A quiet revolution— Transcending and transforming political engagement in the transition movement for community climate resilience

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Abstract

This article explores how participants in Transition (a locally-focused but globally-networked community climate resilience movement) are reinventing processes of social change. The landscape of social movements is shifting in response to the perception of imminent catastrophe and the realization that business—and politics—as usual will not deliver desirable results. Situating Transition as an optimistic new movement arising from outside the conventional political sphere, I survey how transpolitical action and activism otherwise *can transform fundamental values, expectations, relationships, and ways of life. Twenty-nine semi-structured interviews serve as a springboard for examining how current Transition participants experience and understand transpolitical engagement, as revealed through diverse views of the movement's approach to structural change and perceptions of themselves as engaged social actors. Facing macropolitical stagnation and neoliberal domination, I advocate for inclusive definitions of political engagement that illuminate how change happens, what social movements can accomplish, and where affirmative alternatives might be sought. For social movement scholars, taking transpolitical action seriously ensures that we do not discount quiet revolutions and what they can accomplish by elucidating subtle ways of seeking change and their contemporary relevance. For movement participants, this framing can serve as a motivating force, demonstrating transpolitical action's potential to catalyze transformative change.*

Keywords

activism, climate change, environmental social movements, everyday activism, resilience, Transition, transpolitics

Introduction

Amidst the civil rights and antiwar movements of the 1960s, folksinger Joan Baez proclaimed action to be the antidote to despair. Six decades later, these words retain their inspirational relevance. But both the sources of despair and the actions undertaken to assuage them have taken on new dimensions. Equality and peace stand elusive, while the conjoined existential threats of climate change and mass extinction now loom large on our collective horizon (Díaz et al. 2019; IPCC 2018). Global leaders' repeated failure to address these crises has led concerned

world citizens to lose faith that the systems that created such problems can ever overcome them. At the same time, neoliberal governance has obfuscated the political nature of decision-making, replacing ideals of democratic engagement with individual market choice, thereby "reinforcing dominant ideologies around what is possible" (Etherington and Jones 2018, 52; see also Madra and Adaman 2014). This article describes how the landscape of social movements is shifting in response to the perception of imminent catastrophe and the realization that business—and politics—as usual will not deliver favorable results. Optimistic new movements that seek to transform fundamental values, expectations, relationships, and ways of life are now arising outside of the conventional political sphere.

Transition is one such movement. Globally networked but comprised of autonomous local initiatives, Transition aims to cultivate community resilience in the face of climate change and resource depletion (Heinberg 2004; Transition US 2011; Fleming 2016). Among other unique features, detailed below, Transition posits systemic change as both necessary and inevitable. Inspired by the movement's explicit call to transform and generate culture, participants endeavor to "move from one ideology to another" and encourage others to do the same (Polk 2015, 92). Since shortly after its establishment, academic observers and movement leaders alike have questioned Transition's political status and contemplated the value of overt political engagement (e.g., Chatterton and Cutler 2008). Here, I seek to transcend these debates. Rather than asking *if* the movement is political, I take inspiration from social theorists who elucidate political action in unexpected domains. Adopting a broad definition of politics that includes "all the activities of cooperation and conflict, within and between societies, whereby the human species goes about obtaining, using, producing and distributing resources in the course of the production and reproduction of its social and biological life" (Leftwich 1983, 11), I situate Transition within the dynamic landscape of contemporary environmental social movements.[1] Drawing on semi-structured interviews with 29 individuals, I explore how transpolitical engagement is experienced and understood by current Transition participants, as revealed through their diverse views of the movement's approach to structural change and their perceptions of themselves as engaged social actors.

While contemporary social movement scholarship tends to approach climate action as an explicitly political phenomenon undertaken by self-proclaimed activists (e.g., Méndez 2020; Rahm 2023), this article synthesizes a wide range of theoretical and applied anthropological and sociological literature surrounding what I have come to refer to as politics and activism *otherwise* in order to suggest alternative processes and possibilities for catalyzing change. Transition offers a compelling example of a contemporary social movement committed to deep systemic change that identifies working outside of conventional political and activist channels as the best hope for achieving it. Although they often proceed

[1] Resources, here, includes a wide range of tangible and intangible assets, ranging from land, capital, and raw materials to less commonly considered things like "time education, status, influence, health and knowledge" (Leftwich 1983, 12).

quietly and attract little media attention, such movements pose significant threats to the status quo because they "def[y] business as usual by initiating, developing, and actualizing alternatives that inspire and sustain long-term transformations" (O'Brien et al. 2018, 42). In the face of macropolitical stagnation and neoliberal domination, embracing a broad definition of political engagement sheds new light on how change happens, what social movements can accomplish, and where affirmative alternatives might be sought. This article begins by introducing the Transition movement and what differentiates it from other environmental social movements. It then reviews recent scholarship on forms of politics and activism that play out beyond the conventional sphere, outlines my unique research context, and summarizes what I learned about Transition participants' transpolitical perspectives and experiences. Ultimately, I suggest that Transition is an effective conduit for transformative change. Whether politics and activism are broadly or restrictively defined, the potency of quiet revolutions should not be underestimated.

The transition movement for climate change resilience

Transition is both a named movement and an array of independently unfolding processes that promote resilient communities and cultivate courageous new narratives about human trajectories and options. While this article is informed by work among individuals associated with the Transition Network (https://transitionnetwork.org/) and Transition US (https://www.transitionus.org/), ideas and undertakings associated with transition can be identified in a wide range of places and practices. In the global North, movements promoting biophilic design (Kellert et al. 2011), local food (Robinson and Farmer 2017), degrowth (Kallis 2018), and voluntary simplicity (Rebouças and Soares 2021) encourage people to make changes in their own lives that align with the broader changes they wish to see. In the global South, transition thinking is expressed in calls for post-development, post-extractivism, *buen vivir* (a South American movement and social philosophy advocating good living through collectivity, decolonization, and harmonious coexistence (Chuji et al. 2019)) and *eco-swaraj* (an Indian call for personal empowerment rooted in a holistic vision of human wellbeing (Kothari 2018)). At the same time, Indigenous communities around the world are building alliances to defend their lands from fossil fuel extraction and striving to realize their visions of sustainable, self-determined futures (e.g., Coryat and Lavinas Picq 2016; Estes 2019).

The Transition movement began in 2005-2006 with efforts to proactively design local municipalities' recovery from fossil fuel dependency (Hopkins 2011). From initial efforts in Kinsale, Ireland and Totnes, England, the idea spread rapidly. Today, Transition is an international movement with over one thousand official registered groups (and countless unofficial ones) in forty-three countries around the world (with concentrations in Europe, North America, and Australia). Like other social movements, Transition is a collective enterprise driven by participants' dissatisfaction with present circumstances (Scott-Cato and Hillier 2010). It reflects environmentalist concerns that "the environment should be

protected, particularly from the harmful effects of human activities" (Milton 1996, 27), but also goes beyond ecological concerns to call for systemic social justice and prepare communities to survive the turmoil that climate change and resource depletion will bring.

Several paradoxical qualities combine to set Transition apart from other environmental social movements. First of all, although Transition is a global network, it possesses a deliberately nonhierarchical administrative structure. Rather than a top-down organization with local subsidiaries, the movement is designed to expand organically and horizontally.[2] Individual initiatives develop independently and reflect the cultural, material, economic, and educational diversity of the communities that host them (Felicetti 2017). Even as Transition celebrates relocalization and emplacement, however, participants around the world are connected by shared texts, internet documents, and social-media posts (Feola and Nunes 2014; Biddau et al. 2016). It can thus be described as a "movement of movements" united by the common desire to build an equitable low-carbon future (Interview 13, May 2, 2022). Second, Transition echoes intentional community members' desire to coalesce around mutual social values and goals (see Brown 2002), but its initiatives are built *within* existing communities rather than geographically or socially separated from them. This attempt to catalyze change while surrounded by mainstream society engenders a sense of liminality among many participants, as they continuously oscillate between "conventional and alternative lifestyles and social contexts" (Van de Grift et al. 2017, 10). Third, although Transition participants accept the decline of industrial civilization as we know it as inevitable, the movement is distinguished by its positive tone and generative stance. Rather than facing the certainty of hard times with doom-and-gloom, Transition regards the crisis "not as a cause for despair but as a transformational opportunity, a prospective change for the better that should be embraced rather than feared" (Alexander and Gleeson 2019, 106). This "applied optimism" (Hopkins 2008, 15) emboldens participants to cultivate positive change at individual, community, and cultural levels.

Finally, Transition seeks to catalyze comprehensive systemic change, but does so primarily by generating and disseminating more fulfilling alternatives rather than attempting to sway decision-makers in currently dominant political, economic, and social institutions. Skeptical of what marches, petitions, electoral campaigns, and boycotts can achieve, Transition promotes pragmatic personal experimentation with better ways to live. The list of Transition-related activities catalogued by the participants I spoke with is remarkably long. In various combinations, they promote renewable energy at home and in their communities; drive less (and walk, bike, and use public transportation more); build backyard and community gardens; oversee community supported agriculture (CSA) programs; install edible orchards and pollinator patches; organize repair cafe workshops and tool libraries; steward regional land and watersheds; and reduce/reuse/recycle to eliminate waste. They compost food scraps; buy local; eat

[2] While a horizontal organizational approach is a common element of radical movements for social change, it is unusual in the arena of environmental and climate activism.

less meat; strengthen their communities; "reskill" for self-sufficiency; and create music and art that expresses their vision of a better world (see also Willow 2022). Transition, therefore, is not a protest movement in any conventional sense but instead empowers participants to determine their communities' destiny through practical here-and-now action (Henfrey and Kendrick 2015). Participants lead by example, while hoping that others will reproduce or "scale up" their modest projects, thereby making monumental change appear tangible and feasible (Martindale 2015). Because of its do-it-yourself approach to fostering change, discussion (and sometimes heated debate) has long surrounded whether or not Transition should be viewed as a political movement.

Hoping to cast an attractive and inclusive net, Transition's founders initially endorsed a nonconfrontational, nonpartisan approach (see Hopkins 2008). It was not long, however, before critical voices weighed in. A report by the Trapese Collective—a UK-based radical action and education group—charged that Transition's "agreement 'not to rock the boat' will not help [the movement's] long term viability, as it would mean not really changing anything" and that only talking honestly about the political and economic forces influencing people's lives "will build true momentum for change" (Chatterton and Cutler 2008, 7). Others have similarly problematized Transition's post-political orientation and disdain for divisive debate as a "discursive concealment of contingency, conflict and power" (Kenis 2019, 834). True change, such arguments claim, will come not from disparate individual and community ventures but from changing the rules of the game (Mason and Whitehead 2011). Transition's spokesperson, Rob Hopkins, countered by situating the movement as one of many necessary responses rather than a one-size-fits-all solution. "Transition is not about a retreat from our need for engaged and visionary government; rather, it is designed to inspire that leadership," he declared, "Transition is increasingly creating a culture where currently unelectable policies can become electable" (Hopkins 2011, 53). Transition is thus posited as both different from and complementary to more overtly political approaches.

Because cultural change begets political change, one could conclude that Transition has been indisputably political all along. Even while avoiding adversarial ("us versus them") logic and relationships, the movement enthusiastically tackles politically-charged topics ranging from atmospheric emissions to economic justice. Studies of local Transition initiatives confirm that participants' lack of conventional protest indicates neither an acceptance of the existing state of affairs nor an inability to influence proximate decision-making (e.g., Felicetti 2017). Taking this reasoning one step further invites exciting possibilities for theoretical exploration. Shifting from perceiving Transition as *apolitical* to viewing it as *differently political* positions Transition as a location from which to reconsider how we think about politics and political engagement. What if engaged scholars accepted community development as a political act? What if we explored the capacity of local programs to change the status quo and shift the balance of power in and beyond our regions of residence (Connors and McDonald 2011)? What if we celebrated the radical potential of pragmatic action to "reorient the objectives of material and immaterial production" (Scott-Cato

and Hillier 2010, 878)? What if we recognized imagining and achieving visions of a positive future in the here-and-now as profoundly political processes (North 2010; Kenis and Mathjis 2014)?

Politics otherwise: infrapolitics / micropolitics / subpolitics

Three independently developed but complementary concepts encourage us to explore political processes that unfold in unexpected places and ways. Infrapolitics, micropolitics, and subpolitics are founded upon the shared premise that political agency can be conveyed in multiple manners and proceed outside of conventional political spheres.

James C. Scott uses the term *infrapolitics* to denote political struggles that occur "beyond the visible end of the spectrum" (1990, 183). "Infrapolitics," summarizes Guillaume Marche "is to politics what infrared is to light" (2012, 3). While low-profile, undeclared forms of resistance have often been ignored by social analysts and are difficult to discern through a narrow definitional lens, they play an important role in shaping social, economic, and ecological realities. Infrapolitical acts that seem individually insignificant sometimes combine to produce dramatic effects; given the right circumstances, Scott observes, "the accumulation of petty acts can, rather like snowflakes on a steep mountainside, set off an avalanche" (1990, 192). Over time, political engagement that is categorically covert, understated, and informal "can corrode the status quo by generating options and alternatives that dilute the reach of the dominant ideology, without directly or openly challenging it" (O'Brien et al. 2018, 3). Scott and others thus insist that we accept infrapolitics as a real—even foundational—type of politics. As he puts it, to "confin[e] our conception of the political to activity that is openly declared…is to focus on the visible coastline of politics and miss the continent that lies beyond" (Scott 1990, 199). More simply stated, overlooking infrapolitics means missing out on a vast array of political possibilities and obscuring vital intersections between power structures and everyday experience.

While Scott's classic examples involve subordinated groups (slaves, serfs, and laborers) for whom open resistance is obviously precluded, others who feel left behind and/or disempowered by the existing system and the opportunities it affords for resistance also elect to pursue politics beyond the conventional range. For example, infrapolitics has recently been evoked to make sense of urban gardens as a "form of resistance against the dominant order" that challenges urban design and actively forges new relationships between nature and the built environments of cities (Baudry 2012, 45). Even more relevant, Karen O'Brien and colleagues characterize movements like Transition and Degrowth as infrapolitical, coining the phrase *dangerous dissent* to describe movements that challenge existing paradigms by generating "new and alternative systems, new ways of doing things, new types of economic relationships, and new ways of organizing society" (O'Brien et al. 2018, 6). Far from insignificant, such movements plant the seeds of revolution by serenely realizing more just, fulfilling, and sustainable ways to live.

Emerging from the French academic tradition, the notion of *micropolitics* refers to power negotiations that transpire in realms not usually perceived as political. Michel Foucault (1998 [1976]) famously observed that resistance exists wherever systems of power are present. As extrapolated by Peter North, "the effects of power are everywhere, but, consequently, so is resistance to it" (2007, 34). The human condition thus implies an ongoing process of resisting the local systems of domination in which we are entrapped. But because systems of domination are multiple and varied, so too are the options for challenging them. While dramatic revolutions occasionally transpire, the majority of resistance is carried out in relatively restrained and transitory ways. Answering unfulfilling systems with local food, renewable energy, and alternative currency (North 2007), Transition encapsulates countless opportunities for micropolitical resistance.

Subpolitics offers an additional option for contemplating unconventional politics. As articulated by German sociologist Ulrich Beck, *subpolitics* indicates "new ways of conducting politics at social "sites" that we previously considered unpolitical" (1997, 53). There is no reason, in this view, that ideas and actions deemed political should be confined to formal political/governmental spheres. In the contemporary world, Beck argues, "opportunities for alternative actions are opening up in all fields of action—technology, medicine, law, the organization of work—under the pressure of changed challenges and fundamental convictions" (Beck 1997, 52). These changes are integral to life in the "risk society" Beck (1992) describes, marked as it is both by preoccupation with the ever-present threat of anthropogenic catastrophe and (un)natural disaster and by a progressively weakening state and concomitant loss of trust in customary processes to effect change. As Nick Stevenson notes, "subpolitics emerges when the state becomes weakened and in the context of the relative empowerment of civil society" (2012, 66). As they seek and create alternative spaces within the dominant culture, subpolitical actors interrupt politics as usual, politicizing topics typically regarded as outside the political purview. With its emphasis on cultural transformation through pragmatic action and its eschewing of conventional protest and political pressure, the Transition movement mounts a striking subpolitical critique of neoliberal, consumerist, and industrial ways of life (Stevenson 2012).

I use the term *transpolitical* here to encompass all these possibilities. Modified by a prefix that indicates movement across, beyond, and into a different state, such engagements not only proceed outside the realm of conventional politics but also consciously transfer activities of cooperation and conflict into alternative arenas that participants perceive as more promising. Transpolitics transcends politics both by overcoming accepted political divisions and assumptions and by demonstrating how political negotiations play out elsewhere.

Activism otherwise: everyday / indirect / prefigurative / nowtopian

While activism is most typically associated with public protest and strident dissent, it is more usefully understood as a broad spectrum of activities. For social change researcher Silas Harrebye, an activist is any "non-profit-oriented, active citizen engaging socially in the civic sphere to change society for the better by communicating conflict and/or solutions" (2011, 411). This broad definition acknowledges that activism***s*** (in the plural) represent a wide range of ideologies and actions. Indeed, the activism spectrum includes radical activists who are prepared to use violence to achieve their aims; confrontational activists who use civil disobedience to influence laws and policies; creative activists who challenge customary ways of thinking through alternative modes of communication; professional activists who work part- or full- time toward their goals; occasional activists eager for social connection and a chance to be heard; and everyday makers who transform daily life (Harrebye 2011). Thus, while some activists *are* oppositional and engage readily in civil disobedience, others are content to accept a plurality of views and catalyze change in more subtle ways (Neumayer and Svensson 2016).[3]

Beyond its diverse forms, activism varies over time, space, and circumstance. This is true at both individual and collective levels. For instance, how people participate in activism and whether or not they self-identify as activists often fluctuates throughout the life course, reflecting the influence of family, community, and work. For this reason, it is useful to consider participation in social movements not as separate from everyday life but as profoundly integrated into and inspired by it (Roth 2016). Although civil disobedience and direct action may be the most alluring activist forms, they are far from the only—or most effective—varieties. Rather, different—but equally valid—activism***s*** greet discontinuous life demands (Roth 2016). Changes in activist expression are also broadly discernable in longitudinal societal trends. For example, although overt environmental political activity and conservation behavior are distinct types of activism underlain by analogous beliefs, participation in one does not always correlate to participation in the other. In fact, Russell Dalton found that although political activity associated with environmentalism decreased between 1993 and 2010, conservation behavior increased markedly during the same period as a result of a changed policy environment and altered array of opportunities (Dalton 2015).

While participation in electoral/party politics, political persuasion, and direct action protest are important mechanisms of social change, Transition movement participants choose to engage otherwise, pursuing change through everyday, indirect, prefigurative, and nowtopian activist forms. As described by political scientist Jayne Mansbridge, *everyday activism* consists of "talk and action in everyday life that is not consciously coordinated with the actions of others but is

[3] Those who equate activism with radical and confrontational tactics are apt to attach a stigma to the term, which can have negative implications for activists who choose to work in less confrontational ways.

(1) to some degree caused (inspired, encouraged) by a social movement and (2) consciously intended to change others' ideas or behavior in directions advocated by the movement" (2012, 437-438). Everyday activists express their desire for change within the context of quotidian conversations and mundane activities, often adjusting the company and schedules they keep to match the transformations they hope to see. Compared to more typical varieties, everyday activism is less antagonistic, both in its relationship to the present condition and in the non-exclusionary strategy adopted by its adherents. Rather than simply opposing the status quo, everyday activists take a positive, pragmatic stance designed to entice a broad base of support. Working to enact an "accessible set of practices and policies that can resonate and influence the political mainstream rather than existing on the political fringe," they reject a militant identity and do not always view themselves as activists (Chatterton and Pickerill 2010, 480).

Like the prefigurative activism described below, everyday activism "attempts to build the future in the present" by developing essential competencies for resilience and adapting to profound socioecological challenges (Chatterton and Pickerill 2010, 487). Embodying what David Schlosberg and Romand Coles call an *environmentalism of everyday life*, Transition movement participants "confront power by stepping out of existing flows of materials and capital…by reconfiguring the flow of food, energy, and other basic needs" (Schlosberg and Coles 2016, 178; see also Staggenborg and Ogrodnik 2015). In common—and overlapping—with food justice and crafting movements, they work at the juncture of individual resistance and institutional reconstruction.

The term *indirect activism* similarly describes activism that seeks to persuade and mobilize by offering "living examples and experiential education rather than by public demonstration and disruption" (Pink 2009, 462). According to Othon Alexandrakis, it is a mode of resistance in which participants "attempt to bring about their ambitions and visions by activating other groups to undertake resistance of their own" (2016, 275). Instead of confronting the structures they oppose directly, indirect activists complete modest local actions that they concomitantly link to significant societal issues. Like everyday activism, indirect activism is rooted in the quotidian but offers considerable potential for critical expression and systemic reconstruction. As Sarah Pink points out, everyday life "is where we make our worlds and where our worlds make us" (2012, 5). Thus, indirect activists express their transformative agency by, for example, installing community gardens (Pink 2012), joining Slow Food networks (Pink 2009), and creating graffiti that calls others to action (Alexandrakis 2016). In all of these instances, indirect activism consists of hands-on mundane activities that nevertheless speak to broader concerns and contributions.

Prefigurative movements involve the intentional construction of alternative social and ecological relationships that reflect the worlds their participants would like to realize (Maeckelbergh 2009; Yates 2015). In her study of the alterglobalization movement, political anthropologist Marianne Maeckelbergh discovered that prefigurative activists bring means and ends together so that the structures they develop to organize the quest for change parallel the structures

they ultimately desire. The individuals she worked with create their preferred version of the future in the here-and-now, thereby "removing the temporal distinction between the struggle in the present and a goal in the future" (Maeckelbergh 2011, 4). Transition has also been recognized as a prefigurative movement—one that offers a uniquely hopeful vision of a sustainable future (Biddau et al. 2016). Transition participants experiment with diverse economic and social arrangements and continually "prefigure alternatives to development and to forms of growth-oriented economies and societies" (Nicolosi and Feola 2016, 154). In Transition and elsewhere, the creation of viable options not only energizes participants but concurrently undermines the power of the present order by demonstrating that real change is possible (Maeckelbergh 2011, 14).

By pragmatically extending prefigurative principals, *nowtopian* activists endeavor to bring pieces of an imagined utopia into the present. They purposefully reclaim their time and energy from the logic of money and markets, thereby mounting a potent critique of dominant patterns of thinking and ascribing value but, as Chris Carlsson explains in his seminal text on the topic, "instead of traditional political forms like unions or parties, [nowtopian activists come] together in practical projects" (Carlsson 2008, 3). Nowtopias are tangible world-creation schemes in which work is done "for social and ecological reasons and explicitly *not* for the proliferation of capital" (Carlsson and Manning 2010, 928). This type of activism entails creating and facilitating "forms of living, working and producing together which sit outside of capital exchange and instead generate new commons and new forms of relationality" (Gearey and Ravenscroft 2019, 454).

While diverse, nowtopian projects almost always involve hands-on work that is unpaid, essential, and genuinely fulfilling. Quietly proceeding in countless "invisible corners of daily life" (Carlsson 2008, 235), such efforts can be observed in many segments of society and range from vacant-lot/guerilla gardening, to bicycle clubs and repair centers, to open source software networks. Refusing to bide their time or beg others to bring change, Transition participants and other nowtopians nourish alternatives that already exist in their heads, hearts, and hands (Carlsson 2008; Hopkins 2008). Like everyday, indirect, and prefigurative activists, nowtopians channel the ability of infrapolitical, micropolitical, and subpolitical action to challenge the status quo and build an environmentally sustainable and socially cohesive world. As we will soon see, these theories are made tangible in Transition participants' visions, choices, and lived realities.

Research context and methods

Ours is not a hopeful time. Extreme weather events are already impacting many regions, and future warming and sea level rise are likely to unleash future waves of migration and global sociopolitical instability. Habitat loss, climate change, and other anthropogenic factors are driving a mass extinction so intense that half the Earth's species stand to be lost by the end of the century (Kolbert 2014). And economic, regional, and racial inequities persist despite decades of amelioratory

efforts. Young people carry the greatest psychological burden. In a 2019 survey of American teens, 57 percent said they were scared about climate change and 52 percent reported feeling angry about it (Plautz 2020). In the same year, a survey in the UK revealed that nearly one in five young people do not feel that life is worth living—double the rate recorded a decade earlier (Booth 2019). In the intervening years, the pace of change and the prevalence of despair—exacerbated by the isolation and uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic—has only increased. This is the disconcerting reality that Transition participants seek to transcend. In this context, the search for hope is as urgent as the search for solutions.

The perception that political leaders are unable—or simply unwilling—to respond adequately to the monumental challenges we face was intensified in the US by the 2016 election of a flagrant climate change denier. It was tempered only slightly by the passage of the 2022 Inflation Reduction Act under the Biden Administration, which will support the nation's shift to renewable energy and reduce greenhouse gas emissions but is seen by many in the environmental community as a case of too little, too late (Isaacs-Thomas 2022). Increasingly, concerned citizens recognize that they cannot count on the government to step in and solve their problems. Indeed, this is a common refrain in the Transition movement: In today's new normal, no one is coming to rescue us or our communities; there is no "silver bullet" or "magic solution" (Hopkins 2013, 36).

Given the failure of neoliberal government and market forces to tackle the conjoined problems of climate change, resource depletion, and the inevitable social turmoil that will result, growing numbers of citizens accept that they are on their own. Instead of waiting for someone to save them, they now realize that they must save themselves. This has opened new doors to "the possibility for liberated political action" that solves problems through "micropolitical community processes, rather than via normal, macropolitical channels" (Scott-Cato and Hillier 2010, 879). Relatedly, Transition movement participants cite already-in-motion climatic and ecological changes as underlying their shared stance that change is inevitable and imminent. "Change is happening," declares movement literature, "our choice is between a future we want and one which happens to us" (Transition US 2011, 8). Far beyond simply changing lightbulbs and installing solar panels, we need "a profound shift in what we do and how we do it; a complete adjustment of what we imagine to be lying in front of us, of our expectations of the future" (Hopkins 2011, 32).

The interconnections between Transition participants' assessments of politics as usual, their perceptions of ongoing processes of change, and their approach to political engagement became clear over the course of ethnographic interviews with 29 individuals.[4] The bulk of this research was conducted between February and September of 2022. Twenty-five in-depth interviews took place online during this period using the Zoom teleconferencing platform. Guided by my goal of better understanding how Transition participants conceptualize the future, their

[4] While all interviewees gave me permission to use their names, I opted to preserve anonymity for the purposes of this article because of the possibility that differing views regarding politics and activism in Transition could prove contentious in future contexts.

relationships within their local communities, and their strategies for creating change, I asked interviewees to answer ten open-ended questions.[5] Conversational interviews ranging from 43 to 85 minutes in duration were recorded, transcribed, and coded based on themes that rose to prominence during the qualitative data analysis process. Four earlier interviews with Transition participants in my own Midwestern US Transition initiative (conducted in 2019 and early 2020) were also re-coded and included. Conducted by a native anthropologist who shares the broad goals of the Transition movement, this research embodies a critically engaged activist approach that endeavors to unite academic, applied, and reflexive scholarship in one dynamic undertaking (Chari and Donner 2010; Speed 2006).[6]

The vast majority of interviewees resided in communities across the United States (eleven in western states, eleven in central states, and five in eastern states), although individuals from Brazil and Canada also took part. Interviewees included eighteen women and eleven men who ranged in age from their early twenties to their eighties, although most were middle-aged or recently retired. Almost all held a middle or upper-middle class economic status and higher than average educational attainment, and only four individuals claimed a non-white identity. While my interviews open an exceptional window into the lived experience of those who participate in the North American Transition movement, the perspectives of Indigenous peoples, residents of the global South, and other

[5] Questions included the following:

1) Why did you get involved in the Transition movement? What makes it interesting or special to you? How would you describe Transition's goals?

2) What kinds of Transition activities do you participate in? What other activities do you do to support its larger goals?

3) When you think about the direction society is moving today, what do you see as the key challenges? What would you like to change? Do you feel that you are able to shape the direction the future takes? In what ways?

4) Take a moment to envision your community 20 years from now. Envision a positive future in which we have managed to overcome fossil fuel addiction and are adapting successfully to a changed climate. (It doesn't have to be a utopia, and you are not expected to have fully formulated ideas. Your job is simply to brainstorm what life in your future community is like.) What is your community like in the future you imagine? What stands out first and foremost in your vision?

5) How would you describe the community you live in? When you walk/drive/bike through town, what kinds of things do you tend to notice? What thoughts, memories, and associations go through your mind? Do you have a strong sense of community?

6) What do you like about your community? What would you like to change?

7) How do you see your own role within your community? How important is working locally, as opposed to a larger regional, national, or global levels?

8) Do you see Transition as a political movement? In what ways is it political? How is it non-political? Thinking about your role in Transition, do you see yourself as an activist or as something else?

9) What do you see as the best ways to make change?

10) Is there anything else I should have asked but didn't? Is there anything else you'd like to share?

[6] The phrase *native anthropologist* is used to describe someone who conducts research within their own community of origin.

marginalized communities who partake in diverse transition processes apart from the eponymous movement are beyond this project's necessarily limited scope.

This research took methodological impetus from the COVID-19 pandemic. Before the pandemic, I anticipated conducting multi-sited research on Transition groups operating in North America, Europe, and Australia. With this opportunity precluded by unforeseen travel and budgetary restrictions, I decided to conduct interviews via Zoom instead. This allowed me to quickly reach a larger number of individuals involved in a greater diversity of Transition groups. In addition, it enabled me to conduct my research in a nearly carbon-neutral manner (powering my laptop instead of boarding multiple airline flights). Given the topic of this research, this decision was as ethical as it was practical. While online interviews cannot dissolve distance or provide a full multi-sensory immersion into an interviewee's locale, they are increasingly accepted as a valid and legitimate way to conduct qualitative research and raise important questions about what it means to enter the field and conduct fieldwork (Howlett 2022). As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the chasm between offline and online life has narrowed considerably, with experiences as diverse as business meetings and family reunions entering the realm of cyberspace. After months of practice and timely improvements in teleconferencing technology, most people now feel comfortable engaging openly in online conversation. Given their involvement in a locally focused but globally networked movement, this is especially true for the Transition participants I spoke with.

Transition in politics / politics in transition

Transition participants' responses to my queries about the political nature of the movement were surprisingly diverse. Despite agreeing on the need for broad collaboration, local action, and transformative change, some interviewees insisted that Transition is (and should remain) apolitical while others enthusiastically embraced (and elucidated) the movement's political dimensions. In some cases, interviewees offered opinions that appeared diametrically opposed: One individual stated that, as a 501(c)(3) [nonprofit] organization, Transition is "absolutely nonpolitical and it can't be" (Interview 10, March 15, 2022), even as another declared that "any movement that is trying to achieve the goals of transition has to be political" (Interview 21, July 7, 2022). On closer inspection, I found that whether one characterizes Transition as political or not hinges upon different definitions of and assumptions about politics rather than different understandings of the movement's philosophy, strategy, and advocated activities. In fact, all of the individuals I spoke with endeavor to catalyze systemic change from outside of the conventional political arena. Those who equate politics with partisanship and antagonism position their work apart from a realm they see as problematically divisive and ineffectual. Those who view building relationships, developing sustainable ways to meet physical and social needs, and imagining alternative futures as political acts more readily adopt this designation.

Recalling Transition's adaptability as one of its defining characteristics, some participants adjust their perceptions and descriptions of the movement accordingly. Given that many North American initiatives are established in conservative areas, Transition leaders sometimes "soft-pedal" the movement's message in order to "meet communities where they are at in terms of political climate and dominant values" (Poland et al. 2019, 185). For some participants, the ability of Transition to exist in both liberal and conservative settings is among its main attractions (Interview 23, July 13, 2022). As one midwestern movement leader put it, "you can't go into these little towns and rural areas, which are deep red [i.e., conservative/Republican], and get into the politics. You have to be ecologically focused and practically focused about what the assets are and what the needs are in the community. So, to me, hyperlocal means not political" (Interview 6, February 23, 2022). Another leader lamented the "fundamental divisiveness that is tearing this country apart." Reflecting on his successful introduction of sustainability programs in conservative areas, he added, "I don't care who they vote for as long as they have an interest in their community" (Interview 12, April 8, 2022).

Relatedly, Transition emphasizes collaboration, boundary crossing, and "respectful dialogue between the extremes" (Interview 10, March 15, 2022). Conversation and common ground were frequent interview themes. As one individual noted, it is crucial that we "speak in a calm voice and recognize that there are conversations that need to happen" (Interview 6, February 23, 2022). "We look at what the shared values are and try to build bridges," explained another, "rather than trying to identify with a political party" (Interview 15, May 12, 2022). Indeed, compared to other environmental social movements, Transition offers exceptional opportunities for overcoming long-standing societal divisions. Although it highlights climate resilience and social justice, it has "the power to attract people on the [conservative] side of the political spectrum, because it is also about self-reliance, not depending on government, looking after your neighbors, and leaving behind a better legacy for future generations" (Interview 13, May 2, 2022). For some Transition participants—such as the woman who (after careful consideration) declared Transition to be apolitical in nature because of its insistence on hearing all voices (Interview 18, May 24, 2022)—this inclusive philosophy is at odds with expectations about what a political movement looks like.

These sentiments suggest that Transition participants who shy away from a political designation tend to equate politics with partisan division and unilateral campaigns, both which are broadly eschewed within the movement. Some interviewees made this contrast clear before they were willing to discuss the possibility of politics in Transition. As one woman stated, "I think it's important to be nonpartisan. You may disagree with people of a certain party, but they're still part of this community so we have to find ways that we can work together" (Interview 24, July 13, 2022). Since its inception, another explained, Transition has never been about politics, yet paradoxically, "the idea of engaging in local municipalities was [always] a big piece of it because you don't do things in

isolation…so I think its intent is to be politically involved, but not in partisan politics. That's a whole different thing." (Interview 25, July 18, 2022).

Several interviewees presented astute analyses of the distinction between electoral/partisan involvement (which they avoid) and influencing policies/confronting power structures (which they advocate). For instance, one man drew upon his own definition of politics to elucidate how he envisions its role in Transition. "Politics is the art of compromise. Politics is the art of actually getting things done," he said. Transition, therefore, "is inherently political, but it doesn't have to be inherently partisan…because the changes we need involve the interests of everyone across the political divide" (Interview 11, April 4, 2022). Another likewise declared that "politics can't be avoided, even in organizations, because politics has to do with the workings of group dynamics. People who have political office have a certain kind of power and those who elect them in our society would like to influence how that power is used" (Interview 26, July 19, 2022). Reflecting at length on the matter, one Transition participant I spoke with argued for an expansive vision of what politics can encompass. As she elaborated:

> I think that most everything is political. Most every action that people do or view that they hold has implications for political policy in terms of governing bodies and in terms of political parties. Transition is not partisan politically. Instead of supporting a particular candidate…[we] educate and try to bring dialogue forward, which is a political act in the larger sense because it goes against the silencing and the powerlessness myth of 'business as usual' that the largest political forces continue to impose on us. [We] invite everybody to do these life-saving actions, without regard for who they vote for or what their positions may be" (Interview 14, May 6, 2022).

In her view, inclusive nonpartisan efforts that seek to catalyze change and challenge existing circumstances constitute political acts.

Carrying the conversation in a different direction, several interviewees suggested that the issues Transition takes on are not intrinsically political, but rather have become politic*ized* in our ideologically discordant era. For example, one woman asserted that Transition should not be considered political, but also acknowledged that "there are so many elements that can be viewed as such. And that messaging really distracts from the purpose. I feel like Transition is about our common humanity and about the house that we all live in" (Interview 8, March 4, 2022). Transition participants consistently identified the politicization of issues like climate change as a serious problem. People "have politicized something that isn't a political issue," lamented another interviewee, and a huge challenge moving forward will be to "welcome all voices around the table and really have conversations" (Interview 1, July 15, 2019). Transition participants agree that planetary health, human health, and meeting people's basic needs should not be up for political debate. Nevertheless, these have become hot-button

issues, with engaged citizens under considerable pressure to choose sides (Interview 5, February 13, 2022; Interview 28, September 16, 2022).

Transition's political dimensions were most enthusiastically discussed in reference to how citizens can influence local policies and how personal actions can be "scaled up" to catalyze widespread transformative change. Interestingly, even interviewees who characterized Transition as apolitical often exempted nonpartisan local civic involvement from the divisive political realm they deride, noting the distinction between polarized national politics and more personal and productive local interactions. Only at the local level, one interviewee stated, might politics "still be worth the effort" (Interview 19, May 25, 2022). At the same time, participants who embrace the movement's political nature often sited Transition groups' efforts to influence local policies as a reason for their position. As one woman explained, Transition is political "because we have to work with the municipality to change things" (Interview 27, August 19, 2022). In her experience, individuals who manage community vegetable gardens or bicycle to work can only expand on their ideals and actions if they get municipalities on board. By attending meetings and supporting local ordinances to reduce plastic waste or increase renewable energy (among other things), Transition participants are "doing politics at the local level, one city at a time" (Interview 20, June 30, 2022). Indeed, at this scale, the experiential divide between personal action, community action, and political action readily dissolves: Transition participants adopt a change they would like to see (e.g., home composting is initiated). Through passionate role modeling and instruction, the practice spreads to friends, colleagues, and neighbors (e.g., multiple people begin home composting or develop a communal compost site). Eventually, the Transition group decides to take the issue to the city council, which in small and medium-sized communities often includes friends, colleagues, and neighbors (e.g., a municipal composting program is established). In such cases, there is no sense of rupture as Transition-related activities spread from profoundly personal to ostensibly political realms.

Many interviewees talked openly about their local political involvement. For example, one woman declared that her Transition group is seeking to do politics differently. At the local level, she affirmed, "we're working with government agencies and councils, so we're definitely political. I think politics has gotten a bad name in a lot of ways, and it means something really negative to a lot of people. The thing that we're doing differently is making it a positive thing" (Interview 17, May 19, 2022). Another interviewee described how her group had convinced their local government to minimize its ecological footprint (in this case by using renewable energy for government buildings). "I guess you call that political," she stated, "but it's very nonpartisan" (Interview 24, July 13, 2022). Others talked about finding ways to ensure that positive changes undertaken by individuals continue and expand over time. Drawing a historical analogy to the abolition of slavery, one interviewee pointed out that even though some individual slave owners decided to do the right thing of their own accord, ending the practice required putting laws and regulations in place. In other words, although "a lot of it has to come from the people…[to] make things actually stick

sometimes you're going to need policies" (Interview 1, July 15, 2019). Thus, even while they avoid large-scale political campaigns, working with municipalities offers an attractive way for Transitioners to "institutionalize the changes they are working toward" (Interview 16, May 18, 2022).

While Transition is rarely depicted as a resistance movement, the vast majority of participants believe they are expediting "a profound break with current society" (Kenis and Mathjis 2014, 182). Instead of confrontation, protest, and political pressure, they catalyze change from below, outside, and beyond conventional politics. Instead of leveling explicit critiques against business/politics as usual, they challenge existing systems by creating alternatives or, as Rob Hopkins succinctly puts it, by "just doing stuff" (Hopkins 2013). As one interviewee summarized:

> Politics will have to change to make the bigger structural changes that have to happen, but Transition itself is a little bit subversive of that because it's saying, 'let's do this at the grassroots level, let people start making these changes individually.' And then that spreads and you influence more people. These changes can ripple through society. And I don't think it's going to take a majority of people to feel this way. If we can get ten to twenty percent of the culture to start thinking along these lines, there may be a possibility of that rippling out much broader. The idea of Transition is to *get around* politics (Interview 9, March 7, 2022).

In Transition, the goal of political change is not abandoned—it is just pursued differently.

Moving beyond conventional political engagement does not mean giving up on transforming existing power structures or relinquishing decision-making authority. On the contrary, Transition participants trade conventional engagement for strategies they deem more likely to result in real change; rather than refusing politics altogether, they do politics otherwise. In this context, transpolitical action takes several forms. For one thing, Transition participants disregard dominant but divisive norms that prevent people from talking to one another and instead subvert the status quo by rebuilding relationships across political boundaries. Significantly, they also develop and disseminate local practices that put systemic change within the realm of possibility, illustrating how patterns of resource procurement could be more sustainable, just, and fulfilling. Finally, the simple but radical belief that things could be different can be seen as a potent political act. Instead of fighting to claim a larger portion of the pie, Transition encourages people to turn down the pie and bake a cake instead. By combining an implicit rejection of current circumstances with an explicit demonstration of alternatives, Transition develops vibrant possibilities for long-term transformation.

Doing (and defining) activism differently

Transition attracts individuals with identities and interests that go far beyond those typically claimed by environmentalists and other self-proclaimed activists. Paralleling their diverse assessments of politics in Transition, interviewees expressed considerable variability in their appraisals of activism and their willingness to affiliate with it. As we will see, some Transition participants accept the label unequivocally, others accept it with qualifiers, and still others reject it altogether. When I asked people who engage in a comparable array of Transition-related activities if they saw themselves as activists, answers ranged from "completely, that is why I live" (Interview 20, June 30, 2022) to "we've shied away from all that as much as possible" (Interview 17, May 19, 2022). It thus appears that movement participants' relationships with activism hinge neither on how they view the goals of the movement nor on the activities they undertake as part of it but rather on how they define activism. While not all Transitioners describe themselves as activists, all work diligently to promote positive change through practical, local action for environmental and social sustainability. Furthermore, even those who avoid the label see involvement in the Transition movement and being "in transition" toward a resilient future as important aspects of their identity (Biddau et al. 2016, 153). Regardless of how it is categorized, their work evokes the everyday, indirect, prefigurative, and nowtopian undertakings outlined above.

Some Transition participants unreservedly proclaimed an activist identity. Although he hadn't previously pondered the meaning of the term, one interviewee matter-of-factly stated that he sees himself as an activist because he "encourages things to get done and does those things" (Interview 26, July 19, 2022). For other individuals, contemplating their association with activism prompted personal reflection. As one organizer put it, "I resonate with it as one of many aspects of my identity. I'm an activist. I see myself as a systems thinker, a holistic visionary…I am putting myself out there and trying to *live* this change as much as I possibly can" (Interview 16, May 18, 2022). Others considered activism a lifelong calling. "I do strongly identify as an activist. That's probably my main identity," reflected one woman, "I have to stand up against injustice. It's been in my blood since I was a kid. So that's what it means, to me, to be an activist" (Interview 15, May 12, 2022). Similarly, another Transitioner told me, "I think it's just my calling. Ever since I learned about climate change…I just care about people's health, making sure that everyone has their needs met, and making sure we work on this together" (Interview 28, September 16, 2022). Because Transitions' inclusive and pragmatic approach is commensurate with these individuals' understandings of activism, they view the movement as an attractive arena for activist expression and a promising place to do meaningful work.

Quite a few interviewees were willing to adopt an activist label but felt that caveats were in order. Several were comfortable using the term to describe themselves, so long as it was clear that *political* activism was not included (e.g., Interview 6, February 23, 2022). One man contrasted his approach with political activism, stating that what he does with Transition "*is* activism but of a different nature"

(Interview 2, July 15, 2019). Another took the time to unpack the differences he observed between conventional activism and Transition's approach which, he explained:

> [Transition] springs from a deeper analysis; it's not just reactionary. It is based on a positive vision of the more just and regenerative society that we can create together rather than just saying we don't want that. It is inclusive. It's not something that we're trying to ram down people's throats. We're trying to build consensus from the grassroots to take in a wide diversity of perspectives and create a future that works for everyone. I think it's holistic; it's not looking at things in [a] siloed, single-issue way. And I think it's creative. It's humble. It's iterative. It's continually evolving (Interview 13, May 2, 2022).

Others saw the avoidance of protest as a key feature that sets Transition apart from conventional activism. One woman noted that although she never protests, she still sees herself "as an activist in life." Reflecting further on what constitutes an activist, she added, "I think that we all are [activists], because we believe in something and we want people to feel that" (Interview 27, August 19, 2022).

For several people I spoke with, explaining what made their version of activism unique prompted discussion about alternative terminologies. *Change agent* is a preferable self-designation for some individuals who prioritize private over public actions and do-it-yourself projects over civil society politics (Harrebye 2011, 420). For instance, one woman said she saw herself as a "change agent [who is] definitely situated on the front edge of change" (Interview 18, May 24, 2022). Another pondered possible designations, eventually arriving at change as a key aspect of her identity. "Is a change agent the same thing as an activist?" she asked. "I want to bring about change…there are just so many different ways to go about it. And I always think of activism, rightly or wrongly, as being more in your face, more aggressive" (Interview 1, July 15, 2019). Conversely, another interviewee claimed to be content with a "lazy" use of the term activist and said she often refers to herself as a *community organizer* but shies away from the change agent designation because so many people she encounters fear change (Interview 29, September 16, 2022).

One woman I spoke with preferred to describe herself as a *solutions innovator*, a term she saw as transcending political action. "The word activist is too politically wrought," she explained:

> when I picture an activist, it is picketing on the streets and denouncing the ways that society is running. You have to front that with a message. [Being] a solutions innovator [means] leading by example and showing people the benefits and the beauty to what it is that you're doing and living within your message (Interview 8, March 4, 2022).

Indeed, most Transition participants acknowledge that there are many ways to be an activist, some which suit their proclivities far better than others. While conceding that she probably is "an activist of sorts," one interviewee discussed the importance of avoiding coming off as outrageous and was very conscious of the line between promoting positive change and protesting what one sees as wrong. "It's a conversation about how we can get better," she said, and "I think we will be able to achieve a lot more by being friends than by protesting or screaming, [although] I'm sure there's a time and place for that" (Interview 4, March 27, 2020). As this statement suggests, Transition participants often acknowledge protest as a valid strategy, but see it as deviating considerably from their own approach. While a handful of interviewees did report partaking in public protest events (e.g., the 2014 People's Climate March, 2017 Women's March, or regional spin-offs), these activities tend to be held apart from their Transition-related roles.

Interestingly, several interviewees told me that they were formerly heavily engaged in public protest but had become disillusioned about what this kind of action can accomplish. For example, one woman said she used to attend protest events frequently but realized that "protests aren't working anymore. I think we have to be a lot more strategic." For her, this means

> talking about the benefits of making the changes that we need to make in our world to have a livable, sustainable, resilient future. The positives. Make it more attractive for people to come and join the party (Interview 23, July 13, 2022).

Another interviewee thought back to her youthful involvement in protests against the Vietnam War, noting that she "got disenchanted with it back then. It seemed to me to be more theater than actually getting something accomplished" (Interview 17, May 19, 2022). While her desire for change remains consistent with activism, her approach to problem-solving has taken a different tack. Another interviewee got his start in conventional anti-war, anti-globalization, and social justice activism in the early 2000s. He described experiencing a "growing feeling" that the kind of activism he was used to was too aggressive and too eager to play on people's fears and guilt. Problematically, it was "not offering any particular solutions, not doing a lot of in-depth education for people to really understand the root causes. And that was becoming less and less satisfying to me" (Interview 13, May 2, 2022).

Some Transition participants are more uncomfortable than others wearing an activist label. Several individuals brought up the topic of protest in order to contrast it with their own (very different) ways of working, seeking self-definition by articulating what they clearly are not: They are not mainstream, not confrontational, not loud. They instead see themselves as intellectuals, educators, and role models. Citing his lack of participation in protests, one man said, "I don't

view myself as an activist…I'm more of an intellectual radical, thinking through the issues, writing papers" (Interview 10, March 15, 2022). Similarly, another affirmed, "I'm more on the intellectual side of activism. I'm not somebody who leads protest demonstrations or goes door to door or anything like that" (Interview 11, April 3, 2022). One Transition leader voiced a particularly negative view of protest and conventional activism, which he associated with divisiveness and an inability to generate solutions. "Instead of protest," he proudly proclaimed, "we put together an educational program" for our community (Interview 12, April 8, 2022). Highlighting the significance of learning and doing, another interviewee talked about how she'd previously considered participating in protests at her state capital but decided against it. "I'm not sure that is the best way to spend my time," she said, "Am I really going to be heard there?" What she now encourages—and enacts—are changes to the fundamental systems that inform our lives. "We distribute our energy. We grow and distribute our food" (Interview 22, July 13, 2022). As these examples illustrate, Transition works not by criticizing the status quo but by changing it, little by little, and inviting others along for the ride.

As Transition participants see it, conventional activism is not the most effective path toward the changes they wish to achieve. They choose to do activism otherwise, recognizing the coexistence of myriad viable alternatives. As in other environmental social movements, individuals involved in Transition play different roles—some are visionaries; others are builders. As one man eloquently stated, "I want to teach as I fight and I want to learn as I lead…I'm trying to play my role…I'm trying to get into a new way of thinking" (Interview 21, July 2, 2022). The practical, local actions Transitioners undertake to promote environmental and social sustainability transcend the terms they select to describe themselves and the identities they claim. Moving beyond acts that are customarily accorded an activist label, Transition participants are building

> the new Gaian structures that are going to support a livable world. All the food production, distribution changes, and ideas about business and how it has to be structured [to] meet needs in a non-extractive and regenerative way. Economies that fit the way that living systems work. And then another dimension is the shift in consciousness that's needed to support those new structures. That's activist too…And there's [another] dimension of activism now: Nurturing life. All the care work, everything we do. Parenting and caring for one another in every way and caring for the earth and regenerating the soil. All of it (Interview 14, May 6, 2022).

Armed with applied optimism and perseverance, one interviewee explained, Transitioners act locally rather than "waiting around for government or business to do something." Transition, he said, works best "in areas where we don't need anybody's permission to make a change. We can do it ourselves" (Interview 13, May 2, 2022). Doing activism differently implies that transformative change can

transpire away from the spotlight and defy conventional expectations. It signals a quiet revolution comprised of simple daily acts that change how people think and live, setting in motion cumulative changes with the power to alter fundamental social, political, and ecological realities.

Conclusion

As we have seen, Transition participants' relationships to politics and activism are complex and diverse. Yet their transpolitical approach to catalyzing change often transcends the terms they use to describe their activities. Whether such labels instill a sense of pride, inevitability, ambivalence, or disdain, Transitioners work to create a more sustainable and cohesive world not by appealing to leaders of the dominant system through political pressure and public protest but by undertaking pragmatic yet potentially transformative action outside of the conventional political sphere. They grow food, install solar panels, and connect with neighbors (and so much more) because they believe activism otherwise is more likely to yield positive, tangible change than more customary political paths.

While individuals may think about politics and activism however they wish, inclusive definitions capable of encompassing the actions Transition participants take and the changes they hope to make help to guide considerations of what Transition might imply for our understanding of social movements and processes of change. Transition is not about partisanship, division, or protest. But its participants do seek to renegotiate patterns of cooperation and conflict over tangible and intangible resources (Leftwich 1983) and aim to shift "the discourses of power within communities and society and between individuals" (Connors and McDonald 2011, 560). In this sense, Transition is intrinsically (albeit differently) political. For scholars of social movements, taking transpolitical action seriously ensures that we do not discount quiet revolutions and what they can accomplish by illuminating subtle ways of working for change and their contemporary relevance. For activists and movement participants, this broad framing can serve as a motivating force, demonstrating transpolitical action's effectiveness and potential to catalyze change.

This study suggests several important (and interrelated) directions for social movement research. First, exploring transpolitical engagement in relation to the potential weakening of conventional political power is essential. Transition participants' disinclination to do politics as usual indicates both a "radical change and break with the past [and] a response to political inaction and stagnation" (Biddau et al. 2016, 157). Pointing to widespread systemic corruption and public disinformation campaigns, one individual I interviewed didn't mince words; at all but the most local levels, he said, "politics is worthless now" (Interview 19, May 25, 2022). Transpolitical engagement represents a reaction to the failures of conventional politics. But it simultaneously serves to further weaken conventional politics' hold; by enacting change elsewhere, the determinative capacity of the formal political arena is progressively undermined. This positive feedback loop reveals how everyday acts can accumulate to diminish the potency

of conventional politics while concurrently transforming social, ecological, and economic systems.

Second, it behooves us to seek out and learn from additional instances of political engagement in unexpected places. As increasing numbers and types of citizens lose faith in conventional politics, we are likely to witness a cascade of subsurface action—if we are willing to look for it. Such explorations will necessarily consider how complex intersections of race, class, and gender converge to shape transpolitical action in contexts of post-carbon transition. Actions deemed uncontroversial when undertaken by members of a privileged majority, for instance, may be flagged as activist (or even militant) when performed by marginalized minorities. Similarly, what qualifies as intentional transpolitical action for one group of people may in fact represent an imposed survival strategy for another. These—and many other—matters of political identity and power dynamics comprise valuable topics for future research and writing.[7]

Third, Transition reminds us to remain attentive to emergent strategies that bear little resemblance to established activist forms. As longstanding assumptions about linear cause and effect are replaced by more sophisticated understandings derived from complexity science, alternative ways of catalyzing change are likely to gain recognition and respect (Poland et al. 2019). While the personal is now more political than ever, the gulf between formal engagement and the work of change continues to widen; what plays out on the conventional political stage no longer reflects the beliefs and practices of those most committed to building a better world. As social movements change, so too must our ways of identifying and investigating them.

The implications for social movement participants are also significant. As we realize that explicit involvement in formal politics is not compulsory, we concomitantly comprehend that "we shape the world by living" in it (Purdy 2015, 22). From the food we eat to the steps that carry us between points, our daily choices inevitably influence the structures and systems in which we are enmeshed. Our everyday actions matter. Regardless of how we choose to describe ourselves, we become political actors when we appreciate our actions' entanglement with larger issues and causes. Through our diverse daily celebrations of sustainable alternatives and our (equally diverse) daily refusals to support a destructive status quo (Hopkins 2013), we take radical transformative action outside of and apart from conventional politics. By thinking and living differently, we launch a quiet revolution.

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