



# Avoiding the political in transition: A micro-analysis of the micro-politics of conflict



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## ABSTRACT

A prominent motif that has emerged from studies focusing on the Transition Towns movement has been the movement's apolitical status and its commitment to consensus-based approaches. This apolitical stance and adherence to consensus has led some scholars to conclude that the Transition movement is an exemplar of post-political approaches to environmental problems. Despite this commitment to non-antagonistic approaches, previous studies have pointed to the emergence of conflict within and around Transition, an emergence of conflict that, some have suggested, could represent a point of departure towards a more 'political' approach. Following a semi-longitudinal research design and focusing on a particular group of Transitioners located in a rural area of the United Kingdom, this paper examines the micro-politics of conflict within this group, and shows that initially the group was able to modulate, displace and negotiate disagreement and antagonism. Overtime, however, conflict came increasingly to the fore and as this paper shows, conflict contributed to momentary articulations of the social as a sphere of inherent antagonism, contingency and power – the political proper. Yet, from these points of political potentiality, conflict did not lead to a sustained political approach, rather the group disintegrated and the post-political was re-entrenched. This paper ends by briefly reflecting on this re-entrenchment of the post-political and raises questions in relation to the effectiveness of the movement.

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## 1. Introduction

The Transition Towns movement has been the focus of a number of studies within the United Kingdom (Aiken, 2012; Bailey et al., 2010; Barnes, 2014; Felicetti, 2013; Haxeltine and Seyfang, 2009; Mason and Whitehead, 2012; Neal, 2013; North, 2010; Quilley, 2012; Scott-Cato and Hillier, 2010; Seyfang, 2009; Seyfang and Haxeltine, 2012; Smith, 2011) and beyond (Kenis and Mathijs, 2014). One prominent theme that has emerged out of these studies is the consensus-based, apolitical approach of the Transition Network (Neal, 2013) in tandem with a questioning of the effectiveness of this apolitical approach (Kenis and Mathijs, 2014; Trapese Collective, 2008). A number of authors have, however, drawn attention to the appearance of conflict within the movement and have speculated that these conflicts could represent the seeds of a more political and antagonistic approach within Transition (Kenis and Mathijs, 2014; Mason and Whitehead, 2012; Neal, 2013). Following a semi-longitudinal research design, this study focuses

on conflict within one particular Transition group. This paper shows that although, initially, this particular group was able to negate, modulate and manage conflict successfully, disagreement came increasingly to the fore overtime. However, rather than leading to a more 'political' stance, this conflict contributed to the significant weakening of this Transition initiative and the re-entrenchment of the consensual and apolitical approach. Before, however, examining the apolitical status of the Transition movement in more detail, this paper will firstly explore the basic premises of the movement itself.

## 2. Theory

### 2.1. The Transition Towns movement

The particular Transition Town discussed in this paper, Transition Tranmorton, is part of a broader network of Transition Towns which, at the time the study commenced, included some 326 different Transition initiatives. The person widely credited for starting the Transition movement is Rob Hopkins who founded the first Transition Town, Transition Totnes, in 2006 (Transition

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Network, 2013). Transition Totnes can be understood as the beginnings of a self-declared Transition model which can be transposed and drawn upon as a practical resource to address the key concerns of the Transition movement: peak oil and climate change. The basic premise of the concept of peak oil is that the world can no longer rely on a supply of cheap liquid fossil fuels as by the very nature of a sought after non-renewable resource, demand will eventually outstrip supply. The texts of the Transition movement, in which the basis for the movement is spelled out, do not suggest that oil is running out, rather that as the rate of discoveries of new oil fields slows and as old fields begin to become less productive, oil output will start to decline (Chamberlin, 2010; Hopkins, 2006, 2008). In tandem with decreasing production and increasing demand for oil, these texts suggest that there will be dramatic increases in the price of liquid fuels to the point that energy shocks will begin to destabilise contemporary social, political and economic systems. Secondly, the documents argue that due to the release of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere through the burning of fossil fuels, the climate of the planet is irrefutably changing (Chamberlin, 2010; Hopkins, 2006, 2008). In bringing these two facts together a line of reasoning emerges that localisation, the decentralisation of a whole host of services from energy and food production to manufacturing, will “inevitably need to happen” (Hopkins, 2008: 68 italics in original).

There is both an immanent and intentional element of the localisation discourse within the Transition movement (North, 2010), whereby it is argued that climate change stipulates that “we *should* change, whereas peak oil says we *will be forced* to change” (Hopkins, 2008: 37 italics in original). Hence, the Transition movement sees itself as responding to the ethical imperative of climate change and as a pre-emptive movement that helps to build locations which are more ‘resilient’ and better able to deal with the impending energy shortages and its destabilising effects. Other forms of potential large scale, centralised technological solutions to the problems of peak oil and climate change – hydrogen cells, nuclear power, bio-diesel and nuclear fusion – are dismissed as unrealistic as they are the products of the same form of paradigmatic thinking that is the root cause of both climate change and peak oil (Hopkins, 2008: 45).

Within the Transition literature, the immanent and intentional localisation of production and consumption is understood to necessitate and involve a concurrent devolution of “power back to communities” (Hopkins, 2008: 69). While being careful to note that the Transition movement does not seek to “return to a rose tinted version of some imagined past” (Hopkins, 2008: 55); from the Transition publications, films and other imagery, community is constructed as a social form that has been corrupted and lost through the use of oil, a social form that is in need of “re-energising” (Hopkins, 2008: 53) “re-creation” (Hopkins, 2008: 113) and “rebui[ding]” (Tony Jupiter in Hopkins, 2008: 103) in order to act as a palliative to the “illusory nature of the oil created world” (Hopkins, 2008: 149). It is perhaps this “reliance on ruralist concepts of community” (Neal, 2013: 67), in which the notion of community itself is wedded to images of harmony, consensus, cooperation and mutual support (Brint, 2001; Harper, 1989; Murdoch and Pratt, 1993), that could be linked to the espousal of non-antagonistic and apolitical approaches within the Transition movement.

## 2.2. Post-politics

A number of studies have drawn attention to the self-proclaimed apolitical status of the Transition movement (Felicetti, 2013: 563; Kenis and Mathijs, 2014). This apolitical status is linked to a lack of party-political affiliation and a commitment within the movement to eschew confrontation and to maintain a non-partisan, non-adversarial and pragmatic approach to the problems of peak oil and climate change. This form of “non-confrontational community activism” (Bailey et al., 2010: 599) is juxtaposed with “conventional environmentalism”; namely “lobbying campaigning and protesting” (Hopkins, 2008: 135) which is seen as overtly antagonistic, divisive, negative and distracting from more effective forms of pragmatic and positive action (Kenis and Mathijs, 2014).

The consensual path taken by the Transition Movement has attracted a number of criticisms most notably from the *Trapeze Collective* (2008: 6) who have argued that the reluctance to take “positions ‘against’ institutions or projects” leads to an inability to challenge entrenched interests ultimately leading to a movement that would “not really change anything” (Kenis and Mathijs, 2014: 7). In light of these concerns, a number of studies have drawn on the work of Mouffe (2005, 2013), Laclau and Mouffe (2001) and Swyngedouw (2010; 2011; 2013) in order to think through Transition as a ‘post-political’ movement (Kenis and Mathijs, 2014: 174; Neal, 2013: 65). Post-political movements, it is argued, are characterised by a conceptualisation that the direction of social-nature-technology relations can be orientated without conflict and disagreement primarily through managerial, technocratic approaches (Žizek, 2000: 198) and a set of “dialogical consensus” building practices (Swyngedouw, 2010: 225). Conceived in this way, the orientation of societal movement is something that can be achieved without splitting and separating; without antagonisms based around class, race, gender or power – a stance that has been termed a politics of the ‘win-win’ (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001: xiv). Swyngedouw (2010, 2013) argues that the shift towards the post-political is particularly evident in the way environmental problems are being addressed, with Neal (2013) pointing to the apparent parallels between the post-political and the Transition movement.

The concept of the post-political in Swyngedouw (2010, 2013), Kenis and Mathijs (2014) and Kenis and Lievens (2014) is informed by an understanding of *the political* as a particular “ontology of the social” (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001: xiv); an ontology in which the social is constituted through power, antagonism and conflict. In this view, a distinction is made between *politics*, which is conceptualised as sets of practices which attempt to order and organise in particular ways, and the *political*, a view of society as a sphere of antagonism and conflict due to the fact that choices need to be made between irreconcilable alternatives (Mouffe, 2013). This is in contrast to the post-political which posits the social as a sphere in which pluralistic claims can be negotiated and rational win-win solutions found. In distinction to the post-political, the political proper as understood by Mouffe (2005: 11) always entails the formation of a ‘we’, ‘they’ distinction – a we who form around a particular conception of the good life in direct confrontation with a *they* who hold an irreconcilably different vision. In this sense, political, antagonistic identities emerge through the formation of a we in relation with a demarcation of a *they*, a demarcation centred around a set of discordant choices and alternative possibilities (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001; Mouffe, 2005, 2013).

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