



Transition in place: Dynamics, possibilities, and constraints



Emily Nicolosi^{a,*}, Giuseppe Feola^b

^aThe University of Utah, Department of Geography, 332 S 1400 E Rm 217, Salt Lake City, UT 84112, USA

^bDepartment of Geography and Environmental Science, University of Reading, Whiteknights – PO Box 227, RG66AB Reading, UK

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ABSTRACT

The Transition Movement is a translocal phenomenon circulated through transnational grassroots networks. This study explores the geographies of the Transition Movement with a theoretical framework that perceives it as both a social movement and a grassroots innovation. Participant-observation of Transition Salt Lake (TSL), located in the suburban metropolis of Salt Lake City, Utah, was conducted, as the United States remains a largely understudied country in regards to this particular movement. In this pursuit, we asked: (i) how and what this transition initiative draws from geographically extensive and intensive relations, (ii) how it combines place-specific elements and generalized models (embeddedness), and (iii) how this impacts the success of the transition initiative and how these impacts (positive or negative) are generated. Place, space, and scale played a large role in defining the nature, dynamics, possibilities, and constraints of this transition initiative. Specifically, geographically intensive and extensive relations were critical for the mobilization of complementary resources. The Transition model was found to be flexible, allowing for the initiative to adopt those elements that worked in place and to focus on locally relevant topics. TSL faced many challenges identified by previous researchers regarding finances, participation, diversity, and intragroup competition. While networking with other similar groups, TSL demonstrated that fertile environments of activism are incubatory pools for grassroots innovations and social movements, and a trade-off was found with competition for resources between local groups.

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1. Introduction

Geographical scholarship has made important contributions to understanding social movements. Geographers have used notions of place, space, and scale to shed light not only on the emergence, diffusion, and scaling-up of social movements, but also on how social movements employ place, space, and scale to pursue their agendas of resistance to neoliberalism and uneven development (Nicholls, 2007, for an overview). Byron Miller's *Geography and Social Movements* (2000) was the first attempt to link geography with the core literature on social movements; it investigated how differences in state and economic power in and across different locations impact the claims and resource mobilization capacities of social movements. Other inquiries focusing on place have investigated how place-based context influences where social movements occur, their identities, and their potentialities (Routledge, 2003). On the other hand, geographic research concentrating on space has, for example, examined how the spatial unevenness in capitalist development creates differences in

political opportunities and available resources (Barnes, 2004), while social movement scholars with an eye to scale have focused on the scalar strategies that some social movements use, for example, by leveraging international attention to put pressure on local institutions (Tarrow and McAdam, 2005).

While earlier studies focused mainly on environmental protests and resistance to neoliberal globalisation (Pile and Keith, 1997; Miller, 2000; Featherstone, 2003, 2008; Routledge, 2003), scholars have focused more recently on movements that prioritize the construction of socially just and environmentally sustainable alternatives over oppositional stances and social innovation over political strategies (e.g., Pickerill and Maxey, 2009; Brown et al., 2012). The rapid emergence of this particular type of social movement includes, for example, the Transition Movement, permaculture, and eco-housing and ecovillages movements. These movements, which often take the form of intentional communities, tend to not be oppositional (Feola, 2014) and to deliberately not engage with politics, i.e. to be post-political, as some scholars have discussed (Neal, 2013; Kenis and Mathijs, 2014). They place their strategic and practical efforts on building economic and social alternatives, rather than on protests and opposition to dominant systems and structures, although they often perform non-subordination practices (Carlsson and Manning, 2010).

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: Emily.nicolosi@gmail.com (E. Nicolosi), g.feola@reading.ac.uk (G. Feola).

To be sure, the construction of alternatives can be interpreted as a form of resistance and may imply, and possibly even require, forms of deconstruction of dominant imaginaries, institutions, and infrastructures (e.g. [Leff, 2010](#); [Carlsson and Manning, 2010](#)). However, a fundamental characteristic of these movements that distinguishes them from other social movements is their performance of societal change 'here and now' through the everyday experimentation of other worlds ([Hopkins, 2013](#)), real utopias ([Wright, 2013](#)), ecocultures ([Böhm et al., 2015](#)), nowtopias ([Carlsson, 2008](#)), or concrete utopias ([Muraca, 2015](#)). Concrete utopias often challenge the status quo and promote new practices ([Pickerill, 2015](#)), institutions, forms of social and economic organisation (e.g., alternative currencies), and systems of provision (e.g., alternative food systems and community energy). In other words, they experiment with different forms of development and often prefigure alternatives to development and to forms of growth-oriented economies and societies.

Concrete utopias render commonly used theories of geographies of social movements insufficient. The inherent nature of concrete utopias as generators of social and often technical innovation calls for alternative theoretical tools in order to fully grasp the dynamics of these social movements and their geographies. In this respect, without overlooking or downplaying critical approaches, some authors have proposed drawing from socio-technical transition studies ([Caprotti and Bailey, 2014](#); [Schulz and Bailey, 2014](#)). In the same theoretical vein, others have proposed the notion of using grassroots innovations for sustainability ([Seyfang and Smith, 2007](#); [Smith and Seyfang, 2013](#)). Grassroots innovations for sustainability emerge as 'networks of activists and organisations generating novel bottom up solutions for sustainable development' ([Seyfang and Smith, 2007, p. 585](#); [Smith and Seyfang, 2013](#)). They distinguish themselves from mainstream green business by operating from the bottom-up in civil society arenas, experimenting with often radical social and technological innovations that reflect alternative worldviews and systems of values ([Seyfang and Smith, 2007](#); [Seyfang et al., 2010](#)). Grassroots innovations for sustainability are often seen as social experiments and incubators of options that prefigure possible just and sustainable futures ([Haxeltine and Seyfang, 2009](#)).

As argued by [Seyfang et al. \(2010\)](#) and [Hargreaves et al. \(2013\)](#) shown in subsequent studies (e.g., [Seyfang and Longhurst, 2016](#)), grassroots innovations and transition studies can complement social movement theories in very insightful ways. However, few authors have connected these strands specifically in geographical literature (e.g., [Schulz and Bailey, 2014](#); [Longhurst, 2015](#); [Feola and Butt, 2015](#)), and the potential for theoretical hybridization remains largely untapped. In contrast, more traditional perspectives on the geographies of social movements, including political ecology, rational theory, and poststructuralism, seem to have been pursued more widely (e.g., [Beaumont and Nicholls, 2007](#); [Nicholls, 2007](#)).

Beside the innovative potential of concrete utopias, their often translocal character further challenges current geographical theories. Since the early 2000s, social movements have become increasingly translocal ([Della Porta and Diani, 2006](#)), largely as a result of the spread of information technologies, social media, and the increasing movement of people in a globalised world, which has facilitated the transfer of repertoires and activism models across national boundaries. Examples of such translocal networks are the Transition Network and the Global Ecovillage Network, both of which connect local initiatives that use the same repertoires across multiple countries. The international hubs of these networks produce and circulate a common narrative and sets of practical action models through handbooks, guidelines, training courses, and learning materials that are widely disseminated online. These handbooks and materials formalize successful local

experiences and constitute models of practices that local groups elsewhere use to inspire and inform social action. These models are translocal rather than transnational; that is, they occur in place but are circulated through transnational grassroots networks and rooted simultaneously in distinct local cultural contexts.

In the past, geographers have investigated cross-boundary and global movements, but they have mostly focused on transnational networks of different movements bonded by common grievances and agendas, such as anti-globalisation movements (e.g., [Routledge, 2003](#); [Featherstone, 2003](#)). New and largely neglected geographical questions can therefore be posed, for instance, around the cultural embeddedness of models of activism; the link between translocal practices, networks, and flows of material and immaterial resources; and the potential for and implications of scaling-up as a strategic goal of movements that have developed through the replication of local practices.

In this paper, we explore these questions through a case study of the Transition Movement in Salt Lake City, Utah (United States of America). The paper sets out to investigate the geographies of Transition Salt Lake and, more specifically, (i) how and what this transition initiative draws from geographically extensive and intensive relations, (ii) how it combines place-specific elements and generalized models (embeddedness), and (iii) what impacts this has on the success of the transition initiative and how these impacts (positive or negative) are generated.

2. The Transition Movement

The Transition Towns idea was born out of a permaculture class that founder Rob Hopkins taught in Kinsdale, Ireland in 2005. His students' project was to apply permaculture principles to overcoming the problem of peak oil, the point after which the rate of oil production will decline due to diminishing oil resources. The class culminated in an 'Energy Descent Action Plan' for towns that envisioned a post-carbon future, with a stage-based plan of implementation. Hopkins subsequently moved to Totnes, England, where he co-founded the Transition Movement and started the first Transition Town, Transition Town Totnes. Subsequently, Transition Towns were formed in other UK villages and later in localities around the globe. In 2007, the Transition Network was established as the operational structure of the Transition Movement to support activities and develop and disseminate information to all Transition Towns.

2.1. Globally located grievances

The primary grievances of the Transition Movement have traditionally been climate change and peak oil, which were identified as the 'two toughest challenges facing humankind at the start of this 21st century' ([Brangwyn and Hopkins, 2008, p. 3](#)) and are linked to the common root problem of the societal addiction to oil ([Hopkins, 2008](#)). More recently, the financial and economic crisis has gained prominence among the concerns of the Transition Movement ([Hopkins, 2011](#)).

The Transition Movement aims to build resilient communities, where resilience means the capability to respond to external stresses, i.e., to keep functioning and thriving without cheap oil and in the face of climate change ([Hopkins, 2011](#)). Thus, while peak oil, climate change, and the economic crisis are challenges, they are also seen as opportunities for positive change in the local community ([Hopkins, 2008](#)). Change (transition) is to be achieved primarily through social rather than technological means. While the Transition Movement also promotes environmentally friendly technologies, it is wary of embracing technology as a panacea, as it is not able to address the root causes of peak oil and climate

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