



RESILIENCE, COMMUNITY ACTION AND SOCIETAL TRANSFORMATION

.....

People, Place,
Practice, Power, Politics
and Possibility in Transition



Edited by
Thomas Henfrey
Gesa Maschkowski
and Gil Penha-Lopes

1.1. Editorial and Summary

TOM HENFREY

This book explores the interface, or edge, between resilience research and various grassroots resilience-building initiatives arising within the last few decades in reaction to sustainability and related challenges and the perceived inadequacy of centralised responses on the part of government and business. It gathers together relevant materials from the Resilience 2014 conference, organised by the Resilience Alliance, which took place in Montpellier, France from May 5th–9th 2014. Many are derived from a parallel session organised by activists in the Transition movement; it also compiles scattered contributions from elsewhere. They provide insights into what may well be a highly significant phase in the history of community action on resilience, which is potentially on the cusp of its own transition: from a marginal and largely experimental endeavour at the fringes of dominant political and economic systems and restricted by what they permit, to a significant force for global change that reshapes these systems in ways that reflect the long-term interests of the world as a whole, not misguided greed, insecurity and self-interest.

1.1.1. Context

Transition is one of many such grassroots responses, and originated in the market town of Totnes in South West England in 2006. It builds on ideas developed in a permaculture course taught by Transition founder Rob Hopkins at Kinsale Further Education College in Ireland the previous year, whose final project applied permaculture to designing a community-led response to peak oil. In the terms of Resilience Theory's adaptive cycle model (explanations of technical terms in this and the next few paragraphs can be found in Chapter 3.2.2), Transition can be viewed as emerging from a reorganisation phase in the permaculture community resulting from the change in broader context as peak oil went from an abstract possibility to directly experienced reality. Having added climate change to its core concerns, and in the context of high levels of public concern and political rhetoric about climate change, Transition entered what Resilience Theory terms an r phase, rapidly growing to become a worldwide movement that at the time of writing in summer 2014 includes over 1000 registered local initiatives in at least 40 countries worldwide.⁶

⁶ See <http://www.transitionnetwork.org/initiatives/>

Recent years have shown indications that Transition is entering a K phase – one of relative stability, marked by more or less established norms and patterns of activity⁷ – or a release phase in which resources and energy within the movement dissipate and/or decline. Creation of new initiatives has plateaued in the UK, where the movement is most mature (although numbers continue to increase elsewhere, and overall). Many UK-based initiatives report stagnation or reduced levels of activity, and some have ceased to operate in any effective sense. Transition Network, the Totnes-based charity that acts as a coordinating and support body for the movement, has entered a significant phase of reorganisation of its entire structure and operations, responding to the dramatic changes in context since 2006 and incorporating collective learning within the movement over that time.

Reorganisation phases are critical for any system, and in this case present a risk that the Transition movement either vanishes without trace or persists inconsequentially in the background of a world system that does its best to maintain business as usual. Many regarded the financial crisis of 2008-9 as both compelling and providing the opportunity for fundamental rethinking and reorganisation of the global financial system, and indeed of our economy and way of life. High level political action has instead been dominated by the ‘Remember’ effect, focussing efforts on restoring and maintaining economic growth rather than heeding widespread calls for deeper transformation.⁸ The remember effect manifests in people’s lives

7 A summary of these from 2011 can be found at <http://www.transitionnetwork.org/ingredients>

8 Jackson, T., 2009. *Prosperity Without Growth*. London: Earthscan. Heinberg, R., 2011. *The End of Growth*. Forest Row: Clairview.

Figure 1.2.1. – Brussels, May 2014 - Ecolise Registration.



when Transition initiatives disappear without any significant and lasting effects on their local economy, and people within them return to lives, lifestyles and livelihoods only superficially different, if at all, from how they were before. The same would be true if Transition, as a movement, were to compromise its basic commitment to helping bring about a sustainable and fair society, and instead join the ranks of reformist civil society movements who dull some of the rough edges of predatory capitalism without challenging its central social and cultural role. Fortunately, Transition's reorganisation phase can take advantage of significant 'Revolt' effects where grassroots action has changed policy environments – and discourses within them and related areas – in significant ways. Transition and similar grassroots movements have to certain extent created their own "context for renewal"⁹ more conducive to their continued development. This is an example of the permaculture principle 'everything gardens': in other words, resilient systems change their own environments in ways that benefit both them and other interdependent systems. These changes are manifest in marked tensions between rhetorical commitment to action on climate change and other sustainability issues, and entrenchment of macro-economic policies that reinforce and exacerbate their causes.

Initiatives seek to transcend the contradictions arising from the need to work within existing systems at the same time as they render them obsolete.

Many discussions in parallel and plenary sessions at Resilience 2014 reflected this, drawing increasing attention to the issues of power that determine how – and in whose interests – resilience is defined and operationalised. For community-based practitioners working towards fairer and more sustainable societies, resilience means something very different from what it does to governments and businesses seeking to entrench their own privileged position within the status quo.

Attention to these different framings of key guiding concepts is one example of how grassroots movements are becoming increasingly conscious of the importance of cross-scale interactions – in other words, working within panarchies rather than delimited local contexts. Debate within Transition about its relationship with power and power structures increased in intensity and sophistication within the past year or so, and reflects some of the most important learning the movement has achieved in its short history. Closely linked are new

9 Folke, C., J. Colding & F. Berkes, 2003. Synthesis: building resilience and adaptive capacity in social-ecological systems. Pp. 352-387 in Berkes, F., J. Colding & C. Folke (eds.). *Navigating Social-Ecological Systems*. Cambridge University Press.

relationships with research and researchers that emphasise the need to subvert traditional power relationships and develop more inclusive and equitable working methods. Initiatives

The experience of emergence is the magic at the heart of Transition and permaculture, tools for genuine resilience of the kind that can only arise in autopoietic fashion.

like the Transition Research Network,¹⁰ Research in Community,¹¹ and the UK Permaculture Association's research programme¹² promote and enact overtly politicised forms of transdisciplinary that draw on the social and cultural knowledge the permaculture, ecovillage and Transition

movements have developed over the years.^{13, 14, 15} By making explicit the need for radical and transformative action, and the importance of mobilising resources in different ways at different levels, such initiatives seek to transcend the contradictions arising from the need to work within existing systems at the same time as they render them obsolete.

An important new manifestation of this is the establishment of ECOLISE, the European Network of Community-Led Initiatives on Sustainability and Climate Change. Deriving in part from international networks within and between the Transition, permaculture and ecovillage movements, in part from initiatives for collaborative research, and in part from the desire for advocacy at various levels of government, ECOLISE grew out of a process initiated by AEIDL, the European Association for Information on Local Development, who in 2013 produced an initial summary report¹⁶ and assembled interested parties for a planning meeting in Brussels. On Friday May 9th 2014 — the day after the Resilience 2014 Conference finished in Montpellier, ECOLISE was formally constituted at a legal ceremony in Brussels by 25 founding organisations representing Transition initiatives, ecovillages, permaculture projects, and other grassroots initiatives for promoting resilience through community-based action, along with municipal initiatives and specialised organisations dedicated to supporting such action through work in areas such as research and education.

10 <http://www.transitionresearchnetwork.org>

11 <http://www.researchincommunity.net/>

12 <http://www.permaculture.org.uk/research>

13 Henfrey, T., 2014. Edge, Empowerment and Sustainability: Para-Academic Practice as Applied Permaculture Design. In *The Para-Academic Handbook: A Toolkit for making-learning-creating-acting*. London: HammerOn Press.

14 Sears, E., C. Warburton-Brown, T. Remiarz & R. S. Ferguson, 2013. A social learning organisation evolves a research capability in order to study itself. Poster presentation at the Tyndall Centre Radical Emissions Reduction Conference, London, UK, 10th –11th December 2013.

15 Andreas, M. & F. Wagner (eds.), 2012. *Realizing Utopia: Ecovillages and Academic Approaches*. RCC Perspectives 2012/8. Munich, Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society (RCC).

16 <http://www.aeidl.eu/images/stories/pdf/transition-final.pdf>



Figure 1.2.2. – Workshop Organisers and Speakers.

1.1.2. Content

The core of the present book comes from a parallel session at the Resilience 2014 conference on Tuesday May 6th 2014, which in part sought to celebrate the foundation of ECOLISE and strengthen its links with the international resilience research community. Most of the session's organisers had central roles in the establishment of ECOLISE over the previous two years, particularly in developing an interface between research and community action that is one of the core pillars of ECOLISE. Introducing and facilitating the session was Tom Henfrey, a coordinator of the Transition Research Network and Researcher at the Schumacher Institute for Sustainable Systems in Bristol, UK. Three short presentations then set the scene; each a shorter version of a chapter in the present volume. Juan del Rio of the Spanish national Transition hub reported on a research collaboration with Lorenzo Chelleri of the Barcelona Autonomous University that documented the early stages of Transition in Spain (Chapter 2.2). Gesa Maschkowski, a PhD researcher at Bonn University and member of the German national hub, reported on research on the social conditions for effective community action, how Transition activists cultivate personal resilience in order to create conducive environments for behaviour change on the part of others (Chapter 3.1). Glen Kuecker, history professor at de Pauw University in Indiana and active supporter of indigenous struggles in Latin America presented a call for solidarity between Global North activists for social change and those

fighting against injustice in the Global South (Chapter 4.3). The main part of the session employed Open Space, a social technology for resilience building that activates the collective capacity of a community to identify and interrogate key issues arising in any area of interest. Within the general topic of resilience and community action, all participants at the session were invited to propose questions for general discussion. The group agreed on four final questions and formed discussion groups around each of these, everyone present joining the group whose question most interested them. After the discussion, each group fed key points back to the group as a whole. The findings, a distillation of the collective intelligence of the group as a whole, form a chapter of their own (Chapter 4.1).

Other chapters come from relevant sessions elsewhere in the conference: Cheryl Lyon's account of Transition in Peterborough, Canada (Chapter 2.1) and Maja Göpel's paper on paradigm shifts and societal transformation (Chapter 3.3). To add theoretical context, we included a revised version working paper on Transition and Resilience developed by the Transition Research Network in 2012 to support work into monitoring and evaluation methods for Transition groups and not previously made publically available (Chapter 3.2). I also added to Section 2 an account of relevant activity in Bristol, UK, my home city at the time of the Montpellier conference, where grassroots and top-down initiatives on both resilience and sustainability are intersecting in interesting ways (Chapter 2.3). In addition, while at the conference we requested short contributions from several leading names in the resilience field whose contributions to plenary or other major sessions particularly resonated with the theme of the book, and which start the main sections in this collection: Melissa Leach (Chapter 2.0), Helen Ross (Chapter 3.0) and Brian Walker (Chapter 4.0). Finally, we added an essay that, complementing Glen Kuecker's, examines Transition in global context as part of a wider global commons movement (Chapter 4.2), originally written alongside the Transnational Institute's important collection on climate security, 'The Secure and the Dispossessed', here (in the paper version of this book) appearing in printed form for the first time.

1.1.3. The Magic of Emergence

Compiling and editing this collection has been an exciting and rewarding undertaking. To my surprise, it became a parallel to the incomparable experience of resilience as an emergent property of a system, arising of its own accord but that can be encouraged by careful nurturing. As it grew from a simple session write-up, new ideas and contributions appeared, intersections and synergies became evident among the different pieces and perspectives they represent. The whole took on a life of its own, and with no effort at centralised control or organisation, took on a coherence among its constituent chapters that makes them far more than the sum of its parts. My role gave me an experience of emergence that is hard to express in words, but which will be familiar to anyone who has experienced being at the heart of a spontaneous unfolding of this type. This is the magic at the heart of Transition and permaculture, tools for genuine resilience of the kind that can only arise in autopoietic fashion.

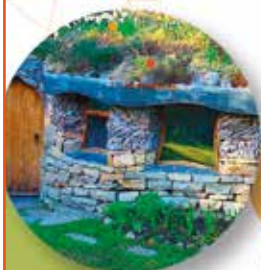


ECOLISE

META NETWORK

A shared platform for learning, action and advocacy,
by and for community-led initiatives on climate change
and sustainability in Europe

**The time has come to work closer together to support
community-led local action for significant change**



www.ecolise.eu



ecolise



@ecolise

Books to empower your head, heart and hands



For our full range of titles, to purchase books
and to sign up to our free newsletter see:

www.permanentpublications.co.uk

also available in North America from:
www.chelseagreen.com/permanentpublications



Resilience has become a familiar buzz word in mainstream politics, most commonly as an excuse for 'business as usual'. Both resilience science and practical experience of community-led action for social change suggest an alternative view, in which resilience implies deep and far-reaching transformation of society.

This collection helps bring that vision into focus through a compelling blend of insights, ideas and action points from community activists, activist-scholars and leading resilience scientists. It includes direct accounts of practical efforts to build resilience at community level, theoretical reflections from a range of academic fields, and calls for collaboration among diverse efforts to create and defend community resilience worldwide.



UK £14.95

US \$24.95

supported by
permaculture magazine
www.permaculture.co.uk

Permanent Publications



www.permanentpublications.co.uk

Distributed in the USA by Chelsea Green