Original research article

One-way street? Spatiality of communities in low carbon transitions, in Scotland

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ABSTRACT

Community low carbon transitions – studies of the ways in which community is used to pursue environmental aims and objectives – are closely linked to arrangements of energy production and use. Community is used as a way to pursue particular energy agendas. Yet, as is often pointed out, the trajectory of transitions imagined, the ambitiousness of the envisioned transformation, and especially the implied community invoked within this, all remain gloriously inconsistent. Within community transitions attention increasingly focuses on the tensions emerging or smoothed over as competing agendas are brought together through capacious words and concepts: for example between so-called top-down government deployed community, and so-called bottom-up emergent community action. This paper offers one way to explain and explore these tensions, where they come from and, thus, help in understanding ways in which they may be overcome. Using the case study of an attempt to target one 'street community's' environmental footprint in Scotland, the paper argues for taking an explicitly geographical and spatial lens to analyse these processes. The paper uses three forms of space—perceived space, conceived space, and lived space—to outline how three distinct but overlapping communities were spatialised. The contention of the paper is that tensions in community transitions often result from different spatial imaginaries, informing one's approach to, and 'common sense' understanding of, community. In reflecting on the spatial implications different forms of community produce (and are in turn produced by), the article argues for greater appreciation of the imbrication of space, community, and energy as mutually co-constitutive.

1. Introduction

In the pursuit of energy transitions, community is increasingly discussed as means to help deliver low carbon ambitions. Whether this community is understood as a 'grassroots initiative' [1], 'grassroots innovation' [2–4], 'sustainability niche' [5], 'bottom-up' actor ([6], pp. 41–48; [7]), or simply a wider context in receipt of 'community benefits' [8,9], community appears as an enabler of energy transitions. However, the picture is not only rosy. As often as community is suggested as being capable of enabling shifts in energy production and consumption, increasingly evidence is emerging that tensions exist within community transitions. These tensions include: a disconnect between community policy and community action in this area [10–13]; community adopted by states as a 'policy object' used to enroll citizens for their (energy) agendas [14], within the diverse, multiple and complex ways that community forms part of governing climate 'beyond the state' [15,16]; that place attachment can serve as a motivator *and* barrier for engaging in community renewable energy projects [17]; the multiple roles of justice [18–21] and cultural drivers within community energy [22]; the ways these initiatives are measured and evaluated causing frustrations for those involved [23,24]; the unevenness and difference in the communities enacting energy transitions, meaning some are far more trusted than others [25]; and what 'community' itself even means whenever applied in this area [26–30]. These aspects regularly accompany each other too. Karvonen [31] argues that community is simultaneously: the mesoscale of low carbon politics, an extension of existing government, identity politics, a knowledge network, and a manifestation of moral responsibility. Multiplicity of meaning and tensions do not have to be negative—'tensions can be both an opportunity and a threat to the often precarious existence of [a community] initiative' conclude Fischer et al. [32]—but they do call for further investigation.

This article argues that one way to understand the complexities of how community is used to meet low carbon objectives is to take an explicitly geographical approach. It argues that the ways community is spatialised is a fundamental component to these tensions. To do so, it takes evidence from one bespoke project where community was specifically called on to help reconfigure the energy relationships in one street: primarily in terms of energy consumption but also with a view to developing energy production. The article makes this case by, next,

offering an overview of community transitions. This section pays particular attention to a prominent example of this field—the Transition movement.[1] An important distinction in what follows is between Transition and transition: Transition is a branded initiative, where groups follow Transition books, connect to the wider movement and have formal accreditation. Yet they also wish to *transition* as a (non-proper) noun, in this case towards a low carbon society. Given this, the article provides a brief, but in depth, overview of how space is variously perceived, conceived and lived, after Lefebvre. Section four then folds this spatial theory back into the field of community transitions. Following this, a methods section, followed by a more detailed case description, outlines the empirical example used here. Particular attention is given to how this project spatialised community. Immediately following, the conclusion returns to spatial theory, setting it alongside the empirical case study, and outlining what taking a spatial approach to community transitions has to offer.

2. The inconsistent community of community transitions

> Community is nearly impossible in a highly monetized society like our own. That is because community is woven from gifts, which is ultimately why poor people often have stronger communities than rich people. If you are financially independent, then you really don't depend on your neighbors—or indeed on any specific person—for anything. You can just pay someone to do it, or pay someone else to do it

‘quote of the month’ for January 2012 [89]

The Transition movement emerged from Totnes in Devon in 2005 [33,34]. Their oft-quoted rallying cry asserts: ‘If we wait for governments, it’ll be too little, too late. If we act as individuals, it’ll be too little. But if we act as communities, it might be just enough, just in time’ [35]. Commentators have variously interpreted Transition as a ‘grassroots technological niche’ [36], a practical working out of Deleuzean inspired politics [37], a permaculture-based social movement [38] or ethical place making [39]. Alternative readings emphasise Transition’s focus on acceptability and accessibility over transformative political action [40,41]. What is constant though is identifying the central importance of community. Wilson sees Transition as ‘the most prominent example of relocalized community’ ([42], p. 68) in the quest for community resilience. Seyfang and Haxeltine stress the importance of Transition’s ‘community engagement processes and initiatives’ ([3], p. 3). Kendrick imagines Transition fostering ‘a community-based life, where the things that we need are produced largely through balancing the capacity of the local land to provide for the needs of the people who life on it’ ([43], p. n.p). These are accurate: community is Transition’s raison d’être.

The initiatives are ‘community-led’, firmly rooted in the ‘local community’, and their eventual goal is a ‘resilient relocalised community’. Transition’s specific mobilisation of community—seen in the above quote of the month—is also laden with disdain for aspects of ‘Modern’ life: mobility, affluence, individualism, and consumption. These all indicate a lack of community. This is a key insight from which to begin an analysis of Transition’s community values. Community is seen as the antithesis of financial independence. Within this quote is the key assumption of what being community contains: not being an individual, involving greater association with and reliance on those who live nearby. The community here, acting as a cure for Modern ills, is a term synonymous with neighbourliness, locality and place. As Painter argues, ‘in everyday usage these two notions [community and neighbourhood] are frequently conflated’ ([44], p. 524). One could also add small-scale to this bundle of elisions. Transition’s ‘community’ can—on

the surface—be seen as a proxy for a (local-)community of place.

But Transition’s community goes beyond this surface, topographical and reified understanding shared with the governmental deployment of community. Transition’s reified veneer of (local-)community of place emerges from their internal heritage, alongside external context. Key Transition texts include Schumacher’s *Small is Beautiful* ([45] [1973]) and writings on permaculture [46,47]. Another source of this call to the local community—that community implies a silent prefix, local—was a suspicion of larger scale ways of organising society. It partly results from the perceived failure of centrally planned economies and neoliberalism, and likely part of a belief in the more anarchic potential of small-scale, micro, and self-organising as a political vision. Thus Transition have spun-off many initiatives such as local currencies [48], local food networks [49], and renewable energy schemes [3]. These are based upon this permaculture vision of community—small-scale, local and modular [38]. Yet crucially Transition’s community also invokes belonging and practical action. Transition believes that to be human is to belong to a community, as plants and animals belong to an ecosystem community. Community here is ‘natural’ and can be understood rationally and objectively: for instance, Dunbar’s Number is used outline the optimum size of a community, around 150 people. Yet this permaculture community also assumes that community has a purposive agency: ecosystems ‘naturally’ gravitate towards succession; human communities likewise purposively seek to answer their ‘fundamental human needs’ [50,51]. Transition’s community thus bridges the strategic deployment of community—with its surface elisions with local and neighbourhood—and also the emergent, practical being in and belonging to community. Transition’s permaculture heritage attracts volunteers to a lived community; Transition’s adaptive use of community as small-scale, and place-based allows the snug fit with their applications for community-funding streams. Of course, in each case only the word ‘community’ is vocalised, written or mentioned.

The question emerging here is how far Transition reflects the wider use of community, in that it covers multiple meanings? Throughout its long history community has been used to underpin various ideologies, ways of idealising and organising society, and normative perceptions of what constitutes the ‘good life’ [52,53]. Only within Carbon governance, community’s variety extends to: ‘an actor, a scale of activity, a spatial setting, a form of network and a type of process’ ([54], p. 777). As Massey has argued, ‘relations of dominance may be maintained precisely through the instabilities of meanings’ ([55], p. 175). Like many community movements have previously, Transition both use community to cover multiple meanings, and commonly elide it with local, place, and small scale. Its polysemy is used deliberately to capture multiple meanings. The word community is both a stumbling block *and* enabler of action and building coalitions. At times it refers to experiential aspects: involvement, belonging, practical action, a ‘natural’ human condition of togetherness. At others it can denote the strategic: a more objective neighbourhood-level understanding of a community that can be rationally know and predicted.

Despite community’s proliferation as a site, actor, and means to enact energy transition, we can still be none the wiser as to what this ‘community’ actually is, or does—other than some vague notion of what community transition is not: not individual-focused, not state-driven, not business-led. The argument in this paper is that taking a geographical approach to community transitions means being alive to the various way(s) in which this community is spatialized. To do that the next section offers a concise outline of some canonical theorizing of space, based on the work of Henri Lefebvre.

3. Towards a geography of community transitions

Space is central to geography and perhaps the only concept capable of unifying the discipline. Though not easy to define, space is used by geographers in a diffuse and inconsistent way. In this way, this article cannot speak for all uses of space, other than to say that space is

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[1] The Transition movement are represented by Transition Network, distinct from wider transitioning projects: https://transitionnetwork.org.