Grassroots localisation? The scalar potential of and limits of the 'Transition' approach to climate change and resource constraint.

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Introduction

This paper engages with the grassroots politics of climate change, multiple resource crisis and, increasingly, capitalist crisis developed in the UK and elsewhere by the Transition initiatives 'movement' (Hopkins 2008). We argue that Transition initiatives embody a collective, progressive politics of responsibilities for climate change and resource crises that is hopeful, optimistic and generative of possibilities rather than focussed on structural barriers to change (Albo 2007), or conceptualising responses to climate change as the latest configuration of a wider neoliberal politics of regulation and privatisation (Perkins 2012, Jonas, Gibbs and While 2011). Rather, questions are raised and visions and exemplars of more positive futures that might be are generated by Transition initiatives actors. We argue that the transition to a low carbon economy needs to be located within conceptions of prosperity, thought of as human welfare within sustainable ecosystems, without the growth of unsustainable levels of resource throughput, greenhouse gas emissions, and other wastes (Jackson 2009). In their capacity as 'knowledge producers', Transition initiatives are one way of generating, arguing for, and prefiguring these conceptions.

However, notwithstanding this positive stance, we argue that there are real barriers to the possibilities of concretely implementing the visions of low carbon futures by community-based agents, and their capacity to mainstream their ideas is as yet undemonstrated. They face what are long standing and well understood problems around the capacities of subaltern groups to remake growth-based capitalist market economies in the face of opposition, centred mainly on their exclusion from control of the forces of

material and energy production which are in private sector hands. Given the radical and utopian nature of the visions the Transition movement generates, its capacity to persuade mainstream actors to abandon growth as a policy objective is limited. Consequently, questions remain surrounding the extent to which a local politics of transition can provide the motive power for a fundamental reorganisation of carbon intensive economies, especially in small places far away from major sources of emissions and from the control centres of the system that generates them. For a substantial transition to a sustainable, low carbon economy operating within the limits of the planet to provide the inputs the economy needs and absorb its wastes, wider multilevel alliances are needed involving the public and private sectors (Bulkeley 2005) to develop and harness the new low carbon technologies that capitalist market economies are so effective at generating (Friedman 2008, Smith, Hargroves and Desha 2010, Kahn 2011). In the longer term, then, can a more systematic, thoroughgoing local politics of transition gain more traction in more complex multilevel environments than in the smaller, less complex places it currently flourishes in?

Introducing the Transition movement

'Transition initiatives' work at a city, town or grassroots level to develop community-based strategies which aim to reduce dependency on non-renewable energy and reduce greenhouse gas carbon emissions by, over time, creating fulfilling low-carbon livelihoods in localised economies. Spreading across the UK from its origins in Totnes, Devon (UK) (Seyfang 2009) the Transition model has spread to much of the English-speaking global North and to western Europe, and more recently there are some early stirrings of transitioning in the Global South (Bailey, Hopkins and Wilson 2010). While some protest

'against' climate change, Transition initiatives argue that (1) life with less energy is inevitable and it is better to plan for it than be taken by surprise when the inevitable energy crunch happens, (2) in a globalised, 'just-in-time' economy communities have lost the resilience they had even in the 1970s to be able to cope with energy and food distribution shocks, and (3) we have to act collectively at a community level to address these looming crises. The philosophy is that informed individual action to reduce emissions and energy use is worthwhile, but inadequate given the scale of the challenges. On the other hand, while national and international action is to be welcomed, faith that governments will act is lacking. Acting collectively from the bottom up at a community level is therefore seen as the most appropriate scalar response. Given that all greenhouse gasses are emitted somewhere, it makes sense to limit them at source – locally (Agyeman and Evans 2004). Through Transition initiatives the unleashing of the 'collective genius' of the community is channelled into a process of 'energy descent', building ways of living in a localised, community-owned economy that will not be dependent on unavailable supplies of fossil fuels.

This is not seen as an unwelcome adjustment to a new life of austerity, a process of self-regulation of docile bodies in response to neoliberal politics of limits and constraint. Rather, the Transition movement argues that the triple crisis (of climate, carbon and capitalism) is an opportunity to transition to ways of life that are seen as more connected and enriching than those provided by globalised neoliberal capitalism, and more cognisant of the limits of the planetary ecosystem on which all life depends (Hopkins 2008). Thus arguments move beyond conceptions of resilience that stress bouncing back to the pre-crisis situation (Adger, Arnell and Tompkins 2005). The Transition movement argues that

peak oil (the end of the easy availability of cheap oil – not the final exhaustion of supply) and other resource constraints central to continued accumulation in low carbon capitalist economy (lithium, uranium, for example) mean that complex carbon-based resource-intensive forms of society do not have a future and will inevitably unravel (Homer-Dixon 2006, Greer 2008, Heinberg 2007). Crisis is seen almost as a Schumpeterian opportunity for creative destruction which will clear away unsustainable fossil fuel-dependent practices to build something better. Life post-oil, Transition initiatives argue, could be more enjoyable, ecologically sustainable and inclusive than growth-based capitalism (Astyk 2008, Hopkins 2008, Murphy 2008). There is, the movement argues, no point expending energy on opposing something that has no future.

The utopian vision of the Transition movement is for a low energy, sustainable society built on localised, resilient communities which produce more of their own food (Pinkerton and Hopkins 2009) and renewable power. Housing would be built using locally-sourced and appropriate materials (Bird 2010). Livelihoods would be generated though locally-owned businesses and social enterprises producing enjoyable work, rather than alienated toil for capitalist business for the sake of generating growth. A key driver of these locally-owned businesses would be minimising emissions and fossil fuel use, and the maximisation of opportunities for local employment and the use of local inputs, financed by money and other locally-owned financial institutions (North 2010b). Local economic welfare would focus more on quality of life, the provision of good, wholesome food and time for family and friends, rather than on economic growth per se. In this it mirrors the perspectives of the 'degrowth' and 'slow city' movements of continental Europe (Pink 2008, Fournier 2007). Its localised vision of a convivial economy is a hopeful, utopian project that

looks to combine rebuilding the self reliance of communities that combine high levels of social capital, local ownership and control with the tolerance, diversity and interconnectedness of contemporary globalisation (North and Scott Cato 2012). It stands against neoliberal visions of a deregulated, neoliberal economy based on free trade underpinned by cheap fossil fuels and externalised emissions (North 2010a).

Thus the Transition approach focuses on a *politics of experimentation and prefiguration* through community-led, bottom up institution building (Bailey et al. 2010). This explicitly utopian but non-oppositional politics has attracted criticism from otherwise broadly sympathetic writers and activists who accuse Transition of an apolitical naivety which fails to recognise the 'systemic' structures of capitalist power which has shown a longstanding capacity to overcome its periodic accumulation crises and undermine putative alternatives (Trapese 2008). A different reading – and one which as sympathetic academics who have been engaged in Transition initiatives in Liverpool and Totnes respectively, we would endorse – is that the politics of transition are a *generative* politics. We argue that this element of Transition reflects the manifestation of the theoretical approaches to social change that stress actors' capacities to act, and obstacles as issues to be dealt with, rather than metanarrratives of capitalist domination that automatically reinforce domination and control (Gibson-Graham 2006). Transition is engaged in a programme of knowledge production about how to deal with energy crisis and climate change, creating a vision of what a post-oil world could look like that might be utopian, but in the positive sense of a method of thinking in creative ways that make alternative futures possible (Levitas 2010). As transitioning has matured it has begun to engage more with changing an unsustainable,

fossil fuel-based socio-technical system through localisation: a positive project to build the sort of society and economy Transitioners wish to see.

This does not mean that Transition initiatives refuse to work with wider partners outside the grassroots. Thus, for example, whilst Transition Heathrow has affinities with the oppositional 'tradition' of UK direct action environmentalism (see Mason and Whitehead 2012a) and many individual Transitioners engage with environmental activism at different times and in different places (North 2011), a *politics of engagement,* building connections with local government was one of the ten steps of the initial Transition model (Hopkins 2008). Thus several Transition groups have built links with the local authorities and Alexis Rowell, a councillor in Camden and member of Transition Belsize (London), wrote a guide to how to work with local authorities on a range of urban issues from Transition staples like food and energy, through to more explicitly urban themes such as biodiversity and green spaces, recycling, planning, transport, and urban well being (Rowell 2010). It may be through such activity that Transitioners can develop a productive subpolitics that engages with the local administrative sclerosis and lack of imagination that can hinder proposals for concrete grassroots change that do not fit easily with local rules and techniques of administration (Mason and Whitehead 2012b). Through alliances they might be able to engage more effectively with actors at different scales, a necessary condition for addressing a multilevel problem like climate change. On the other hand, the extent that Transition is able to engage with and counter unsustainable, growth-based models of urban entrepreneurialism (Harvey 2001) is untested. This wider, systemic change will be necessary if technological progress does not produce a sustainable low carbon capitalism. Social Movement Theorist Alberto Melucci (1989:60-69; 1992) argued that key strategic questions

for social movements relate to whether to aim for large scale systemic change, influencing large numbers of people and elites; or acting more as producers of new knowledges or ways of living in prefigurative ways. Guided by this, we will engage first with the possibilities of and limits to the politics of engagement, before examining the more traditional Transition action repertoire of the construction of prefigurative institutions, to examine if, paradoxically, these might be more effectively constructed in more complex urban environments than in the small towns and cities that Transition has engaged with to date.

The politics of engagement – transition towns and cities

Is Transition right in identifying the community level as a sort of 'Goldilocks Zone', neither too top down nor too individualistic and slow to result in change at the scale necessary? To some extent, it can seem so. In smaller towns and villages it can be easier to imagine, co-ordinate and create practical manifestations of grassroots social change that can look like resonant signifiers of concrete change. Bottom up projects seem more feasible, particularly amongst a dense, likeminded milieu. As one former activist from the Totnes area put it:

> "And then there's everywhere around, there's alternative things actually happening as well. Dartington is there and happens. The Totnes Natural Health Centre ... Conker Shoes, all these things ... There are these businesses. There are alternative projects … happening, so the social infrastructure also gives that message, something can happen here ... you see all these people. You take your kids to the school and people are discussing projects and futures and different social, environmental,

> economic infrastructure. So one is getting those ideas reinforced which if you are in the middle of a big city, it's much harder to find that, all those elements supporting the internal vision. It's like 'Ah, I can do something'"
>
> Community activist, quoted in Longhurst 2010a:265**)**

In smaller, more remote, places local and national government can seem far removed, and given that public services are less extensive, citizens can be used to providing more of what they need themselves. The Transition movement's visions of localised resilience that can seem to hark back to a small town feeding itself from its agricultural hinterland and employing itself through locally-owned businesses can be harder to envisage and materialise in a globally-connected city where the high street has long been superseded by the supermarket and out-of-town shopping centre. Indeed, although far from being a 'back to the land' movement, Transitioners do stress the fundamental *un*sustainablity of the current metabolism of large cities based on feeding themselves through global food networks, powering themselves through coal fired power stations attached to the grid, and sending their wastes to landfill elsewhere (Steel 2008). Fossil fuel-enabled suburbanisation is a particular target: a popular Transition film is entitled 'The end of Suburbia' (2004).

Thus smaller towns seem more fertile ground for experimentation in Transitioning. Rob Hopkins explains why he chose Totnes as the site to develop his Transition Town model thus:

> "I could have gone to Hull and spent 15 years trying to get it working or actually here in the sense (that) there are certain towns like Stroud, Lewes, Totnes, all the places that actually became Transition places first, that have a long history of being kind of laboratory towns, laboratory places for innovative ideas … it felt like it was

somewhere where the Transition idea could embed faster than it could in other places" (Longhurst 2010a:269)

Consequently, Whitehead and Mason (2012b) argue that the spatial politics of transition has close affinities with radical forms of municipalism, a territorial ethic that manifests itself not only in the idealised geographic imaginaries of rural Transition Towns with agricultural hinterlands (see Hopkins 2008, chapter 3), but also informs the economic metaphors that are incorporated into the associated discourse of localisation such as the notion of the 'leaky bucket' (Brangwyn and Hopkins, 2008) where resources leaving a community are conceptualised as lost wealth, rather than resources for another, equally legitimate community. It is the prevalence of such imaginaries that, in part, engenders the belief that transition can be more successfully achieved in small towns than large cities. To overcome this problem, Whitehead and Mason (2012b) argue for a more *relational* conception of place that stresses connectivity between places, not isolation and disconnection. Transitioners do recognise this, arguing that small towns can be the source of wider, more extensive transitions when ideas generated in place travel. Indeed, one of the core organisers of Transition Lewes specifically attributed the success of the town's Transition initiative thus:

"it's a town that has a fiercely independent spirit, strong sense of community, strong sense of pride in the town. It's a smaller community, it's easier to get messages across. It goes all the way back to Tom Paine. American and French independence are philosophically the brainchild of Tom Paine, and he lived in Lewes, and that has permeated (the town's spirit). So there is a responsive base of people here who feel that doing things in a different way is right. Because it's a small town, if you stage an

event with an internationally renowned speaker you get lots of people and they feel, 'hey, this is something good.'"

(Lewes Transition Town activist)

However, it can also be argued that the specific type of imaginary that can emerge in such places that does not stand up to scrutiny with the result that, in practical terms, there is some evidence that transitioning a smaller community is not necessarily any easier than an urban community. First, much of the local resilience that Transitioners ascribe to small towns and wish to recreate (Hopkins 2008 59 – 67) has been lost. As a tobacconist in Lewes, put it:

"I've known Lewes for 60 years. ... A few years ago even, 30 or 40 years ago, there was more work. So 40 years ago we had two cinemas, the quarry, the iron foundry, two breweries, and Baxters print works, the first colour printers. ... We had the cattle market until 1994, we had agricultural fairs, two or three agricultural dealers. ... There was work. 600 people worked at Baxters. But as Sussex University took a hold the academics moved in, the price of houses moved up, all those things have gradually gone. … Playing 'Mary, Mary Quite Contrary' won't bring it back. It's gone." (Lewes shopkeeper and Lewes Pound user)

Secondly, patterns of migration between town and city and connections between them have shaped the nature of some of the Transition Towns in ways that mean that it is difficult to conceptually (or practically) disconnect them from the urban. Transition 'hotspots' Stroud and Lewes are both bohemian enclaves commutable from London where many residents combine big city occupations with small town living in bohemian places (North and

Scott Cato 2012). Similarly, the emergence of Totnes as a centre of 'alternative' cultures was predicated on increasing personal mobility and its growing importance as a node across a range of different but overlapping countercultural networks (Longhurst 2010a). These processes can lead to forms of rural gentrification that can potentially undermine local initiatives and fuel discord between perhaps more conservative long term residents and the more bohemian incomers (Lees 1999; Longhurst 2010a).

Perhaps then, urban Transition may not necessarily be any more difficult than rural. There *are* examples of urban Transition initiatives that look to change the way we see and value the 'urban' that do engage with issues of multilevel governance, partnership working, complexity and scale. Among the first Transition initiatives were Leicester, Bristol, Nottingham, Liverpool and Brixton, London. 85 official urban Transition initiatives were listed on the Transition Network website in June 2010[i]. Transition Bristol worked with the local council to develop a peak oil report (Osbourne 2009) and to explore local food security as part of a climate change and energy security strategy. Transition Sheffield convened a Green New Deal conference to develop economic alternatives to the credit crunch, which led onto strategic work with the council on reducing the city's carbon emissions. Transition Nottingham inspired the City Council to pass a peak oil resolution. It might mean, then, that developing Transition activities that have a substantive and material impact is actually easier in cities than rural areas. We will explore these issues in more detail with a discussion of the transition process in Liverpool, home to one of the authors of this paper.

Transition Liverpool was one of the first fifty official Transition initiatives, founded in November 2007. From the inaugural meeting, attended by approximately 80 members, the complexity of transitioning a large, globally connected city with huge social problems was at

the heart of discussions. How Liverpool should feed and power itself, what the transport infrastructure should be like, what jobs and businesses should be part of a low carbon economy in the city were huge questions, that a community-based was not able to address alone. The choices were between working very locally, in urban communities, or engaging with partners in multilevel governance institutions. This local governance infrastructure was itself complex. How should Transition Liverpool work across potentially five metropolitan boroughs (Liverpool, Knowsley, Sefton, St Helens and Wirral)? Liverpool City Council was holding a 'Year of the Environment' which after the excitement of the 'Capital of Culture' year seemed disappointing: how should Transition Liverpool engage with what seemed like a totally inadequate response to the dangers of climate change, if at all? How could it engage with other partnerships across the city region, from the Local Strategic Partnership to the Primary Care Trusts' 'Decade of Health and Welfare?' Should Transition see these as opportunities to engage with wider stakeholders, albeit with open eyes? Would Transition Liverpool end up being seen as a community group delivering someone else's agenda? Or should a more oppositional stance be taken? If Transition Liverpool's agenda was localisation and thinking about alternatives to economic growth, should the group engage with the city's economic development agencies, or the Chamber of Commerce? How could they be persuaded to move from an understandable focus on economic growth, especially after the onset of the economic crisis of 2008 and engage with the full implications of peak oil and climate change? The immensity of the task seemed at best dazzling, at worst, given how far we were from where we needed to be, paralysing (North 2010c). Things in Totnes and Lewes seemed simpler, and Rob Hopkins' cheery and honestly delivered advice at a meeting in Liverpool, that 'I haven't a clue how to transition a place like Liverpool and look forward you telling us' didn't help.

Secondly, Transition Liverpool was a new entrant to an already crowded urban field. The city had a local Friends of the Earth group, a climate action network, two social centres providing spaces for groups to meet, a Friends of the Festival Gardens group looking at the site of the former Garden Festival, a Mersey Basin Campaign, allotment groups, an organic gardeners group, Freecyclers, and a free economy group to name a few. The focus on peak oil made Transition Liverpool distinctive, and the existence of large numbers of similar-minded groups all with email distribution lists meant that communication with potential supporters was simple. Large meetings were easy to organise given the density of ICT networks available through which to mobilise, and, it might be thought, there was a large pool of people to draw on for practical project work. But how Transition Liverpool should work with the other groups needed thought.

In debating a way through this minefield Transition Liverpool was guided by the transition methodology (Hopkins 2008: 147-175) and by debates in other cities which centred on issues of scale as a way to handle complexity. Should a city-wide 'Transition hub' work in partnership with others in the city to influence strategic development and get issues of climate change and peak oil onto the agenda, and support the emergence of working groups and district Transition groups? This was the approach adopted in Bristol. Or should the group immediately work in smaller urban districts or wards, where practical manifestations of change made more sense and could be more visible: this was the approach in Nottingham and Sheffield. After some discussion, the name 'Transition South Liverpool' was decided upon in preference to a more local name like 'Transition St Michaels' or 'Transition Sefton Park', referring to the leafy, bohemian district of Liverpool in which most members of the group lived, and which boasted two Green Party Councillors. This was

felt to be a pragmatic decision to, as it was put at the time, 'go where the energy is'. Those who wanted to work at a city-wide level could, while those who wanted to work in communities could do that. Whatever members decided to do would be what happened. In time, a Transition allotment, bike repair project, free economy group, and energy group developed Liverpool's manifestations of transition, albeit at very prefigurative forms.

In practice, very few members of Transition Liverpool wanted to work at a strategic level though multilevel partnership processes. Those who did worked through Low Carbon Liverpool, a partnership between the University of Liverpool, the Chamber of Commerce, Groundwork Merseyside and Liverpool Vision, the city's economic development company. This group organised a set of seminars in the city that facilitated a conversation between economic development practitioners, community groups, climate change activists and Transition South Liverpool members, which fed into a low carbon strategy for the city which was accepted at a policy level (North and Barker 2011). Its recommendations included the need for the city to develop an energy security strategy and consider a bid to be European Green Capital as a mechanism for catalysing the transition to a low carbon economy. These recommendations were accepted. Given the strength of the on-going economic crisis that broke out in 2008 and the public spending cuts imposed by the new UK government in 2010, an understanding of the viability of alternatives to growth as a specific objective were harder to win. Thus, partnership working beyond the favoured community level did have some benefits, although it would not of course be possible to claim that Liverpool was in anyway embarking on change of the scale transition argued is necessary.

Grassroots resilience?

Moving to more concrete examples of practical action in cities to promote resilience, we now turn to one of the key local institutions Transition groups have attempted to construct: local currencies. We have used local currencies as our case study given their importance as prefigurative local institutions within Transition initiatives' wider social change strategy, exemplified by work in Transition 'hotspots' like Totnes (Devon), Lewes (Sussex), Brixton (London), and Stroud (Gloucestershire) (North 2010b). All four are locally-produced paper currencies which circulate only in the local area. They feature local scenes or heroes, suggesting that residents should be proud of and invest in their hometown. People wishing to use the notes must first change pounds into the local currency, which they can spend with local businesses. Generally, they can exchange any unspent notes back into sterling. The intention is that the businesses then spend them with other participating businesses, either directly with each other and with their suppliers or by taking personal drawings or paying staff partly in the local currency. The local currency is fully backed by sterling on deposit to build confidence and trust in it: if there was a 'run' on the local currency or if a business took in more than it could spend the notes could be converted back into sterling.

The first Transition currency was the Totnes Pound, followed by the Lewes Pound in September 2008 and the Stroud and Brixton Pounds in September 2009. While the Totnes Pound only exists as a one pound note, the Lewes Pound followed a one pound note with five, ten and twenty-one pound notes in July 2009. Stroud, Lewes and Totnes are all market towns with rural hinterlands, with established countercultural milieus and a history of green

activism and green politics. Therefore, the establishment of Transition initiatives and local currency projects in such places is perhaps not surprising, particularly, as they closely fit the archetypal imaginary of a rural Transition Town. Conversely, the fourth Transition currency – the Brixton Pound – challenges such imaginaries, and the preconception that small towns and their hinterlands provide a more productive space for prefigurative politics than larger, more complex metropolitan spaces. As with other local currencies the principal aim was to support small businesses as they faced the challenges of the credit crunch that blew up in 2008, and competition from large chains. It aimed to do this by building closer relations between Brixton residents and local businesses, and by shortening supply chains and hence carbon emissions and fossil fuel dependency by encouraging more local production. But a key new theme also emerged: pride in Brixton, in its diversity and locally-owned businesses, and a perception that Brixton was mischaracterised by police brutality, racial unrest, poverty and violent crime. In contrast, many residents felt they had a vibrant local community, something they wanted to nurture, defend, and correct what they thought of as misrepresentations (North 2010b:183-191). As a local cafe owner and Brixton Pound user put it:

> "I really like to use the Brixton Pound because I think it's really important to support and invest in your own community. Having a Brixton currency encourages people who live locally to spend more money locally, and the more good businesses that are independent that you have in a community, the happier it is." (Brixton café owner: fieldnotes)

This focus on town tride brought in key allies who shared this interest: the council's Town Centre Director, and senior councillors. In turn, they brought the council's political support alongside, providing £6000 funding and help with publicity and printing.

Forty thousand Brixton pounds denominated in one, five, ten and twenty Brixton pound notes were launched, emblazoned with the local heroes who shaped the area's diversity including Olive Morris, founder of Brixton Black Women's Group, Gaia scientist James Lovelock, Jamaican cricket fan, Trotskyist, historian and author of "The Black Jacobins" CLR James (1938/2001) and Vincent van Gogh. Of the four Transition currencies launched so far, Brixton appears to be the most successful, with the largest circulation and the most business participants. Arguably this success is a function of municipal support, and its geographic location in south London. The involvement of the think tank the New Economics Foundation (nef) and proximity to national media were important factors in providing credibility, something that is an important factor in radical, 'niche' currency experiments (Longhurst 2012). Thus, in contrast with the Brixton Pound the small town currency projects have struggled to build comparable support for their experiments. In this particular example, an urban context proved more conducive than a rural one, despite the fact that the latter is more aligned with the archetypal small town and its hinterland Transition initiatives geographic imaginary.

However, the success of the Brixton Pound has not necessarily been as a localisation project. Instead, its success has been as a tool for social inclusion, community development and marketing tool for Brixton. Lambeth Council's support is at least partly predicated on its symbolic value to the area, as a signifier of its gentrification and edgy, creative culture. As local record shop and recording studio owner Blacker Dread put it, "It's changing Brixton

from being infamous to famous." Indeed, the currency organizers suspect that the Pound may have played a role in helping to *attract* chain stores to the area, an irony considering the ethos of the currency is to protect local small business, not to encourage local forms of growth by revitalising the high street. On its own terms as a localisation tool the Brixton Pound has struggled to function effectively and increase the local economic multiplier, and has not begun to act as a tool for local economic structuration or to grow the range of sustainable goods and services that are produced locally, providing the longed-for 'prosperity without growth'. Like the other Transition currencies, and North American local currencies, these local experiments have failed to make a dent in the globalised nature of the capitalist market, in which next to nothing that local residents use on a day-to-day basis is produced locally (or as locally as Transition members feel is appropriate).

The paper-based nature of the Transition currencies provides them with a high level of visibility. It is this symbolic aspect of the projects that has often attracted media attention and currency collectors. For those behind the projects who are engaged in the wider politics of monetary reform (with which the complementary currency movement often overlaps) paper notes symbolize the possibilities of creating new forms of money, as well as functioning as a consciousness raising device for those who have never questioned the nature of money. However, use of the currency needs to be incentivised if greater numbers of participants are going to become involved. Paper-based currencies are not conducive for business-to-business transactions as relatively few businesses transact in cash with each other or with their supply chain. The relatively 'low tech' nature of the currency system is therefore a significant barrier to its further development from a tool to facilitate exchanges to one which will facilitate the development of a more localized economy. One way of understanding this is that the new Transition currencies are insufficiently *entailed*.

Taylor (2010:44) uses the concept of entailment to highlight the way in which 'doing something in a particular way entails something else'. In other words, it highlights the way in which socio-technical systems (such as monetary systems) are highly interconnected to a range of other systems on which they depend to provide their functionality. Thus, the successful use of a car requires a range of supportive systems (energy, traffic management, infrastructural etc). It is highly entailed.

In this context the issue of resilience is pertinent. The Transition movement argues that the high levels of entailing or systemic interconnection within industrial society are a serious systemic risk (Hopkins 2008, p. 56, 1011 pp44-53). For example, the fuel strike of 2000, it is argued, raised the serious possibility of food disappearing from supermarket shelves as a result of breakdown of the 'just in time' delivery systems whereby supermarket chains supply themselves (nef 2010). Given the likelihood of future fuel price shocks this might be a more widespread, systemic vulnerability. Periods of economic crisis where interconnected systems break down such as the Great Depression (North 2007:62-78) and the Argentinean economic crisis (ibid:149-173) have been fertile periods for the creation and expansion of complementary currencies). At such times the currencies function as a form of *expedient* technology 'what you reach for when you are stuck' (Taylor, 2010, 45). The appeal and functionality of such systems is partly dependent on the fact that they sit apart from the wider systemic crises. However, during times where the effects of economic crisis are less immediate and tangible the appeal of expedient technologies can fall away because they offer less functionality than the alternative, conventional money. Local currency activists in the UK are therefore drawing the lesson that the next challenge is to build the entailment of their currency systems by linking them to wider systems that support their functionality (Ryan-Collins 2010, 2011, Longhurst 2010b). The fact that the

nef/Brixton Pound collaboration is leading this work through the development of a Transition 2.0 project that moves Transition currencies from paper to electronic form suggests that such entailment might be easier in urban contexts. In the case of the Brixton Pound there are three areas of entailment on which they are working. The first is a pilot of electronic Brixton Pounds, using mobile phones, which started in September 2011. The shift towards electronic platforms and open source and peer-to-peer complementary currency systems is an observable phenomenon within the wider currency field (Slater 2011).

The second dimension of systemic support that is lacking in the UK is a localised banking system. Berkshares and some of the German Regiogeld systems have partnerships with local banks that facilitate the holding of accounts in the local currency, permitting the banking and transfer of the currency. The UK has no such local banking infrastructure with which the Transition currencies could collaborate. Instead, the Brixton Pound has recently formed a partnership with the London Mutual Credit Union but cannot offer accounts in Brixton Pounds yet. Delayed UK legislation which is intended to modernize and strengthen the Credit Union movement may strengthen their role for example by allowing them to lend to small businesses using the Sterling 'asset' which backs the Transition currencies.

The third area of 'missing' entailment which hinders the functionality of Transition currencies is integration with the taxation system. Brixton Pound activists persuaded Lambeth Council to allow staff who agree to receive up to ten per cent of their salary in electronic Brixton Pounds, but they have struggled to get the council to accept Brixton Pounds as payment for local taxes. They relate this to a wider culture of political centralisation within the UK:

> "And more generally the UK's highly centralised political system. Fiscal policy, that's been a real barrier for us. We've struggled to get the council to accept them as tax as

> the council collects its business rates but has to give to straight back to the government to be redistributed centrally, so there is no point them collecting it in anything other than sterling. We are trying to work on that but it's a big challenge. It's a sort of cultural thing as well. The lack of autonomy that this political and economic system creates for local actors, particularly municipalities makes organising a successful currency scheme very difficult in the UK".
>
> Brixton Pound activist

Certainly, the need to raise local taxation was a driver of one of the most revered examples of local currency experimentation, the Depression era Austrian Wörgl (North 2007). The future success of the Brixton Pound may well therefore depend on the extent to which these three supporting systems can be integrated with the currency system. This line of thinking would suggest that building successful local currencies requires engagement with and reform of (rather than rejection of) the wider digital infrastructure, banking and taxation systems associated with financialised, globalized capitalism: something nef engages with. This is an interesting phenomenon for advocates of localised, appropriate-scale resilience that critiqued unsustainable complex systems, and consequently, this approach is not universally accepted. Other advocates of local currencies, for example Ithaca's twenty year-old Ithaca Hours, remain committed to appropriate technologies in the form of paper-based local currencies. Those who see complex systems breaking down are particularly attached to maintaining resilient, community-based, low-tech approaches emerging from small towns. There is less interest in connection to or the reform of global power networks, except through their supersession. Of course, we cannot draw lessons on the totality of Transition initiatives' prefigurative work from local currencies. Other Transition initiatives

have worked on community-owned power generation, food schemes, social enterprises and the like, and their success and failure will help in our analysis of this strand of Transitioning.

Conclusion

These discussions raise questions about the geographies of Transition. The rural utopian imaginary has featured in a long line of literature and experiments which have sought to build alternative institutions and have supposed that the rural fringes are a suitable site for such experiments, based on a logic that cheap land and a lack of surveillance are a good basis on which to escape the wider system (Schmied 2005, Hardy and Ward 1983). In the case of the Transition movement, this imaginary forms the foundation of its approach to economic relocalisation. However, this paper has argued that it might be that urban centres provide a more fertile ground for making substantive progress towards the aims of the movement. This claim is based on the argument that the politics of Transition are plastic and generative, offering a range of strategies to the participants. In other words, if activists are actively seeking reforms of the wider mainstream institutions necessary for their local infrastructure to work, then cities provide a more proliferative variety of spaces which can be exploited by what Whitehead and Mason (2012b) call 'Transition urbanism'.

We have argued that while it is easier to organise small scale but visible and useful projects that communicate a vision and do take small steps towards resilience in smaller, local places, experiences in Bristol, Liverpool, Nottingham and Sheffield show that economic development agencies *can* engage in a politics of transition. In Liverpool local alliances with economic development agencies have begun to influence the private sector to promote

practical moves towards low carbon and resource efficiencies by business, who control the means of production and energy generation. This suggests that when grassroots approaches reach their limits, partnership work at the larger, urban scale is possible. This is something the permissive Transition approach does not object to. Transition argues for grassroots action when elites fail to act. When they do, they deserve critical support.

Urban cosmopolitanism, rather than local resilience, might also be an important supporting factor. Cities, having a diversity of actors able to do the work of transition provide the institutional thickness (Amin and Thrift 1995, Amin, Cameron and Hudson 2002) for this to happen, and therefore might therefore be, long term, more fertile ground for a deeper transition involving systemic change than in the smaller towns where it currently flourishes. However, although these are interesting developments for urban transitions, the extent that strategic work like that in Liverpool does lead to concrete action to transition to a local low carbon economy, and is not subject to well known processes of incorporation, is yet to be seen.

The alternative to engagement is to focus on local institution building and grassroots activism. However, we would argue that the experience of Transition currencies raises questions about the extent to which, given limits to grassroots action alone, this can be done without engaging with existing public infrastructures and thus with the power relations that enact them. It suggests that, if the approach is entailing, proximity to power and influence are perhaps necessary supporting conditions for the successful development of alternative economic forms, as scholars of social movements within the resource mobilisation school have long argued (McCarthy and Zald 1977). A different set of politics might therefore be necessary, if entailing means the transformation of large scale socio-technical systems, which understands that civil society action does not necessarily take

place in a separate space from the 'state' (local or otherwise) and that it is, to some extent, constructed by it (Szreter 2002). Theorists of local socialism in the 1970s and 80s, arguing for action 'in and against the state', recognised this (Cockburn 1977, Mackintosh and Wainwright 1987).

It follows, then, that local Transition initiatives that engage with local power structures, as in Bristol and Liverpool, might more effectively promote the transition to low carbon economies. Municipal authorities in smaller places, with only weak policy making functions create limited space for grassroots institution building in which manifestations of transition are certainly visible, and can and do act as exemplars of what can be done that are reproduced elsewhere, but their impact in concrete emissions reduction terms can be limited to the small towns in which they are located unless networks exist to transmit their lessons out of where they are born. Brixton's experience shows that, closer to the seats of power, cities might have denser networks within which to build alliances if the aim is to change socio-technical systems. Of course, the question then arises of the extent to which engagement and integration leads to systemic change or co-option as, some would argue, happened in other cases of 'alternative' systems building such as organic agriculture (Guthman 2004, Smith 2006). Transition will not be the first community-based group to be welcomed into the smothering embrace of the local state. Nor would it be the first environmental movement to abandon its radical roots in favour of engagement with the political mainstream (Rowell, 1996). Time, and further research, will tell.

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