



(De)politicising the local: The case of the Transition Towns movement in Flanders (Belgium)



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A B S T R A C T

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As a reaction against global problems such as climate change and peak oil, localisation movements gathered renewed momentum during the last decade. Prominent amongst these is Transition Towns, a movement which advocates the development of resilient local communities to deal with these challenges in an adequate way. On the basis of extensive qualitative research of the movement's rise in Flanders (Belgium), this article studies the way Transition Towns represents the local. It shows that the movement is vulnerable for what has been called the 'local trap', and argues that the latter should actually be conceived as a post-political trap. The representation of the local is depoliticised when it conceals the fact that it is always a hegemonic construction which inevitably entails exclusions and the exercise of power. Drawing on post-foundational political theory, this article not only provides a novel interpretation of Transition Towns, but also aims to recast the ongoing localisation debate by showing that post-politics represents a fundamental problem for it. At the same time, however, the political can never be completely abolished, but always comes back with a vengeance. This ambiguity and complexity are central to this article's analysis of how Transition Towns deals with the local and the political.

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1. Introduction

1.1. The emergence of the Transition Towns movement

Confronted with globalisation and global environmental problems, several contemporary environmental movements, particularly grassroots movements, consider the question of localisation a central issue again.¹ Local systems, primarily local food systems, are believed to be crucial for overcoming the current environmental crisis. Moreover, they would also enhance human health and the socio-economic welfare of the local inhabitants (Born and Purcell, 2006; Sonnino, 2010).

One of the most influential contemporary localisation movements is Transition Towns, which after emerging in the UK in 2005,

spread quickly around the world, establishing its presence in Flanders (Belgium) in 2008.² The movement attributes paramount importance to building resilient local communities as a strategy to avert the twin problems of climate change and peak oil (Hopkins, 2008a). As Brangwyn and Hopkins (2008: 10) state in the *Transition Initiatives Primer*:

“Given the likely disruptions ahead resulting from Peak Oil and Climate Change, a resilient local community – a community that is self-reliant for the greatest possible number of its needs – will be infinitely better prepared than existing communities with their total dependence on heavily globalised systems for food, energy, transportation, health and housing”.

Local food provision (Pinkerton and Hopkins, 2009), but also local energy and currency systems are crucial aspects of this endeavour (North, 2010b). The movement tries to realise them through positive, constructive and cooperative actions: optimism, pro-activity and inclusion are core values of its approach.

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¹ Pleas for localisation are not new. Historically, the advocacy of localisation goes back at least to the utopias developed by nineteenth century thinkers such as William Morris and Edward Bellamy (North, 2010a). The more recent “small is beautiful” proponents of the 1970s (Schumacher, 1973) also still influence current localisation debates (Feagan, 2007).

² While there is a tendency no longer to speak about Transition Towns, but about Transition culture or Transition network, we have chosen to stick to the original term ‘Transition Towns’ in this article, in particular because this is how the movement calls itself in Flanders.

The Transition Towns movement is not a small movement. By July 2013, 469 localities (towns, cities, islands and neighbourhoods) all over the world were recognised as formal transition initiatives.³ While many are situated in the UK, there are also initiatives in the US, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Chile, Finland, Germany, Italy and Japan. In addition, there are a large number of informal or not yet formal groups, of which several are located in Flanders (Belgium).

By July 2013, there were 80 Flemish (mostly informal) transition initiatives. Many of them are located in towns or small cities in predominantly rural areas (examples include Scherpenheuvel, Ramsel and Zedelgem, towns or small cities with a population of less than 7000 inhabitants situated nearby or in the countryside), but there are also some urban groups (such as in Ghent, Antwerp and Brussels, with populations of up to 500,000 inhabitants), and groups that are located in suburbs of larger cities.

Despite its strong presence in urban and suburban locations, Transition Towns to a large extent promotes rural values and practices. The movement could therefore be seen as part of a larger trend to revalue rural concerns in contemporary society (Woods, 2009; see also Neal, 2013). Characteristic of this is, amongst others, the focus of the movement on local food provision. Ian Bailey et al. (2010: 600–601) stipulate that “each initiative is encouraged to identify issues most relevant to that community”, while they highlight that “[a] starting point for most initiatives is food as an exemplar of how basic needs can be liberated from oil dependency”. Maybe even more than in the UK or in other countries, food is the primary focus of most transition initiatives in Flanders, which especially presents a challenge for urban transition groups, obliging them to transgress the rural–urban dichotomy in relation to food provision (Woods, 2009). Through activities such as city and roof gardening, setting up local food networks, farmer markets or self-harvesting farms (in the nearby countryside), establishing organic and seasonal eating houses, or promoting compost toilets, herbal walks, urban bee keeping, permaculture community allotments and repair and recycle workshops, these groups try to bring the rural into the city, or, in other words, to ‘ruralise’ the city. As Sarah Neal (2013: 61) argues, such initiatives “are indicative of the recognition of social-nature proximities and the relationship of humans to the non-human” thereby challenging not only “the old modernist separation of the social and the natural” but also “urban and rural binaries”. As a result “new hybrid sociospatial forms” are established “that blur the rural and the urban” (Woods, 2009: 853). Furthermore, as we will show, the ‘ruralisation’ of the city as promoted by Transition Towns also has a strong socio-cultural dimension: for instance, by promoting a specific type of social relations and a particular vision of ‘the good life’, the movement aims to revitalise “the social and cultural meanings attached to rural places” (Cloke, 2006: 21). In other words, Transition Towns could not only be seen as a ruralisation movement in the materialist meaning of the word, but also in relation to how rurality is socio-culturally constructed (Cloke, 2006; Woods, 2009).

The Transition Towns movement has known relatively quick growth in Flanders, setting up a large number of meetings, activities and actions, often involving a remarkably high number of participants. That so many Flemish groups nevertheless remain informal, follows from a certain heterodoxy: on the one hand, they are clearly inspired by the ideas of the movement, while on the other hand, they take the freedom to give their own interpretation and direction to the movement’s ideas, emphasising in particular the 11th step of Transition Towns’ 12-step approach: “Let it go where it wants to go...” (Brangwyn and Hopkins, 2008: 27). Their primary

goal is to develop local resilience within the concrete setting of their community, not to become ‘branded’ as part of the Transition Network. They want to “do things”, to use the words of Amanda Smith (2011: 102).

1.2. Post-politics

New movements such as Transition Towns cannot be understood in isolation from the broader socio-historical context (DeFilippis et al., 2006). Interestingly, Transition Towns explicitly portrays itself as breaking with conventional environmental discourses, and as innovating on several fronts (Hopkins, 2008a). First, the movement criticises the dominant focus on “individual” behaviour change, and advocates “collective” behaviour change instead (Hopkins, 2008a: 135). Moreover, in contrast to conventional approaches, *The Transition Handbook* argues that “the man in the street” is not the problem, but the solution, and that a movement should not prescribe people’s actions, but primarily play a catalysing role. Transition Towns also dismisses the widely held belief that economic growth is still possible (“albeit a greener growth”) advocating an “economic renaissance” instead (“albeit a local one”). Finally, it explicitly presents its focus on relocalisation as an alternative to worn-out discourses about sustainable development.

Transitions Towns is of course not the only or the first movement to criticise conventional environmental discourses. All over the world, people and groups from different backgrounds are pursuing alternatives to the predominant paradigms of ecological modernisation, sustainable development, and the currently fashionable notions of green growth and the green economy as they are considered insufficiently effective or just (e.g. Bond, 2012; Angus, 2009). From a specifically academic perspective, the latter have also been criticised as partaking in a profound tendency towards depoliticisation characterising the current era (e.g., Bettini, 2013; Goeminne, 2010; Kenis and Lievens, 2014a; Swyngedouw, 2007, 2010; 2013; Žižek, 2008). By focussing on technical (e.g., nuclear energy, carbon capture and storage), market-oriented (e.g., emission trading), and individualised (e.g., sustainable consumption) measures, hegemonic approaches, tend to refrain from fundamental debates on the kind of societal transformations needed to tackle climate change (Kenis and Lievens, 2014b). However, the question is not only how effective or just these conventional approaches are. The problem is also that they are often represented as the only feasible and realistic ones, as a result of which it becomes very difficult for alternative movements to make their voices heard (Kenis and Mathijs, 2014c). As conflict is frequently rejected as irresponsible given the common challenges we face and the urgency of the crisis, a strong consensual logic unfolds. Through the occlusion of the plurality of possible strategies and projects, depoliticised representations of climate change are not only a potential obstacle to tackling it effectively, but also hamper the democratic debate that is needed (Kenis and Lievens, 2014a).

In order to understand exactly what is at stake, it is important to consider a distinction made by post-foundational political theorists (Lefort, 1988; Marchart, 2007; Mouffe, 2005a; Rancière, 1999; Žižek, 1999), namely, the distinction between ‘politics’ and ‘the political’. Different scholars have given slightly different accounts of these notions, but they all share the same general intuition.⁴

³ <http://www.transitionnetwork.org/initiatives/by-number>, date: 16 July 2013.

⁴ Jacques Rancière (1999), for example, speaks about the difference between politics and the police, but the logic behind this distinction is similar to other post-foundational approaches. For a more profound analysis of the different currents in post-foundational political theory and their relation to environmental discourses, see Kenis and Lievens (2014a). For a further elaboration of Rancière’s work in relation to climate change discourses, see Kenis and Mathijs (2014c).

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