localism that’s really anti-immigrant. You can develop a localism that says ‘as long as our town or our region or our country is functioning well, it doesn’t matter if it’s doing that on the backs of other people.’” The “long-term success of the movement,” he noted, depends on figuring out how to be multi-racial, how to be multi-class “better than most movements in the United States have been able to figure it out.” Though I have

begun to explore these issues here, how Transition is developing throughout the US, including in different contexts and specifically in urban areas where there are initiatives such as Los Angeles, Houston, Pittsburgh, and Chicago, will continue to be an important topic of investigation.

The view that the increasing frequency and severity of extreme weather events will lead to greater awareness of climate change and therefore make it easier to address these problems is widespread among many activists, well beyond the Transition movement. Neither of these assumptions is necessarily true. In fact, disasters that lead to greater levels of fear, anxiety, and economic hardship can make solidarity building and organizing more difficult. Though there is not an automatic link between experiences of disasters and shifts in worldview, however, more research on the connections and conditions surrounding organizing around “natural” disasters is warranted. This is also connected to how social movements use science, and to concepts such as “resilience” which are becoming more and more widespread in organizing, including outside of environmental movements.

Building on this study, continuing to research the ways in which place-based, prefigurative politics are functioning within contexts of neoliberalism and the state, and in relation to more state-focused movements, will be a valuable site of future research. National trends continue in the direction of cutting social safety nets, public infrastructure, and local funding. In the northeast, as well as in other parts of the US, there are increasing battles over resource extraction and transport infrastructure. Though there are not large deposits of shale gas in this area that could lead to controversial fracking like in other parts of the US, there are proposals for Canadian

tar sands pipelines and new utility corridors through Vermont, Maine, and New Hampshire. As the region is likely to see increasing energy development and land seizures through eminent domain, then, it will be important to understand the roles and practices of local, place-based politics and activism. Similarly, as Transition and other organizing grows, as Naomi Klein notes, “the more you will hit up against entrenched power which will force you to have relationships with structures of power, whether it’s corporations or structures of government, that are less friendly than the ones you’ve had so far...Because this is really about control” (Hopkins, *Transition Culture* (blog) March 23, 2011).

## **Conclusion**

More observation and critical reflection of the Transition movement is needed by scholars and activists. Being explicit and conscious of the strategies and the underlying assumptions of the movement can contribute to learning and greater efficacy. The Transition movement’s emphasis on experimentation and developing “operating principles” rather than rigid practices fit well with ongoing critical reflection. As Transition and related movements are addressing the most pressing crises of our time, they will only become more relevant and urgent topics of investigation. Building a genuinely democratic response to climate change, which is unfolding globally and nationally in a context of vast inequality, requires innovation in how we engage in social struggle, and the development of new possibilities for living in community and participating in government and the economy. As Conway writes, “politics as progressives conceived it in the twentieth century has to be

reimagined. Reformulating assumptions about knowledge and power is constitutive of any new, radical and democratic politics” (2006, 135).

Likewise, though the current political economic “terrain is certainly hostile, it is also emboldening in that it raises the stakes by deliberately rearranging the rules of engagement, forcing people to seek solutions in the present tense, outside the system” (Starr and Adams 2003, 42). Paying attention to the Transition movement’s specifically place-based, prefigurative features provides a better understanding of the strengths of this approach and its political significance. It also sheds light on neglected tensions and challenges. Through its ambitious yet practical “social experiment,” the Transition movement is casting its lot not with governments or experts, but with the collective lived experience of people in local communities around the world, conceiving of “utopia as an open-ended social process that is always in the making and whose exact contours cannot be known in advance” (Conway 2006, 133-134).

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