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FROM INDIVIDUAL TO COLLECTIVE CHANGE AND BEYOND
ECOLOGICAL CITIZENSHIP AND POLITICISATION

May 2015

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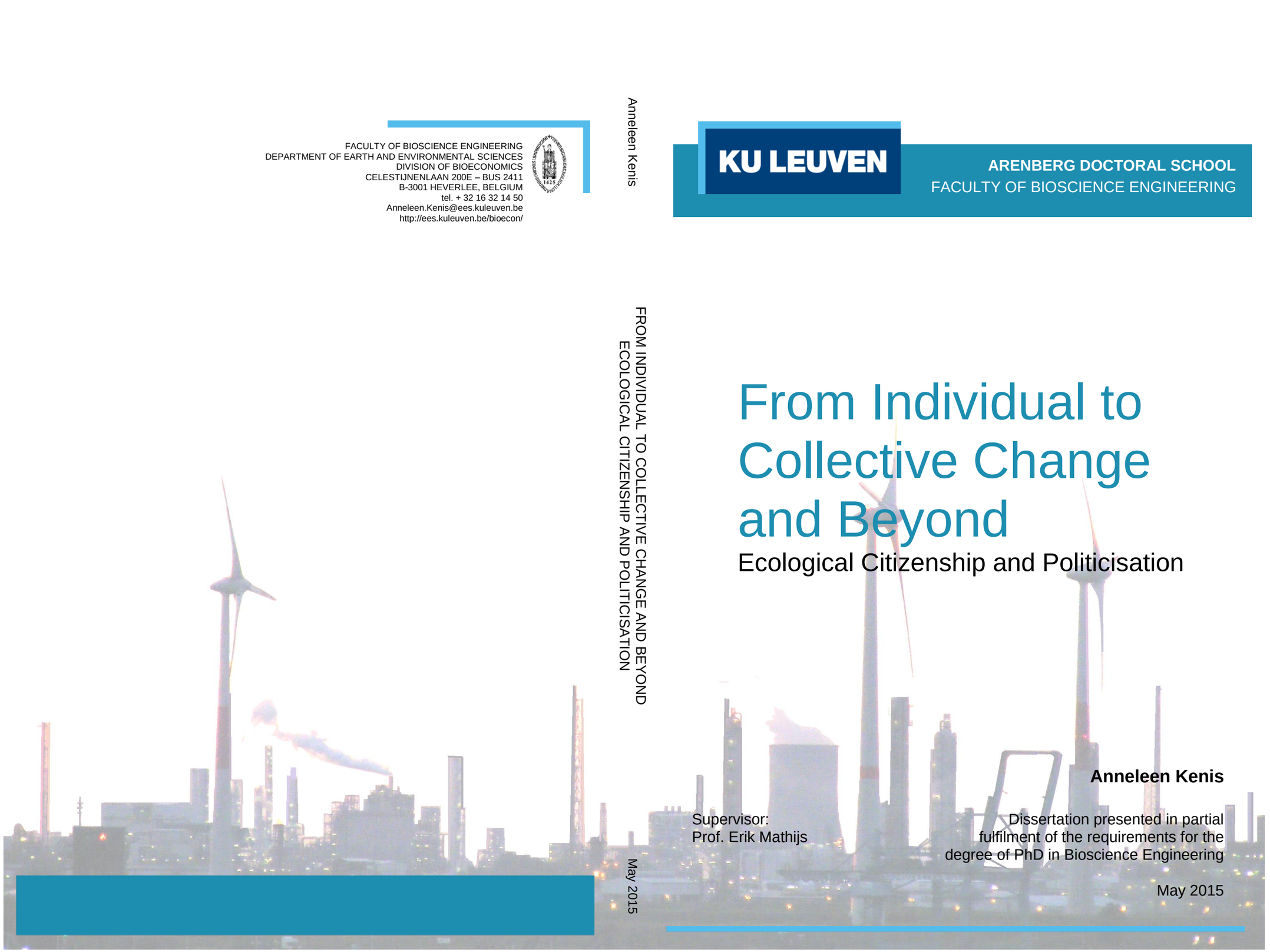
From Individual to Collective Change and Beyond

Ecological Citizenship and Politicisation



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Supervisor:
Prof. Erik Mathijs

Dissertation presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of PhD in Bioscience Engineering

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Uitgegeven in eigen beheer, ANNELEEN KENIS, GENT

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Global social-ecological inequalities not only imply that the consequences of ecological destruction are distributed in an extremely uneven way, but also that those privileged by class, gender, nation and race play a predominant role in theorising what is happening today. The risk is not only that this will result in a one-sided and distorted view of the ecological crisis and the struggles against it. The problem is also that this unevenness is often only recognised in a theoretical way. Is it not ironic that the people who write about the materiality of human existence, about its embodiment and embeddedness, are often those who are able to largely shift the 'burden' of this materiality onto other people, other species and the planet? Dedicating several years to study and research inevitably entails that others undertake the tasks our embodiment requires.

Even if this dissertation is meant as – a modest contribution to – a critique of the current social-ecological (dis)order and a call for change, one cannot but reflect on that other question, therefore: would it not have been better to spend my time in another way, to really live in a socially and ecologically sustainable way, to set up initiatives, to campaign, to support groups fighting for change?

While I have been writing this PhD, international climate negotiations have been deadlocked, the global climate justice movement has known a dip, emissions boomed. After having participated in actions or other activities, it was often with reluctance that I returned to my desk. My heartfelt doubts were even bigger when I decided not to participate at all because I had to finish this or that article or chapter or had to get prepared for yet another seminar or presentation.

However, it were not only the demands of academic life that made me return to my desk. As is the case with many of the people I interviewed, I experience(d) a similar kind of powerlessness, not knowing where to start, being confronted with a condition that seems so overwhelming that it is difficult to imagine how to arrive at meaningful change. To a certain extent, this dissertation was aimed at better understanding this condition, grasping what is at stake, and finding tools to develop a way out. Luckily, the question whether this aim, which is both all too common and much too ambitious, has been realised or not, is not a criterion for obtaining one's doctoral degree ...

Having said this, I would first and foremost want to acknowledge that writing this PhD would not have been possible without the people – both anonymous and familiar - who have sustained me and thereby created the space and time to engage in this project. Along the same lines, I would like to express all my appreciation for the people who do not wait for theoretical explorations to concretely take action.

More in particular, I want to thank all transitioners and climate justice activists for their engagement, and for their willingness to share this engagement and their thoughts, opinions, feelings and doubts about it with me. Even if this PhD has only one

responsible author, it would not have existed without the efforts, commitments, the unpayable (and mostly unpaid) efforts of the hundreds and thousands of people who make up the movements I have been writing about.

Next to that, I also want to thank a number of persons who guided me during my doctoral trajectory. A first word of gratitude must go to my supervisor Erik Mathijs. I might refer to the many things which I learned from him or through which he inspired me. But I especially want to thank him for having given me the freedom and the trust to engage in a research project that is rather atypical – both from a substantial and a methodological point of view – within our research group. Qualitative research is still too often greeted with scepticism, and that is certainly the case with activist research. As my supervisor and I actually first got to know each other when I applied for the position of doctoral researcher, I am very grateful for having received this trust and for having been able to pursue an uncommon research path, knowing that this is also an uncertain or even risky option for a supervisor.

I would also like to thank the assessors of my PhD, Marc Craps, Maarten Loopmans and Erik Swyngedouw. Marc Craps' interest in and reflections on methodology and action research were very supportive and always insightful. I have been very much inspired by the way in which Maarten Loopmans combines great social commitment (both inside and outside academia) with rigorous academic research, and he has provided me with a model of the kind of academic I would like to be. As will become clear for the reader of this dissertation, the work of Erik Swyngedouw constituted one of my main sources of inspiration. The confrontation with his thoughts on post-politics has been a key turning point in my doctoral trajectory. The creativity, depth and scope of his intellectual output are most inspiring.

A special word of thanks also goes to Matthias Lievens and An Gordier, not only because they more than anyone else 'sustained' me during long days of hard work, by making soup or bringing me a cup of coffee, a sandwich or tea, but also and in particular for sharing both everyday life and what goes beyond that. More in particular, I would like to thank Matthias Lievens for the common commitment (though in periods especially in our minds) that things not only can, but especially should be different. I would like to thank An Gordier, and the little Isja, for joining in and enriching the pleasant and frustrating moments of my (our) often ordinary, sometimes slightly crazy adventures, from the Bijgaardenpark to the cohousing project, from the beautiful island Femø (Denmark) to the university city of Lund (Sweden).

I thank them and my other friends, family members, comrades, house- and soulmates for still being with me, even if – as one of my friends often joked – the signs of a PhD being almost finalised are that the author has gained 20 kg, grew a beard, and has no friends anymore. I am very happy that my friends are still there, and luckily, I have another reason to justify the increase of my weight. I am still working on the beard.

But above all, I thank Luka and the little not-yet-born child. Not only because it sounds familiar and nice to thank your children in your PhD, or even to dedicate your PhD to your children (often a too thin compensation for having been present too little at times), but because, you, my dearest kids, were really what brought me light and joy every single day: every morning, every evening, and … even though at times a bit frustratingly … almost every night.

Anneleen

17 April 2015, Lund, Sweden

SUMMARY

A number of scholars has described predominant discourses on climate change as profoundly depoliticised. At the same time, however, other scholars have challenged this 'post-political thesis' for not taking the multiplicity of voices and actually existing forms of contestation sufficiently into account. In this context, reference is made to grassroots environmental movements which would challenge the status quo and thereby politicise climate change. Is the significant number of ecologically committed citizens, organised in all kinds of collectives, not a sign that climate change is not so depoliticised at all?

In this dissertation, I study these forms of contestation, and the processes of politicisation and depoliticisation they entail. Elaborating upon contemporary debates on the post-political and climate change, I investigate the tension between the aforementioned positions, and show that the existence of diverging voices does not disprove the post-political thesis as such. I undertake this project not only from a theoretical, but also from an empirical point of view, stressing the interaction between both.

Theoretically, the dissertation draws in particular on the work of Chantal Mouffe and Erik Swyngedouw and, to a lesser extent, on the work of Slavoj Žižek, Ernesto Laclau and Jacques Rancière. Although the way these scholars define the political and depoliticisation slightly differs, the red thread of these different analyses is that a discourse is post-political (or post-democratic in the case of Rancière) when it, first, misrecognises the constructed and therefore contingent nature of the social, second, obfuscates that the construction of the social inevitably entails acts of power, and third, conceals that each such construction produces certain exclusions and therefore generates conflicts or antagonisms. Applied to climate change, post-politics manifests itself particularly in technocratic or consensual discourses, or in discourses which reduce society to the sum of consumers, ecological commitment to individual moral action and sustainable transitions to technological innovation. Each time, what remains invisible is that tackling ecological crises presupposes a deeply power- and conflict-laden process. The relevance of this observation is that acknowledging the political is a key condition for processes of change not only to be effective, but also and especially democratic.

Empirically, this dissertation is based on qualitative research (interviews, document analysis and participant observation), more in particular activist research, and presents the results of an in-depth study of processes of politicisation and depoliticisation in discourses of ecologically committed citizens, and the movements in which they are involved. More precisely, I focus on Transition Towns and the Climate Justice Action movement, two grassroots movements which were launched in Flanders in 2008 and were remarkably successful at that time. Moving beyond the individualism of sustainable consumption paradigms, and advocating more collective

forms of ecological citizenship instead, both movements succeeded in attracting quite a lot of participants in a short lapse of time.

However, as my analysis reveals, despite these commonalities, both movements take radically diverging pathways on other terrains. In particular, they give a different meaning to the 'we', the collective in which ecological citizens are embedded. I analyse this difference in terms of two forms of ecological citizenship: a communitarian and agonistic one. Crucial in this distinction is the extent to which both movements give a place to 'the political'. Importantly, Transition Towns thinks itself as a geographical community, internally harmonious and externally related to similar local communities. Key features are localisation, social connectedness, resilience and the good life. As I show, Transition Towns is particularly vulnerable for what scholars have called the 'local trap', which I reconceptualise as a post-political trap.

Climate Justice Action explicitly attempts to repoliticise the climate terrain. Significantly, however, exactly this explicit political stance seems to alienate people from the movement, and thus to limit the movement in its capacity to broaden its democratic basis and to become a substantial political force. This is even more the case to the extent that Climate Justice Action tends to overpoliticise and frames the whole field of climate change in terms of allies and adversaries, friends and enemies. In a post-political context, one cannot fight for alternatives without first fighting post-politics. However, when the constitution of 'we-them distinctions' becomes too explicitly a goal in itself, the paradoxical result is that a movement's capacity to build a sufficiently broad 'we' is constrained.

The analysis of how 'the political' manifests itself in these grassroots climate movements (or is concealed by them) also provides theoretical insights into the political itself. First, through the analysis of Transition Towns, I show that even in the most depoliticised discourses a symptomatic form of the political pops up again. In so far as the movement feels the need to state, time and again, that we should be positive and collaborative, Transition Towns' discourse is in fact very polemic and conflictual. Even discourses which reject 'we against them' positions thus subtly engage in a polemic, but then against 'the political' as such. The analysis of this return of the political shows not only that the issue of the political cannot be circumvented or denied in the last instance, but also provides starting points for a repoliticisation of the ecological field.

Second, I show that a significant part of current scholarship on climate change and post-politics overlooks that it is on the level of discourse or representation that the diagnosis of post-politics should be made. It is not reality as such which is post-political, but the way reality is portrayed. As long as the actually existing diversity of voices on climate change is not accounted for, the post-political thesis retains its value. Furthermore, post-politics is a critical notion, exactly developed to bring this diversity to the fore.

Therefore, I argue that post-politics is a real problem for tackling climate change in an effective and democratic way, and the attempt to overcome it is not only a necessity but also a profound challenge.

SAMENVATTING

Volgens een aantal onderzoekers zijn de dominante discours over klimaatverandering diepgaand gedepolitiseerd. Tegelijk stellen anderen deze 'postpolitieke these' in vraag omdat ze onvoldoende rekenschap geeft van de veelheid aan stemmen en feitelijk bestaande vormen van contestatie. In die context wordt vaak verwezen naar grassroots milieubewegingen die de status quo zouden uitdagen en op die manier klimaatverandering zouden herpolitiseren. Is het opmerkelijk groot aantal ecologisch geëngageerde burgers die georganiseerd zijn in allerhande collectieven niet een teken dat klimaatverandering helemaal niet zo gedepolitiseerd is?

In deze doctoraatsthesis bestudeer ik deze vormen van contestatie en de processen van politisering en depolitisering die ermee gepaard gaan. Voortbordurend op actuele debatten over het postpolitieke en klimaatverandering onderzoek ik de spanning tussen de bovenvermelde posities, en toon ik dat het bestaan van uiteenlopende stemmen als zodanig de post-politieke these niet weerlegt. Ik doe dit zowel vanuit een theoretisch als een empirisch perspectief, met de nadruk op de interactie tussen beide.

Theoretisch is deze doctoraatsthesis vooral gebaseerd op het werk van Chantal Mouffe en Erik Swyngedouw, en in mindere mate ook op dat van Slavoj Žižek, Ernesto Laclau en Jacques Rancière. Hoewel deze auteurs het politieke en depolitisering op een lichtjes verschillende manier invullen, is het toch mogelijk om een rode draad te onderscheiden: een discours is postpolitiek (of postdemocratisch in het geval van Rancière) als het, ten eerste, het geconstrueerde en dus contingente karakter van het sociale miskent, ten tweede, verhult dat de constructie van het sociale onvermijdelijk de uitoefening van macht veronderstelt, en ten derde, onzichtbaar maakt dat zo'n constructie bepaalde uitsluitingen met zich meebrengt en daarom conflicten of antagonismen genereert. Toegepast op de klimaatkwestie manifesteert postpolitiek zich vooral in technocratische of consensuele discours, of in discours die de maatschappij reduceren tot de som van consumenten, ecologisch engagement tot individuele morele actie, en duurzaamheidstransities tot technologische innovatie. Wat telkens onzichtbaar blijft is dat de aanpak van ecologische crisissen een proces veronderstelt waarin macht en conflict een cruciale rol spelen. Het belang van deze observatie is dat de erkenning van het politieke een sleutelvoorwaarde is opdat veranderingsprocessen niet enkel effectief zouden zijn, maar vooral ook democratisch.

Empirisch is deze doctoraatsverhandeling gebaseerd op kwalitatief onderzoek (interviews, documentenanalyse en participerende observatie), meer bepaald activistisch onderzoek, en presenteert ze de resultaten van een diepgaande studie naar processen van politisering en depolitisering in de discours van ecologisch geëngageerde burgers en de bewegingen waarin ze actief zijn. Concreet focus ik op Transition Towns en Climate Justice Action, twee grassroots bewegingen die in

Vlaanderen in het najaar van 2008 werden gelanceerd en op dat moment opmerkelijk succesvol waren. Door het individualisme van het duurzame consumptieparadigma achter zich te laten en meer collectieve vormen van ecologisch burgerschap te promoten, slaagden beide bewegingen erin om in een korte tijdsspanne veel aanhang te winnen.

Ondanks die gemeenschappelijke punten slaan beide bewegingen echter uiteenlopende wegen in op andere terreinen. In het bijzonder geven ze een verschillende invulling aan het 'wij' waarin ecologisch geëngageerde burgers ingebed zijn. Ik analyseer dat verschil in termen van twee uiteenlopende vormen van ecologisch burgerschap: een communitaristische en een agonistische variant. Cruciaal in dit onderscheid is de mate waarin beide bewegingen een plaats geven aan 'het politieke'. Hierbij is het belangrijk dat Transition Towns zichzelf ziet als een geografisch omschreven gemeenschap, intern harmonieus en extern verbonden met gelijkaardige lokale gemeenschappen. De sterke vorm van lokalisering die Transition Towns daarbij vooropstelt, en verbindt met idealen van sociale verbondenheid, veerkracht en het goede leven, maakt de beweging bijzonder kwetsbaar voor wat onderzoekers de 'lokale valstrik' hebben genoemd, welke ik herconceptualiseer als een postpolitieke valstrik.

Climate Justice Action, langs de andere kant, poogt expliciet het klimaatterrein te herpolitiseren. Opmerkelijk genoeg lijkt echter precies die expliciet politieke houding mensen van de beweging te vervreemden, en daardoor diens capaciteit te beperken om zijn democratische basis te verbreden en een substantiële politieke kracht te worden. Dit is nog sterker het geval in die mate dat Climate Justice Action de klimaatkwestie soms dreigt te overpolitiseren en het hele klimaatterrein beschrijft in termen van bondgenoten en tegenstanders, vrienden en vijanden. In een postpolitieke context kan men geen strijd voeren voor alternatieven zonder eerst postpolitieke representaties zelf te bestrijden. Maar wanneer de vestiging van wij-zij onderscheidingen te expliciet een doel op zich wordt, is het paradoxaal resultaat dat het vermogen van een beweging om een voldoende breed 'wij' op te bouwen beperkt lijkt.

De analyse levert niet alleen inzicht op over de opkomst van nieuwe grassroots milieubewegingen en de wijze waarop ze zich inschrijven in een breder politiek veld, maar draagt ook bij aan een beter begrip van het politieke zelf. In de eerste plaats toon ik doorheen mijn analyse van Transition Towns dat zelfs in de meest gedepolitiseerde discours een symptomatische vorm van het politieke opnieuw opduikt. In zoverre de beweging de nood ervaart om steeds opnieuw te stellen dat we positief moeten denken en moeten samenwerken, is het discours van Transition Towns eigenlijk zelf erg polemisch en conflictueus. Zelfs discours die 'wij versus zij' posities verwerpen, doen daarom op een subtiele wijze aan polemiek, maar dan tegen 'het politieke' als zodanig. De analyse van die terugkeer van het politieke toont niet enkel dat het politieke in laatste instantie niet vermeden of ontkend kan worden, maar levert ook aanknopingspunten voor een herpolitisering van het ecologische veld.

Ten tweede toon ik dat een groot deel van het huidige onderzoek naar klimaatverandering en postpolitiek over het hoofd ziet dat het op het niveau van het discours of de representatie is dat de postpolitieke diagnose gemaakt moet worden. Het is niet de realiteit als zodanig die postpolitiek is, maar de wijze waarop die wordt voorgesteld. Zolang hegemonische discours geen rekenschap geven van de feitelijke diversiteit aan stemmen behoudt de postpolitieke thesis zijn waarde. Bovendien is het belangrijk om te zien dat postpolitiek een kritische notie is, exact in het leven geroepen om die diversiteit te laten zien.

Op die basis argumenteer ik dat postpolitiek een reëel probleem is om klimaatverandering op een effectieve en democratische wijze aan te pakken. De poging om dat te overwinnen is niet enkel een noodzaak maar ook een fundamentele uitdaging.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. POST-POLITICS

In his book *Climate Change and Society*, John Urry (2011, p. 90) calls the diagnosis that our current era would be post-political a 'new orthodoxy'. He particularly targets Erik Swyngedouw's thesis that especially in the field of climate change, a strong post-political tendency prevails. In contrast to this thesis, he argues there actually exists a broad range of different types of climate politics, 'and it is odd to write them all off as only "post-political"' (p. 91). Furthermore, he states that Swyngedouw strangely 'seems unaware just how politics in recent years involves many kinds of environmental movement, protest and discourse, including direct protest such as climate camps' (p. 91). Urry also points to the case of the Transition Towns movement. According to him, this movement is 'significantly political since it challenges the sedimented systems of twentieth-century carbon capitalism' (p. 92). He concludes that a whole spectrum of political approaches to climate change is emerging, many of which go against the stream and involve 'imagining alternatives, developing "great fictions", demonstrating through actions, and building material futures that substantially challenge twentieth-century carbon capitalism' (p. 92). He thus decidedly rejects the post-political thesis, because he thinks it ignores the many manifestations of non-mainstream environmentalism.

Urry's argument is shared (albeit with many nuances) by a number of other scholars of recent grassroots climate movements, in particular Peter North (2010), David Featherstone (2013), Paul Chatterton and Paul Routledge (2013). They all somehow question the post-political thesis, both in general and applied to climate change, and they refer to new grassroots climate movements such as Climate Justice Action and/or Transition Towns to substantiate their claims.

David Featherstone (2013), for instance, considers the emergence of the Climate Justice Action movement a clear sign that it is too easy to diagnose our current era, or current climate change discourses, as generally depoliticised:

> There are […] important tensions in this argument. In common with other work which adopts a post-political turn, it develops a rather limited engagement with the forms of contestation that are being shaped in the current conjuncture. While there are key

> attempts to de-politicise key issues such as climate change, to argue that these are the only ways that such politics is being articulated is reductive. The demonstration at the Bella Centre [an action of the Climate Justice Action movement during the Copenhagen climate summit] mobilised a set of ideas around climate justice which have become increasingly influential (p. 46).

In an article by Featherstone, Chatterton and Routledge (2013), the same argument is repeated: 'climate justice involves an antagonistic framing of climate politics that breaks with attempts to construct climate change as a "post-political" issue' (p. 602).

Peter North (2010), in his turn, rejects the post-political thesis by referring to the case of the Transition Towns movement:

> This paper critiques Swyngedouw's conceptionalisation of the politics of climate change as inevitably reducible to 'post-political' conceptions of sustainability, arguing that climate change and resource crises, including peak oil, are contested over the extent that these crises provide the opportunity to move away from an integrated global economy either to a new regionalism or to a new convivial economy (p. 592).

All these authors rightly point to the fact that a multiplicity of climate discourses exist, and that grassroots movements, such as Transition Towns and Climate Justice Action are consciously going against the stream, trying to develop a counterhegemonic discourse. However, is this enough to conclude that these movements are 'political', that climate change is therefore a politicised terrain and that the post-political thesis is wrong? These are some of the core questions this PhD thesis will address.

1.2. CONVERGENCE SPACES

Interestingly, in some of these approaches, movements such as Transition Towns and Climate Justice Action are merged together in one category of 'new grassroots climate movements' which question dominant discourses, and would thus politicise climate change. Peter North (2011, p. 1583) makes this idea explicit by describing these movements as being part of the same '"convergence spaces" (Routledge 2003) within which organisations, networks and activists act independently, coalesce, act together, then disperse again'. According to him, movements such as Transition Towns and Climate Justice Action share a common analysis of the problem, but in their attempt to tackle it, they choose different strategies. Furthermore, North (2011, p. 1583) argues, '[f]or activists, no one scale or technique […] is privileged. […] The different tendencies and networks that organise in this space do not do so in competition with each other, but in complementary ways'. The idea is that different forms of engagement for the climate can be fully complementary in that they all somehow work together towards a larger goal. The broad 'climate movement' is thus represented as a terrain of complementarity and mutual reinforcement.

As such, this can be an attractive proposition: individuals do not have to ponder too much on how to give shape to their ecological commitment, but they can swiftly switch from one approach to the other, as all are reinforcing each other. Movements

should not compete with each other for hegemony within the broader camp of political forces combating climate change.

However, the question is whether it is really that simple. Are the supposed convergence spaces really spaces that are free from hegemonic and thus political operations through which the adequate responses to climate change are framed? Do different climate movements really contribute to realising the same goal? And how do these movements' participants experience this concretely?

North (2011, p. 1583) states about activists from both movements: 'Individuals argue that they may carry out different forms of social movement activity at different times under the auspices of different discourses or organisations, using different tactics focused on different audiences: but to the same ultimate end'. As I will show, my empirical analysis led to a different conclusion. While a minority of activists are active in or have sympathy for both movements, most see the other movement as very different from, and sometimes even as the opposite of their own. Remarkably, Rob Hopkins, one of the co-founders of Transition Towns, does not seem to be convinced at all that we are dealing with convergence spaces. As he states in his answer to *The Rocky Road to a Real Transition*, a booklet criticising Transition Towns from a more radical, activist and climate justice perspective (TrapeseCollective 2008): 'ultimately its main success is in helping to highlight how, in spite of being motivated by many of the same concerns, the Transition movement and the activist protest movement are, ultimately, distinctly different approaches' (Hopkins 2008).

Interestingly, the result of this framing of both movements in terms of convergence spaces in combination with the rejection of the post-political thesis is paradoxical. Scholars such as North state that there is no problem of post-politics in relation to climate change, but we can ask the question whether talking in terms of convergence spaces is in itself not already a post-political representation of the relation between movements such as Climate Justice Action and Transition Towns. Indeed, if one is convinced that these movements constitute a convergence space, there is no longer a need to think this space in political terms: it is then no longer an arena where important choices have to be made between different strategies, visions and approaches. It is as if there is nothing fundamentally at stake in the choice for either Climate Justice Action or Transition Towns.

1.3. POLEMICS

In this PhD thesis, I will present the results of a study on processes of politicisation and depoliticisation in relation to climate change, focusing in particular on new grassroots climate movements, such as Transition Towns and the Climate Justice Action

movement.[1] As I will argue, there is something of great 'political' importance at stake in the choice between an engagement in one or the other of these two movements, and it relates to the question how we can realise effective and democratic change. Empirical research on these topics did not only lead to the conclusion that the discourses of both movements widely diverge on a more fundamental level, but also that the representation of their mutual relations in terms of convergence spaces is not that innocent. As I will argue, in the choice for either the Transition Towns or the Climate Justice Action movement much more than the question 'how to tackle climate change' is at stake. The problem with the idea of convergence spaces, which I consider to be a post-political representation of how both movements relate to each other, is that it conceals struggles which are present below the surface. Therefore, I will not only challenge this idea of convergence spaces, but also the critique of Urry and others concerning the post-political thesis. As I aim to show, post-politics is a real problem for grassroots climate movements from the perspective of both effectiveness and democracy, and the attempt to overcome it is not only a necessity but also a profound challenge for them.

In this introductory chapter, I will first elaborate more in detail on the question *why* I have adopted the theoretical framework of 'the political'. Subsequently, I will present my research goals and questions as established at the beginning of my research trajectory. As will become clear during the rest of this dissertation, my principal goals and questions have slightly changed over time, as often happens in qualitative research. Yet, it seems useful for this introduction to shortly discuss the initial starting point of my research. In a next section, I will succinctly present my theoretical framework. First, I will elaborate upon post-foundational political theory and political discourse analysis, as these two currents together inform the theoretical framework that I used throughout my research. Second, I will shortly develop why a (post-)political discourse analysis is relevant for the study of grassroots climate movements. Finally, I will give an overview of the different chapters, and shortly discuss their scope and aims.

2. RESEARCH DESIGN

The choice to study Transition Towns and the Climate Justice Action movement from the perspective of the political was not pre-determined, but arose during my research trajectory. It was only on the basis of my empirical research in these movements that

[1] I use depoliticisation and post-politics as synonyms in this dissertation, even if post-politics can be conceived both as a narrower and as a broader concept, depending on which framework is used. I generally follow the work of Chantal Mouffe in this regard. Depoliticisation should thus be interpreted in the specific meaning which is given to it within the framework of post-foundational political theory (see further).

the question of the political in a certain way imposed itself as a crucial issue, both for describing and analysing these movements and for building them in a democratic and effective way. Equally, Urry, North and others formulated their critique of the post-political thesis only a few years after I started my research project, and the need to juxtapose my own analyses to their writings thus only arose at a later stage. Their analyses, which strongly diverge from my own, were an important challenge to refine my own analysis.

To clarify the choices made, in this section I will summarily recount the sequence of events that brought me to my actual research questions and my focus on the problem of the political and post-politics.

2.1. RESEARCH TRAJECTORY

The start of my research project was a pilot study (partly conducted on the basis of my master thesis in sustainable development and human ecology) on individual behaviour change as an engagement to tackle climate change. In that framework, I conducted both a literature review and in-depth interviews with twelve environmentally conscious young adults. The somewhat surprising conclusion was that even people who actively engage in individual behaviour change often do not consider this a very meaningful strategy for tackling climate change, but do it nevertheless because they feel they lack the power to do what they consider really necessary. Interestingly, and in contrast to my initial expectations, almost all respondents who were attempting to change their individual behaviour considered collective action a more meaningful strategy. One of the main reasons they did not put this into practice was that they felt no meaningful initiatives existed which could provide the framework for such an engagement, and they did not know how to set them up themselves. Moreover, by changing their individual behaviour, they argued, they at least had the feeling of not being guilty for making the situation worse.

In the period following this pilot study, however, two new grassroots climate movements were launched in Flanders which had the potential to fill this void, namely the Transition Towns movement, which emerged in September 2008, and the Climate Justice Action movement, which was created in December 2008. Interestingly, some of the respondents of my initial study became actively involved in Transition Towns or Climate Justice Action, and a single one in both. Consequently, I started studying these new forms of collective action, focusing in particular on people's motivations for undertaking this engagement. The focus of my PhD research thus emerged through a rather empirical investigation of new environmental movements, partly inspired by the environmental psychological and educational perspectives which I had adopted during my pilot study. At that stage, I did not yet dispose of a fully specified theoretical framework with the help of which I could analyse these newly arising movements. Yet, the choice was already made to adopt the methodology of activist/action research

(more on this in chapter 2), and I started gathering data through participant observation, document analysis and in-depth interviews.

More specifically, I first became involved in Transition Towns in September 2008, when the movement was officially launched in Flanders with a two-day introductory course. During the first weeks of its existence, it was not entirely sure yet whether this movement would be the object of my study, but the idea that this was a possibility was present from the start. In any case, I wanted to know more about this movement to which so many people felt attracted. It was the quite remarkable success of the movement, in combination with its peculiar discourse, which informed my decision to study Transition Towns in more detail. What attracted me in the movement was its focus on *collective* instead of *individual* action, its choice for building alternatives *from below*, and its belief in the power of people to realise substantial change. All of these were ideas which, at that moment, were quite absent in the Flemish environmental sphere, which was strongly influenced by technocratic, managerial and individualising approaches. Furthermore, in my understanding at the time, this focus could be considered as a response to and a remedy for the shortcomings of the mainstream paradigm of individual behaviour change, which I had disclosed in my pilot study. However, what struck me at the same time, in a less positive way, was Transition Towns' urge to leave behind every 'we against them' discourse, and its conviction that we especially need a psychological account of change. Transition Towns strongly believed in the need to 'transcend' the 'paradigm of struggle', and argued we should rather look to ourselves and engage in a dialogue with our traditional opponents. Its discourse strongly focused on values such as cooperation, complementarity and inclusion. Since Transition Towns presented quite a remarkable and unique combination of ideas and perspectives, my initial questions concerned the origins or foundations of these ideas, the extent to which they were shared and spread, and the question to what extent they could indeed contribute to successfully building a movement against climate change.

Yet, the more I became involved in the movement, the more I started to feel a certain unease with some of the ideas that the movement defended so strongly. In particular, the rejection and especially the psychologisation of more oppositional strategies, the embrace of the local as intrinsically better, and the fact that more divisive notions such as class, race and gender were dismissed outright made me feel increasingly uncomfortable. I was not alone in this. While the movement attracted many people in its first years, it also lost many of its most enthusiastic militants. It appeared there was not much space for diverging voices. Rather than engaging in contradictory discussion or debate, people were told they had to 'transcend' more conflictual attitudes, as the latter would impede the all-round collaboration that was considered so crucial in the light of climate change. At the same time, however, very particular ideas on the root causes of climate change and related visions on alternatives were put forward, and in some people's experience sometimes even imposed without real discussion. Especially the combination of an 'all together in the

same boat' discourse with the psychologisation of diverging opinions, suggesting that the latter display a kind of immaturity or testify to the presence of psychological 'defences' against Transition Towns' views, made it very difficult to go against the stream *within* the movement. These observations and experiences led me to search for theories which could help me to grasp what was exactly at stake in this remarkable discourse of Transition Towns. After having explored a number of theoretical trajectories, including the work of Michel Foucault (see also e.g., Darier 1999, 1994, Rutherford 2007, Wagler 2009) and Antonio Gramsci (1971, see also Ekers et al. 2009, Mann 2009), I arrived at post-foundational theories of the 'political' (e.g., Mouffe 2006, Rancière 1998, Žižek 2000). Put very simply, the problem with Transition Towns seemed to be that there was almost no space for 'the political'. The notion of 'post-politics' which these theories develop appeared to be very suitable to analyse discourses which conceal or deny the reality of power, conflict and division by representing society one-sidedly in harmonious and cooperative terms. As Erik Swyngedouw (2007, 2010a, 2013) shows, hegemonic discourses on climate change are very often characterised by such post-political tendencies. Climate change is then framed as a question which should unite us all, enabling all-round cooperation against CO_2. Invoking a sense of urgency, we would no longer have the time for outworn divisions and conflicts 'from the past'. The result is a discourse that conceals or represses the political dimension of social relations and activities. Interestingly, such post-political tendencies not only seemed to be present in hegemonic climate discourses, but also in counterhegemonic discourses, e.g. in the discourse of Transition Towns.

In the meantime, while I was struggling to find a way to deal with Transition Towns both in practice and in theory, another grassroots movement was set up in Belgium in December 2008. It would later join the international Climate Justice Action network, and name itself accordingly. Its focus was on building an international movement for climate justice, it explicitly advocated system change, and tried to realise its goals through direct action. Concretely, the Belgian wing of the movement set up several climate camps, organised a number of actions, and engaged in the mobilisation towards the climate summit in Copenhagen in 2009. Climate Justice Action's discourse was strikingly different from Transition Towns'. Notions such as struggle, conflict and system change were central to it. The reference to issues such as class, race and gender seemed evident. Instead of focusing on the local, Climate Justice Action was strongly internationally oriented. While Transition Towns rejected a 'we against them' discourse, for Climate Justice Action it seemed to be more than evident that there is a 'we' and a 'them', and the goal of the movement was even to form a 'we' that was strong enough to tackle 'them'. Opposition was key.

While both Transition Towns and the Climate Justice Action movement explicitly rejected hegemonic climate discourses and developed counter-hegemonic approaches, the Climate Justice Action movement nevertheless appeared to be almost the opposite of Transition Towns in certain respects. It therefore seemed more than

interesting to take Climate Justice Action as a second case study, as this would enable a comparative approach. More in particular, in view of the theories I just discovered, the movement seemed to be much more politicised. And was it not politicisation that is needed in order to arrive at democratic and effective change, at least if we follow the political theories of Mouffe, Žižek and Rancière?

As I will explain throughout this dissertation, however, the answer turned out not to be that straightforward. It soon became clear that Climate Justice Action had its difficulties too. Many people apparently could not recognise their own concerns in the movement's discourse, and therefore seemed not to feel represented or heard by it. Interestingly, this was often related to its strongly politicised discourse. The result was a dilemma: on the one hand, politicisation seems key to fighting climate change in an effective and democratic way, while on the other hand, a politicised discourse risks to obtain insufficiently broad support and thus also to remain ineffective. Climate Justice Action seemed to be much stronger in stating what it was opposed to than in formulating an alternative. To the extent that imagining a vision on an alternative is a crucial element of repoliticisation (Mouffe 2002b), it seemed as if Climate Justice Action was also not able to fully move beyond post-politics (more on this in chapter 6). Processes of (de)politicisation appeared to be profoundly ambivalent, which made it impossible to come up with easy or straightforward diagnoses and conclusions.

The following questions became increasingly important. How do new grassroots climate movements such as Transition Towns and Climate Justice Action deal with 'the political'? To what extent do they embody, reinforce or counter post-political tendencies? What is the effect of this on their capacity to realise effective and democratic change? On the one hand, I aimed to understand the emergence and development of new grassroots climate movements on the basis of the theoretical framework of the political as elaborated by post-foundational scholarship in political theory. On the other hand, I wanted to contribute to refining and operationalising theories of the political through my empirical work.

2.2. Research questions and goals

These questions were subsequently reformulated into the following research goals: to study processes of politicisation and depoliticisation as they appear in the discourses of government and policy bodies, corporations, NGOs and, especially, grassroots climate movements in their current dealings with climate change, and to contribute to the elaboration of theories of 'the (post-)political' on the basis of this empirical analysis.

The research was intended to take place on three levels:

(1) The predominant discourses in dealing with climate change as proposed, framed and implemented by government and policy bodies, corporations and mainstream NGOs.
(2) The discourses of new, counter-hegemonic grassroots climate movements (concretely, Transition Towns and the Climate Justice Action movement).
(3) The discourses of concerned citizens who are or who are not involved in these new movements.

The first level provided the background for my research, as my actual focus was on the third and, especially, on the second level.

The research questions were:

- How and why do processes of politicisation and depoliticisation emerge in the discourses of both the main actors (government and policy bodies, corporations, NGOs …), concerned citizens, and new grassroots climate movements (more specifically, Transition Towns and the Climate Justice Action movement)?
- How and why do these processes of politicisation and depoliticisation influence actors' potential to tackle climate change in a democratic and effective way?
- What does the study of processes of politicisation and depoliticisation in relation to climate change learn us about the (post-)political?

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1. THEORISING THE POLITICAL

In order to show what is precisely at stake in the discussion on post-politics or depoliticisation, I will shortly elaborate in this section on some of the basic tenets of post-foundational political theory, principally developed by Chantal Mouffe (2000, 2002a, 2006), Ernesto Laclau (1990, 1996), Slavoj Žižek (2000, 2010) and Jacques Rancière (1998, 2001, 2006). These political theories have been introduced in the field of environmental studies by Erik Swyngedouw (2007, 2009, 2010a, 2010b, 2013), and later also by Amanda Machin (2013), Gert Goeminne (2010, 2012), Pieter Maeseele (2015) and others. In combination with political discourse theory, developed by scholars such as Steven Griggs, David Howarth, Aletta Norval and Yannis Stavrakakis (Griggs and Howarth 2004, Howarth 2000, Howarth et al. 2000, Stavrakakis 1997), and grounded in the work of Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau (2001), this current informs the theoretical framework that I used throughout my research.

As the concept of post-politics is being increasingly questioned over the last few years, including by critical scholars (Chatterton et al. 2013, Featherstone 2013, Larner 2014, McCarthy 2013, North 2010, Urry 2011), it is important to delineate it very precisely. To start with, it is important to heed an essential distinction often drawn between 'politics' and 'the political' (Marchart 2007, Mouffe 2006, Rancière 1998, Žižek 2000). As will become clear, the debate about the meaning of the (post-)political is quite sophisticated and complex, and different scholars define these notions differently. For many of them, however, 'politics' refers to the sphere of the institutions such as the parliament or voting. This is also what is usually understood by the term 'politics'. 'The political', in contrast, refers to an order of discourse, a kind of logic of acting and thinking, which recognises the reality of power, dissensus and decision and which gives a place to conflict and debate on fundamentally different ways to conceive of current and future society. In contrast, a discourse can be said to be post-political when it (1) misrecognises the constructed and therefore contingent nature of the social, (2) conceals that each such construction entails certain exclusions and therefore generates conflicts or antagonisms, and (3) obfuscates that the construction of the social inevitably entails acts of power. In other words, the discursive concealment of contingency, conflict and power is constitutive of post-politics.

Although the precise philosophical underpinnings of these different theories are less relevant for my research project, it is important to underline some of the key features of these theories. I will start with the work of Laclau and Mouffe (2001) since that forms the principal link between theories of the political and political discourse analysis. Indeed, Laclau and Mouffe have developed an important discourse-theoretical framework which has allowed them not only to reframe a number of debates on emancipatory politics and democracy (thereby laying the basis of what would develop into political discourse theory (Howarth 2000, Howarth et al. 2000)), but which also provides the groundwork for Mouffe's (2006) later project to rethink the notion of the political as such. To start with the first, according to Laclau and Mouffe, social objectivity is constituted through discourse. Discourse, in other words, has a larger meaning here than in studies which merely consider it as a set of ideas or beliefs shared by a group of people (Howarth and Stavrakakis, 2000). Discourse is constitutive of the social. Society is always composed of discourses, which are products of political hegemonies and which inevitably produce certain exclusions on the basis of which antagonisms can arise. Therefore, the construction of society through discourse has an irretrievable political dimension. On the basis of their reconstruction of the theory of hegemony, Mouffe and Laclau thus uncover the operation of power at the heart of the social: there is no social relation which is not the product of power. In this sense, Laclau and Mouffe affirm 'the primacy of politics in their social ontology' (Howarth 2000, p. 104, see also Howarth et al. 2000). As Howarth and Stavrakakis (2000) summarise:

> We take discourse or discourses to refer to systems of meaningful practices that form the identities of subjects and objects. […] discourses are concrete systems of social relations and practices that are intrinsically *political*, as their formation is an act of radical institution, which involves the construction of antagonisms and the drawing of political frontiers between 'insiders' and 'outsiders'. In addition, therefore, they always involve the exercise of *power*, as their constitution involves the exclusion of certain possibilities and a consequent structuring of the relations between different social agents. Moreover, discourses are *contingent* and *historical* constructions, which are always vulnerable to those political forces excluded in their production, as well as the dislocatory effects of events beyond their control (p. 3-4).

Discourse theory is especially important to the extent that it is on the level of ideas or representations (discourses) that 'the political' is affirmed or concealed through post-politics. In other words, while all social relations are discursively constructed, and while this always entails the exercise of power, the specific discourses involved can remain blind to their own political dimension or actively conceal it. In that case, they are depoliticised or post-political. A democratic and politicised discourse, in contrast, is one which fully recognises that it is political.

As each hegemonic constitution of the social generates certain exclusions, these can become the inscription points for forms of antagonism. According to Mouffe's later work (2002b, 2005, 2006), in the last instance, the political is about recognising the constitutive reality of antagonism. This recognition is crucial from a democratic point of view: it makes it possible to turn antagonism into agonism, a relation between adversaries who fight each other while recognising the legitimacy of each other's position. Depoliticisation, in contrast, occurs when the exercise of hegemonic power and the antagonisms that result from it are covered up. If that happens, Mouffe argues, the conflict threatens to become worse and unmanageable: it then degenerates into a fight between enemies, who cannot but try to destroy each other.

Jacques Rancière's (1998, 2006) approach to politics is quite different, although some basic intuitions are similar to Mouffe's. He distinguishes between 'politics' and 'police', arguing that political action is about making something visible that was previously invisible, or making certain unheard voices hearable, in opposition to a (post-political, in my words) managerial 'police' logic which suggests there is nothing to see or hear at all and which aims to maintain what already exists. As I will elaborate further in chapter 6, a political act, according to Rancière, always happens under the assumption of the equality of each and everyone. By acting as if one is equal to another, the normal (hierarchical) order of things is disturbed, and as a result, the inevitably inegalitarian police order appears as fundamentally contingent. In other words, by acting as if one is equal to others, one realises certain effects in terms of what is visible or hearable. This moment of subversion of the existing order is the crucial hallmark of political action, according to Rancière.

Even though political action always springs from a particular grief or demand, due to its egalitarian assumption it always has a universal dimension, Rancière argues.

In a somewhat similar fashion, Laclau and Mouffe have argued that politicisation occurs when a series of demands or griefs are equivalentially inscribed in a counterhegemonic discourse, through which one demand comes to stand for the whole and acquires a universalising thrust (Mouffe and Laclau 2001). The signifier that expresses this demand becomes the nodal point in a discourse and becomes tendentially empty to the extent that it comes to stand for a whole series of equivalential demands.

Relying on both Rancière and Laclau and Mouffe, Slavoj Žižek has played an important role in developing and popularising the notion of post-politics. In *The Ticklish Subject*, he writes:

> In post-politics, the conflict of global ideological visions embodied in different parties which compete for power is replaced by the collaboration of enlightened technocrats (economists, public opinion specialists…) and liberal multiculturalists; via the process of negotiation of interests, a compromise is reached in the guise of a more or less universal consensus. Post-politics thus emphasises the need to leave old ideological divisions behind and confront new issues, armed with the necessary expert knowledge and free deliberation […] (Žižek 2000, p. 198).

The focus on the need to reach consensus and a good dose of technocracy are thus the hallmarks of post-politics. Political struggle, in contrast is 'not a rational debate between multiple interests, but the struggle for one's voice to be heard and recognised as the voice of a legitimate partner' (Žižek 2000, p. 188). As is the case with Rancière and, to a lesser extent, Mouffe, the political for Žižek is about acknowledging the inevitability of exclusion and thus about remaining open to the possible contestation of exclusion. Politicisation, moreover, always implies 'a singular which appears as standing for the Universal, destabilising the "natural" functional order of relations in the social body' (Žižek 2000, p. 188). Political action, in other words, opens a perspective on the universal and exhibits the contingency of each social order.

I will come back to these different conceptualisations of the political in a number of chapters which follow. It will then become clearer what politics and post-politics precisely mean for these scholars and what we can say from this perspective about new grassroots climate movements. At this stage, it is important to stress a few key elements. First, a red thread running through the different conceptualisations of the political is the focus on discourse (or in the case of Rancière, on the order of the 'sensible'). In other words, the political is of a discursive nature: it entails a discourse that acknowledges conflict, power and exclusion, and makes them visible.

Second, the political theorists mentioned also share the idea that the recognition of the 'political' is crucial for democracy. Žižek (2000) states it in a very straightforward way: 'politics and democracy are synonymous: the basic aim of antidemocratic politics always and by definition is and was depoliticisation' (p. 188). The central idea is that democracy requires a recognition and a making visible (and contestable) of the power that organises society and the exclusions or conflicts that

this can generate. A society is democratic when it recognises that it lacks an ultimate foundation, but remains characterised by contingency (Marchart 2007). As Mouffe (2002a) argues: 'Instead of trying to erase the traces of power and exclusion, democratic politics requires us to bring them to the fore, to make them visible so that they can enter the terrain of contestation' (p. 33-34). Post-politics or depoliticisation is the opposite of democracy, since it operates through the concealment or misrecognition of power and conflict.

All these approaches take part in what has been called 'post-foundational political theory' (Marchart 2007). The different authors mentioned all somehow suggest that society is deeply political, in the sense that it has no *ultimate* foundation, but is the provisional and contingent result of political decisions and power struggles. However, this political foundation of society (which, given its instability and contingency, is not really a foundation in the strict sense of the term) can be rendered invisible by depoliticised discourses. Society is then represented as if it had an ultimate foundation, for example in 'human nature' (its competitive character, or its survival instinct and related short-termism). Such representation of society closes off the possibility to contest and change its order. It takes away the symbolic conditions of possibility of conflict and contestation, which, as a result, are neutralised. Therefore, post-political or depoliticised representations of society are far from innocent, post-foundational theorists argue. Indeed, they render invisible that society is a contingent construction, that it could have been different, and that there should therefore be scope for questioning currently existing social arrangements. This is fundamentally what democracy is about: maintaining an openness for society to be put into question, which can happen through forms of conflict, debate or resistance.

As the political involves understanding social reality in terms of power, plurality, disagreement and potential exclusion, it is also crucial for maintaining an openness for change as such. This is something which critics of the post-political thesis sometimes fail to acknowledge. As we will see, they turn the post-political thesis on its head: they suggest the focus on post-politics makes resistance invisible, while creating an openness for resistance is precisely what the post-politics critique is all about.

3.2. GRASSROOTS CLIMATE MOVEMENTS RECONSIDERED

Why would it be of particular importance to approach new grassroots climate movements from this specific point of view of political discourse theory and the critique of post-politics? There are several reasons for this. First and foremost, the relevance of 'the political' is related to its implications for democracy and effectiveness. The relation between the political and democracy has already been addressed above. The issue of effectiveness is less prevalent in the discussion on climate change and the political. However, tackling climate change will require a fundamental rethinking and reconstruction of basic parameters of society. In so far as

the climate crisis is not in the first place a crisis of nature, but a crisis of society and of how it relates to its ecological conditions (Foster et al., 2010), real solutions will presuppose profound social change. Crucial is therefore our capacity to grasp its root causes, and our ability to recognise the contingency of societal structures and the power relations underpinning them. Moreover, as Mouffe and Laclau (2001) argue, social change is inevitably a process which entails the exercise of power, and therefore often generates conflicts and opposition. It also inevitably generates exclusions: each choice that is made in a transition process excludes others.

Second, political discourse theory also allows us to investigate the different layers a discourse is made up of, the origins of its respective elements, and the meaningful effects of their rearticulation in a novel discourse. Each social movement has a project, and it will articulate this project by weaving together 'different strands of discourse in an effort to dominate or organise a field of meaning so as to fix the identities of objects and practices in a particular way' (Howarth and Stavrakakis 2000, p. 3). One of my aims will be to analyse Transition Towns and Climate Justice Action in terms of the discursive elements they bring together and the nodal points around which their respective discourses are woven. Of crucial importance is how the meaning of these signifiers is articulated and transformed through their integration into a new, more or less coherent discourse. At the same time, however, the resulting discourse still bears traces of the origins of its constituent elements in other discourses. This is highly relevant for understanding the myriad of meanings which are embedded within every discourse, but are not always that easily identifiable. The analysis of these meanings can help to explain what is at stake in particular choices made by movements.

Third, the focus on the political is important because initiating a process of change usually requires questioning the status quo, going against the stream, overcoming prevailing commonsensical opinions. It presupposes the creation of a space where certain questions can be asked, and new possibilities can be created. It presupposes, in other words, that voices that were previously muted, can become heard, and new ideas can pop up. The ideal space where this can happen, according to the previously mentioned political theorists, is one which is represented in political terms: a space of potential conflict, plurality, antagonism and opposition. In other words, realising change requires making visible the very need for change, the capacity of certain actors (not) to realise it, the possible strategies that can be used, and the imaginations that can underpin alternative practices.

4. OVERVIEW OF THE DOCTORAL THESIS

The composition of this PhD thesis expresses two trajectories. On the one hand, it follows the logic of the different steps my research process has gone through, starting with my pilot study on individual behaviour change, then engaging in activist research

in two grassroots climate movements, discovering the problem of the political, developing a comparative analysis of the two movements from the point of view of the political and post-politics, and finally ending with some theoretical reflections concerning our current post-political predicament and the challenge of repoliticisation. On the other hand, in a certain way it also expresses the trajectory a number of my respondents have followed. Several of them were initially especially involved in individual behaviour change, but soon experienced the limits of this commitment, and therefore started to engage in one of the new grassroots climate movements that arose in Flanders at the time. Moreover, the sequence of chapters also logically orders the main results of my research (from broad to specific, from empirical to theoretical, from the individual to the collective level, from the level of specific social movements to the socio-historical context setting the stage for hegemonic discourses on climate change) and expresses the shift in theoretical references that have informed my analyses. For example, while chapter 3 lacks any reference to theories of the political, but is rather informed by critical environmental education studies and by the work of Gramsci and Foucault, it is only subsequently that the issue of post-politics pops up.

As will become clear in what follows, I opted, in consultation with my supervisor, for a PhD mainly based on articles. This means that almost all the chapters have been submitted for publication to academic journals, and most of them are published at the moment. Next to those published chapters, I wrote this introduction, a methodological chapter, a conclusion, and an epilogue, in order to at least partly meet the requirements of a monograph.

Concretely, I begin this PhD thesis with a methodological chapter (Chapter 2: *Activist research: the personal and the political*), which provides a descriptive and theoretical account of the research process and its methodological underpinnings, focusing in particular on activist research, which I reflect on from the perspective of my personal experiences on the one hand, and on the basis of theories of the political, on the other.

Subsequently, I present the main results of my PhD research. The third chapter consists of a presentation of the findings of my pilot study concerning individual behaviour change: *Beyond individual behaviour change. The role of power, knowledge and strategy in tackling climate change.* As previously stated, this research led to the conclusion that people who engage in individual behaviour change do not always consider this a meaningful or effective strategy for tackling climate change. Sometimes, they rather advocate collective action, but do not see many potential avenues for this.

This pilot study formed the basis for my research in Transition Towns and the Climate Justice Action movement, both of which promote collective action and seemed to provide an answer to the shortcomings of the mainstream paradigm of individual behaviour change. The first insights I developed as a result of this research were situated on three terrains: (1) the difference between sustainable consumption

(as an important part of individual behaviour change) and ecological citizenship, (2) the comparison between several forms of collective action (put forward by Transition Towns and Climate Justice Action respectively), and (3) the crucial role of processes of politicisation and depoliticisation in this context. These findings are discussed in chapter 4: *Ecological citizenship and democracy: communitarian versus agonistic change*. This chapter actually makes the step 'beyond individual behaviour change', in the direction of ecological citizenship. It explores the different shapes the latter can acquire, and how these are related to what in the meantime had become a key subject of my PhD research, namely the question of (de)politicisation.

Subsequently, I decided to deepen this question of politicisation and depoliticisation in each of the movements, by focusing on one element that I considered central to each of them. With regard to Transition Towns, this was the issue of localisation, while for Climate Justice Action, I focused on the imagination of future alternatives. It should be noticed that these two themes (localisation and the imagination of future alternatives) are not situated on the same level. Whereas for Transition Towns, I chose a theme that belonged to the core of the movement's project, for Climate Justice Action I rather focused on a subject which was significant in its absence, as its vision on alternatives remains rather undeveloped. This led to the next two chapters: chapter 5: *Politicising the local: the case of the Transition Towns movement in Flanders (Belgium)*, and chapter 6: *Climate change and post-politics: Repoliticising the present by imagining the future?*

At a later stage in my research, I started to reflect back upon the theory, on the basis of my empirical investigations. I increasingly addressed the question what could be inferred from my analyses of Climate Justice Action and Transition Towns with regard to theorising the political and post-politics, both in relation to ecological issues, and more in general. The evident question is whether or not climate change is indeed depoliticised, and why this is (not) the case. Less evident is the question how to move beyond post-politics once we have arrived at this diagnosis. If post-politics is indeed an obstacle for tackling the worsening ecological crisis in an effective and democratic way, we cannot avoid the question how to repoliticise. As I will argue in the seventh chapter, even the most post-political discourse exhibits a subtle polemic, and this can become the starting point for repoliticisation. Furthermore, the features that make ecological questions so vulnerable for depoliticisation could also provide the basis for turning them into areas of politicisation *par excellence* (see the chapter *Searching for 'the political' in environmental politics*).

My PhD ends with a concluding chapter and an epilogue. The conclusion constitutes an attempt 'to close the circle', both with regard to the empirical subject of my study and regarding the theoretical framework that I adopted. More in particular, in this chapter I come back to the question of convergence spaces and the contestation which recently arose with regard to the adoption of theories on the political in the field of environmental studies. I thus situate my own findings in the most recent debates on this topic, and formulate some conclusions and suggestions

for future research trajectories. In the epilogue, which constitutes the 'end' of my PhD, I look back on the cases considered. More in particular, I consider the 'end' of both movements. Indeed, while Transition Towns and Climate Justice Action arose in Belgium at the moment when I started my PhD research, Climate Justice Action disintegrated a few years later, and Transition Towns, while still existent, lost much of its original impetus. My PhD would not have been complete without a reflection about the current state of both movements.

As I already stated, most of these chapters were written as articles that were submitted to peer-reviewed journals. As a result, a number of arguments, or variants of them, recur in different chapters. Partly, this is due to the need to introduce my basic problematic of post-politics and my methodology in these different texts. Partly, however, this is the unintended result of the peer review process, several reviewers asking me to elaborate upon issues which had been developed in other papers, with a limited amount of repetition as a result.

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CHAPTER 2

ACTIVIST RESEARCH:

THE PERSONAL AND THE POLITICAL

If I had tried to enter
I may have never been invited
If I had seen the cracks
I may have fallen in
If I had seen your tears
I may not have cried with you
If I had strained to hear
I may not have heard your voices
If I had sought the one true story
I may have never known
If I had watched your struggle from a distance
I may have never shared your pain
Reflective prose, Researcher's Personal Journal, September 1994 in Karen Malone (2006)

1. INTRODUCTION

My research project combined a theoretical exploration of the problem of (de)politicisation with qualitative research methods, the confrontation between which allowed me to assess processes of (de)politicisation on the basis of the actual experiences and discourses of existing movements. The aim of this chapter is to explain my main methodological choices, and to discuss more in detail the 'action' aspect of my project.

My research was conducted within the paradigm of critical social research – more specifically, activist research. Although in the chapters that follow, I will particularly make use of empirical data drawn from the interviews I conducted, it needs to be underlined that my activist involvement played a crucial role in developing many of the ideas that underpin these chapters. Often, preliminary insights on the basis of participant observation were subsequently explored through the interviews. Moreover, without being embedded in the movements as an activist researcher, these

interviews would never have been possible in the first place, neither would they have been as to the point as they were, or would I have had all relevant background information to interpret them properly. In this chapter, therefore, I will not merely set out my methodological framework, but I will especially also provide an account of my experience as an activist researcher.

To start with, I will present some of the underpinnings of activist research. For people who are familiar with qualitative research, some of these points are well known, but due to their importance for the methodological framework I adopted, I will shortly rehearse them here. First, I will argue that social research cannot evade the question of the political. Subsequently, I will present an argumentation in favour of activist research, discuss the rationales which led to the development of this approach, and how scholars mostly conceive of the place of the political within it. As I will argue, more than is the case in other research streams, activist researchers take the political very seriously, and this is one of their main merits. However, as I will argue further in the chapter, this position at the same time generates several challenges for conducting research in a credible way. However, before I delve into these discussions, in a third section I will first shortly present my research design which is constituted as a qualitative embedded multiple case study. Furthermore, I will explain the focus on interviews and the choice for discourse analysis. After this, I will, in a fourth section, turn back to the question of activist research and address some of the difficulties I experienced in practice. I will do this by bringing three short stories which give insight into the fascinating but also complicated nature of activist research. These experiences form the basis of a number of theoretical reflections which I will develop in the fifth section. Finally, I will formulate some lessons learned and suggestions for future research. [1]

2. THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

2.1. RESEARCH AND POLITICS

Writing a dissertation on processes of politicisation and depoliticisation, it is difficult to avoid addressing the topic of the political in the chapter on methodology. If one claims that the political is constitutive for the social, it surely also has pertinence for social research. This is all the more important as the idea(l) of the 'objective', neutral researcher, detached from politics, is still how academics are usually portrayed today (Denzin and Lincoln 2005, Hale 2008, Reason and Bradbury 2008). The idea is that research is, or should (try to) be, value-free and objective. However, this (self-)presentation of academics is not innocent.

[1] Note that this chapter does not describe the methodology of the pilot study, for this I refer to chapter 3.

I want to raise three points in this respect, which are relevant in the context of my dissertation. First, the observation of relations between data and theory are inevitably shaped by paradigms, the latter being understood as 'the net that contains the researcher's epistemological, ontological, and methodological premises' (Denzin and Lincoln 2005, p. 22). As basic worldviews, paradigms are made up of beliefs about the nature of reality and the ways in which we create knowledge (Esterberg 2002). Second, what is considered objective or neutral is often a reflection of the ideas, paradigms or discourses that are hegemonic in a certain period. As a result, some research findings or questions are considered as normal or neutral, whereas others are more often depicted as politically inspired or ideological. Third, research results can be used to defend certain political positions and delegitimise others.

The combination of the last two statements leads to a paradox: the more research is presented as neutral, the easier it becomes to use it in order to justify particular hegemonic positions. Inevitably, the underlying political stakes are then misrecognised. In the words of Charles Hale (2008, p. 2): 'all knowledge claims are produced in a political context; notions of objectivity that ignore or deny these facilitating conditions take on a de facto political positioning of their own, made more blatant and unavoidable by the very disavowal'. Democratic values are at stake here: if the underlying issues are made invisible, they are also made uncontestable, and as I will argue at length throughout this dissertation, this constitutes a threat to democracy. The point is that by presenting one's own position as 'objective', underlying values or conflicts are neutralised from the beginning, and political discussion and opposition is foreclosed. Slavoj Žižek (1994) considers this the masterstroke of ideology. The dominant ideology is the one that succeeds in presenting itself as the opposite of ideology: as natural, logical, or evident, or as so-called neutral science or technique.

As a reaction to this, alternative research paradigms have emerged, which question the false dichotomy between social research and society (Denzin and Lincoln 2005, Reason and Bradbury 2008). The premise is that we are unavoidably social and political beings and we cannot separate these features of ourselves while studying social phenomena (Valentine 2005). What we see is always filtered: 'questions of gender, class, race, nationality, politics, history, and experience shape our research and our interpretations of the world, however much we are supposed to deny it' (Schoenberger 1992, p. 218, see also Valentine 2005, p. 113). In social research, this is even more the case than in other research domains, such as physics or medicine, because 'in social research, humans are the researchers as well as the objects of study, which means that pure objectivity is impossible' (Esterberg 2002, p. 11). As Erika Schoenberger (1992, p. 218) argues: '[t]he task, then, is not to do away with these things, but to know them and learn from them.'

This latter argument points to the importance of the recognition of one's own positionality and personality (Schuermans 2013, Valentine 2005). If objectivity or neutrality is an impossible achievement in social research, what becomes crucial is to

be conscious about one's own positions, to be reflexive on how this can influence the research findings, and to be open and explicit about this towards the research community. In other words, the focus moves from 'objectivity' towards 'confirmability' (Baxter and Eyles 1997, Lincoln and Guba 1985, Reid and Gough 2000). However, even though reflexivity is crucial, the problem is not entirely solved in this way. Can one really know and be transparent about all the particularities of one's own social and political background and personality? Is knowledge sufficient to 'free' oneself from, or transcend, all one's biases, prejudices, and values? The risk is that one implicitly pursues a kind of 'neutralised' position again, but this time via the detour of reflexivity.

Chantal Mouffe's (2006) statement that there is no 'beyond hegemony' is arguably also valid for social research. Mouffe suggests it is impossible to entirely step out of a hegemonic framework in order to completely identify this framework and take a distance from it. The implication seems to be that complete transparency is never possible, which does not mean that one should not *strive* to be as reflexive as possible. But on the moment that one pretends or claims that one can overcome human situatedness, one falls in the trap of objectivism again (see also Rose, 1997).

2.2. TOWARDS ACTIVIST RESEARCH

Interestingly, a number of scholars argue that researchers must not only be aware of and open about their own positions but must also embrace a set of specific, carefully considered political positions and commitments (Esterberg 2002, Reason and Bradbury 2008). They argue that because social research is never neutral and because it can be (ab)used in favour of particular hegemonic positions, it is not only a question of sincerity to be open and explicit about one's own position. It is also the task of researchers to produce that kind of knowledge that can be useful in the struggle for emancipatory social change. On the basis of this conviction, a whole field of critical scholarship has emerged that tries to intellectually grasp oppressive social realities and by developing a better understanding of them, also aims to contribute to overcoming them.

But is producing insight enough? Is it enough to study oppressive realities from behind one's desk, contributing to the development of emancipatory knowledge that is published in academic journals? Or should researchers move beyond the confines of the university and also contribute to change in other ways? In this context, Peter Walker (2007, p. 365) expresses his concerns that even critical research

> remains largely focused inward, confined to academic publications that are unavailable or unintelligible to those who might benefit from the research, and restricted to conferences and seminars attended almost exclusively by like-minded, privileged academic elites who do not themselves directly experience the hunger, disease, poverty, and environmental hazards and degradation that they study, write, and speak about.

As he aptly summarises: 'no matter how brilliant, a light in a sealed box does not illuminate. And it consumes resources, energy, and space in the process', that could be used otherwise (Walker 2007, p. 365).

On the basis of such considerations, a number of scholars emphasises the importance of communicating research results beyond the confines of academic publications, to the people scholars are talking about, and more generally to anyone who might take an interest in these results. To the extent that people gain knowledge about the conditions affecting their lives and world, they will also gain the power to change these, the argument goes (Esterberg 2002, Reason and Bradbury 2008).

However, some take a step further and argue that researchers should not merely give insights from an outsider's perspective, but also become part of action processes themselves. As the Autonomous Geographies Collective (2010, p. 247) critically notices, 'too many academics are happy to build their careers on the backs of researching the oppressed, "but, paradoxically, they rarely join with them in their 'struggle'" (Kitchen and Hubbard 1999, p. 196)'. In the words of Karen Malone (2006, p. 377): 'simply talking about or writing about change is a poor substitute for researchers actively working for change'. Moreover, it is argued, one can never obtain real insight into issues related to social change without being part of these processes themselves (Reason and Bradbury 2008). One's positionality, for example being part of particular social groups, then becomes a benefit instead of a burden, as it helps to 'develop a deep, multifaceted, and complex understanding of the topic under study' (Hale 2008, p. 20). The idea is that as an 'outsider' you can never completely experience, and thus understand, the different layers of the issues at stake.

These perspectives have especially been embraced by scholars who conceive themselves as action researchers, scholar activists, activist researchers or activist scholars. Even if these different identifications seem to have a slightly different focus, the lines of demarcation between them are not always very sharp. Generally speaking, one could state that action research is based on a particular methodological protocol in which research questions, goals and steps are defined together with a particular social community, which actively takes part in the research and whose meetings are for a big part centred around this common research endeavour (Reason 2006, Reason and Bradbury 2008). The other streams rather start from an engagement with and within a particular political group or goal, but the participants are not by definition active co-researchers (e.g., Chatterton 2008, Autonomous Geographies Collective 2010, Hale 2008, Mason 2013, Piven 2010).

Although I took inspiration from all these streams at the start of my research, retrospectively I observed that my own approach corresponded most closely with the approach of activist research. However, before explaining how I engaged practically and theoretically with the issues at stake, I will first present my research design.

3. RESEARCH DESIGN

3.1. A QUALITATIVE EMBEDDED MULTIPLE CASE STUDY

My initial research aim was to study the rise of the Transition Towns and Climate Justice Action movements, mainly in Flanders (Belgium), but also as parts of broader international networks. The study relied on an embedded multiple case research design. As Yin (2008) argues, case studies are the most appropriate research strategy when a 'how' or 'why' question is being asked about a contemporary set of events over which the researcher has little or no control. A multiple case design enabled me to engage in a comparative approach. Concretely, my study consisted of a comparison of two cases: Transition Towns and Climate Justice Action, which I also contrasted with initiatives that focus on individual behaviour change, as in many conventional awareness raising campaigns. Comparative research is generally seen as a useful way to increase the transferability of research because it makes it easier to distinguish between those conclusions that are contextual and those that are probably also transferable to other settings (Baxter and Eyles 1997, Lecompte and Goetz 1982, Schuermans 2013). The use of an embedded design allowed me to study not only the discourses of the movements themselves, but also how the people who are engaged in these movements appropriate or translate these discourses in their own terms, and contribute to (re)framing the movements' general discourse.

The study started from the very general question 'why' and 'how' both movements were launched in Flanders (Belgium) at a particular moment in time, and 'how' they developed during their first years. Through a cyclic iterative process back and forth between empirical observations and theory (Baarda et al. 2005), the focus became gradually more specific, as I explained already in the introductory chapter of this dissertation.

Concretely, I became involved in Transition Towns when the movement was launched, in September 2008. I stayed active until March 2010, participating in particular in Transition Initiative Ghent (TIG), while at the same time being engaged at the Flemish hub level and keeping close contacts with other transition initiatives in the region. Next to my engagements in Ghent and Flanders, I took part in a Transition Cities conference in Nottingham (UK) in November 2008, together with a couple of transition friends. Around March 2010, after one year and a half of activist research, I turned to a less intensive engagement, and during the subsequent two and a half years, I followed the further evolutions of the movement from a short distance.

The launch of Climate Justice Action followed a few months later, more concretely after a March for climate and social justice on the 8th of December 2008, which was also the moment I got involved. Its first public manifestation was the first Belgian-Dutch Climate Action Camp in Antwerp in the Summer of 2009. I was actively engaged in the movement for a period of 2,5 years, namely from its start until the

Summer of 2011. The most active part of my engagement was thus situated in the year before and after the Copenhagen climate summit in 2009, and included both an international activist weekend in Copenhagen in October 2009 to prepare actions, meetings and other events during the summit and a stay of ten days during the Copenhagen summit itself. In this period Climate Justice Action was a significant, internationally organised force within the broader European climate movement, even if it afterwards slowly disintegrated (as did my own engagement). While I kept in touch and closely followed the last activities of the movement, I did not remain as actively involved as before. The last activity in which I participated was a Climate Action Camp in Leuven in the summer of 2012, but without taking part in the organisation of the camp anymore.

My involvement as an activist researcher implied that I was an active participant in both movements amongst the other participants. Concretely, this meant that I took part in meetings, activities and actions and that I did my share of all the practical tasks which setting up new movements entails. This included the design and production of leaflets and posters, contacting speakers, booking rooms, contributing to translating *The Transition Handbook* into Dutch, renting material such as tents, facilitating meetings, giving lectures and guiding educational exercises, drafting activities programs and brochures with practical information, reaching out to broader audiences by distributing promotion material, participating in coordination, strategic and other discussions, spotting and occupying locations for actions or camps, building up the infrastructure of the camps or arranging accommodation for transition weekends, welcoming new people, cleaning toilets, doing security tasks, and cleaning up after camps, actions or activities.

At the same time, I continued to have my role as a researcher. In this role, I took field notes, conducted 40 semi-structured in-depth interviews, and analysed an extensive range of leaflets, booklets, books, press releases, websites and other materials produced and/or spread by the movements. Through a prolonged engagement in the field, and the combination of my experiences and observations as an activist researcher and the interviews and document analyses I conducted (triangulation), I aimed to enhance the credibility of the research (Baxter and Eyles 1997, Lincoln and Guba 1985, Reid and Gough 2000). Furthermore, it allowed me to arrive at a thick and rich description of the discourses developed by both movements and their participants. At the same time, using different data sources enabled me to study potential divergences between the 'official' discourse produced by the movements (and materialised in books, websites, …), and the way its message was creatively adapted by local groups and individual transitioners and activists.

As I will explain in what follows, when I started systematically analysing my empirical material, I chose to use the data collected on the basis of activist involvement and document analysis mainly as general background information, whereas the data obtained through the interviews provided the 'hard' data on which I focused most analytic attention.

3.2. A FOCUS ON INTERVIEWS

In order to arrive at a profound understanding of how discourses are adopted, shaped, opposed, neglected, nuanced, and complemented with elements taken from other discourses, to apprehend how discourses are made coherent, and to grasp the inconsistencies, tensions and blind spots which any discourse inevitably contains, I opted to focus my analysis in particular on the empirical material drawn from the interviews (Dunn 2005, Valentine 2005, Kvale 2007, Fontana and Frey 2008). More than many other methods, interviews help to grasp how people make sense of their own engagement and how discourses are reconstructed thereby, partly in response to topics or questions which are brought to the fore during the conversation. In this context, it is important to underline that interviews do not mirror a pre-existing reality, but are to be seen as processes of social construction (Kvale 1995, see also Fadil 2008). The interview is thus considered a process in which meaning is discursively (re)produced. Both the interviewer and interviewee are involved in this endeavour, which, in this case, challenges the interviewee to (re)construct a coherent story on her own engagement in one of both movements. Both the construction of coherence and the tensions, contradictions and inconsistencies that still remain are interesting and significant (see also chapter 3). The latter reveal something about the obstacles encountered and the issues at stake in the process of developing a narrative on one's engagement. Indeed, these incoherences can not only represent contingencies encountered when constructing a discourse, but can also point to the topics on which people have to make a decision, where new meanings have to be created, and unsolved problems have to be dealt with.

3.2.1. SAMPLING

Concretely, I conducted 40 in-depth interviews: 20 interviews with climate justice activists and 20 with transitioners.[2] The focus was on the 'mobilisers' of both movements, or the organic intellectuals in gramscian terms (Gramsci 1971). In other

[2] Three small points should be added with respect to this. First, all these interviews took place during the active phase of my research. More concretely, I started interviewing people half a year after I got involved in the respective movements. Second, I actually conducted 41 interviews, but one interview was unusable due to too much background noise. Third, originally I also wanted to include a group of people engaged in both movements, but I found too few of them to take this really as a separate group. Furthermore, the participants all clearly chose sides. I thus added the two respondents which could have been seen as belonging to both movements to the group whose 'side' they eventually chose (for both of them this was Climate Justice Action). Next to this, some participants of the one movement also participated in a limited number of meetings or activities of the other. More concretely three transitioners came to the first Climate Action Camp, where they were also especially invited, as a specific activity was organised about Transition Towns. Moreover, one transitioner participated in a Climate Justice Action meeting (but was very disappointed and never returned).

words, I opted to interview those people who had an active role in launching or broadening the movement, and, related to this, in setting up activities, organising meetings, reaching out to new people, putting issues on the agenda, engaging in strategic discussions and debates.

As the aim of qualitative research is not to arrive at general or universal statements, the representativeness of the 'sample' is not a criterion for the credibility and transferability of a study (Reid and Gough 2000, Schuermans 2013). Still, because the group of people who actively gave shape and direction to the movement was rather limited, I can state that my 'samples' are relatively representative of the voices and perspectives that were present amongst this group of mobilisers at the time. The decision to conduct 20 interviews for each of the movements was especially motivated by the observation that I had thereby reached a level of saturation (Baarda et al. 2005, Conradson 2005). I did not opt for a fixed number of interviewees at the beginning, but after having interviewed 20 transitioners, no significant new issues seemed to pop up anymore.[3] Even more importantly, it seemed I had interviewed a large number of the people who were active at this level of movement building at that time, and who were willing to be interviewed. As I considered it important to interview a similar number of people in both movements, I subsequently decided to also interview 20 climate justice activists. Because the number of people actively mobilising in this movement was smaller than in Transition Towns[4], I can say with even greater conviction that I have been able to make a representative overview of the different voices present amongst this group of people at that time.

To have an accurate idea of the 'sample' of interviewees, two other important elements should be taken into account. First, I decided to limit my sample in terms of the geographical location where people lived and their main activity was situated. All respondents lived in Flanders at the moment of the interviews, and a little bit less than half of them were inhabitants of Ghent. This option was taken despite the fact that Climate Justice Action was organised on the national level, and operated during its first year in close cooperation with activists from the Netherlands. The main rationale behind these geographical limits is that the Transition Towns movement emphasises the importance of being first and foremost active in 'one's own local community', and so did I. Ghent was also a particularly lively and well-rooted initiative, which got off the ground almost immediately. Several of its members played an active role at the Flemish hub level and in the outreach activities of the movement more generally. As I chose to make my two 'samples' comparable on this level, I subsequently replicated this geographical focus in my study of the Climate Justice Action movement. Second, I considered it important to give a voice to as many women as men. Concretely, I

[3] Of course, every single respondent always tells something new. Still, a sense of saturation can be reached when more or less all issues are extensively dealt with from the different perspectives which are present inside the movement.

[4] In this context, it should be noted that I limited my 'samples' to people who had their main place of residence in Flanders (see further).

interviewed eleven female and nine male climate justice activists, and exactly 10 male and 10 female transitioners.

Within these parameters, I opted for maximum variation sampling as a form of purposeful sampling, or more precisely, a combination of self-selection with maximum variation sampling (Patton 2002). The choice for this method was aimed at developing a rich and thick description of the discourses presented by the participants involved in one of both movements, and to enlarge the credibility and transferability of the study (Baxter and Eyles 1997, Lincoln and Guba 1985, Reid and Gough 2000).

Concretely, I proceeded as follows. First, I sent a mail to all transitioners and climate justice activists who were subscribed to the respective mailing lists, with some information on the research I was doing and a general call for interviewees. While I had already discussed my research during meetings, the goal of this mailing was also to ensure all people actively involved in the movement were correctly informed about the study I was conducting and felt welcome to discuss my involvement as a researcher. At the same time, I announced the next step in my study and asked for people who were interested to be interviewed.[5] Several people promptly responded positively, which resulted in the first interviews. One of the rationales for this approach was that I did not want to put myself in the superior position of deciding who is 'worthwhile' to be interviewed and who not. The latter approach could have established or reinforced informal hierarchies in the movement and lead to feelings of exclusion, which I wanted to avoid.

Second, and additionally, I more specifically addressed a number of people in order to increase the number of interviewees and to realise a maximum variation. At this stage, I proceeded via purposeful sampling. The aim was to include a maximum range of opinions, perspectives, experiences and positions. I based myself on how these were articulated during meetings, actions and activities. This maximum diversity was aimed at facilitating an inquiry into differences and similarities within the movement and to enable a rich description of it.

The 'samples' were of course also influenced by the transitioners and activists' willingness to be interviewed. The general level of positive response was high. One of the advantages of research into movements in which one is also actively involved, is that it took me relatively little effort to find people who were prepared to be interviewed. Indeed, my prolonged engagement 'in the field' allowed me to build positive relationships and trust (Baxter and Eyles 1997, Lincoln and Guba 1985, Reid and Gough 2000). The fact that I was generally welcomed as an activist who is also a researcher, rather than the opposite, let alone a researcher who merely studies activism, greatly contributed to this. In general, grassroots movements are considered less accessible for researchers and this is in particular the case for movements engaging in direct actions or other activities which are sometimes met with repression

[5] The fact that I would send this mail had been discussed first within the Transition Towns hub and the Climate Justice Action process group, and there was a general agreement that this was the best way to proceed.

by the police or the judiciary, such as Climate Justice Action. Understandably, activists are sometimes reluctant to speak out openly and freely. My genuine involvement in the movements was key to overcoming this barrier. Only two activists from Climate Justice Action, and three from Transition Towns, whom I had asked, did not participate. It has to be underlined in this context that I took the simple fact of not answering to my mail for a 'no', even if there could have been several other reasons for not answering. I did not probe people as I did not want to force anyone into accepting an interview, or even to bring them in the uncomfortable situation that they would have to refuse explicitly towards someone they know.

An important question concerns the profile of the respondents who ended up as part of my 'sample'. Self-selection had as a result that, to a certain extent, especially people who were enthusiastic to speak out, were included. Mostly this enthusiasm followed from the fact that these people were the pioneers of the movement, who wanted to build it and tried to convince others to join too. In a single case, the willingness to speak out especially followed from doubts about the movement and the need to share these. This kind of self-selection was not a problem, as these were also the respondents I was looking for: people actively involved in the movement with a clear vision on where to go.

Next to this, my own profile probably also had an effect on the sampling process, as I had the impression that especially more progressive transitioners felt interpellated to be interviewed. Furthermore, the fact that I focused in particular on the city of Ghent, which was one of the more outspokenly progressive and critical transition initiatives, possibly also led to a small bias in this direction. There can thus have been a limited bias in the selection of interviewees that might have influenced the research results. Remarkably, however, this bias does not go in the direction that one would expect on the basis of the research findings. Rather the contrary: despite the fact that the research revealed the existence of forms of defensive localism (see chapter 5), progressive voices were probably overrepresented in my 'sample'. This observation counters the argument that my findings would be the result of a biased sample which would over-represent inwards-looking tendencies. As I had a less outspoken or deviating profile within Climate Justice Action, such a mechanism is expected to have played less a role there.

3.2.2. STRUCTURE, CONTENT AND CODING

In view of facilitating a smooth flow of the interviews and creating enough openness for the respondents to bring in their own topics while maintaining a degree of coherence and comparability between the interviews, I opted for a semi-structured, open-ended interview schedule (Baarda et al. 2005, Dunn 2005). The topics of this schedule were mainly drawn from my field experience. The schedule was subdivided into three parts. First, I started with open questions concerning the interviewees' own activity, including their motivations to engage in Climate Justice Action or Transition

Towns, their involvement in the launch and the development of the movement until that moment, what in the movement attracted them, what were the difficulties or challenges they experienced, and how they perceived the main characteristics of the movement. I also asked some questions about how they conceived of the root causes of climate change, about alternatives to the current way society is organised, and about strategies to move from here to there (or more concretely: strategies to tackle climate change). Subsequently, I asked some questions about the relation between their own engagement and more conventional approaches in environmentalism.

Second, I presented 12 theses which struck me as crucial during the document analysis, and which were all drawn from publications by the movement in which the respective interviewee was involved (in particular *The Transition Handbook* and the *Transition Initiatives Primer* for Transition Towns, and a number of leaflets, booklets and outreach texts produced by Climate Justice Action).[6] I asked the respondents whether they agreed with these theses or not, and why. Furthermore, I asked how they would interpret the theses. This enabled me to inquire into participants' visions and interpretations of their own movement, and to correct or adjust my own interpretation based on the document analysis. Indeed, as Kevin Dunn (2005, p. 80-81) notes, one of the interesting elements of interviews is that 'your own opinions and tentative conclusions can be checked, verified and scrutinised'. This method was also very helpful in order to develop a thick description of the many nuances present inside the movements. Finally, it allowed me to investigate divergences between the movements' 'official' discourses and how it was interpreted or shifted by individual members or local and national groups. With regard to Climate Justice Action, the theses focused amongst others on COP 15 (the Climate Summit in Copenhagen in 2009), direct action, violence, the role of companies and politicians, the role of the market and economic growth, individual and collective action, 'false solutions' and alternatives, and the UN climate negotiations. With regard to Transition Towns, they zoomed in on topics such as resilience, localisation, the ideal profile of a transitioner, dialogue, inclusion, local money systems, peak oil, the psychology of change, the role of older generations, the responsibility of individuals, spirituality, community building, collective awareness-raising and the role and place of companies and governments.

Third, I asked the interviewees whether they knew the other movement (Climate Justice Action and Transition Towns, respectively) and whether they would envisage to become engaged in this movement as well, why (not), and what they considered the main similarities and differences with their own approach. Subsequently, I

[6] With regard to Transition Towns, I particularly used these documents because they were the first transition documents that were translated into Dutch, and they had a big impact on the movement in Flanders. Even if the movement has in the meantime become broader and some key concepts have changed, these first publications constituted its ideological backbone at the time. With regard to Climate Justice Action, less written material was available, which made the question which text fragments to choose less difficult. I particularly drew theses from those documents on which there existed a kind of 'consensus' in the movement, as they were agreed upon in general assemblies (e.g., outreach texts).

presented a short text produced on the basis of text fragments of the other movement, and asked the respondents to comment on it. Many of the theses which I presented to the actual members of the movement at stake came back in these texts, which gave me an idea of the similarities and divergences in the responses of transitioners and climate justice activists to the same or similar statements. This way of proceeding did not only made a comparison possible, it also allowed me to investigate how they perceived their own activity in relation to alternative forms of engagement, more in particular the other movement under study. Furthermore, it enabled me to introduce a specific type of outsider's perspective for each of the movements. The complete interview schedules can be found in annex 1 (Transition Towns) and annex 2 (Climate Justice Action).

Throughout the interviews, I used a combination of different interview techniques as described amongst others by Kevin Dunn (2005). In particular, working with theses has been an extremely fruitful experience both for me and for the respondents. For some respondents, this exercise was redundant, as their experiences and opinions were already extensively articulated in response to the open questions which preceded the theses. Other respondents found it more difficult to formulate their viewpoint in response to open questions, and were obviously relieved when I came up with the theses, which structured the content of the interview more clearly and allowed them to formulate their viewpoint in relation to another viewpoint.

In this context, it is important to underline once again that interviews are not considered as reflecting individuals' pre-existing identities or viewpoints, but provide an occasion for people to (re)construct their own engagement and identity and to consider their own insertion into a movement. The texts mentioned above and the questions concerning the interviewees' attitudes towards the other movement were especially revealing in this regard. Indeed, it was in particular in confrontation with 'the other movement' that one's own perspective acquired more precise shape (see chapter 4, where I analyse on the basis of the work of Chantal Mouffe (2006) how the relation with 'them' has a constitutive effect on the 'we'). Putting the own approach in contrast to another one helped to articulate the specificities of one's own understanding of the issues at stake.

Another technique which I frequently used was to play the devil's advocate (Dunn, 2005). It was particularly successful in challenging the interviewees to formulate their viewpoints more sharply. The texts of the other movement often functioned as a variant of this technique, as they similarly brought in a different way to look at the issue at stake, and challenged the interviewees to take a more precisely articulated position.

Most of the interviews took place at the respondents' home, a few at my place and a few at a public place (e.g. a bar). I left the choice to the respondents, but underscored the importance of a quiet environment. All interviews took between one and two hours and a half and were digitally recorded, for which permission was asked. The interviews took place in a confidential setting, which was particularly important

for many climate justice activists, and anonymity was guaranteed. All respondents got a small present (a package of herb seeds) after the interview to thank them for the effort.

Once the interviews were conducted, they were fully transcribed, coded and analysed in detail with the help of the software program NVIVO®. The digital recording, detailed transcriptions and consistent way of analysing the interview data with NVIVO was opted for in order to maximise the dependability of the study (Baxter and Eyles 1997, Lincoln and Guba 1985, Reid and Gough 2000, Schuermans 2013). As the interviews were conducted in Dutch, it should be noted that all quotes used in the published articles and the dissertation are my own translations.

3.3. DISCOURSE

In this dissertation, I present a discursive analysis of Transition Towns and Climate Justice Action through the lens of theories of the political and political discourse theory (Howarth 2000, Howarth et al. 2000, Laclau and Mouffe 2001), but one could also argue that I bring just one of many possible narratives or stories about the movements (Reason and Bradbury, 2008). The story I present inevitably leaves certain issues out while other points might be overemphasised. This statement is not meant to lead to the radically sceptic conclusion that all 'stories' told about the movements are as credible, or correspond or resonate equally with the experiences, opinions and modes of self-understanding of their participants and with theories that can be adopted to interpret them (see also Baxter and Eyles 1997). The point I want to make is that every discourse is the result of a specific process of construction, and this is inevitably also the case for the discourse that got formed through the writing of this dissertation.

Starting from the perspective of (political) discourse (theory) means, amongst other things, acknowledging that the researcher, or people in general, can never have direct access to 'reality', or stronger, that there is no 'reality' without discourses which give meaning to it. There is no secret truth hidden to be uncovered, no real identity which one can reach if one digs deep enough. Or seen from the other side of the coin, there are millions of secret truths and potential identities as they are performed through the myriad of discourses which mark human life. These statements are not meant to deny that 'objects exist externally to thought', as Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (2001, p. 108) emphasise. The point is related to 'the rather different assertion that they could constitute themselves as objects outside any discursive condition of emergence'.

(Political) discourse theory starts from the understanding that discourses are constantly constructed and reconstructed through a myriad of influences, and that it is impossible to ever trace this process entirely. This understanding has important implications for how we should understand the research process. To give a very

concrete example: the linear way in which research articles are usually structured (first a problem statement, then a presentation of the theoretical framework and the research design, followed by the empirical results, a discussion section and conclusion) gives a false account of how social research happens in actual practice. Social research is usually based on a continuous move back and forth between theory and empirics.

However, this statement is perhaps even not precise enough, as there is actually no principled distinction or separation between theoretical and non-theoretical discourses. This means, amongst other things, that the way research is commonly presented, as is the case in this dissertation, is not and cannot be a reflection of the actual research process, which is much less linear than the presentation in the form of research articles suggests, and a distinction between the theoretical framework and empirical findings can never neatly be drawn.

Interestingly, social research means the production of discourse about discourse. Hereby, it is important to note that the discourse produced through research is always partly the product of who the researcher is herself. The researcher therefore has to be considered one source of the co-construction of this discourse, next to many others. Furthermore, it is relevant to note that the discourses thus produced do not exist next to society, but co-produce society. As already hinted at, interviews do not merely reflect a pre-existing reality, but form a process which is part of society and through which our understanding and relation to society is constructed. As I will show in what follows, these considerations have important implications for how social research should be performed and understood.

To conclude, political discourse theory has been key to my overall research endeavour, determining my project both in terms of its ontological, epistemological and methodological underpinnings. Ontologically, following Laclau and Mouffe (2001), the social is considered to be constituted through discourse, understood as a set of relations between elements which has a more or less systemic character. Epistemologically, this discursive view on the social leads to an anti-positivist and critical view of knowledge production, acknowledging that discourse is not something outside of the researcher, but that the research process partakes in its production. The consequence is that the research process is never neutral, but always 'political' to a certain degree: it is involved in the relations of power characteristic of discourse production, and partakes in the construction of identities. Finally, methodologically, this was translated into political discourse analysis, focusing on how elements of meaning are articulated with each other, how discourses are structured around nodal points, which meaningful effects arise as a consequence, and which exclusions are constitutive for the resulting discourse.

4. THREE SHORT STORIES

In contrast to the dominant conception of academic research, according to which personal experience, engagement or involvement would undermine a project's objectivity, activist researchers consider personal experiences and explicit political involvement as a crucial dimension of the research process (Malone 2006, Reinharz 1992). In this section, I will present three short stories of how the personal and the political impacted upon my research trajectory. Each of the stories will zoom in on a particular aspect of the experience of doing activist research that confronted me with a dilemma or obstacle. My aim is to show that activist research is fascinating, but also messy, given all the obstacles, dilemmas, and personal and political challenges it poses. These stories serve as an entry point to discuss a number of difficulties, pitfalls and ambiguities which are constitutive of activist research.

The first story concerns my quandaries with the Transition Towns movement, and explains why I ultimately decided to leave the movement. The second story deals with the dissemination of knowledge amongst a broader public and the difficulties confronted when submitting one's ideas to a public debate. The third story will take a detour via the potato action (in which both transitioners and climate justice activists were involved) to zoom in on the complex relation between academia and society and the challenges this creates for engaged researchers. In section 5, I will lift these stories beyond their idiosyncratic origin and formulate some more general questions and considerations about the personal and the political in activist research.

4.1. TAKING A DISTANCE

As I already described in the introduction, after getting involved in Transition Towns I was soon confronted with difficulties, as I felt increasingly uneasy with key elements of the discourse of the movement. Certain 'incidents' contributed to this feeling. I will illustrate this with one example. At one of the first meetings, a couple of people proposed to engage in guerilla gardening. Personally, I conceived guerilla gardening as quite an innocent and fun action. The idea is that citizens 'secretly' plant flowers, vegetable crops and other plants in public places such as neglected pieces of land, roadsides, forests or parks. However, several transitioners strongly rejected this proposal, reproachfully arguing that we should not engage in 'negative' or 'radical' actions that are 'illegal', 'forbidden', 'dangerous', too far from 'lay people's' common sense, and that especially seem to entail a kind of 'we against them' attitude. The atmosphere during the meeting took a strange turn, as several of the people proposing the action were confused by the unexpectedly negative reactions to their idea. They especially appeared to be surprised by the 'framing' of the action as being 'aggressive' and 'negative', and therefore out of question. The very fact that for many it seemed to be 'evident' that this is not an appropriate action contributed to the

uneasy atmosphere. It appeared as if those who would merely envisage such an action would not have understood anything of what transition really means. The problem with these kinds of reactions is that they can have a chilling effect: as it would turn out soon, people started to think twice before proposing another such action that could possibly be interpreted as 'aggressive' and as 'not fitting with the philosophy of transition'.

The meeting ended with a round of hugs, as usual. Some transitioners stressed this 'ritual' as an important aspect of community building intended to nurture a positive, warm and encouraging atmosphere. However, some people immediately left the room. They did not want to hug people they just felt offended by, and anyway, they did not like to hug people they barely knew. What frustrated them even more, however, was how this behaviour was framed in its turn. Some people seemed shocked by their unwillingness to 'connect' with other people, and by their lack of efforts to 'transcend' the negative feelings which arose during the meeting. Maybe these people had psychological problems or defences which could explain the fact they did not want to hug?

This and other, similar experiences made me feel increasingly alienated in 'my own movement'. As explained in chapter 1, these were also the experiences that led me to search for theories which could help me to understand and conceptualise what was at stake and that finally made me decide to leave the movement. This decision was not taken impulsively. Several other options had come to the fore: I could have shared my doubts and criticisms even more clearly with the members of the movement, I could have tried to change the movement and redirect it, or set up an alternative transition initiative together with allies. This is all what I might have done if I would not have been involved as a researcher too. That position added complexity to the choices I was confronted with. Could I communicate my doubts so clearly without imposing these topics as key issues on the movement? Could I afford this as an activist researcher? If I would start to play such a dominant role, was there no risk that I would finally end up studying the reactions to my own presence? Did I want this central place? Was my initial aim not to study Transition Towns, and would the movement still be the same after these interventions? Of course, I do not want to suggest that I would have been so successful in introducing my ideas into the movement, or that the movement would have accepted them, but there was a strange side to taking up these issues as an activist researcher.

Many questions popped up, but the most prominent point was clear: I could not be an activist researcher in a movement that I did not support enough. Indeed, activist research starts from the premise that you support the movement in which you are active, that you try to produce that kind of knowledge that can further the movement's goals, and that you defend the movement's causes where necessary (Hale 2008, Malone 2006). But what does this mean when the distance between your own position and the one of the movement becomes too big to maintain a loyal engagement? The fact that my disagreement with Transition Towns exactly concerned

its lack of space to disagree made the situation even more complicated. Activist research and (post-)politics became entangled in very complex ways. From the several approaches I could choose, taking a distance seemed most appropriate if I wanted to respect the movement's ideas and positions while at the same time being able to question them.

4.2. POLITICISING THE CLIMATE DEBATE

A crucial aspect of activist research is to produce that kind of knowledge that can actually contribute to the struggles that are taking place. To make this knowledge really politically relevant, it is considered of key importance to publish these findings not only in academic articles and conference papers, but also to communicate them to a larger audience, and to position them carefully within the debates that are taking place. The crucial question is: on what terrain can one contribute? Which research results are relevant to be translated to a broader audience? How to do this in a way that both respects the movements at stake, and allows the researcher to take a position herself?

The more my research evolved, the more the issue of 'the political' imposed itself as having a broader significance for the climate debate in Belgium. A first contribution I could make was to translate the insights I gained on (de)politicisation in the ecological field to a broader audience. Second, and related to this, a more fundamental debate on the root causes of climate change, alternatives and strategies seemed to be missing. The ideas of movements such as Climate Justice Action, which profoundly question the status quo, deserved to be taken more seriously in the climate debate. They are relevant as such, and could also help trigger a discussion on root causes, alternatives and strategies, and thus contribute to repoliticising the ecological field. Indeed, as I will argue further, the best way to politicise is to take a stance, to choose sides.

I found a co-writer in Matthias Lievens, and the book 'De mythe van de groene economie. Valstrik, verzet en alternatieven' was born. To a large extent, this book is the articulation of a set of opinions which I formed throughout my research, and is inspired by the vision of Climate Justice Action, or better, the vision which we developed together within the movement. Evidently, we refined this vision, broadened it, and developed it further in a specific direction. But its ideological backbone is based on ideas shared within the climate justice movement.

Rather unexpectedly, the book had quite some success, selling a few thousands of copies. A whirlwind of reviews, media appearances, endorsements, criticisms, debates and confrontations followed. The book's explicit intention was to repoliticise the climate debate in Belgium (and the Netherlands), by challenging the predominant perspectives on the issue. Thereby, we deliberately chose not to bring a theoretical, vague or abstract story, but to call things, people and practices with which we

disagreed by name. Next to outspokenly positive reactions, there were also quite some critical responses, especially from the side of the conventional environmental movement and members of the green party. A number of people appeared to have great difficulties with the 'conflict perspective' we adopted. Was it not possible to sort this 'disagreement' out within the green movement itself? Was it really necessary to formulate public criticisms of conventional sustainability discourses? We would sow disunity within the ecological movement, precisely on a moment we should be working together. We would do injustice to those people who 'stand with their feet in the neoliberal mud to work for a better world' (Holemans 2012). The book's title appeared to offend a part of the mainstream environmental movement: aren't we all convinced that we need to 'green' our economy? Will we question the few things that happen on the environmental plane? Don't we risk to alienate people even further from the green cause?

Who ventures into the fire of political struggle cannot expect to escape the flames. Is it not much more comfortable to formulate controversial ideas in the theoretical and abstract, vague and incomprehensible academic jargon which scholars use so often? Is it not easier to publish one's texts only in international journals (preferably read by like-minded souls)? Is it not much more simple to avoid contestation and to present one's own position as better and different, because derived from 'science'? Submitting your position to political debate inevitably means not only making 'friends', but also 'enemies', perhaps not always where one would have wanted or expected.

4.3. IT WAS A SUCCESSFUL ACTION[7]

On Sunday the 29th of May 2011, the now famous 'potato action' took place in Wetteren, against genetically modified potatoes planted in open field. I will not delve into all the particularities of the action and what happened afterwards, because that would lead me too far, but a few points are relevant in this context. Although both movements that I studied differ a lot, they also have connections, as became clear during this action, where both climate justice activists and transitioners were present. The action had different sides and attracted a wide range of people who came for particular aspects of the day: the farmer market, the debates and workshops, the children animation, the social networking, and the direct action. The event was the provisional culmination of a long campaign that attempted to stop field experiments with GMO's, including juridical complaints, roundtable discussions, the organisation of citizens' inspections etcetera.

[7] This title refers to a statement several people made at the end of the day of action. However, this same statement led to Barbara Van Dyck's dismissal, as she was supposed to be not only, or in the first place, a citizen or activist, but an academic, and both roles were considered incompatible.

The huge relevance of the action for the question of the relation between academia and society became clear in the weeks and months that followed. But even on that particular day its significance was already underlined by a small counter-manifestation of academics who stated that the action attacked objective, neutral 'science'. The slogan of the demonstrators was 'save our science', and they depicted the activists as being opposed to it.

The action was not strictly related to my research, but since many of the people whom I met during my involvement in Transition Towns and the Climate Justice Action movement were there, the event was also not clearly distinguished from it. That was also one of the reasons why I agreed the next day to be shortly interviewed by a journalist of De Standaard who had called me to gather more information concerning what had happened. At that point I had two choices: either to focus on my role as a researcher, involved but professionally detached (an easy, conventional position to take in this kind of situations), or to abandon a purely outsider's perspective, recognise my own positionality and openly choose the side of the activists. Since the image that was portrayed in the media was outspokenly negative and unnuanced, and did not correspond at all with the image I had of the action myself, and since I knew the activists, their motives and backgrounds, and I strongly sympathised with this attempt to put the GMO debate on the public agenda, I chose to identify with them. This choice threw me in an unforeseen maelstrom.

Interestingly, my role as an activist researcher did not actually change, I had been an activist researcher for years, but as a consequence of how the events unfolded, this 'double' role was suddenly revealed. Apparently, I had to choose sides, as if I could not be both an activist and a researcher at the same time. I thus seemed confronted with a catch 22. Both the rector and my direct colleagues asked me to openly and explicitly take a distance from the action, and not doing this apparently would make me a *persona non grata* for them. However, taking a distance from the action would at the same time make me *persona non grata* for my activist friends.

5. Reflections

5.1. Trust

Compared to similar research projects (Autonomous Geographies Collective 2010), I have encountered strikingly little resistance against my research within the movements I was involved in. The main reason is undoubtedly that I was a committed member of both movements. I was not the all-too-typical academic, who, despite her good intentions, remained above all an outsider with a privileged position, willing to share 'her knowledge' in an often slightly paternalistic way. As the Autonomous Geographies Collective (2010, p. 250) aptly notices, a lot of action-oriented research

> implies, wrongly, that as academics we are still the main foci for the production of knowledge, and specially placed to assist the social and political struggles of others. It appeals to academics 'as professionals' to do their bit for those less fortunate, rather than as citizens jointly challenging the broader social system.

Neither did I follow the example of academics who get involved, but leave again once enough information has been collected to write a number of research articles or a dissertation, someone who is maybe genuinely interested in and concerned about the movement but whose primary focus is university life. In the words of Peter Walker (2007, p. 365): the 'fly-by-night researchers' are the worst, they 'take the most and give the least'. He subsequently quotes a colleague stating 'I've seen colleagues pitch up for 3 weeks' field work, single author 3-4 papers and never go back again'.

My position was different, both more engaged and more modest: I had a position of an activist or transitioner amongst her fellows. I was not only *seen* as one of them, I actually *was* one of them: I did the same shitty tasks and took the same risks.

Being an activist researcher of a particular kind gave me access and credibility, but also gave me a responsibility not to disappoint this trust. It was not always easy to know which choices I had to make, in particular if I wanted to maintain an authentic position at the same time. Whereas most transitioners originally might have expected that I would write a generally sympathetic narrative on the movement, and this was also my intention, I finally developed a critical analysis. Of course, it was known that I had some doubts, as I found it crucial to be open and honest about this from the start, but few will have expected that this would finally lead to taking a distance, and neither did I. As Dunn (2005, p. 85) notes, '[i]t is fairer that the researcher's motives and political orientation are obvious to the informant rather than hidden until after the research is published'. The point is that people had trusted me on the basis of an initial position, but this position changed over time. Moreover, in activist research, people trust you because you are a fellow activist. But what if you are suddenly not an activist anymore, but *only* a researcher? It might appear trust is being violated, even if that happened in an unintended way.

Interestingly, in my case, my opinion changed exactly because of the research I was doing. As Shulamit Reinharz (1992, p. 195, see also Malone, 2006) writes: '[a]lthough changing the researcher is not a common intention in […] research, it is a common consequence'. However, little attention is paid in the literature to the consequences this can have for the research you are doing, in particular in a context of activist research.

5.2. WHICH SIDE ARE YOU ON?

The questions of trust came back under a different guise in the aftermath of the potato action. The weeks after the action, several people and groups tried to develop an appropriate relation to the action: activists, but also other green groups, NGO's and

parties. Public opinion was turning in different directions, and every position that was adopted could have some impact on the dynamic of the debate. The questions were paramount: who speaks out? Who defends what or whom, and why? How to interpret silences, unexpected statements and particular choices by specific actors? How to understand the way public discourses get formed?

However, for me personally the most crucial question was: 'which side are you on?' It seemed I not only had to make an impossible choice between two positions: the academic or the activist. But this choice also seemed to have unescapable consequences for my respective 'research credibility' and 'street credibility'. The Autonomous Geographies Collective (2010, p. 248) writes in this context about 'the often torturous psyche of the academic-activist, forever caught between two worlds and sets of people with competing priorities, expectations, and pressures'. Her position is not easy, as she risks to be none of both fully. She risks to be never completely an equal amongst the activists, as there might always remain some suspicion. At the same time, she is often not considered a real researcher, as her activism could bias her research. Frances Fox Piven (2010, p. 807) notes in this context that:

> […] politically relevant scholarship that takes the form of testimony and op eds, or properly footnoted articles and books, remains well within the comfort zone of academic life […] the query is more likely to be provoked when academics identify with the trouble-making assertions of power by groups at the bottom of society, or groups at the cultural margins.

This was also my experience. Although I had been an activist researcher for quite some time, it was only on the moment that 'trouble' arose that I was suddenly exposed to the research community. I had to account for my position, and for the influence my political views could have on my research. Would my research be contaminated by my openly political positions? Did I need to justify and contextualise my actions in such a way as not to jeopardise my research credibility? Walker (2007, p. 266) concludes that engagement 'with different audiences "outside the academy" will require accepting possible professional risks', and Piven (2010, p. 808) notes that 'the personal commitment to activism must be passionate and paramount if it is to survive the tension created by the dual path.' One of the difficulties, according to her, resides in how 'rewards and punishments' are given out by fellow scholars on a daily basis. Underscoring the difficulties of engaging in activist research, she muses: '(m)ost of us are mere humans […] we have only so much time and energy to do our work as scholars or as activists, and we can withstand only so much insult' (p. 809).

Fundamentally, the distinction between one's role as a researcher and one's involvement as an activist is a false dichotomy. The real problem resides much more with the avowed but impossible 'neutrality' and 'objectivity' of academic research. Moving beyond this dominant view, one quickly arrives at the conclusion that it does not make sense to ask one to choose between both roles, not because one *can* combine both roles, but because both roles are combined *by definition*, although often

not as explicitly and openly as is the case with activist research. As I stated earlier, social research can never be fully distinguished from politics. While research and politics are seldom so overtly connected as in activist research, the connection is always there. One can deny this or try to be open and reflexive about one's own position, and act according to it.

5.3. WHERE IS THE POLITICAL IN ACTIVIST RESEARCH?

As already stated, activist researchers argue that research is not politically neutral, and that it is important to recognise this. The key issue, however, is: 'what or where is the political in activist research?' In other words, what do activist researchers mean if they state we should take the 'political' dimension of research more seriously? And how can one deal with this in practice?

Strikingly, in much of the literature on activist research (including action research and scholar activism), a rather narrow notion of the political is used. Activist research is then characterised by its self-avowed and open choice for emancipatory goals, such as empowerment and the struggle against oppression (e.g., Chatterton 2008, Autonomous Geographies Collective 2010, Malone 2006, Reason and Bradbury 2008). While I personally support such goals, I will argue in chapter 7 that a normative understanding of the political unnecessarily limits the scope of what the political can consist of, and therefore risks to partly miss what is at stake in the defence of the political. Furthermore, such a position too easily circumvents the question whether 'we know which "seeds" we are, or should be, planting' (Walker 2007, p. 367). Activist research starts from the assumption that scholars should not only reflect on specific topics or do research about them, but also actively support the change people are struggling for. But do we know 'which change', and how do we decide on this? Change into what direction, with whom and based on what principles? For instance, is freedom a legitimate goal? What does the struggle for freedom entail? Whose freedom? How to give substance to this ideal?

These issues became very prominent as my doubts concerning Transition Towns' goals, strategies and discourse increased. Paradoxically, the problems perhaps especially arose to the extent that Transition Towns does not fully endorse the type of values that are typically advocated in literature on activist research, such as equality, emancipation and empowerment. These values were part of my luggage when I entered the movement, but did not entirely connect to the latter's self-understanding.[8] Indeed, what if these values and notions stand in contrast with the very way the respective people and movements conceive themselves? Would it not be paternalistic to decide for Transition Towns that they should wage their 'struggle' in these terms, even if struggle is everything they are opposed too?

[8] The experience with Climate Justice Action was different in this regard, as my luggage and theirs were more similar in this regard, albeit evidently not completely equal.

Next to these concerns, two reflections led me to abandon this one-sided focus on emancipatory politics in the literature on activist research. First and foremost was the experience with Transition Towns, to have no real space to disagree with the movement's approach. It was soon obvious to me that this problem related to 'the political', but the typical discourse about empowerment and emancipation gave me little tools to grasp what was at stake. I needed a more sober understanding of what the political was about, namely discourses acknowledging power, conflict, disagreement, decision, contingency. Through my encounter with the work of Chantal Mouffe (2000, 2002, 2006), amongst others, I discovered a notion of the political that does not contain any a priori normative positions, but is merely about the possibility to disagree and to be in conflict, and this proved extremely helpful in coming to grips with Transition Towns.

A second reflection concerns what I wrote above about the non-neutrality of social research. How can we understand this non-neutral nature of 'scientific' discourses? And especially, how can one deal with this as a researcher? The above-mentioned notion of the political turned out to be extremely helpful in this regard. It helped me understand scientific discourses as one kind of discourses next to others, all of which have particular political functions and effects, and all of which try to conceal or acknowledge these. Moreover, this more sober notion of the political gave me a very relevant clue for how to deal with the non-neutrality of science. Evidently, the political dimension of discourse challenges you to take a stance, not to remain aloof. But how could one then still call the discourse that is produced 'scientific'? Even if one acknowledges that no science is entirely neutral, how can we still distinguish scientific discourses from plainly political ones? Or are all part of the same grey space of discourse? Of course, there are many criteria for doing qualitative social research in a rigorous way (e.g., Baxter and Eyles 1997, Lincoln and Guba 1985, Reid and Gough 2000). However, something more seemed to be at stake. My strategy to deal with this issue has been relatively simple, but yet significant: it was to make this non-neutrality (or the political) into the very object of my research. My argument would be that an important aspect by which scientific discourses distinguish themselves from plainly political ones lays precisely in the fact that they reflect back upon their own political nature and consider the political as a specific object of research. With this, I do not want to suggest that the political itself should be the very object of every social study from now onwards. What I want to do is to point to an important issue that is at stake in social (and surely activist) research processes.

Activist researchers argue it is important to be reflexive of one's own values and positions. However, my argument is that one should add a level of reflexivity to this. Activist research, in my view, needs not only to reflect upon which side it takes (e.g. the struggle for emancipation). It also and especially needs to reflect upon what it means to take stances, or more precisely, what are the conditions for this to be possible in the first place. Under which discursive circumstances can one become aware of this non-neutrality, and can people freely and openly adopt a well-

considered political position? This is something activist research, in the way I have conducted it, can decisively contribute to: not only by urging people to become self-conscious and choose a position, but especially by helping to create the discursive conditions under which it becomes possible for people to take a position in the first place. In other words, activist research should also defend 'the political', without in an a priori way defining which position in a political debate or struggle is to be preferred. This is the key to the 'sober' notion of the political I advocate throughout this thesis, and which I develop more in detail in chapter 7.

The central distinction is therefore not one between scientific and political discourses, as scientific discourses are also always political to a certain degree. Neither is it one between scientific discourses which take the side of the oppressed versus scientific discourses which factually defend the status quo because they refuse to take sides. It is one between discourses which acknowledge the political in the sense that they recognise they partake in a field where power is exercised, conflicts are fought and decisions are made, versus discourses which present themselves as neutral.

The sober approach I think should underpin activist research thus especially needs to contribute to making visible the fault lines, conflicts and power relations that exist and show that the social is contingent. Activist researchers would then contribute to creating democratic spaces where 'the political' can be accounted for. To formulate it in yet different terms, advocating empowerment and emancipation only becomes possible in a discursive context which already acknowledges the political, and the creation of such a context is something which critical and activist research can contribute to.

Having arrived at this stage of the argument, a caveat should be added. The above analysis does not mean one should merely adopt a metaposition, which amounts to demanding that conflict or power would be acknowledged as such. Indeed, adopting a higher, reflexive position cannot be a flight into a new type of neutrality. The temptation could exist to think that by taking the political as an object of study, one could again claim to have acquired a kind of higher position, which would again warrant a kind of scientific neutrality. This is not the case: to start with, the very choice of the political as an object of research is not neutral in itself. I would argue it is also based on a choice for democracy, which, as I argue in this dissertation, starts by taking the political seriously (e.g. Mouffe 2000, 2002, 2006). Moreover, as one can never entirely put oneself above the field of political contestation, one will also have to recognise one's own position within the hegemonic field one aims to describe and make visible. This should not run counter to the previous argument. Rather the opposite: in concrete circumstances, the best way to make the political visible is by actually taking stances. Indeed, it does not suffice to study the political 'as such', but one ought to study it in its concrete manifestations, through concrete acts of taking sides. In other words, one cannot limit oneself to announcing that contestation should get a place, as some scholars of the political do. The work of Amanda Machin (2013) is an example of this. Unwillingly, this results in the typically detached academic

position, in which one takes a seemingly neutral position from which one can judge other discourses. One thus puts oneself above the political dimensions which are constitutive for human life.

To sum up, my argument is that a proper acknowledgement of the political in social research requires two moves at the same time: making the hegemonic field visible, and adopting a stance oneself in this field. The first move is a precondition for the second, but the second move also contributes to the first. If one would limit oneself to making the political visible, the result would be a paradox, as it then appears as if one can advocate the recognition of the political from a position which stands above the conflict, and which is neutral or non-political in itself. Ultimately, the attempt to repoliticise a debate and democratise it fails as a result. One can only recreate space for disagreement by taking a stance (by disagreeing with others), and demanding that this disagreement is recognised as legitimate.

Or seen from the other side of the coin: activist researchers should not merely advocate a particular political goal, such as emancipation, but also the political as such, both as a general democratic principle, as the condition of possibility of their personal advocacy, and as an object of their research, which makes it possible to self-critically reflect on their own engaged and scholarly activities. In other words, they have to support a specific cause and help create a context in which causes (including other ones) can be defended in the first place. Whereas much activist research fails to do the second, some academic research on the political forgets the first.

6. LESSONS LEARNED

I want to end this chapter with a few self-critical reflections on methodological difficulties or challenges which I faced during the research process, or issues which I have insufficiently tackled. These are issues I would surely approach in a different way in future research projects, and therefore they can also be seen as lessons learned.

6.1. WHERE ARE THE OBSERVATIONS?

The lack of a more systematic analysis of my observations and insights gathered through the activist part of my research is without any doubt the weakest side of my research project, even if I can give a whole range of good reasons for this. Next to the theoretical arguments to focus on interviews (see section 3.2), some more mundane and pragmatic reasons have to be mentioned in this regard. The first reason is related to the recurring problem with participant observation, namely that it generates an overload of information. When taking notes, one inevitably has to make a selection. However, in the initial phase of a research project, it is often not easy do decide what this selection should consist of. On one extreme, one risks to try writing down

'everything', which leads to a chaos of information. On the other side, one can also run the risk of making the focus too narrow, and lose information which afterwards turns out to be relevant. Personally, I switched between both extremes. The result was an amalgam of field notes which did not always have a systematic character. The fact I started doing empirical research very early onwards in my research trajectory, when my methodological protocol, let alone my research questions and goals were not yet precisely formulated, aggravated this problem. Other issues which played a role are the difficulty to systematically take notes while also being part of the action process, the evident lack of audiotapes which allow for smooth and correct note-taking afterwards, the fact that meetings, actions and activities are (by definition) not ordered in a way that facilitates an easy process of structuring and comparison, the fact that I took part in so many meetings and activities that I was a bit overwhelmed by the massive amount of 'data', and the relative lack of experience in how to deal with this, including amongst my peers.[9] In this context, it should be noted that the generally greater scientific credibility of more conventional methods such as interviews also played a certain role in my choice to focus on these data.

A second, even more important point is that participant observation triggers a number of specific problems of ethics and deontology. People tend to forget a researcher is present, and it is not always easy to distinguish what is said publicly and what should be considered as private. Researchers should counter the temptation to include stories relating to the private sphere in their analysis (Schuermans, 2013), but in the kind of research I was engaged in, the lines between public and private were often not clear. There are many stories and interventions which I deemed highly relevant for my research but which in the end I refrained from writing down due to ethical concerns.

From an ethical point of view, one of the merits of interviews is that they are more clearly circumscribed. The slightly unnatural context created in order to perform interviews has as an advantage that it is clear for everyone that they are part of a research context: interviewer and interviewee are sitting in a silent space with a dictaphone between them. Therefore, there is not much doubt that what is being said will normally be used for research goals.[10] As the research setting is much less clear in activist research,[11] an ever present ethical concern relates to the question what information can be used as empirical data, and what not, even if one has the approval to be part of the movement as an activist researcher.

[9] In this context, it should also be noted that the first interviews were conducted more or less half a year after I started with the activist research part. At that moment, my research questions and focus had become clearer. Furthermore, surely if they are semi-structured, interviews are more easily comparable. As interviews are taped, it is also easier to recall what was said exactly, and to decide upon what is most important. In general, there is much less discussion on the legitimacy to use these data in the analysis.

[10] This does not mean interviews do not generate their own ethical or deontological problems.

[11] Which is also desirable, as it allows to overcome the disadvantages of the unnaturalness of an interview context, or more conventional types of observation.

A third reason is that during my research trajectory my interest shifted from an empirical to a theoretical one. As I started to feel the need to delve into the theoretical side of the discussion, my field notes became less preponderant.

Despite these rationales, the lack of a more systematic analysis of my observations and experiences as an activist researcher is regretful. This is especially the case because these observations and experiences have had an enormous importance for the way my actual research questions and results were shaped. I have not been able to account sufficiently for this. Or, to put it in more positive terms: I have not been fully capable of 'valorising' the surplus which activist research has meant for my research project.

6.2. METHODOLOGICAL PREPARATION, INTERVISION AND MEMBER CHECKING

Related to this is the retrospective consideration that my methodological framework was not sufficiently developed on the moment I started my empirical research. Already in the first weeks of my doctoral trajectory, I became involved in Transition Towns. This was partly due to the sudden emergence and rapid success of the movement, and partly to the justified advice of my supervisor to proceed in this way. With hindsight, however, it might have been preferable to first establish the basic contours of a methodological protocol before embarking upon field research (developing a method to structure field notes, reflecting on how to introduce myself to the movement, etc.)

Moreover, in this type of research, working with an intervision group is actually a requirement. This means gathering at least once a month with a more or less fixed group of scholars who are engaged in similar research and with whom one can discuss problems or questions which arise during the research trajectory. Such a way of proceeding can help make certain choices in a more well-considered and reflexive way, and can also be a good channel for peers to give feedback on each other's work (Baxter and Eyles 1997, Lincoln and Guba 1985, Reid and Gough 2000). Although it would have been very useful to participate in such a group, it was not available during my research and there were not enough people I knew who engaged in similar research to establish it. This does not mean that my research was not subjected to other forms of peer debriefing, including meetings with my supervisor and assessors, the presentation of research findings during seminars and conferences and informal forms of peer debriefing such as coffee break discussions or other informal talks with colleagues or academic friends (Lecompte and Goetz 1982, Lincoln and Guba 1985, Schuermans 2013). Moreover, since most of the chapters of this dissertation have gone through the peer-review process of academic journals, a lot of useful feedback was provided by anonymous peer reviewers.

Of course, one does not only need feedback from peers, but also from members of the movements one studies (Baxter and Eyles 1997, Lincoln and Guba 1985, Reid and Gough 2000). I would consider the lack of a more systematic form of member checking as the second major weakness of my research. Surely, I did engage in member checking in an informal way. As I was an active participant of both movements, many of the ideas I elaborated were informally discussed with other members (both in personal talks, and in the form of workshops which were set up by other people and/or by myself).[12] A significant number of people were reached in this way, and this helped me both to communicate preliminary research findings and to collect feedback on these first interpretations. Furthermore, as parts of my research results were widely communicated through the distribution and promotion of the popular book 'De mythe van de groene economie', I had the opportunity to engage in numerous talks and debates about these issues with people both inside and outside both movements.

Next to these informal forms of member checking, I did send my first papers (which included many of the ideas that made it into this dissertation *in statu nascendi*) to members from the Transition Towns movement in the earliest stages of my research trajectory, but I stopped doing this after a while.[13] One of the reasons was the difficult position I started to have in relation to Transition Towns. Moreover, for a while I felt uncertain about how to deal with this. It took me some time to figure out, and by the moment I had made a decision, a distance had grown between myself and the movement. I felt some reluctance to overcome this distance again, and that refrained me from still sending my papers. A less important factor, was the expectation that Transition Towns members would possibly not agree with all aspects of my interpretation. As the movement describes itself explicitly as apolitical, the depiction of Transition Towns as depoliticised would probably not have posed a

[12] To give a few examples: within the transition movement I set up several 'statement games' in which I presented theses which I elaborated during my research (and which, according to me, displayed crucial and often ambivalent characteristics of the movement or difficult questions the movement was confronted with) and asked the respondents to take sides. Subsequently, they were asked to engage in a debate with each other on the basis of these positions. In this context, I also presented parts of my own analysis and asked the respondents to react on it. Another example constitutes a workshop about the Transition movement which I helped to set up a at the first Belgian-Dutch Climate Action Camp in Antwerp in 2009. Next to a large numbers of transitioners and climate justice activists, we also invited Alice Cutler (co-author of *The Rocky Road to a Real Transition*) to clarify her critical analysis of the Transition movement and to engage in a debate with some of the pioneers of the Transition movement in Belgium and The Netherlands (amongst others, Peter Polder and Jeanneke van de Ven). As her analysis converges with mine, this helped me to better grasp some issues at stake, and especially to map the answer of transitioners to critiques. In this context, I also discussed a number of topics which were crucial for my own analysis. I can also give many examples concerning the Climate Justice Action movement, as I spoke in many workshops and debates, presenting part of the analysis which would later constitute the core of my PhD, and engaging in several discussions on these topics with other participants.

[13] My first papers were all about Transition Towns, I wrote my papers on Climate Justice Action only at a later stage.

problem.[14] However, most transitioners might not have agreed with the critical perspective I take on this issue. To a certain extent, avoiding this confrontation constituted a kind of cowardice to engage (once more) in a proper political debate. Therefore, this example shows once again that acting in a properly political way is maybe the most desirable, but not always the most easy or evident option to take.[15]

I strongly considered to send my papers to members of Climate Justice Action but it felt weird to send my material to one movement and not to the other. In that sense, the decision no longer to act as an *activist* researcher in Transition Towns had consequences far beyond what I had considered originally. More reflection is needed on how to deal with such situations. But especially, more research is required on the 'political' relation one starts to have with one's 'research objects' when presenting research findings which partly contradict the political positions taken by them. Being part of an intervision group could surely have helped, but there is also a need of more adequate scholarly literature on these specific difficulties that can arise in activist and other research settings.

6.3. THEORISING

Another point of concern relates to the rather negative balance I make of Transition Towns. I have been wondering why I ended up with this conclusion, and if I look back honestly, this negative balance appears to be partly the result of the theoretical framework I adopted. Interestingly, if I would have opted for another theory, the balance of both movements could have been quite different. Of course, the choice for this theoretical framework was not arbitrary, but imposed itself during my research as relevant for the cases considered. Still, it should be noted that this choice also had particular repercussions. To give one example: it had as a consequence that I looked mainly to the discourses of both movements, and not to their practices. This is relevant in the sense that if I had studied the actual practices of both movements, my analysis of Transition Towns would probably have been entirely different. Indeed, even if one would come to the conclusion that Transition Towns' practices do not contribute significantly to turning the tide, it would not have led to the kind of critical diagnosis I have made by focusing on the influence of its discourse on the hegemonic struggle.

Therefore, I want to come back here to my earlier statement that I tell just one possible story. The present analysis should be considered both in terms of what it reveals, and in terms of what it inevitably conceals. Most importantly, by no means

[14] That is also why I think I do more justice to the movement by analysing it as generally depoliticising than is the case with attempts by, amongst others, North (2010) and Urry (2011) to discern forms of politicisation in its discourse.

[15] As plenty of examples show, it is much easier to hide one's position behind a scientific, technical or otherwise depoliticised discourse, which makes one can avoid the confrontation and the mobilisation of the courage and skills this requires, while at the same time in a subtle way continuing to defend a political position.

does it pretend to be the final and ultimate story to be told about the movements and processes at stake.

7. CONCLUSION

Social research cannot evade the question of the political, I argued in this chapter. The same is valid for the publication of research results. Even academic publications can, at least to a certain degree, be considered as political interventions. Being modest about the analysis that you bring is therefore one thing, but recognising that this story can nevertheless impact upon the very object of study, is quite another. Therefore, I can only hope that the analyses presented in this dissertation do not discourage people, but help to better grasp what is at stake, and contribute to building society in more democratic directions.

I like to underscore that this research has been conducted from the modest position of someone who knows how hard it is to build movements in practice, and that my sometimes overly critical perspective is the perspective of someone who is searching and struggling together with other transitioners and activists to find ways to realise effective and democratic change. Being involved as an activist researcher means, on the one hand, being an activist amongst other activists, but on the other hand, it also entails taking a distance from time to time, to submit one's engagement and movement building efforts to critical scrutiny. As Peter Reason and Hilary Bradbury (2008, p. 4) note 'just as theory without action is meaningless', '[a]ction without reflection and understanding is blind'. This also perfectly summarises the aims of the political theories I worked with.

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CHAPTER 3

BEYOND INDIVIDUAL BEHAVIOUR CHANGE: THE ROLE OF POWER, KNOWLEDGE AND STRATEGY IN TACKLING CLIMATE CHANGE[1]

1. INTRODUCTION

Individual behaviour change is fast becoming a kind of 'holy grail' in environmental policy today (e.g., Jackson 2005, p. 121, Stevenson and Keehn 2006, DEFRA 2008). Its goal is to 'encourage, motivate and facilitate more sustainable attitudes, behaviours and lifestyles' (Jackson 2005, p. iii). These attitudes involve 'more sustainable patterns of consumption, covering the purchase, use and disposal of goods and services' (p. 13). A broad spectrum of measures has been developed to reach this goal: from education programmes, such as awareness raising campaigns, to economic rewards. With the help of a whole range of incentives, policymakers try to steer individual (consumer) behaviour in the intended 'environmentally friendly' direction. Until recently, there has been an increasing tendency in this approach to use non-rational means to influence behaviour (e.g., McKenzie-Mohr and Smith 1999, Heimlich and Ardoin 2008). Tim Jackson (2005, p. vi) underlines for example 'the need for policy to […] attempt to affect individual behaviours (and behavioural antecedents) directly'. This means, for example, using role models, social pressure or connoting the desired behaviour to positive feelings of freedom, friendship or sex, as is also done in the advertisement industry.

The focus on education for individual behaviour change is also present in the strategies that a number of conventional environmental movements put forward today. Environmental movements often make it the cornerstone of their campaigns to convince people to take the bicycle instead of the car, to buy organic food from nearby or to avoid overpackaged cookies, tooth brushes or pineapples. Of course, there are other strategies. Many environmentally concerned citizens point to the way society is organised (the transport infrastructure, the organisation of cities or the profit-driven market economy) and engage in collective social actions for what they

[1] Published as Kenis, A. and Mathijs, E., 2012. Beyond individual behaviour change: The role of power, knowledge and strategy in tackling climate change. *Environmental Education Research* 18 (1), 45-65.

call ‘structural change’. These can take the form of petitions, demonstrations or blockades, aimed at protecting rain forests, fighting against traffic or banning genetically modified organisms (e.g., Wall 1999, Griggs and Howarth 2000, Doherty, Plows, and Wall 2003, Rootes 2009).

But why do people choose for one type of engagement rather than another? Our research started from the observation that we have little knowledge of people’s motives in making this choice. Moreover, the basic assumptions of such engaged choices often remain implicit. Fundamentally different visions of the root causes of environmental destruction, of possible solutions and even of human beings and society seem to be playing a role.

In this study we started from the hypothesis that a crucial question underlying this dilemma is that of power: who has power and how can one exert power and thus realise change in a sustainable direction? That this notion of power is important is already obvious if one looks at some of the main slogans environmental movements use to further their case.

Between ‘You’ve got the power to choose’ as a conscious consumer and ‘Reclaim Power’ through collective action, the analysis of power differs, but the realisation that power matters does not.[1] We think that a focus on power can help to explore why people choose a particular type of engagement rather than another, and that this can constitute a fruitful contribution in current debates in environmental policy, the ecological movement and, as we will argue, also among scholars.

In section two, we will compare the main theses of the literature on education for individual behaviour change with those of education for collective social action. Section three introduces our research objectives and the design of our empirical research. In the fourth section, the research findings are demonstrated and discussed. In the final section, we formulate some general conclusions.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In the academic literature, a similar division can be found as the one described above. A big part of this literature focuses on education for ‘pro-environmental behaviour’, which often actually means education for individual behaviour change (e.g., Rickinson 2001, Kollmuss and Agyeman 2002, Bamberg and Möser 2007, Heimlich and Ardoin 2008). This research often starts from an observed ‘gap’ between ‘knowledge’ and ‘action’, and has practical aims. It examines the factors that explain why and when people commit themselves to changing their individual behaviour, in order to be better able to influence people in this direction. Contrary to this approach, there

[1] The first was the slogan of a Greenpeace campaign to stimulate people to choose a renewable energy provider (Greenpeace 2009), the second was the main slogan of an action organised by a couple of thousand activists against the climate summit in Copenhagen in December 2009 (Climate Justice Action 2009).

exists literature which starts from a totally different point of view. It also studies people's motives for taking action and develops education programmes to stimulate this, but it defines action very differently, namely as a collective engagement to influence politics, policy or corporate management and to change social relations (e.g., Clair 2003, Kapoor 2003, Jensen 2004, Clover 2006, Malone 2006).

Inevitably, different visions on the root causes of environmental problems and their possible solutions, and on human beings and society, are playing a key role here. Firstly, while the individual behaviour change approach generally tends to conceive of the environmental issue in terms of the sum of individual decisions and choices, the collective social action approach stresses the role of social structures and systems in causing environmental problems (e.g., Courtenay-Hall and Rogers 2002, Jensen 2002, Clover 2003, Chawla and Cushing 2007). Secondly, while the first approach asks the question how people can be steered into a predetermined 'pro-environmental' direction in their capacity as consumers, the second approach rather stresses their status as citizens, embedded in collective agencies constituting the 'subject' of social change (e.g., Courtenay-Hall and Rogers 2002, Carlsson and Jensen 2006, Jensen and Schnack 2006). Thirdly, whereas the first approach promotes education that mainly focuses on positive-scientific knowledge of the nature and effects of the environmental problem and on knowledge about prescribed 'pro-environmental behaviour' strategies, the second recommends raising people's 'knowledge' in a broader sense, including for example the root causes of the environmental problem, visions on alternatives and a broad spectrum of strategies to realise them. In this broader sense, more than 'knowledge', narrowly conceived, is at stake (e.g., Clair 2003, Clover 2003, Jensen 2004). The aim of this second type of education is rather to enhance people's 'action competence', which requires more than mere knowledge (e.g., Jensen 2002, Jensen and Schnack 2006). Fourthly, the first approach tends to understand power as a psychological phenomenon. It stresses the importance of, for example, 'locus of control' and 'perceived behavioural control' (e.g., Kollmuss and Agyeman 2002, Jackson 2005), and tends to understand people's statements about experiences of powerlessness as expressions of their psychological barriers for engaging in individual behaviour change[2]. The second approach, in contrast, conceives

[2] In its list of important barriers for pro-environmental behaviour, the DEFRA report (2008, p. 35) mentions the following examples: (1) 'Scepticism around the climate change debate and distrust of both government and industry. For example, about a quarter don't believe their behaviour contributes to climate change.' (2) 'Disempowerment, as there is a disconnection between the size of the problem (Global Climate Change) and the individual's contribution (e.g. turning off lights) and a sense that individuals cannot make a difference. About one third said it was not worth Britain acting, as other countries would cancel its actions out. More than half claimed if government did more, they would too'. As such, experiences of powerlessness are psychologised. They are not taken seriously, but reduced to a feeling, a false impression, that has to be taken away. Instead of understanding the choice not to engage in pro-environmental behaviour as being based on an analysis of the problem and on a strategic judgement, it is approached as a behavioural problem. Authors such as Redclift & Benton (1994, p. 7-8) sharply reply to this with statements such as: 'One of the most important insights which the social scientist can offer in the

of power as an effective and relational social reality (e.g., Redclift and Benton 1994, Clover 2002).

Within the framework of this paper, it is not possible to extensively elaborate on the differences between these two research approaches and how they rely on different visions of the root causes of the environmental problem and its possible solutions, of human beings and society. It suffices here to point to their divergent conceptions of power, of change and of the type of knowledge that is required for realising change.

3. RESEARCH OBJECTIVE AND DESIGN

3.1. RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

The central question of our research is why some of the people who take action as a response to the environmental crisis choose individual behaviour change and others collective social action. On the basis of the literature briefly summarised above, one might hypothesise that these alternatives correspond with different visions of human beings and society and, more specifically, on the nature and role of power. In order to give a precise focus to our study, this question was applied to the case of climate change. Summarised, our research question is *whether* environmentally aware people think and/or experience that they have real power to contribute to a solution for climate change (or not) and what they think about *how* to exert this power.

3.2. RESEARCH DESIGN: METHOD, DATA COLLECTION AND DATA ANALYSIS

To explore this research question, we engaged in qualitative empirical research. As Rickinson (2001) has noted, qualitative research in this domain is relatively rare. The focus of the majority of previous studies has been on 'the *extent*, rather than on the *nature* of [respondents'] environmental concern, attitudes and behaviours' (Rickinson 2001, p. 221). In order to study the latter, a qualitative research design was elaborated to allow us to delve more deeply into people's environmental convictions, experiences and actions.

environmental debate is that the eminently rational appeals on the part of environmentalists for 'us' to change our attitudes, or lifestyles, so as to advance a general 'human interest' are liable to be ineffective. This is not because (or *primarily* because) 'we' are irrational, but because the *power* to make a significant difference, one way or the other, to global, or even local environmental change is immensely unevenly distributed.'

The sample consisted of twelve young environmentally aware adults (age: 25-35 years) who are all highly educated, who are very concerned about climate change (according to themselves and people who know them) and who are environmentally committed in one way or the other. On the basis of snowball sampling we came into contact with a large group of such young 'environmentalists', amongst whom we chose twelve respondents on a theoretical basis (Baarda, De Goede, and Teunissen 2005, Babbie 2009). The goal of this purposive type of sampling was to select at least a certain variety of respondents (in terms of their ideological background, beliefs, and concrete engagements) that could give us a first idea of the range of possible answers to our research question (Baarda, De Goede, and Teunissen 2005, Denzin and Lincoln 2005). Concretely, the environmental engagements of our respondents varied from political activity to policy work, professional involvement in national environmental movements, voluntary work in local action groups and personal lifestyle changes. Their ideological positions ranged from green liberal to eco-socialist and eco-primitivist. All respondents were more or less part of what could be called the 'green scene'[3] (Horton 2006). Nine of them were women, three were men. They all lived in Antwerp, Ghent or Brussels, the three largest cities in Flanders, the northern part of Belgium.

Data collection consisted of semi-structured in-depth interviews of between one and two hours. The choice for this method of data collection was necessitated by the nature of the research questions. These focus on experiences and opinions, which cannot easily be studied through the observation of behaviour, but by directly questioning the respondents (Smith-Sebasto 2000, Baarda, De Goede, and Teunissen 2005). To give an overview of the themes that were provided as inputs, the interview schedule is added as an annex (see annex 3). The interview was structured in such a way as to steer the respondents as little as possible. Of course, interviewing never merely reveals people's consciousness, but inevitably also has the effect of creating it to a certain extent. An interview is 'inextricably and unavoidably historically, politically, and contextually bound' (Fontana and Frey 2008, p. 115), however open and non-steering one tries to be. We are aware that, for example, formulating certain proposals and asking the respondents to react, has such an effect. We tried to counterbalance this influence on the respondents as much as possible by making *the same* suggestions to *all* respondents, and by putting the more concrete proposals at the end of the interview. However, making such proposals as such proved to be very important during the interviews as asking a respondent to react to a concrete proposal often revealed more of the respondent's experiences and ways of thinking than sticking to non-specific open questions.

The interviews were completely typed out and subdivided into text fragments. First, we started with open coding, in which each text fragment received one or more

[3] The fact that all respondents were more or less in the 'green scene' (Horton 2006), is one of the limiting factors of our sampling. It is surely possible that a sample of, say, governmental officials, with no connection to this green scene, would give different results.

labels which covered the content as well as possible. Second, these codes were ordered to enable us to search for certain structures in the material. We did this with the help of the software package 'MindManager®' which makes it possible to spatially order and visually structure the text material. In this process of axial coding, we several times added new labels on higher levels of abstraction, which finally led to a series of tree structures that gave a schematic overview of the research results. On the basis of these structures, a number of tentative hypotheses were formulated, which we elaborate upon in paragraph 4.

Within the limited scope of this study, it was not possible to fulfil all criteria of good qualitative research. For instance, we did not triangulate our data. Nevertheless, we increased the credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability of our research by, e.g., choosing the data source that best fitted our research questions, using the method of purposeful sampling, recording the data digitally, making extensive reflective notes during the research process, giving a thick description of the research results, and engaging in member checking and limited peer debriefing (e.g., Reid and Gough 2000, Baarda, De Goede, and Teunissen 2005, Denzin and Lincoln 2005). Furthermore, we took the 'risk' of being confronted with discrepant information by searching for a maximum of variety in our limited sample (including 'extreme cases')[4]. Nevertheless, it should be clear that on the basis of this method, and given the specificity and relatively limited number of respondents, it is not possible to give definitive answers to the research question. Our primary goal was more modest: to explore the role of power in the choice for different types of environmental commitment and to formulate a number of directions for further research. The usefulness of such an exploratory approach is evident from the fact that many of our findings do not tally with the assumptions and expectations we had in the beginning, as will be explained more thoroughly in the next section.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this part, we will discuss the research findings. In the limited scope of this article, it is not possible to provide an exhaustive overview of all significant elements present in the discourse of the respondents. Instead we will focus on five findings, which can possibly feed the current debate and trace new directions for future research. Firstly, we discuss the respondents' experiences of power(lessness). Secondly, we focus on

[4] With 'extreme cases' we mean people who adopt a quite radical ideological position and/or go quite far in their own environmental commitment. For example, a few respondents went amazingly far in changing their individual behaviour: they took a shower only once a week and only with cold water, they stopped visiting their parents who serve non-organic food for dinner or they lived without heating even during winter months. Others were so committed to organising actions, to demonstrating or to giving lectures that their personal lives and health suffered from it. Ideologically, some respondents were very liberal, while others were eco-primitivist or eco-communist.

what we would call 'strategy scepticism'. Thirdly, we reflect on the respondents' feelings of being conditioned, and their resistance to this. Fourthly, we discuss the observed 'gap' between the analysis respondents make and the strategy they propose. And, finally, we analyse another significant gap, that between what respondents say on a concrete and on a more abstract level.

4.1. POWERLESSNESS

A first important observation is that while our original purpose was to map experiences of power and powerlessness, almost no text fragment could be labelled as an experience of power. The feelings that were mentioned most frequently are worry, indignation, pessimism, defeatism, and indeed, on top of the list, powerlessness[5].

The respondents experienced this powerlessness with regard to several themes. Firstly, some referred to the huge scale, the long-term nature and complexity of the climate problem. These seem to have a paralysing effect, in that they render organising action against climate change quite difficult. Each action appears as negligible compared to the magnitude of the problem. As Laura[6] stated when she made the comparison with her own actions for car-free Sundays: 'Well, having car-free Sundays is of course something else than going against climate change. A car-free Sunday is something very concrete, but also very limited and easy to realise.'

Secondly, some respondents said that they felt incapable of comprehending the root causes of climate change. That made them feel powerless in the sense of not knowing against whom or what they had to act. Helga stated for instance:

> I think it is also related to the fact that our economy is based on capitalism, and I think capitalism is detrimental to nature, and I think that.... but yeah, I don't know that for sure... I find that a difficult question also because I might not have read enough about these issues. I don't know all the details, I have to make sure that I'm not too... I'll think about it.

Thirdly, many respondents referred to the lack of strategic vision as an important cause of powerlessness. Several of them said they actually had 'no strategy at all to tackle the issue' [7], and pointed to this as 'the biggest problem'. Thus, Laura stated:

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[5] It is important to mention that respondents knew that the study was about their commitments and motivations with regard to climate change, but not that 'power' and 'powerlessness' were crucial concepts in our approach. Therefore, it is not the case that they mentioned these terms so often because they would have known this was our core question.

[6] We have translated the Dutch interviews into English, trying to remain as close as possible to the original, spoken language. The names of the respondents, corporations and organisations have been modified, for reasons of anonymity.

[7] If we put a word or sentence in double quotation marks, it means that we quote a respondent directly.

> But I also think that the problem is actually that I don't really know what the right solution is, or what we should strive for. Well, I have a couple of ideas in my mind, but, to say, this is the right course, and let's now all turn this way, I don't really have this today. Because that would, I think, make it really very easy, and I also think that many people would do much more.

Sometimes this feeling appears to be related to a lack of knowledge of the range of possible strategic options. Sometimes it seems to result from the experience that nothing seems to work. Boris stated for example:

> I really have difficulties with this, with which ways are still left over. What can we really do? Taking to the street has no effect. Taking legal steps against companies has no effect. Politics doesn't work. Lobbying politicians... has no effect, or too little.

Having arrived at this point, some respondents came up with 'extreme' strategies as the only possible alternative, although they turned out also to be sceptical about these in the end. Boris:

> Imagine that you found the CCC [an extreme left terrorist group in Belgium, operating in the 1980s], not composed of communists, but of ecologists, what will we do then? Placing bombs, and getting arrested the day after? Because we are heavily controlled, we can't do anything, everybody would see it. I've considered that, because you see indeed: nothing is happening here. That is powerlessness … Then you think: we should get organised, and then we will make it all happen by ourselves. But yes... where to place a bomb? In Brussels? Whatever, that doesn't interest anyone.

Fourthly, almost all respondents mentioned the lack of a credible vision of an alternative as a crucial factor in experiencing powerlessness. Several respondents asked if they could skip this question, or said we should first ask other questions. Others kept on reflecting in silence. Many respondents felt that another type of society should be possible, but had to conclude that they were not capable of explaining what that society could look like. Laura stated for example:

> One of the biggest problems is that I can't explain it very well. Actually, I do have such a kind of society in my mind, where this is all really possible, and it feels right. But I'm not able to explain it...

Several respondents concluded that in so far as they had an idea or a sense of an alternative, they still did not believe that it would ever be possible to realise it. Some even stated that they did not want to go on thinking about it for this very reason. Pauline: 'Yes, I feel like... (strongly)... it is not that I don't have doubts , but I cannot but believe in it for myself... Because I don't think we will have another system within the next twenty years.'

4.2. STRATEGY SCEPTICISM

A second finding is that it appeared impossible to draw a simple distinction between two forms of environmental commitment, as we set out to do. All respondents who were active on the collective social level were also engaged in individual behaviour

change. The opposite was not the case. For many respondents, individual behaviour change was their only engagement. However, what came as a surprise is that almost none of the respondents said they believe that individual behaviour change could make a real contribution to tackle climate change. The arguments given for this kind of engagement were all of an ethical nature, they were about 'doing the right thing'. Boris argued for example: 'For me, I wouldn't be able to live differently, but I know that in reality, it is zero, it doesn't matter at all.' And Helga stated:

> Maybe I do it in order to have a positive conscience or to earn my place in heaven [laughs]. I would feel badly if I were to carry on as I used to, but that doesn't mean that I think that I am making a real contribution.

This is a quite paradoxical observation: although 'it doesn't help at all' ten out of twelve respondents invest serious efforts in buying organic food, saying no to the car, saving energy and so on. They seem to do things in which they do not really believe.

This surprising finding could have important consequences for pro-environmental behaviour research, especially if it would be confirmed in further research. Pro-environmental behaviour research studies the factors that make people change their individual behaviour. One of the most evident factors that is rarely taken into consideration, however, is the extent to which people actually believe that such a type of engagement, and the strategy on which it is based, is effective in the first place. Our research findings suggest that this point may be more important than one would think at first sight. In the case of environmentally aware people, at least, there is no lack of awareness of the nature and effects of the ecological problem, nor is there a lack of motivation to take action (for whatever social, psychological, cultural or other reasons one can imagine). All respondents described the climate problem as being very serious, and displayed a great motivation to take action. What seemed to be lacking, however, is the very belief that the currently dominant strategy of individual behaviour change is effective. A number of participants stated they increasingly tended to give up on this type of engagement, as they considered it ineffective. They said they used to be very strict on their individual behaviour in the past, but became less rigid in this because of their doubts about the usefulness of this type of action. Chantal stated for example:

> And I'm also a little bit tired of always having to appeal to my own conscience, while, (...) every time I take the car, somehow I feel bad because of that ... But I don't find that's just, ... that people always have to take responsibility for the bad things. Because, ... uh, driving a car is bad, but as long as the government invests in roads instead of railways, there are no real alternatives, and nothing will really change...

As a conclusion, a tentative hypothesis we would like to formulate on the basis of this exploratory study is that an important reason why only relatively few people change their behaviour might not only be related to what is often referred to as 'climate scepticism' (Jones 2009), but also to what we would call 'strategy scepticism'.

4.3. CONDITIONING AND RESISTANCE

A third finding is that most respondents were very critical towards people who actively try to convince others to change their individual behaviour, and towards educational actions promoting this (especially towards awareness raising campaigns that promote individual behaviour change in a 'direct'[8] way). Many respondents disapproved of the 'blaming' or 'paternalistic' character of these actions. Deborah argued for example:

> And, then, I asked myself the question 'why don't I want to convince others' … And then I come to the problem of culpabilisation, that you are making people feel individually responsible for the environmental crisis. And I don't agree with that …

Furthermore, several respondents criticised the fact that awareness raising campaigns, by focusing on individual behaviour change, tend to represent the climate problem as less serious than it actually is. Pauline stated for instance:

> The big risk, of course, is that we all fall into the trap that … we think that we are doing fine when we even once use the bicycle to go to the shop. Because that is what these campaigns are suggesting … They sometimes even resemble a kind of collective easing of our conscience … as if the goal is to give people a good feeling, to give the impression that the environmental movement and the government are taking the necessary steps to tackle climate change, when in fact, nothing is done …

Many thought such awareness raising campaigns are even more 'questionable' to the extent that they are not only conducted by environmental movements or governments, but also by private companies. Helga for example was very critical of the Belgian electricity company L, which campaigned to convince people to save electricity:

> I find that hypocritical. A big company like L, I don't know, I have never read they were so revolutionary in this regard, in saving energy on all levels. It remains a bad company of which I've heard many bad things, how they act towards consumers... It disturbs me when these companies act as if they are saints... I mean, when they promote something which seems good, all the while doing something else.

The intensity with which many respondents spoke was revealing. Martin stated for example that he is 'sick' of these actions: 'the companies just do what they want, and individuals are again asked to take responsibility'.

As explained before, there is a recent tendency in environmental policy, but also in pro-environmental research and in the environmental movement, to increasingly focus on ways to steer people's behaviour 'directly' rather than to convince them by giving arguments and information. Our respondents reacted very strongly against this tendency, and criticised its paternalistic thrust. Eline stated for example: 'It more and

[8] With the term 'direct' we refer here to the idea of Tim Jackson (2005, p. vi) that we quoted in the introduction, namely 'the need for policy to […] attempt to affect individual behaviours (and behavioural antecedents) directly'. Concretely, this means using role models, social pressure or connoting the desired behaviour to positive feelings of freedom, friendship or sex, as is also done in the advertisement industry.

more looks like vulgar advertisement campaigns: images of sexy bimbos have to seduce people to eat vegetarian, well-known actresses are paid to promote organic food'. Such reactions reveal something of how such attempts to steer behaviour 'directly' might be perceived by environmentally aware citizens, and confirm the criticisms that a number of authors have developed in a more theoretical fashion. These criticisms boil down to the observation that in such approaches, people are considered as objects to be conditioned rather than that they are taken seriously as subjects of change (Courtenay-Hall and Rogers 2002, Carlsson and Jensen 2006, Jensen and Schnack 2006).

The use of economic incentives is another way to directly steer people's behaviour. Like social marketing, it does not aim at educating people and giving them information, but contrarily, it attempts to appeal to a certain rationality, namely the instrumental reasoning of consumers. However, a comment by Chantal shows that people can also feel uncomfortable with this kind of steering. Chantal explained that since people have to pay for plastic bags in the supermarket, she feels the tendency in herself to use them more than she did before:

> Yeah, in the past, I never used plastic bags … I have to say that I do it more and more today … In fact, I don't know why, but since they introduced this measure … Since you have to pay for plastic bags, I changed my mind … In fact, I don't know why …

Is one of the reasons for Chantal's change of mind that what she did in the past out of autonomous moral considerations is now being 'steered' from above?

On the basis of our empirical findings, we cannot formulate general hypotheses that can explain the observed resistance against awareness raising campaigns. Further research and theoretical work is required to elaborate on this. As other authors (e.g., Luke 1997, Darier 1999, Læssøe 2010) already suggested, Foucault's work on power and especially on governmentality might constitute a fruitful starting point here. In every social relation, there is power, and every power implies resistance, Michel Foucault (1994) explained. His notion of governmentality, which is about the 'techniques and procedures for directing human behaviour' is of particular interest in attempting to understand what is at stake in individual behaviour change strategies (Rose, O'Malley, and Valverde 2006, p. 83).

Governmentality involves the attempts to act on the desires and activities of others, aiming at 'governing the forms of self-government, structuring and shaping the field of possible action of subjects' (Lemke 2002, p. 52). The specificity of this type of power, often conceived as a kind of ethical 'guidance', is that people do not merely obey, but seem to produce the government's objectives 'out of themselves', as it were. Subjects are supposed to 'govern their soul', consider their own life as an enterprise, and use techniques for self-improvement. It is no coincidence that new actors, such as policy bodies and non-governmental organisations, play a crucial role in such informal techniques of government that attempt to make individuals responsible for their 'self-care' (Lemke 2002, p. 59). These techniques try to produce moral subjects, whose behaviour is supposed to generate beneficial effects on the

level of the population as a whole (e.g. lowering the general level of carbon dioxide emissions). The statements of a number of our respondents seem to point to an intrinsic ambiguity of governmentality strategies: for these to be effective, forms of self-government must not be seen to be governed or steered. At the core of this ambiguity a space of resistance might develop that is oriented against attempts to steer individual behaviour. Although this is all formulated by way of hypothesis, what is obvious at least, is that measures like awareness raising campaigns can have a counterproductive effect on environmentally aware citizens.

4.4. THE 'GAP' BETWEEN ANALYSIS AND STRATEGY

A fourth important observation is that there seems to be a lack of coherence in the responses of many respondents. Quite often, opinions were formulated that seem to be contradictory or at least at odds with each other. This might not surprise scholars who are familiar with this kind of qualitative research. However, what is striking is that we could observe some patterns which made these contradictions significant.

One case in point is the 'gap' between how respondents analyse the climate problem and the concrete solutions they propose. Almost all respondents point to the structural organisation of society as the root cause of climate change, stressing, for example, 'the growth economy' or 'capitalism'. However, if one asks about solutions, the first, spontaneous answer one tends to get, is not the transformation of these structures, but individual behaviour change. For example, on the question 'what are, according to her, the root causes of climate change' Eline answered: 'Our capitalist economic system where everything turns around making profit... That's the big responsible …. And the democratic deficit, and the disappearance of … the commons.' When we asked her what should happen to tackle climate change, she answered: 'Stopping with consuming so much?' How can we understand this apparent contradiction, especially given the observation that almost none of the respondents actually believed in the solutions they spontaneously first came up with during the interview? In what follows, we will discuss three characteristics of this observed gap between analysis and strategy that can help us understand what is at stake here.

To start with, it is remarkable that the respondents did not appear able to articulate strategies that fitted well with their own analysis. Many amongst them gave the impression that we were the first to ask them why they do what they do rather than something else. During the interview, they seemed to be confronted with the fact that they had not reflected a lot about their own choices. For example, when we asked Eva whether she thought the changes in her individual behaviour had an influence on the growth economy that she had identified as the root cause of climate change, she stated: 'Uh, no idea…'. And after a minute of silence: 'Can I skip this question? No, I suppose?' Silence again. 'Okay, I will try, but I will just think out loud, I don't have a clear idea about that yet …' In the same line, it was striking that when

we made suggestions about possible collective social actions, almost all respondents endorsed these proposals enthusiastically. When we proposed, as example, to organise a petition for a new public service for the insulation of old buildings, Eva stated immediately: 'That's a good idea!' As long as we did not provide these suggestions, almost none of the respondents came up with this kind of idea themselves. This finding of course has methodological implications, but also tells something about the respondents. One gets the impression that they are not capable of formulating different strategies and of reflecting on their comparative merits. Moreover, it appears that the solutions they think of can easily be influenced. To have a better understanding of what is at stake here, it is interesting to consider the four different types of action-oriented knowledge that Jensen (2004) distinguishes: (1) knowledge about the nature of the problem and its effects, (2) knowledge about root causes, (3) knowledge about strategies for change, and (4) knowledge about alternatives and visions. While it is remarkable that most respondents have quite adequate knowledge of the first type (the nature and effects of the climate problem), from the moment one considers the other three dimensions, namely root causes, strategies and visions, one observes a quasi linear decrease in the precision and sophistication of the responses. It was exactly these last three dimensions that triggered a strong feeling of powerlessness in the respondents (cfr. paragraph 4.1).

Secondly, it is remarkable that the respondents know the existing awareness raising campaigns quite well. As a response to the question what they do for the climate, most of them spontaneously list forms of individual behaviour change and when doing this, very often refer to existing campaigns. For example, Eva starts her answer (formulated in a remarkably imperative tense) as follows: 'The things they say you should do: turn in saving light bulbs, use ecological detergent, use your bicycle or go by public transport, rebuild your house in an ecological way, use FSC-labelled wood, and so on.' Even more striking is the fact that many respondents gave the impression that they assumed we were investigating whether they were doing well in their own behavioural choices. Especially their first answers seemed to be motivated by a concern for social desirability in this respect: 'Yes, I use ecological detergent', 'no, no, I almost never drive the car'. One respondent sent us two text messages after the interview, because she remembered a few of her individual actions that she forgot to mention during the interview. Only when we clearly stated that they could interpret engagement in a broad way, from reading about the environmental issue to signing petitions and so on, the respondents seemed to feel relieved, stopped focussing on their own individual behaviour change, and even started to severely criticise this strategy, as was explained above.

Thirdly, it is noteworthy that, although several respondents stated that developments such as 'the end of capitalism' are the only option to arrive at a final solution for climate change, none of them seemed to believe that this kind of radical social change is a feasible perspective today. In this sense, it is possible that the respondents have a certain knowledge about different strategies, but that they do not

believe that real change is possible anyway. This could be a reason why they limit their engagement to 'having no blood on their own hands', particularly because engaging oneself for structural change is always a gamble in a certain way. It is possible to struggle one's whole life for such change without any tangible result. One of the advantages of individual behaviour change is that you can at least always say your actions have borne some results, however limited these are. As Deborah stated:

> It sounds maybe very pathetic, but I also want to be able to say at the end of my life, look, I have done my bit for this world, and I didn't only talk, I also tried to reduce my ecological footprint. I find it important to have the possibility to make such a positive balance at the end … Because if you only look to structures, and for example, you don't succeed … then I don't think that you can really make a positive balance at the end.

This suggests that there perhaps exists an even stronger connection between people's engagements and their opinions and experiences of power(lessness) than suggested above. Maybe people do not choose the strategy that seems most powerful or effective, but just feel totally powerless when confronted with the real causes of the problem? The choice for individual behaviour change might not then be a genuine strategy for change, but rather an attempt to be compromised as little as possible by a system that they think they cannot change anyway. Laura stated for example: 'I think I feel more at ease because I don't have to feel guilty … I don't think that I really make a contribution, but neither do I do something really wrong or bad.' A little bit later, she added: 'In fact, I just would like to leave behind that whole system that is so polluting and burdened … and corrupt'. In this sense, individual behaviour change becomes a moral matter of a particular kind: the respondents do it to have 'a good conscience', 'to earn their heaven' or to have 'no feelings of guilt'.

Nevertheless, most respondents seemed to be convinced that on certain moments 'times may change'. Some stated, for example, that with an increase of natural disasters people will start raising their voices. Steve explained:

> I hope for a series of events, for example the mudflows in Limburg, or erosion if it rains too much. They know the cause perfectly well…, and solutions exist … I hope that some disasters will take place, I mean, 'disasters' is not the right word … events that will make people take action.

And Chantal stated: 'For example, on a certain moment we will be out of oil, or any other … it is to say, people will not just put up with all that …' Remarkably, if 'times will change', what the respondents see happening is not only, or not in the first place, a greater engagement in individual behaviour change, but 'a raising of voices'. In this, they often refer to how social change happened in the past. Shane stated for example:

> But if the crisis really takes on big proportions, I think people will raise their voices and take to the streets ... I'm thinking for example about the workers movement, that really started from below, ... And I believe in something similar with respect to climate change, from the moment that people see what is at stake.

4.5. CONSISTENCY AND COMMON SENSE

A last important finding has to do with another lack of coherence we observed in the stories of the respondents, namely between what respondents stated on a more abstract and on a more concrete level. This was most remarkable when respondents were asked questions about whether they believed in a conflict or collaboration model to realise change. For example, in the beginning Chantal said:

> I think it is not so smart to make a story of 'us against them'. Because I think companies should just be sensitised and they have to understand that it can be interesting from an economic point of view to produce environmentally friendly stuff.

However, a little later, she stated:

> Oh, E [a large energy company in Belgium], I find really horrific. The way they act as if they provide green electricity. They are just profiteers. Companies like E, I find them terrible. They enslave us by their monopoly position… Yeah, if they would produce more green electricity they would give us more choice. But instead, they opt for as much profit as possible.

This lack of coherence in the answer of Chantal is no exception. Almost all respondents advocated collaboration in general, theoretical terms, but when asked about concrete situations, collaboration was often strongly rejected in favour of a more conflict-oriented approach. This difference between abstract and concrete answers has its counterpart in the difference between more experiential and more cognitive convictions. Shane explained, for example: 'Instinctively, I find it very difficult that N [an environmental organisation in Flanders] is sponsored by E', but a few minutes later she stated that she 'thinks' it is very important to work together with companies and that she does not 'believe' in 'an anti-culture'.

The more abstract answers that were given by the respondents seemed to be more in conformity with the dominant discourse : 'yes, of course I am in favour of collaboration', 'no, of course not, I am against extremes', 'yes, everyone hand in hand' and we certainly prefer 'win-win-situations'. But these positions often clashed with what they proposed in more concrete situations: then the environmental movement should suddenly be much more 'aggressive', 'radical' and 'ready for battle'. These concrete judgments were often expressed with much more power and emotion. When we confronted the respondents with this observation and continued to inquire along these lines, many became confused or openly started to contradict themselves. It often happened that respondents changed their mind during the interview, and/or made explicit efforts to make their own story more coherent than it at first appeared to be. Some respondents did this even explicitly. We asked for example to Chantal: 'But didn't you tell something else in the beginning? There you seemed to say that...' And she answered: 'I evolved (laughs). Yes, no, because I have to think about it now, I have to reflect much more within myself, and it is quite difficult to say that…'

The work of Antonio Gramsci (1971) can shed an interesting light on such incoherencies. Gramsci paid a lot of attention to the 'spontaneous' consciousness of

people, which he called ‘common sense’. This includes ‘diffuse, uncoordinated features of a general form of thought common to a particular period and a particular popular environment’ (Gramsci 1971, p. 330). According to him, the common sense is fragmentary, incoherent and inconsequential, but it can develop into ‘a healthy nucleus of good sense’ when it is made more coherent (p. 328). Furthermore, Gramsci explains there can be a tension between what people do in practice and what they think theoretically. In a certain way, they can have two consciousnesses: one which is implicit in their activity but which they often cannot easily articulate, and one which they acquired by absorbing existing discourses.

These reflections can illuminate some of the observations we made above about the respondents’ ‘contradictory consciousness’. In particular, there seems to be a discrepancy between the abstract norms of collaboration and dialogue which the respondents upheld and which can be said to be part of the dominant discourse, and their concrete ideas about struggle and resistance that are not yet articulated on such an abstract level. What is remarkable, however, is that most respondents are not just randomly chosen individuals, but people with a relatively highly developed environmental consciousness. In this sense, they are ‘intellectuals’ themselves in the general meaning Gramsci gave to this term. According to Gramsci (1971), all people who are engaged in the formulation and distribution of ideas amongst the mass of people are intellectuals, and consequently, all are involved in ideological struggle. This means that they take part in the (often implicit) struggle about the different directions in which people’s common sense can be led, or in other words, in which their common sense can be made more coherent. However, as the research findings suggested, most of the respondents seemed not to be aware of this struggle, let alone that they play a fully self-conscious role in it. As such, the lack of coherence in the answers of the respondents possibly says something about the extent to which the current environmental movement has well-articulated analyses, strategies and visions at its disposal.

5. Conclusion

As this article is based on exploratory research, we cannot draw definite conclusions, but we can develop some hypotheses, and sharpen our concepts and questions. The least we can say is that our assumption about the role of power and powerlessness seems to have been a useful starting point. In a paradoxical way, our research suggests that most respondents do not engage in individual behaviour change because they consider it to be effective or because it gives them the possibility to exert power. Quite the contrary, many experience that they have no power at all, or at least lack the power to engage in the collective social actions which they believe are really necessary. As a result, most respondents do something that actually is within their reach, but which they do not really believe to be effective. As such, the core of the

problem indeed seems to be a question of power. It presents itself as a paradox: the starting point seems to be an experience of powerlessness, which follows from what we have called 'strategy scepticism', directed against the dominant strategy of individual behaviour change, and from a lack of credible alternatives.

Consequently, this finding suggests that closing the 'gap' between knowledge and action does not in the first place - at least not in the case of environmentally aware citizens - require a further raising of people's knowledge of the environmental problem as such. What seems to be needed, is knowledge of root causes, visions on alternatives and especially strategies to reach these. By leaping too directly from knowledge of the nature and effects of the environmental problem to the level of solutions, the individual behaviour change approach risks sidestepping not only the human-societal context within which the problem arose, but also the possibility for people to engage in strategic reflection themselves and to draw their own conclusions on the kind of actions required. In other words, it risks sidestepping the possibility for people to be really em'power'ed citizens and potential subjects of change.

As a conclusion, one can state that, whereas there is a quite clear distinction between 'individual behaviour change' and 'collective social action' studies in a lot of policy and academic literature, the distinction is maybe not so clear-cut in the minds of ecologically concerned citizens. Whereas almost all respondents were (also) involved in individual behaviour change, most seemed to prefer collective social action as a strategy towards change, even if they did not put this strategy into practice. One of the most important barriers to undertaking the latter seems to be that the dominant discourse does not provide them with the conceptual tools needed for engaging in these kinds of action. More attention to the 'action-oriented' domains of knowledge (knowledge about root causes, strategy and alternatives) might compensate for this.

Concerning this, it is important to acknowledge that there exists a fundamental difference between strictly physical knowledge about climate change and action-oriented domains. The latter can never be as exact as the first. If one speaks about analysis, strategies and alternatives, one definitively enters onto ideological terrain. On the basis of Gramsci's work we have shown that 'common sense' is a fragmented and incoherent collection of all sorts of ideas and influences, and that ideological struggle has to do with making this common sense more coherent in one way or another. In a certain way, environmental researchers and/or educators are also involved in this ideological struggle, whether they want it or not. Their position is not easy. On the one hand, they cannot claim to make 'objective' judgments. On the other hand, they cannot neglect this terrain either, as they then risk allowing for it to be occupied by movements, governments or companies that also have other interests than the 'common good'. Maybe the task of researchers and/or educators can be to try to make the range of possible analyses, visions and strategic options visible and to make their assumptions, effects and implications explicit. Hereby, it is of central importance to get to the abstract level of the principles underlying these, and to be

conscious of the fact that one thus enters an ideological battlefield. One of their contributions could even be to disclose the very ideological character of the debate as such.

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CHAPTER 4

ECOLOGICAL CITIZENSHIP AND DEMOCRACY: COMMUNITARIAN VERSUS AGONISTIC CHANGE

1. INTRODUCTION

In the first handbook published by the Transition Towns movement, Rob Hopkins (2008b) draws a clear distinction between conventional environmentalism and the Transition approach. Whereas conventional environmentalism focuses on 'individual behaviour', uses 'fear, guilt and shock as drivers for action', and prescribes what people should do to tackle climate change (think about campaigns urging people to buy FSC-labelled wood, adapt their driving style or choose ecological washing products…), Transition Towns focuses on 'group behaviour', uses 'hope, optimism and proactivity as drivers for action' and aims 'to act as [a] catalyst[s] for a community to explore and come up with its own answers' (p. 135).

Transition Towns is one of the grassroots environmental movements which have recently emerged and strongly criticise the focus on changing individual (consumer) behaviour in conventional environmental discourses, and tries to promote another type of commitment instead. Thereby, the movement resonates with the growing critique in the academic literature of the omnipresence of individual behaviour change, and in particular sustainable consumption, in green thinking. Critical scholars target the individualisation, moralisation and commodification characteristic of conventional environmental discourses, which would conceal the structural character of the environmental crisis, shifting responsibility to households and individuals who, through market incentives or in a moralist fashion, are urged to change their individual (consumer) behaviour (Clover 2002, Courtenay-Hall and Rogers 2002, Jensen 2002, Jensen and Schnack 2006).

In this article, we aim to understand the different types of environmental commitment that are promoted in the discourses of environmental movements and in academic and policy literature. We do this in particular from the viewpoint of theories of the (post-)political as developed by authors such as Chantal Mouffe (2006), Jacques Rancière (1999) and Slavoj Žižek (2000). On this basis, we aim to shed a new light on the distinction between the predominant sustainable consumption framework and a more comprehensive ecological citizenship perspective. The latter category covers yet widely different approaches. Despite a similar critique of conventional frameworks, new grassroots environmental movements differ in their

visions on what should happen instead. To illustrate this divergence, we will make a comparative analysis of how Transition Towns and the Climate Justice Action movement give shape to ecological citizenship.

Like Transition Towns, Climate Justice Action criticises the fact that many conventional environmental campaigns approach people as objects rather than as subjects of change and advocate individual instead of collective change. However, as we will show, both movements differ a lot in how they conceive of the collectivity, the 'we' they want to build to take common action. Crucially, the extent to which this 'we' is represented in *political* terms is a key point of divergence. As a result, we will argue, two different forms of ecological citizenship can be distinguished: a communitarian and agonistic form, epitomised by Transition Towns and Climate Justice Action respectively. This distinction does not only render intelligible the divergence that exists between types of ecological engagement, but also allows to grasp how people inscribe themselves within a broader (post-)political constellation.

In view of this objective, the article relies, on the one hand, upon post-foundational political theory (in particular the work of Chantal Mouffe (1992c, 2002, 2006)) which provides a critical theoretical account of the political-historical context within which the debate on sustainable consumption and ecological citizenship can be situated. On the other hand, the paper is based on extensive qualitative research during several years in both the Transition Towns and the Climate Justice Action movement. We not only investigated how members of both movements conceive of their own engagement, but also, and most importantly, how they perceive the type of environmental commitment promoted by movements they are *not* a part of. The combination of this theoretical framework and empirical material allows us to better understand the ways in which people try to move beyond an individualised and depoliticised way of dealing with climate change and the difficulties they are confronted with in this endeavour.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1. SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION AND POST-POLITICS

A vast literature has been produced on changing individual (consumer) behaviour as a strategy to tackle environmental problems such as climate change. Literally hundreds of studies have been undertaken during the last decades to gain a better understanding of why and when people change their individual (consumer) behaviour (Bamberg and Möser 2007, DEFRA 2008, Heimlich and Ardoin 2008, Jackson 2005, Kollmuss and Agyeman 2002, Rickinson 2001, Stevenson and Keehn 2006).

An (at least implicit) assumption of many of these studies is that environmental problems result from the sum of a mass of individual environmentally unfriendly

behaviour choices. The solution to our environmental predicament is thus supposed to reside in redirecting these behaviour choices in a more environmentally responsible way. However, this approach is more and more put into question: many scholars have shown how the focus on sustainable consumption tends to downplay the complexity of current environmental problems and their structural anchorage in our society and ways of living (Courtenay-Hall and Rogers 2002, Jensen 2002). It is also criticised for leading to the privatisation of environmental action (Clover 2002, Courtenay-Hall and Rogers 2002, Maniates 2001), making people's engagement conditional upon their purchasing power (Courtenay-Hall and Rogers 2002, p. 289) and approaching individuals as objects rather than as potential subjects of change (Jensen and Schnack, 2006).

A large part of the behaviour change literature studies how individuals' (consumer) behaviour can be steered via economic incentives (Berglund and Matti 2006) or via non-rational means such as role models, social pressure or by connecting the desired behaviour to positive feelings of freedom, friendship or sex, as is done in the advertisement industry (Heimlich and Ardoin 2008, Jackson 2005, McKenzie-Mohr and Smith 1999). This approach often starts from a kind of behaviourism which does not consider people as conscious citizens, Jensen and Schnack (2006) argue. At best, people are conceived as conscious consumers, but even that is not always the case.

Looking from the perspective of theories of post-politics or depoliticisation (Mouffe 2006, Rancière 1999, Žižek 2000), one could state that a post-political construction of engagement is underpinning a large part of the contemporary environmental debate (Swyngedouw 2007, 2010, Kenis and Lievens 2014). This construction does not only 'address and construct citizens as consumers or purchasers of commodities' (Dowling 2010, p. 491), but also presupposes new forms of steering, controlling and disciplining them (Kenis and Mathijs 2012). Steering happens for example via advertisement campaigns, which are supposed to work upon people's unconscious drives, or via economic incentives. As Andrew Dobson and Derek Bell (2006b) argue, the predominant idea is that '[i]f the sticks and carrots are appropriately placed and priced, self-interested rational actors […] will be induced to push their own appropriate behavioural buttons without further government intervention' (2006b). They conclude that '[i]t is this last aspect of the scheme that makes it so enticing for liberal-capitalist governments'.

The paradox of such a post-political construction is that it inevitably has important political effects on the strategic field of environmentalism, although it does not acknowledge these effects or confronts them head-on. It hides what is politically at stake in environmental action behind an individualising, economic, moral or even psychological discourse. Indeed, the focus on sustainable consumption is not only a product of the currently predominant neoliberal paradigm, it also reinforces this paradigm by depicting environmental problems, such as climate change, in purely market and/or moralistic terms. A key dimension of this approach is to reduce people to consumers rather than to call upon them to act as citizens. 'It is symptomatic of the

triumph of the ultimate neoliberal subject—the citizen-consumer—that people in the affluent world have internalized the idea that the best way to tackle climate change is through lifestyle change', as Sherilyn MacGregor (2014) aptly summarises.

Exactly this attempt to realise change within the parameters of what currently exists – or in the words of Ian Cook and Erik Swyngedouw (2012, p. 1973) to realise change in a way 'that nothing really changes' – is characteristic of current post-political tendencies with regard to climate change. More precisely, the reduction of society to the simple sum of individuals, the identification of individuals as mere consumers, and the reduction of environmental transformation to changing individual purchasing acts, are symptomatic for and reinforce the post-political tendencies present in the environmental sphere. Such a discourse fails to represent society in political terms, namely as characterised by power, hegemony, exclusion and conflict (Mouffe 2000, 2006). It conceals the fact that environmental commitment will inevitably be confronted with deeply political questions, such as what kind of socio-environmental future we are striving for, how to get there, and who could be possible allies and opponents in this endeavour.

2.2. ECOLOGICAL CITIZENSHIP

In order to move beyond the limits of the sustainable consumption approach, the discussion on ecological citizenship provides a good starting point. As Andrew Dobson and Ángel Valencia Sáiz (2005, p. 157) have argued, a 'turn to citizenship' has recently occurred in a big part of the literature on environmental politics, which led to a wide debate on the notion of ecological citizenship (e.g. Dobson 2006, Dobson and Bell 2006a, Gabrielson 2008, Hayward 2006). Admittedly, some scholars have used the term 'citizenship' to refer mainly to the responsibilities of ecologically aware *individuals*, sometimes almost identifying *citizens* as *consumers* (e.g. Seyfang 2005, 2006; Spaargaren and Mol 2013). Ecological citizenship then refers to a *conscious* choice to change one's individual behaviour, rejecting practices whereby this behaviour is steered through economic stimuli or advertisement campaigns. In other words, the aim is to change the motivational basis underlying environmental action. The importance of internal motivation is generally recognised. As Dobson and Sáiz (2005, p. 157) argue, ecological citizenship requires 'shifts in attitudes at a deep level – deeper than those reached by fiscal measures'. People should not be steered by enlightened governors, but take their own responsibility.

Dobson refers in this context to the notion of the ecological footprint, which can help inform citizens' decisions. However, as Amanda Machin (2012, p. 853) notices, 'for Dobson, the obligations that arise from the ecological footprint apply to the individual, not to a collective.' A similar observation can be made about other analyses which emphasise the motivation underlying environmental action (e.g. Jagers et al. 2014).

Machin is right in the sense that moving beyond a post-political framework requires paying attention to the social-economic structures and power mechanisms which characterise our current socio-environmental predicament (Kenis and Lievens, in press), and thus to the collective side of engagement. Realising structural change will be difficult if one remains within the contours of an individualising representation of the environmental field. As Chantal Mouffe (1992b, p. 6) stresses, genuine political action happens when people act together with others in *common* actions to realise transformational change. As she argues, one cannot think citizenship outside of its relation with the political and the democratic public sphere. People become citizens exactly by engaging in collective action in the public sphere: citizenship is 'the democratic political identity par excellence' (Mouffe 1992b, p. 6). Interestingly, Mouffe adds a term to the notion of citizenship: she emphasises the necessity of its democratic character for it to be properly 'political'. The formation of collectivities is not necessarily political as such, but needs to be recognised, which requires a democratic, plural space where different collectivities can confront each other in struggle and debate. A key question is thus how environmental movements construe collective identities and how we can conceptualise the notions of citizenship underpinning them.

3. RESEARCH DESIGN

In order to further develop this conceptual discussion in an empirically grounded way, we engaged in qualitative research studying the rise of Transition Towns and Climate Justice Action in Flanders (Belgium) (Denzin and Lincoln 2005, Esterberg 2002). More in particular, we engaged in an embedded multiple case research design (Yin 2008). This allowed us to adopt a double focus: we both studied discourse at the level of the movements, and looked at how its participants framed their own engagement within them.

The choice for activist research during one year and a half gave us an insider view of the dynamics characterising both movements (Hale 2008). [1] After this period, we turned to a less intensive engagement, following the further evolutions of the movements for about two and a half year from a short distance. Over these four years of investigation, we actively took part in more than 80 meetings, activities and actions, conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with 40 persons who were very actively involved in one of both movements, and performed a document analysis of books, leaflets and websites. This triangulation of data was intended at enhancing the credibility of the performed study, and at realising a rich and thick description of both movements, their main characteristics and people's involvement in them (Baxter and Eyles 1997).

[1] Although only Anneleen Kenis was practically involved as an activist researcher in these movements, we will nevertheless use the plural 'we' as this is more convenient.

The interviews took on average between one and two hours. As we aimed to include as many different perspectives as possible, respondents were selected on the basis of maximum variation sampling (Patton 2002). Whereas the data collected on the basis of activist involvement and document analysis form the background of the study, the interviews, which were analysed in detail with the software program NVIVO®, provided the 'hard' data. These interviews consisted of three parts. First, we started with open questions concerning the interviewee's own activity, including questions about the relation between her own engagement and more conventional approaches in environmentalism. Second, we presented 12 theses drawn from publications by the movement in which the respective interviewee was involved, asking her whether she agreed with these theses or not, and why. Third, we asked each interviewee to read a short text produced on the basis of text fragments of the other movement, and comment on it. This allowed us to investigate how she defines her own activity in relation to alternative forms of engagement. In other words, it enabled us to study the specific way in which the relations between 'we' and 'they' are understood in both movements.

4. RESEARCH FINDINGS

First, we will describe the emergence of both movements and the visions they put forward on how to tackle climate change. Both movements formulate a critique of the predominant paradigm (including its focus on sustainable consumption), and put forward a more comprehensive account of ecological citizenship. Second, we will show that the two movements' conceptions of ecological citizenship nevertheless significantly differ. Central to these different conceptions is how both movements conceive of the 'we', the collective level of their engagement. Third, we will argue that this question closely relates to the place both movements attribute to 'the political'.

4.1. MOVING BEYOND SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION

4.1.1. THE TRANSITION TOWNS MOVEMENT

Transition Towns originated in the UK in 2005 as a reaction to the lack of appropriate action to tackle peak oil and climate change (Brangwyn and Hopkin 2008, Hopkins 2008b). The movement is sceptical of both the predominant focus on sustainable consumption and the idea that we should wait and hope for more far-reaching government initiatives. To quote Ben Brangwyn, one of the pioneers of the movement: 'If we wait for governments, it'll be too late; if we act as individuals, it'll be

too little; but if we act as communities, maybe it'll be enough.'[2] Rob Hopkins, one of the movement's founders, quotes Bill Mollison, the co-originator of the permaculture concept, to support his argument for collective change: 'I can't save the world on my own. It'll take at least three of us' (Hopkins 2005, p. 148). The crucial ingredient of their project is therefore situated on a *collective* level: the building of local resilient *communities* that are able to deal with the challenges of climate change and peak oil (see also Bailey et al. 2010, Neal 2013, North 2010).

To set up a Transition community, 12 initiating steps need to be taken by a steering *group* of like-minded people who live in the same town, city, island or neighbourhood. The 12 steps include, for instance, raising awareness, using open space, facilitating a Great Reskilling, creating an Energy Descent Action Plan and developing visible practical manifestations of the project. The latter can take a variety of forms. As is argued in the movement's *Handbook*: 'It might be productive tree plantings, solar panels, or hemp/lime plastering. It could be a beautiful cob bus-shelter or an alternative currency used for a defined period' (Hopkins 2008b, p. 163). Most importantly, whatever initiative is taken, such initiatives 'should, at this point, be both uncontroversial and photogenic' (p. 163).

Typically, a new Transition group starts with developing visions of how the local community could look like in 2020, 2030 or even 2050. Localisation and resilience are central ingredients of these envisioned alternative futures (see also Kenis and Mathijs 2014a). Community building is key, both in Transition Towns ideal future scenario and in its strategy towards change. As Bailey, Ian, Rob Hopkins, and Geoff Wilson (2010, p. 598) state, Transition Towns' 'solutions are construed as intrinsically local, in the general sense of relocalisation and in a specific focus on community-scale action'. Inclusion, dialogue and the psychology of change are considered cornerstones of how a community can be built. In the words of Sarah Neal (2013, p. 62): 'localised and community centred politics which emphasise mutuality and collective action can all be identified as initiatives and/or areas of concern within Transition culture.'

Interestingly, even participants' motivation is addressed within a collective framework. For instance, it is recommended to set up 'heart & soul working groups' within every Transition initiative, in which people can investigate together how to overcome personal barriers towards change (Hopkins 2008b, p. 87).[3] It is not the case that individual behaviour change is considered unimportant. Rather, '[g]iven that purely personal lifestyle change is insufficient, the scale of the local community is identified as the most effective level at which to organise', as Peter North (2010, p. 1588)summarises.

Still, at this point an ambiguity sometimes sneaks into Transition Towns' discourse. When stating that 'the creation of the problems of peak oil and climate

[2] http://www.redpepper.org.uk/Transitional-demands/

[3] For a more comprehensive account of the main features of the Transition Towns movement, see amongst others the work of Ian Bailey, Rob Hopkins and Geoff Wilson (2010), John Barry and Stephen Quilley (2009), and Amanda Smith (2011).

change is the result of many individual actions', and that 'the solution requires taking responsibility for these actions' (Hopkins 2008b, p. 92), an individualising analysis of environmental problems co-exists with a community approach. [4]

4.1.2. The Climate Justice Action movement

Climate Justice Action set off even more explicitly on the basis of disappointments with conventional environmental approaches.[5] Its argument is not only that insufficient action is undertaken to tackle climate change, but especially that many of the proposed measures (e.g. nuclear energy, emissions trading and agrofuels) are 'false solutions' as they are said not to really tackle climate change, or to shift the crisis onto other social and environmental terrains. The movement rejects these solutions as 'neoliberal illusions', accusing businesses and governments of giving priority to profit motives. To challenge these 'false solutions', Climate Justice Action calls upon people to '*join together* in taking control over our lives and real solutions …' (CJA booklet 2009, p. 1). Its aim is to build movements from below which could both put pressure on governments and businesses and be prefigurative of how alternative socio-environmental relations could look like. The 'real' solutions the movement advocates include community control over natural resources, food sovereignty, settling the North's ecological debt to the South, and a 'just transition' to a low-carbon economy. Climate Justice Action stresses these 'solutions from below will not come without a struggle' (CJA booklet 2009, p. 24), and such a struggle can only be won if people organise themselves *collectively*. The reason why not more people engage in collective action is blamed on capitalist consumer culture. As Derrick Jensen (2009) argues in booklet distributed by the movement: 'Part of the problem is that we've been victims of a campaign of systematic misdirection. Consumer culture and the capitalist mindset have taught us to substitute acts of personal consumption (or enlightenment) for *organised* political resistance' (p. 26).

Though most of its activists make far-going sustainable choices in their personal lives, they resolutely reject changing individual (consumer) behaviour as a strategy because 'personal change does not equal political change' (Jensen 2009, p. 26). Interestingly, the reduction of individuals to consumers is explicitly denounced: a focus on individual change 'accepts capitalism's redefinition of us from citizens to consumers'. It is argued that '[b]y accepting this redefinition, we reduce our potential forms of resistance to consuming and not consuming. Citizens have a much wider

[4] On this moment, there is a tendency no longer to speak about Transition Towns, but about Transition culture or Transition network (see also Mason and Whitehead 2012). However, on the moment this research was conducted, the term 'Transition Towns' was still predominantly used, at least in Flanders (Belgium).

[5] For more information on the Climate Justice Action movement, see amongst others David Featherstone (2013), Paul Chatterton, David Featherstone and Paul Routledge (2013), and Kenis and Mathijs (2014b).

range of available resistance tactics, including voting, not voting, running for office, pamphleting, boycotting, organising, lobbying, protesting.'

4.1.3. BREAKING WITH CONVENTIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL APPROACHES

Conceiving of people as actors who consciously and collectively attempt to tackle climate change, the discourses of both Transition Towns and Climate Justice Action go beyond a narrow focus on sustainable consumption and advocate a kind of ecological citizenship (see figure 1). This also resonates in the comments of many of their participants. As Erika, who is active in Transition Towns, explains[6]: 'the first thing that attracted me in the movement is that it is a completely different approach than the conventional environmental movement, which after all … always focuses on your own behaviour and norms'. Similarly, Kate argues:

> There is a very strong focus on individual behaviour change, and I don't think that this is always the most motivating choice for people. I think… well, that you should simply go for more *communal* solutions, because these are more feasible, they work better, and they are more motivating […] And *that* is surely a big difference [with the conventional environmental movement], that you take distance from the individualisation of those problems and that you move towards the collective, to 'how we can tackle it *together*'? That, instead of putting energy saving lamps, you realise something bigger together…

Several interviewees dismissed the blaming character of discourses on changing individual (consumer) behaviour, stressing the structural embeddedness of individual choices, rejecting the marketisation of solutions for climate change, and underlining that more profound change is needed. As Jean-Francois, a climate justice activist, tells:

> It's not that individual behaviour change is not important, but I still have some second thoughts with it. Because the solutions are not individual. They can only be collective. And I think this stress on individual responsibility, that this is sometimes very blaming.

Interestingly, this does not mean that these transitioners and climate justice activists are against individual behaviour change. They rather seem to find it *evident* to try to live as sustainably as possible, but they at the same time point to the limits of this approach. As Gregory explains:

> Well, eh, I am actually in favour of individual behaviour change, and I think that it is necessary; I also do it myself. But I think it is a totally unproductive and counterproductive strategy to believe that this is the egg of Columbus. That this will solve climate change. I even think there will be resistance by people against such strategies. I think it is very blaming towards individuals. Individuals are in this way also reduced to market subjects, consumers. They are made responsible for climate change, and at the same time the real, structural causes disappear out of sight.

[6] All first names refer to interviewees of one of both movements. These names have been modified for reasons of anonymity.

sustainable consumption	ecological citizenship
individual action	individual and collective action
economic and/or subconscious incentives	underlying ethical-political principles

Figure 1. From sustainable consumption to ecological citizenship

4.2. TWO CONCEPTIONS OF ECOLOGICAL CITIZENSHIP

Both movements thus move beyond the conventional sustainable consumption approach, and promote key elements of what can be identified as ecological citizenship. As they stress the collective or communal dimension of environmental action, they move at the same time beyond a limited approach to ecological citizenship which merely stresses the *conscious* motivation of individuals to change their individual (consumer) behaviour. A key question is then how this collective dimension is framed in the discourses of both movements. In other words, how do Transition Towns and Climate Justice Action understand the community, the 'we', within which ecological citizens are embedded. While they share the stress on this collective dimension, how they frame the latter will radically set both movements apart.

In what follows, we will discuss five basic tenets of the type of collectivity both movements aim to build (see figure 2). We will investigate how both movements define the boundaries of their collectivity, how they conceive of the social relations within the collective, and between the community and society at large, where they situate the motor of change and how the common good is conceived of. As we will argue, these divergent conceptions of the 'we' within which ecological citizens are embedded corresponds to the place they attribute to *the political*.

Transition Towns	Climate Justice Action
geographical boundaries	political boundaries
harmonious internal relations (social connectedness)	consensus-seeking in a divided setting
reaching out through dialogue and collaboration	outside world as a power- and conflict-laden space
change through dialogue, psychology of change	struggle and counter-power as motor of change
substantial common good	common good as object of hegemonic struggle
⇒ communitarian ecological citizenship	⇒ agonistic ecological citizenship

Figure 2. Two conceptions of ecological citizenship

To start with, how do both movements define the boundaries of the community or collectivity they want to build? This question is easily answered for Transition Towns: the movement tries to organise people on the basis of 'the local scale' and frames the collectivity unambiguously as a geographical entity (Kenis and Mathijs 2014a). Both the focus on the 'local' and 'scale' are important in this. As William argues: 'I think you should work locally, actually simply because that is a scale on which you can get some grip. And finally, because it is the scale on which you live your life.' One of the advantages of organising on the basis of 'scale' would be that it allows to move beyond the circle of people who are 'already convinced'. As Kate explains:

> What attracts me, is that it has the potential to go beyond one's own circle. Because you work on the level of a neighbourhood or village, you actually work geographically instead of thematically … which means you try to reach out to *all* people who live in a certain area, and you try to do things together.

In correspondence with this, Transition Towns distances itself from activist groups which organise on a more political basis. As Seth states:

> The problem with many activist movements is that they do insufficient effort to involve the broader, local population. […] In this sense, transition has a much bigger potential, I think, to involve people. Because you really work locally. And many activist movements don't do that.

One such *activist group* is Climate Justice Action. While most transitioners are not generally negative about Climate Justice Action, they consider the movement as having a problem in this regard, and see this as one of the reasons they would never become active in it. John explains:

> The objection I have against such movements is that you sit around the table with a specific group of people who all agree with each other. Well, I don't think I would get

> involved in this … because I think you will be only there with likeminded people […] It will surely be interesting and fun, but I prefer to invest my energy in people who actually live here and try to do something.

The differences that transitioners bring to the fore are significant. The type of collectivity that Climate Justice Action aims to build is indeed of a completely different nature. It is explicitly a deterritorialised collective, based on an alliance of people – throughout places – who have *a common political project* for society. As is stated in one of its outreach texts: 'we are reaching out to all those *who share our vision'* (CJA 2009). Furthermore, the 'we' they want to establish is explicitly defined in opposition to a common adversary, a 'them'.

Interestingly, even modest or cautious manifestations of this agonistic approach evoke negative reactions from transitioners. The very first sentences of one of Climate Justice Action's leaflets already triggered critical responses from transitioners. Sarah reads the text aloud: '"Once again, those who created the problem claim they also have the solutions: carbon trading, so-called 'clean coal', nuclear energy, biofuels, even a 'green new deal'. These are not real solutions."' She sighs:

> '(t)hose who created the problem?': Yeah, that is exactly the type of we/them reasoning which we try to react against. Moreover, all solutions which are now put forward are dismissed. That appeals to few people, if you always state 'this is wrong', and 'even the solution is wrong'. Fine with me if you want to take a critical stance, but you have to know that you will never reach many people in this way. Like this, you discourage people from the very beginning…

Sarah is not the only transitioner who is convinced that an agonistic approach will 'discourage people' or 'scare them off', and that this is one of the big problems which movements such as Climate Justice Action will be confronted with. As Marc states about the Climate Justice Action movement:

> I think they are too extreme for mainstream people […] You know, with such an approach you will always have allies and adversaries, while Transition Towns does not look for allies and adversaries. Eh …, of course they look for allies. But not adversaries [laughs].

Seth summarises the differences between Climate Justice Action and Transition Towns by stating: 'it simply doesn't help to shout against your neighbour because he works for ExxonMobil, you know?'

Unsurprisingly, these differences also have an influence on how both movements conceive of the social relations within the collectivity. We/them distinctions are explicitly rejected in many of Transition Towns texts, and this is key to how the movement conceives of the relations within the community. As Rob Hopkins (2008b) states: 'Lesson One [is] Avoid "Them and Us"' (p. 125). The movement strongly focuses on building better social ties, which is considered to be difficult to realise in a conflictual atmosphere. As Anna explains: 'you experience it yourself when people talk to you, eh, as if, you are the enemy, so to speak. That will not facilitate cooperation…

The openness is gone.' Jacob motivates his choice for the Transition Towns movement as follows:

> What is nice about transition is […] that it is not blaming others and thinking in dualities of 'we-them', since that is a false duality. […] The whole mentality of struggle is left behind. You observe it yourself: when you approach people in the right way, they are very receptive.

Dialogue and the creation of better social relations are thus considered as crucial, in the first instance to build the local community, but also to enhance society's resilience, and even to tackle climate change. As Hopkins (2008b) argues: 'The Transition approach seeks to facilitate a degree of dialogue and inclusion that has rarely been achieved before […] simply because without it we have no chance of success' (p. 141). Inclusion and dialogue are thus put forward as alternatives to a more agonistic approach. In the words of Hopkins (2008a):

> One fundamental misunderstanding […] is the belief that *change* is something that we have to *fight* for, that those in positions of power will cling to business as usual for as long as possible, that globalisation will only wobble if we shake it hard enough.

Transitioner Sophie fully agrees with this statement, arguing: 'In the end, [companies] also have an interest in saving the earth. Moreover, their system… you already see that the money system… it falls apart and they are also duped. That's why I don't believe that it is all so contradictory and irreconcilable.'

Exactly those elements about which many transitioners are so enthusiastic meet fierce reactions amongst climate justice activists. Alexis: 'I don't see why it would be a misunderstanding if you state that you have to fight for change.' And Timothy reacts: 'Yes, of course people in positions of power will react enthusiastically [to Transition discourse]. Because it doesn't threaten their positions at all […] Those people in power positions aren't stupid.' And he adds: 'Actually, I think the concentration of power is one of the main reasons things are going wrong today.' Jean-Francois reads out loud: '"Transition is determinedly inclusive and non-blaming […]"':

> Yeah, that sounds good. But does it work like that? Well, history is made through struggle. Sometimes there is simply a we and a them. From time to time, I like reading a novel in which someone from the oppressive class turns out to have a complex and interesting personality with which you can feel sympathy. But historically, it is someone who needs to be put aside. Sometimes, there simply is a we and a them. There are unequal positions of power …. I can't stand it. For me, exactly this denial reproduces existing inequalities. And that's where it starts. Making this invisible.

After having given a similar reply, Alice calls out: 'Does that really come out of the Transition Handbook? It's really dangerous actually.'

Unsurprisingly, Climate Justice Action starts from a very different point of view. Precisely because society constitutes an unavoidably conflict-laden and contested space, it is argued that one first and foremost has to understand the power relations that are at work and that prevent more effective and democratic steps to tackle

climate change from being taken. Subsequently, one has to organise collectively in order to build enough counter-power to challenge these oppressive structures. In other words, it is about building a 'we' that is strong enough to tackle 'them'.

However, in their turn, transitioners strongly criticise this approach. As Anna states:

> But do you know what's the danger? That kind of movements acts very often from a perspective of struggle. […] It's all about 'we 'versus 'the others'. It's all about 'the others will be against us'. Yes, I think this is a pointless strategy.

Sophie explains that this was one of the main reasons why she chose for Transition Towns: 'The nice thing about transition is that it is, in my feeling, entirely different. Not denouncing, not fighting, but trying to change by oneself.' Similarly, Dave emphasises the importance of a 'positive story', of not being 'anti' all the time. Still, after a short silence, he adds: 'of course, by being in favour of something, you are also against something else.'

Interestingly, some transitioners even went a step further in their doubt whether or not a conflictless approach is tenable. As Sarah, for instance, muses:

> Yes, I agree that we should not indicate culprits… Provisionally not. I think, if we become successful, then we'll evidently get quarrels with people who have interests that it doesn't happen, and then we will notice whether there is no 'we-and-them' [laughs].

Interestingly, the assumption of Climate Justice Action that structurally embedded power relations are a central issue is not only valid for society at large, but also for localities, and even for their own communities. In their view, *all* collectivities are conflict-laden and contested spaces. As Jason explains:

> Even if you try to work prefiguratively, you remain in a certain sense a mirror of society, that cannot be excluded. There are differences, between men and women for example. […] and even in the ideal society […] power will play a role in every social relation to a certain extent.

While climate justice activists assume that power relations will always continue to exist, they yet try to overcome them as much as possible in their own communities. For instance, in order to avoid the power of representatives in a classic democratic system, they developed a form of direct democracy through consensus decision making. In a passionate way, Jason explains:

> But why am I in favour of consensus decision making? For a simple reason: majority votes do not seek the best solution, but the solution which finds a majority of half plus one. Regardless of whether that majority has a lot of interest in the issue at stake, while the harm might be very big for the minority. Consensus is about seeking a way with which everyone can feel comfortable.

Still, as several climate justice activists point out, even in such a political community, there remain power relations. Even though consensus-seeking is 'the best one can get' according to most activists, it is seen as far from perfect. Kelly comments: 'Yeah, it's double, because on the one hand you think there's democracy, but on the other the

biggest mouths get to speak most. […] Well, I find that it does not always look so democratic.' And Alice similarly notices: 'I sometimes have the impression that people who are quite dominant and know very well what they want and are verbally strong, out-argue others too easily'. She stares in front of herself for a few seconds, and adds: 'but perhaps this is the case everywhere.'

Remarkably, the way Climate Justice Action consciously inserts itself in a conflictual setting in society at large thus contrasts with how it deals with internal power relations. Whereas external power relations should be made visible and be politicised through an outspokenly agonistic approach, internal power relations should be transcended through deliberation and consensus-seeking. To realise this, or at least to come as close as possible, specific tools are developed each time inequalities and power relations pop up. As Jason illustrates: 'There are systems such as vibeswatch, these are also imperfect, but still, they try to be attentive for questions such as "can people express themselves?" Sometimes people are inhibited to speak out.'

At the same time, however, consensus decision-making is considered as something that is only feasible or desirable within the confines of an already established *political* community. Jason again: 'A basic condition for seeking consensus is that there is, eh, a common goal, a kind of common ground. […] You presuppose a kind of general interest which binds everyone'. Consensus on 'the common good' is thus sought within the framework of a self-conscious project for hegemony, which is clearly delineated from its opponents.

Transition Towns, in contrast, aims to find a consensus on the 'common good' within the *local* community. Their hope and assumption is that if dialogue is facilitated in an open atmosphere, people can learn to look beyond the borders of their own (political) background and perspectives, and arrive at a common vision on the good which is shared by all local inhabitants.

The notion of the 'common good', or 'the good life', is very important in Transition Town's discourse, even if they are not explicitly mentioned in the official documents. These notions articulate the future vision Transition Towns is striving for. As Anna tells: 'Yes, it's all about concrete translations, suggestions for how it could look like… then I actually see *the good life*. And I find that very attractive.' Similarly, William ponders:

> I hope we'll manage to understand that one can still live a beautiful life by looking for alternatives in what is not material, in a form of the good life, which is interesting, agreeable, perhaps social but essentially based on less oil.

A key step in a transition process is therefore constituted by common visioning exercises in which local inhabitants imagine what a future, localised community life could look like. However, while these exercises are framed as open-ended, and participants are encouraged to think out of the box, they are at the same time explicitly encouraged to come up with future alternatives which radically break with

current 'oil depended' and 'anonymous' ways of living, and which thus constitute key elements of what Transition Towns conceives as the good life (see also Kenis and Mathijs 2014a).

We are thus confronted with two diverging understandings of the common good. On the one hand, Transition Towns assumes that it is possible to define a common good that is shared by everyone (or at least, by all inhabitants of a particular place). The condition of possibility of this is (a particular kind of) deliberation. On the other hand, Climate Justice Action also develops a notion of the common good, albeit one which is supposedly only shared within a particular political community. That it can lead to disagreement (and conflict) within society is explicitly stated. It is a common good that distinguishes itself from and that is defined in relation to other common goods, defended by other political forces. As we will argue in the next section, this brings us close to Mouffe's notion of radical or agonistic democracy, whereby different political forces propose '[their] own interpretation of the "common good", and [thereby try] to implement a different form of hegemony' (Mouffe, 2000, p. 104). However convinced they are of their own vision, Climate Justice Action explicitly states that it is impossible for everyone to agree: its notion of the common good will remain an object of conflict and debate.

4.3. THE PLACE OF 'THE POLITICAL'

In order to theoretically account for these empirical observations, we especially draw on the work of Chantal Mouffe (1992b, 2002, 2006). Interestingly, Mouffe (1992b) suggests a distinction between three types of citizenship: liberalism, civic republicanism (of which communitarianism is a part), and agonistic citizenship. Whereas liberalism rejects the notion of the common good in favour of notions of the right and justice, both communitarianism and Mouffe's own agonistic approach maintain a central place for the common good. The latter two approaches differ, however, in that for the communitarian perspective, the community is based on a 'substantive idea of the common good', which threatens to take a 'dangerous conservative turn', according to Mouffe (1992b, p. 227). In contrast, for the agonistic viewpoint, there is also a notion of the common good, but its content is less substantial and, most importantly, it is presented as contestable. The 'commonality' is 'an ethical-political bond that creates a linkage among the participants in the association, allowing us to speak of a political "community" even if it is not in the strong sense' (p. 231).

Transferring Mouffe's ideas onto the ecological terrain, Machin (2013) draws a similar distinction between a green republican and a radical democratic or agonistic approach. On the one hand, she sympathises with the fact that green republicanism does not regard individuals 'as self-interested consumers but rather as responsible

and virtuous citizens' (p. 4) and that it 'acknowledges the importance of community in underpinning a green way of life' (p. 3). On the other hand, she critically diagnoses green republicanism as presupposing 'an agreement upon the substantive content of the "common good"' (p. 4). As she critically wonders: '[w]ho decides the meaning and demands of the "common good"?'

According to Machin, a similar diagnosis can be made of green deliberative approaches which, despite their claims to the opposite, *do* suppose the possibility of an overarching common good. However, this time the common good is something which has to be arrived at through active participation and dialogue. As she argues: 'It is simply expected that citizens will reach an agreement that a sustainable way of life is in the common good and, further, they will reach agreement on what this way of life looks like. No consideration is given to the possibility that there may be those who are left out of the discussion and that there may be those wo don't agree' (Machin 2013, p. 58).

The ambiguity of the visioning exercises conducted by Transition Towns is very similar. On the one hand, these exercises are meant to be open-ended, and the common good is presented as something one has to arrive at together through dialogue, while on the other hand, the basic tenets of this common good are predefined on beforehand. Transition Towns stands on two legs, therefore: a communitarian ideal of the good life, and a deliberative approach to consensus-seeking, whereby deliberation is expected to (re)produce this ideal, allowing for small variations.

In a certain way, this closure of the deliberative process is unavoidable: on the moment one adds 'green' to the notions of republicanism and deliberation, the dialogue is never completely open anymore (Machin 2013). This should not be a problem as such. The problem resides in the fact that it is supposed that everyone can agree on this; and that open dialogue will lead to this conclusion. The need to tackle climate change and to do that by building resilient local communities is thus taken for granted. The problem is not only that exclusions due to the specific way the common good is framed and implemented are misrecognised, but also that these exclusions can barely be contested or addressed within an atmosphere that is so strongly oriented to inclusion and consensus. This provides part of the explanation of the depoliticised character of Transition Towns: the non-neutral but political nature of the common good and how it is constructed threaten to remain unacknowledged, as a result of which it remains outside of the sphere of debate and contestation.

The difficulty Transition Towns has in dealing with conflicts shows that Machin (2013) has a point with her critique of such forms of green republicanism and green deliberative notions of democracy, as they do not take pluralism sufficiently seriously. By supposing that through far-going dialogue one can arrive at consensus, one threatens to misrecognise the fundamental and ineffaceable presence of power and conflict (see also Mouffe 1992b, 2006). By adding a predefined notion of the common good, the possibility of pluralism and more fundamental disagreement is further

erased. Machin's (2013, p. 47) indictment that the presupposition of one overarching common good is 'antithetical to pluralism' is probably too strong when talking of Transition Towns. Yet, Transition Towns' understanding of pluralism appears to be based on the existence of a plurality of *local* communities. Therefore, its vision remains imbued with a kind of communitarianism which fails to fully acknowledge the potential political conflicts following from pluralism. Mouffe (1992a, p. 29) argues she

> cannot accept the solution put forward by the communitarians, for their attempt to recreate a type of *Gemeinschaft* community cemented by a substantive idea of the common good is […] incompatible with the pluralism that is constitutive of modern democracy.

Climate Justice Action, in contrast, radicalises this pluralism and thinks it in terms of real conflicts and oppositions. That is why we consider Climate Justice Action close to an agonistic conception of citizenship, whereby liberal notions of liberty and equality are challenged by a more anti-capitalist and radical-democratic understanding of them. As Mouffe (1992b) argues, an agonistic approach 'does not postulate the existence of a substantive common good', but 'nevertheless implies the idea of commonality, of an ethico-political bond that creates a linkage among the participants in the association, allowing us to speak of a political "community" even if it is not in the strong sense' (p. 231) . This bond is a public concern, based on a specific interpretation of principles such as equality and liberty, which remains contestable. The common bond can be understood differently by different hegemonic projects, which entails conflictuality can never be entirely overcome.

Strikingly, however, Climate Justice Action integrates an element of deliberative democracy in its preference for internal consensus decision-making, which brings it somewhat closer to Transition Towns again. This ambiguity reveals the difficulties encountered when implementing a radical democratic vision for a nascent ecological movement. On the one hand, this movement intends to engage in agonistic struggle, while on the other hand, it wants to integrate a large group of activists into a coherent political collective.

Crucial for our story is the different types of 'we' that thus result. The difference between Transition Towns and Climate Justice Action is a difference between a communitarian 'we' and an agonistic 'we.' This corresponds with two types of citizen commitment which require people to inscribe themselves very differently within a collectivity. Transition Towns' mode of inscription is consensual, deliberative, but with a strong stress on emotional and psychological dimensions, and directed towards all inhabitants of the local community. Climate Justice Action's inscription is based on a common adversity and a deliberative process of deciding upon political principles, within the confines of a common political fault line. The result is two different kinds of ecological citizenship: a communitarian and an agonistic one. Crucial in this distinction is the place that is attributed to 'the political' as the inevitably conflictual dimension in society.

5. CONCLUSION

In the beginning of this article, we argued that in contemporary society, there is a strong 'post-political' hegemony in the way environmental problems, such as climate change, are framed. The focus on sustainable consumption bears the hallmark of this post-political hegemony. Both Transition Towns and Climate Justice Action question and contest it by offering individuals new forms of engagement beyond their status as consumers. To a certain extent, as we argued, they therefore both re-open and repoliticise the debate on climate change. However, from this initial similarity onwards, their paths quickly diverge.

To clarify what is precisely at stake, it is useful to distinguish politicisation on the level of the individual and on the level of a community. In the first case, politicisation occurs when people no longer view themselves as mere consumers (or clients, or in terms of other strictly private roles), but (also) as citizens who have the capacity to publicly participate in shaping society. Politicisation on the level of the individual therefore refers to the shift from sustainable consumer to ecological citizen. Both movements under study facilitate and promote this move.

Politicisation on the level of the community has a slightly different character. It takes place when this community is capable of viewing itself as part of a broader context of social, economic and political relations, which it understands to be characterised by power and conflict, and in which it self-consciously inserts itself. At stake is therefore how a community frames the place it adopts in the public sphere and the collective dimension of the kind of ecological citizenship it advocates. Both movements under study choose divergent paths in this regard. Transition Towns tends to think itself as a geographical community, internally harmonious and externally related to similar local communities. Climate Justice Action, in contrast, depicts society explicitly in conflictual terms and self-consciously inserts itself into this conflictual setting. Parallel to these two forms of collective organisation, we have therefore distinguished two forms of ecological citizenship: a communitarian and an agonistic one. The extent to which the resulting 'we' is politicised is therefore also radically different: whereas Transition Towns' notion of 'we' is strongly depoliticising, Climate Justice Action adopts an outspokenly (perhaps overly?) politicised view of collective identity.

But how do these 'we's' concretely establish themselves? As Mouffe (2006, p. 15) states: 'in the field of collective identities, we are always dealing with the creation of a "we" which can exist only by the demarcation of a "they"'. Interestingly, both movements seem to develop their own identity at least partly by distancing themselves from the other one. Both the strong reactions on statements of the other movement and the fact that many respondents found it easier to explain their disagreement with the other movement than to justify their own approach, confirm this. The conclusion is thus not only that we must distinguish different forms of

ecological citizenship, but also that each's very specific shape most strongly manifests itself in relation or contradistinction to the other.

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CHAPTER 5

(DE)POLITICISING THE LOCAL: THE CASE OF THE TRANSITION TOWNS MOVEMENT IN FLANDERS (BELGIUM)[1]

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. THE EMERGENCE OF THE TRANSITION TOWNS MOVEMENT

Confronted with globalisation and global environmental problems, several contemporary environmental movements, particularly grassroots movements, consider the question of localisation a central issue again.[2] Local systems, primarily local food systems, are believed to be crucial for overcoming the current environmental crisis. Moreover, they would also enhance human health and the socio-economic welfare of the local inhabitants (Born and Purcell 2006, Sonnino 2010).

One of the most influential contemporary localisation movements is Transition Towns, which after emerging in the UK in 2005, spread quickly around the world, establishing its presence in Flanders (Belgium) in 2008.[3] The movement attributes paramount importance to building resilient local communities as a strategy to avert the twin problems of climate change and peak oil (Hopkins 2008a). As Ben Brangwyn and Rob Hopkins (2008, p. 10) state in the *Transition Initiatives Primer*:

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

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

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

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

The Transition Towns movement is not a small movement. By July 2013, 469 localities (towns, cities, islands and neighbourhoods) all over the world were recognised as formal transition initiatives.[4] While many are situated in the UK, there are also initiatives in the US, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Chile, Finland, Germany, Italy and Japan. In addition, there are a large number of informal or not yet formal groups, of which several are located in Flanders (Belgium).

By July 2013, there were 80 Flemish (mostly informal) transition initiatives. Many of them are located in towns or small cities in predominantly rural areas (examples include Scherpenheuvel, Ramsel and Zedelgem, towns or small cities with a population of less than 7000 inhabitants situated nearby or in the countryside), but there are also some urban groups (such as in Ghent, Antwerp and Brussels, with populations of up to 500.000 inhabitants), and groups that are located in suburbs of larger cities.

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

[4] http://www.transitionnetwork.org/initiatives/by-number

'the good life', the movement aims to revitalise 'the social and cultural meanings attached to rural places' (Cloke 2006, p. 21). In other words, Transition Towns could not only be seen as a ruralisation movement in the materialist meaning of the word, but also in relation to how rurality is socio-culturally constructed (Cloke 2006, Woods 2009).

The Transition Towns movement has known relatively quick growth in Flanders, setting up a large number of meetings, activities and actions, often involving a remarkably high number of participants. That so many Flemish groups nevertheless remain informal, follows from a certain heterodoxy: on the one hand, they are clearly inspired by the ideas of the movement, while on the other hand, they take the freedom to give their own interpretation and direction to the movement's ideas, emphasising in particular the 11th step of Transition Towns' 12-step approach: 'Let it go where it wants to go…' (Brangwyn and Hopkins 2008, p. 27). Their primary goal is to develop local resilience within the concrete setting of their community, not to become 'branded' as part of the Transition Network. They want to 'do things', to use the words of Amanda Smith (2011, p. 102).

1.2. POST-POLITICS

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

Transitions Towns is of course not the only or the first movement to criticise conventional environmental discourses. All over the world, people and groups from different backgrounds are pursuing alternatives to the predominant paradigms of ecological modernisation, sustainable development, and the currently fashionable notions of green growth and the green economy as they are considered insufficiently effective or just (e.g. Bond 2012, Angus 2009). From a specifically academic perspective, the latter have also been criticised as partaking in a profound tendency towards depoliticisation characterising the current era (e.g., Bettini 2013, Goeminne 2010, Kenis and Lievens 2014, Swyngedouw 2007, 2010, 2013, Žižek 2008). By focusing

on technical (e.g., nuclear energy, carbon capture and storage), market-oriented (e.g., emission trading), and individualised (e.g., sustainable consumption) measures, hegemonic approaches, tend to refrain from fundamental debates on the kind of societal transformations needed to tackle climate change (Kenis and Lievens forthcoming). However, the question is not only how effective or just these conventional approaches are. The problem is also that they are often represented as the only feasible and realistic ones, as a result of which it becomes very difficult for alternative movements to make their voices heard (Kenis and Mathijs 2014). As conflict is frequently rejected as irresponsible given the common challenges we face and the urgency of the crisis, a strong consensual logic unfolds. Through the occlusion of the plurality of possible strategies and projects, depoliticised representations of climate change are not only a potential obstacle to tackling it effectively, but also hamper the democratic debate that is needed (Kenis and Lievens 2014).

In order to understand exactly what is at stake, it is important to consider a distinction made by post-foundational political theorists (Lefort 1988, Marchart 2007, Mouffe 2005a, Rancière 1999, Žižek 1999), namely, the distinction between 'politics' and 'the political'. Different scholars have given slightly different accounts of these notions, but they all share the same general intuition.[5] Chantal Mouffe (2005a, p. 9) has provided a typical definition when she states that 'politics' is about 'the set of practices and institutions through which an order is created', while 'the political' refers to 'the dimension of antagonism'. Politics, more generally, refers to the specific social sphere made up of institutions such as parliament and government. The political, in contrast, is broader and more specific at the same time: it refers to an order of representations (or discourses) through which society is given meaning, and these discourses can evidently manifest themselves outside the sphere of politics itself. More precisely, the political is that order of discourses that acknowledges the existence of power, conflict, division and contingency in society. It is the concealment of these latter elements, for example in discourses advocating consensus, which is constitutive of the post-political (Marchart 2007, Mouffe 2005a).[6]

More precisely, one could state that a discourse is post-political when it misrecognises the constructed and therefore contingent nature of the social; conceals the fact that each construction entails certain exclusions (an element which is stressed by both Mouffe and Rancière) and can therefore generate conflicts or antagonisms; and obscures the fact that the construction of the social inevitably entails acts of

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

[6] The term 'depoliticisation' is also used in a broader, and often theoretically less rigorous meaning. However, we use depoliticisation and post-politics more or less as synonyms, both referring to the loss of the political as analysed by, amongst others, Mouffe (2002), and applied on environmental issues by, amongst others, Swyngedouw (2010).

power. As Slavoj Žižek (1999) has stressed, the effect of such post-political representations of society is especially that they occlude the possibility of more far-reaching social transformations. Moreover, democracy itself is at stake in post-politics: democracy, according to these scholars, is impossible when conflict, power or exclusion remain invisible and uncontestable.

According to Erik Swyngedouw (2007, 2010, 2013), post-politics manifests itself in particular within many of the currently predominant environmental discourses. A hypothesis informing our research is that it is partly against this backdrop that recent, alternative forms of environmentalism, such as Transition Towns, arose. The task these movements face is not easy: they attempt to develop radical alternatives, but to make these visible, they also have to break through consensual and technocratic logics at work in the environmental sphere. The pivotal question is therefore whether and to what extent such alternative environmental movements succeed in going beyond post-politics. Specifically, the question at hand is how recent localisation discourses, as put forward for example by Transition Towns, relate to the problem of post-politics.

For Peter North (2010a), Transition Towns' focus on localisation is a sufficient reason to qualify the movement as transcending the post-political condition. He writes, '[the Transition Towns movement] is a fundamentally more radical, utopian vision of a society which has transitioned to a post-carbon economy based on inclusion, local distinctiveness, equality and freedom. As such, it is deeply political' (North 2010a, p. 591). Similarly, John Urry (2011, p. 92) diagnoses Transition Towns as being 'significantly political since it challenges the sedimented systems of twentieth-century carbon capitalism'. Like North, Urry (2011, p. 93) also rejects the post-political thesis as such for not taking the 'range of different politics surrounding changing climates' into account.

However, as we will argue in this article, the problem of (post-)politics is more complex than North and Urry seem to acknowledge. To uncover what is exactly at stake, we will develop both a theoretical exploration and an in-depth empirical analysis of Transition Towns' discourse on localisation (with a specific focus on local food provision) in an attempt to answer the question to what extent the movement indeed contributes to overcoming post-politics.

1.3. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

In our research, we aim to assess how Transition Towns, and particularly its Flemish wing, deal with post-politics. We do this in particular from the perspective of how the movement maps or represents the local, and to what extent it gives a (post-)political account of localisation processes. The answer to these questions is evidently of great relevance for the movement's capacity to provide effective and democratic solutions to peak oil and climate change.

In order to address these issues, we will proceed, in the following section, to discuss recent debates on localisation processes, with a view to identifying how such processes stand up to the critique of post-politics. In the third section, we present the research framework and methodology. The fourth section is a combined results and discussion section, in which we elaborate on why Transition Towns prefers the local scale, how they conceive of the locality's relation to the broader context of society, and how they understand its internal structure. This leads us to the final section, which pulls from the preceding data and analyses to investigate to what extent Transition Town's concept of localisation contributes to the politicisation or depoliticisation of peak oil and climate change, and what is its effect.

2. THEORY

2.1. IDEALISING THE LOCAL

Localisation is increasingly promoted both by scholars and activists as a strategy for sustainability. In what follows, we will discuss some of the main arguments in favour of localisation. The focus will be on local food provision, which is what the Transition Towns movement in Flanders is especially focusing on. However, many of the arguments provided are also applicable to other issues.

First, localisation is said to have environmental advantages since it cuts energy and pollution costs related to global transportation and distribution systems (e.g., reducing food miles) (North 2010a, Seyfang 2006, 2007). Furthermore, local food systems are supposed to rely more often on sustainable production methods, such as organic farming (Born and Purcell 2006). Second, from a social-economic perspective, more face-to-face interactions amongst local people would help foster relations of trust between producers and consumers and, more generally, amongst citizens (Sage 2003). Increased human interaction and trust, it is argued, strengthens local economies and communities (Seyfang 2006, 2007): local empowerment, (food) security, and even social justice and democracy are expected to be the result (Feenstra 1997). Third, it is claimed that local food is riper, fresher, and more nutritious – partly because its 'local nature' implies the elimination or reduction of extended shelf life, packaging, transport and synthetic re-fortification – and thus healthier and of a higher quality (DeLind 2006). Furthermore, proximity would enlarge the possibilities for the consumer to see under what conditions food is grown (e.g., what pesticides or fertilisers are used) and to form an opinion on the health aspects of food production.

In many pleas for localisation, the local receives an inherently positive connotation (Born and Purcell 2006; Sonnino 2010). Furthermore, in some instances, the local is depicted as an intrinsic site of opposition and resistance to what are called the 'destructive forces of globalisation' (e.g., Allen et al. 2003, Cavangh and Mander 2004, DuPuis and Goodman 2005, Feagan 2007, Sage 2003). The local is then

presented as radical and subversive while the global is conceived as hegemonic and oppressive (Born and Purcell 2006).

2.2. THE LOCAL TRAP

Unsurprisingly, a number of authors takes issue with this idealisation of the local (e.g., Allen et al. 2003, Campbell 2004, DuPuis and Goodman 2005, Hinrichs 2000, 2003, Winter 2003). Branden Born and Mark Purcell (2006) speak about the 'local trap', referring to the tendency amongst activists and researchers to assume that the local is a priori desirable over larger scales, whereas there are sound reasons to argue, as well as many empirical studies suggesting, that this is not by definition the case.

First, on the environmental terrain, a number of studies show that while localisation may reduce both transportation and distribution costs, other environmental costs, such as heating or irrigation, can increase (Sonnino 2010). Furthermore, the claim that shorter distances are always more ecological overlooks factors such as the transported volume and the travel distance of the consumer (Mariola 2008, Van Hauwermeiren et al. 2007). Remarkably, the local is sometimes also equated with being organic, avoiding GMOs, preserving open space, tasting better, and so on (Born and Purcell 2006). However, as Hinrichs (2003, p. 35) aptly argues: 'Small-scale, local farmers are not inherently better environmental stewards'.

Secondly, critical questions can be raised with regard to food quality and human health. It might seem logical that a farmer closer to the market has fresher, and thus more nutritious and healthier food to offer than one who has to travel a greater distance. But in practice, this is not always the case. As Born and Purcell (2006, p. 203) state: 'Large-scale farming operations can, and must use, rapid-shipment methods and quick refrigeration to keep produce fresh. In some cases, it might be fresher and better for consumption than the local choice'. Moreover, other features, such as production methods (e.g., whether or not they are organic) could have a greater impact on quality and health aspects than travel distance.

Thirdly, as to the putative socio-economic benefits of localisation, several authors argue that localising the economy can produce economic losses for the local community just as easily as it can engender economic advantages (Born and Purcell 2006). Moreover, even if localisation strengthens the local 'economy', it is not certain that it also strengthens the local 'community'. Existing local inequalities can result in an unjust distribution of the economic gains of localisation, thus reinforcing rather than alleviating social injustice in the locality (Hinrichs and Allen 2008). Similarly, even if localisation does have positive benefits for a local community, this does not mean that it also enhances social justice on a broader level. Not all local communities have the same resources or capacities (DeFilippis 2004). Critical authors therefore stress that proximity is not the same as social fairness (Allen 2008). They argue that there is no reason to expect that local production and consumption in itself leads to more just

social relations, even if producers and consumers know each other personally (Hinrichs 2000). Local systems can lead to greater face-to-face interaction, and as such to more trust, but there is no reason to expect that this will intrinsically lead to more social justice, transparency, sustainability, democracy or (food) security (e.g., Allen 2008, Hinrichs 2003, Hinrichs and Allen 2008). While the local can be empowering for certain local actors, it can in the same way be disempowering for other, both local and non-local actors. As Patricia Allen (2008) points out: 'Without a direct focus on justice issues, alternative agrifood efforts may only create marginal, safe spaces for the privileged'. Similarly, Clare Hinrichs (2000, p. 301) emphasises that 'many direct agricultural markets involve social relations where the balance of power and privilege ultimately rests with well-to-do consumers'.

Furthermore, several authors show that localisation bears the risk of going hand in hand with forms of protectionism, particularism, patriotism, elitism, conservatism and even xenophobia (see e.g., Allen 2004, Allen et al. 2003, Campbell 2004, Feagan 2007, Hinrichs 2003). This tendency is often called defensive localism (e.g., Allen 1999, Hinrichs 2003, Winter, 2003). It can lead to the misrecognition of wider social interests and internal difference, and to the cultivation of feelings of antipathy towards the 'other' (Allen 2004, Hinrichs 2003, Winter 2003). Melanie DuPuis and David Goodman (2005, p. 362) refer to an 'unreflexive localism' which can lead to 'a potentially undemocratic, unrepresentative, and defensive militant particularism'.

The conclusion on the basis of these observations should be nuanced. Localisation can have desirable effects, but these require a number of important conditions to be fulfilled. Much depends on how the local is constructed: in this sense, 'defensive' and more 'progressive' forms of localism can be distinguished (e.g., DuPuis and Goodman 2005, Featherstone et al. 2012, Hinrichs 2003). Some authors, however, go as far as to claim that, whether in its defensive or progressive variant, 'there is nothing inherent about scale' (Born and Purcell 2006, p. 196). In other words, one cannot equate a scalar strategy with a particular set of outcomes: this would amount to a conflation of means with ends, strategies with goals. The outcomes of localisation efforts would not be intrinsic, but contextual: they depend on which actors and agendas are empowered by a specific scalar strategy.

Three theoretical reasons are put forward to explain why there is nothing inherent about scale (Born and Purcell 2006, see also Brown and Purcell 2005, Purcell and Brown 2005). First, it is stated that scale is socially constructed, and is thus a product of conflict and power. Therefore, its qualities are not ontological but contingent. Second, it is argued that scale is both fluid and fixed. On the one hand, scales are not permanent, invariable structures given by nature; they are mutable. They are constantly being made and remade. On the other hand, their fluidity is not boundless. Once constructed, they can last for a certain time and become hegemonic. As a result, they are real and have concrete effects, for example, in the way they favour certain groups over others. Third, it is stated that scale is a relational concept: the notion of a local scale makes sense only in relation to other scales. Each scale is

'defined by and tied to the others' (Born and Purcell 2006, p. 198). Like scales themselves, the relationships between particular scales are claimed to be socially constructed. Born and Purcell (2006) conclude that, at most, scale can be a strategy to achieve a particular end, and this end, they argue, should be clearly articulated in itself and distinguished from the scalar strategy that is used as a means to achieve it.

2.3. LOCALISM AND THE (POST-)POLITICAL

Interestingly, some of the objections to localisation strategies are strikingly parallel to criticisms of post-politics. Indeed, discourses that idealise the local tend to misrecognise the fact that scale is a social construction and is therefore contingent; that competing interests and ideologies are at stake; and that forms of power, exclusion and conflict are involved in scalar strategies. Our thesis, therefore, is that what idealisations of the local tend to overlook is exactly what is also concealed in post-political representations of society: its contingency, and the divisions and power relations which it is characterised by. Remarkably, even in the critical literature on localisation, the problems of the 'local trap' have not yet systematically been analysed in terms of post-politics. As we will see, however, our research led us to the conclusion that the local trap can best be conceptualised as a 'post-political trap'.

Interestingly, some authors have pointed to the apolitical or depoliticising effect of particular localisation discourses (e.g., Clarke and Cochrane 2013, DuPuis and Goodman 2005, Hinrichs 2003) and even of Transition Towns itself (e.g., Mason and Whitehead 2012, Neal 2013, Smith 2011, Trapese Collective 2008). However, there is no systematic exploration of the link between Transition Towns' representation of the local and post-politics so far. It ought to be stressed, in this context, that localisation as such cannot be called post-political, but only the way it is represented or constructed through certain discourses. Indeed, investigating post-politics, a crucial question is whether power and conflict are rendered visible or not (Mouffe 2000, 2005b), and this visibilisation happens through discourse. A local food system is not political or post-political in itself: this depends on how it is discursively given meaning.

The fact that Transition Towns goes 'against' the stream, and develops quite a radical alternative to conventional environmental discourses, is thus no sufficient ground for calling the movement 'political' (North 2010a, Urry 2011). Nor is it a sufficient argument for dismissing the 'post-political' thesis, as North and Urry do when they refer to the movement as exemplifying the 'really existing multiplicity of approaches' in relation to climate change.[7] As Chantal Mouffe (2005a) would answer: calling certain discourses post-political does not mean there are no forms of

[7] Other critics of the post-political thesis make a similar argument as North (2010a) and Urry (2011), referring to more oppositional grassroots movements, such as the Climate Justice Action Movement (e.g., Chatterton et al. 2013, Featherstone 2013). For an analysis of this movement from the perspective of 'the political', see Kenis and Mathijs (2014).

opposition or antagonism anymore. For her, power, conflict and exclusion are constitutive of the social. The crucial question is whether the discourses through which the social is interpreted account for these realities and make them visible.

The question of post-politics is especially important from a democratic point of view. As several political theorists argue, depoliticisation is the central element threatening to undermine democracy (e.g. Lefort 1988, Mouffe 2005a, Marchart 2007, Rancière 1999). Only when conflict is recognised and made visible, it becomes possible to keep it within democratic bounds (Mouffe 2005a). If not, however, the political (and its conflictual nature) does not disappear as such, but it comes back with a vengeance: it becomes intensified and reappears under forms that are less democratic, or less liable to be moderated and institutionalised. Mouffe famously argues for example that the rise of the far right during the last decades is the result of the consensual logic governing the contemporary political scene after the weakening and demise of the left/right distinction. Similarly, consensual logics lead to what Rancière (1999) calls 'post-democracy', a constellation in which what is actually visible is presented as the only possible or imaginable reality. For these authors, the very possibility to question and contest the actual state of society is a crucial feature of democracy.

Adopting a political discourse perspective can shed an interesting and innovative light on the ongoing localisation debate, as it provides a unifying framework on the basis of which we can assess how power, conflict and contingencies are represented or concealed in certain scalar discourses. Furthermore, it also allows us to investigate to what extent movements depart from hegemonic practices and create a democratic space in which political plurality can become visible. The assessment of localisation discourses from the vantage point of the (post-)political, evidently requires empirical inquiry.

3. Research Design

To study Transition Towns and how it represents the local, we conducted an extensive empirical study relying on qualitative research methods (Denzin and Lincoln 2005, Esterberg 2002, Patton 2002) investigating how Transition Towns was launched in Flanders (Belgium) and how it developed during its first years. From September 2008 to March 2010 we studied the movement intensively and from the inside as activist researchers (Hale 2008); then, for the subsequent two years, from 2011 through 2012, we followed it from a short distance.[8]

As activist researchers, we were especially involved in the transition initiative of Ghent, which was the most active group at the start of the movement in Flanders. Ghent is a city of 250.000 inhabitants and has a population density of almost 1600 inhabitants per square kilometre. Although it is the second biggest city in Flanders,

[8] Only the first author of this article was involved as an activist researcher in Transition Towns. Yet, for convenience's sake, we will continue to use the plural form 'we'.

large parts of it retain the character of a town. Ghent is actually composed of a series of 'village-like' neighbourhoods with their proper outlook and character. Interestingly, like other transition groups located in cities (Smith 2011, see also Bailey, Hopkins and Wilson 2010), the group in Ghent decided soon after its launch to split up in neighbourhood groups, thus starting to work on smaller 'village-like' scales, while at the same time maintaining a hub at the city level.

Next to our involvement in the transition group of Ghent, we also participated in activities of several other groups (including some outspokenly rural groups) and closely followed activities on the Flemish hub level. In total, we engaged as activist researchers in more than 40 meetings, activities and actions of the Transition Towns movement.

To get a more profound understanding of the perspectives and experiences of the people involved in the movement, we conducted 20 in-depth interviews of about two hours on average. Half of the interviewees were members of the transition initiative of Ghent (and its subgroups), the other half were key persons from other transition groups, mainly from towns or small cities situated in predominantly rural areas (examples include Ramsel, Merchtem, Scherpenheuvel, Kruishoutem and Hoeilaart). A document analysis of books, leaflets and websites produced by the movement completed our study.

Being involved as activist researchers basically meant that we were active participants in the movement amongst other transitioners (setting up meetings and activities, engaging in strategic debates and actions, getting involved in awareness raising, and doing practical tasks, including, for example, contributing to the Dutch translation of *The Transition Handbook*), while, at the same time, maintaining our position as researchers. At the start of our research, we asked permission to be closely involved in the movement in this role, and to conduct interviews.[9]

The combination of our involvement as activist researchers with the conduct of interviews and the study of documents was aimed at enhancing the validity of the performed study. At the same time, it allowed us to study potential divergences between Transition Towns' 'official' discourse and how it was taken up in some of the local initiatives in Flanders. In order to fine-tune this comparison, we presented interviewees with theses collected from our document analysis (in particular *The Transition Handbook* and the *Transition Initiatives Primer*) and asked them whether they agreed with these theses or not, and why.[10] Moreover, we asked how, according to them, the theses should be interpreted. This allowed us not only to acquire a rich and thick image of the movement, but also to check for possible misinterpretations

[9] In another paper, we provide an elaborate account of the methodological and political difficulties of being an activist researcher, in particular within a movement with which one starts to disagree.

[10] We particularly used these documents because they were the first transition documents that were translated in Dutch, and they had a huge impact on the movement in Flanders. Even if the movement in the meantime became broader and some concepts changed, these first publications therefore still constitute its ideological backbone.

from our side and to obtain a detailed account of the nuances present inside the movement.

In the presentation of the results, we will especially make use of the data obtained on the basis of the interviews, which were digitally recorded, fully transcribed and coded, and analysed in detail with the help of the software programme NVIVO®. The data obtained through participant observation and document analysis serve as a general background for the analysis.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In what follows, we will present our research results. We will focus on the following questions: why does Transition Towns prefer the local scale, how does it conceive of its relation to the broader context, and how does it understand its internal structure? As will become clear, the movement has a strong tendency to idealise the local, and is liable to fall into the local trap, which we will show to be primarily a post-political trap. At the same time, however, several transitioners appear to have an outspoken political consciousness and adopt widely diverging viewpoints. The result is that Transition Towns is not free from division, and thus of potential politicisation, even though these diverging viewpoints (until now) only occasionally openly and visibly clashed.

4.1. THE LOCALITY AS THE PREFERRED SCALE TO TACKLE PEAK OIL AND CLIMATE CHANGE

What are Transition Town's main arguments for localisation? To start with, the locality is promoted as the preferred scale to tackle peak oil and climate change. Localisation would shorten distribution networks, thus reducing oil consumption and CO_2 emissions. Anna, one of our interviewees, argues for example: 'what you very clearly have is a reduction of energy use, of food kilometres and the like'.[11] Transitioners also argue that proximity results in greater care because 'you see the consequences of what you do'. This would be valid for both consumers and producers. Daisy notices for example: 'if the company is closer to the people, they will apply more effort to do it well. Because there is a social bond between people'. Daisy's statement also indicates the notion that localisation is supposed to lead to more social connectedness. Several transitioners argue that connectedness is not only essential for efficiently tackling climate change, it is also central for 'the good life' they want to build after the collapse of current society they foresee and the necessary (and, in their view, desirable) transition to 'another world' (see also Barry and Quilley 2009). As the *Transition*

[11] All first names refer to interviewees. They have been modified for reasons of anonymity.

Initiatives Primer relays to its readers: 'these relocalisation efforts are designed to result in a life that is more fulfilling, more socially connected and more equitable' (Brangwyn and Hopkins 2008, p. 4). Many transitioners endorse this point of view, frequently linking it to imaginations of a (sometimes idealised) past of resilient and cohesive rural life. As Peter states: 'It's not that I think that rural life was better on all accounts 100 years ago, but what we should strive for goes into that direction, I think, rather than continuing the current course'. Similarly, Anna tells us what she 'hear[s] in this story': 'The local dimension, those mutual relations, the resilience of such a village, that is a form of embeddedness that is very comforting […] that is really the good life.' Often, such an interpretation goes together with romantic visions of rural local community life. Marc for example muses: 'Yeah, I see myself already, coming back from the field with hay, together with a group of people, and then we make a big heap of hay, and everybody stays overnight, well… I am quite romantic on this, yes (laughs).'

Seen from the perspective of the literature reviewed above, we can observe that many arguments for localisation provided by transitioners (re)produce a rather typical, idealised story about the local, constructing at the same time 'idyllised meanings of rurality' (Cloke 2006, p. 21). Consequently, a sometimes over-romanticised 'local-good/global-bad' distinction tends to sneak into their discourse (Hinrichs 2003). Scale is (implicitly) supposed to be the main distinguishing factor, not only between environmental damage and sustainability, but also between the 'good' and the 'bad' life. Some transitioners state this very explicitly. For example, reflecting on the root causes of the crises we witness today, Kate states: 'I think it is related to scale, more than to the concept of the company, for example. It's about how big something is.' A wide array of statements similar to this are made by other transitioners. Especially in relation to the responsibility of business actors in causing climate change, blame was given primarily to 'big' companies: they are problematic, not small ones. What is evidently neglected in such statements is the fact that all operate according to the same market mechanisms (Albo 2007, North 2010a, Wall 2005). Only one interviewee, Daisy, expresses doubt on this point, implicitly recognising that there is no necessary relation between scale and sustainability. She states*:*

> Yes, in the past, I really believed that if people are responsible for a certain area, eh, local and self-sufficient, well then they will consume and pollute much less. But by coincidence somebody told me yesterday about Easter Island, and how they destroyed their own natural environment ... and that did, yeah, that undermines it actually, doesn't it? And now, I don't really know how to think about this anymore…

Significantly, the local in Transition Towns discourse is not merely a question of scale, but acquires, as we will see, a substantively normative content. This is a bit at odds with the idea advocated by the movement that resilient local communities should be built through open processes. Following Hopkins' (2008a, p. 135) statement that the movement has to act as a catalyst for communities 'to explore and come up with its own answers', Jessica, for instance, emphasises that for her transition means 'simply, that people who live in a certain neighborhood determine by themselves what they want to do and how they want to do it'. Inevitably, a tension seems to arise between

letting people build their own Transition Town through an open process and the substantive normative content that its localisation discourse seems to embrace from the start, and many transitioners seemed to oscillate between both positions. This tension between viewing movement-building as following a recipe of clear-cut normative principles on the one hand, and considering it as an open and contingent process on the other, is of course extremely relevant from the point of view of the political.

A typical transition process starts with common visioning exercises in which members of a local community try to imagine a resilient future locality. At the same time, however, these exercises are often framed within the limits of a particular notion of 'the good life'. The effect is that a seemingly collective and participatory process risks to be implicitly steered by the preconceived visions of the movement's founders and pioneers, an (often) small group of mainly well-educated middle-class people (O'Rourke 2008 in Bailey, Hopkins and Wilson 2010), who, in the words of Dupuis and Goodman (2005, p. 361) 'decide what is "best" for everyone'. [12] Unsurprisingly, this also leads to divergences within the movement. While some participants express concerns about the lack of diversity, and look for ways to broaden the movement's social base, others merely notice that '*the others*' do not seem ready yet for the desired transition.

A core feature of 'the good life' promoted by the movement is social connectedness, thus rejecting anonymous, individualised life in cities. In the words of Terry Marsden (2006, p. 14), they try 'to escape the seeming anomie of urban life by creating "new localisms"'. Transitioners claim greater social connectedness can only be realised on a smaller scale. However, whereas Marsden thus describes the post-urban desire to go back to the countryside, Transition Towns rather tries to bring the rural into the city. The movement advocates a 'ruralisation' of the city by (re)dividing it into smaller village-scale neighbourhoods or communities in order to recreate the 'lifestyle experiences' that are 'traditionally associated with rural life, such as community solidarity' (Woods 2009, p. 53). It is particularly on this smaller level that transition initiatives are supposed to find fertile ground. The example of Ghent is revealing: after a successful start at the city level, a number of transitioners argued that the initiative was not 'local' enough, that one cannot create a socially connected 'community' on this level, and that the (contemporary) city is not part of their imagined future alternative. For that reason, the group decided to split up in smaller neighbourhood groups.

Stronger social bonds are not only considered crucial for local inhabitants' well-being, but also for solving a wide range of contemporary problems, such as climate

[12] The lack of diversity within both steering bodies and the membership has been debated both in Flanders and elsewhere. For instance, Smith (2011, p. 102) argues that 'membership diversity, or rather the lack of it' is a major problem for the movement, since 'preliminary findings from a recent survey run by the project suggest that 95% of the respondents described themselves as white European, and 86% were educated to post-graduate level'.

change. In that sense, Transition Towns follows community advocates such as Robert Putnam (2001) who consider the glue of strong social ties as the alpha and omega of nearly every single 'good', thereby risking to fall in the trap of seeing localisation *'as a panacea to virtually all societal ills*' as Gregory Albo (2007, p. 338) puts it. As Marc argues: 'What should happen? Simply, people should become more sociable again, and you can't maybe imagine, but a lot would follow from that …' In this light, more oppositional or critical attitudes towards community building are easily shoved aside. Marc ardently opposes 'we against them' discourses, for example, stating that if we want stronger social ties, we should be positive, open and kind to, literally, everyone. Such a rejection of discourses based on struggle or conflict constitutes a fundamental feature of the movement. It is no coincidence that divisive terms such as 'gender', 'class' or 'race', which are central to many politicising discourses, are almost absent from Transition Towns' narrative. Insofar as the notion of social justice appears, its divisive and politicising impact is often neutralised by the assumption that justice results from better social ties. Bailey, Hopkins and Wilson (2010, p. 598) claim that Transition Towns endeavours 'to bring together a broad range of social concerns under the Transition banner'. However, these social concerns are especially 'about "affluenza" and the erosion of local communities by globalisation', again stressing social connectedness and scale as core social issues. Hinrichs (2000, p. 301) warns that as a result, less privileged people within local communities thus often have to 'weigh concerns with income and price against the supposed benefits of direct, social ties'. Since 'the balance of power ultimately rests with well-to-do consumers' social connectedness risks becoming a poor substitute for what social justice could actually mean (Hinrichs 2000, p. 301).

4.2. THE LOCAL COMMUNITY FIRST!

Localisation has yet another important role in many transitioners' understanding of how to deal with peak oil and climate change: it also acts as a local haven of refuge against 'the coming storm'. In this sense, the focus is no longer on avoiding this storm, or on developing broader strategies that include people beyond the local community. Anna emphasises for example that the Transition Towns movement is in the first instance 'about the survival of a local community'. Or as Jacob ponders: 'Then I think, yes, if things go wrong, then I can still live.' This survivalist perspective, as noted by Barry and Quilley (2009) and Bailey, Hopkins and Wilson (2010), is related to an apocalyptic discourse which sometimes overshadows the 'happy community building' atmosphere of the movement, and is mobilised in order to urge people to engage in a far-reaching forms of localisation. Climate change, and especially peak oil underpin the movement's apocalyptic expectations. According to Mason and Whitehead (2012, p. 496) they form 'the framework of converging catastrophes within which Transition Culture operates'. One of the reasons for stressing peak oil, is that 'whereas poorer

regions of the world are predicted to bear the brunt of climate change and biodiversity loss, the severest impacts of peak oil are likely to be felt in the advanced North' (Bailey, Hopkins and Wilson 2010, p. 602), leading John Barry and Stephen Quilley (2009, p. 17) to conclude that Transition Towns' success is potentially due to 'the tacit and sometimes overt emphasis on survival'.

The idea that peak oil and climate change are imminent, and that we ought to prepare ourselves for the coming catastrophe, is, as Swyngedouw (2010) would state it, typically undergirding forms of post-politics. The fact that the building of local resilient communities is presented as 'the only viable solution', contributes to this post-political predicament (Bailey, Hopkins and Wilson 2010, p. 598). Confronted with the scale and emergency of the challenge, it seems we can no longer afford any loss of time due to doubts, disagreements or endless debate. Although this is not necessarily the case, such discourses can also easily lead to what has been called defensive localism (Allen 2004; Hinrichs 2003; Winter 2003). One of the latter's consequences is that solidarity risks being restricted to people from nearby, maybe even to people 'we know'. The fates of people from far away, people we do not know, risk to remain out of sight (Allen 1999). This is especially the case if the urge to ensure the survival of one's own community goes together with the idea that survival will not be possible for everyone, and that therefore, perhaps, a kind of 'survival of the fittest' will be the inevitable result. Concerning the need to prepare for the coming catastrophe, and to make sure one obtains her or his share of limited resources, Ronny tells us:

> So, actually a kind of fear to survive, to make sure you have those basic goods. And my thing was then, well, okay, if we will announce this very publicly, then everyone will buy the last forests, and I don't know what …I just want to make sure I have my own forest too.

John emphasises, in his turn, that local, resilient, and especially rural communities are better positioned in such a situation:

> I think people on the countryside have the advantage of disposing of some land and wood, and that people in the city will face difficult times. Well, I don't want to think about this too much, but stories by your grandparents come into mind: during the war, peasants were much better off, because they had food.

These findings correspond with the observation of Barry and Quilley (2009, p. 27) that the focus of the movement on survival and catastrophe 'is also present […] in the priorities that emerge very early in the development of local TT [Transition Towns] initiatives – concerns about food production, allotments, buying land and the securing food and energy supplies'. As they argue, 'the discourse of peak oil and food shortages feeds very directly into anxieties about family and community survival'. North (2010a, p. 587) concludes that the key question is whether 'localisation [is] just a form of survivalism that stresses gardening rather than guns?'

The answer is not always clear. Several transitioners emphasise that building one's own haven of refuge does not imply that the Transition Towns movement would not also (try to) be socially just. Two arguments are put forward to this end. The first

is that the movement takes 'all local habitants' into account. The other argument is that 'in the end, it is also better for others, like the [people from the] South' if we build local resilient communities here. Seth argues for example:

> Yes, but I think we serve the world best by, eh, folding back upon ourselves rather than by being concordant. […] I think Africa will be much better off when we don't bother them any longer than when we express our solidarity with them or so.

However, some transitioners problematise this strategy. As William argues, the 'we' Transition Towns tries to build thus risks to become something negative: 'we are prepared and the rest isn't'. The focus is then on 'my village, my community' and the conclusion is that 'everybody closes his door, and you will protect yourself'. Moreover, not all are convinced that building resilient local communities in the North is better for the global South. As Kate notices:

> Because I mean for the South, at this moment it [consumption by people from the North] is a very important source of revenue for them, it is unjust, but ok, what will you do about it? No, we just close that off, and we will fold back upon our own neighbourhood. Well, that doesn't seem to be a good scenario to me.

Yet others criticise this strategy from a totally different perspective. They doubt whether building resilient local communities will give them the security they desire. As Sophie explains: 'Mhmm. I didn't experience it yet, it is not proven yet, that it will give me more life assurance'. This seems to be particularly worrying insofar as there is a chance that others will try to profit from one's self-sufficient community if, in a moment of crisis, push comes to shove. Jessica elaborates on this, saying: 'The question is, of course, you form a resilient community that can sustain itself very well, and next door there is one which is not able to do so: to what extent won't they come to profit from what you realised?' She continues: 'So yeah. If there is really a crisis, then I don' t know if you have really put yourself in security in this way.' Further on in the interview, Jessica argues that for this very reason, we should urge other localities to build their own self-reliant local community as well. This idea is echoed in the 'official' discourse. Insofar as the movement has a broader strategy for society at large, it consists of a 'viral' or 'rhizomic spread' of similar local initiatives (Hopkins 2008a, p. 202; Bailey, Hopkins and Wilson 2010, p. 596). However, this strategy inevitably confronts certain barriers. Not all localities have an equal capacity to transform themselves, nor are the resources to do so evenly distributed (DeFilippis 2004). As a result, this strategy risks strengthening existing inequalities, reinforcing unequal spatial distributions of financial, environmental and social capacities. Several transitioners are acutely conscious of this risk, and the recent tendency to speak about 'Transition culture' or 'Transition network' instead of 'Transition Towns' perhaps provides a way to deal with it (Mason and Whitehead 2012; Neal 2013). Yet, the original focus on (one's own) place is still central to the movement's discourse, with a significant group of transitioners embracing more 'defensive' forms of localism.

Another element which reinforces this defensive localism is that for some transitioners, the locality is not only a kind of haven of refuge, but also something one ought to be attached to, be proud of, even 'love'. The local good – global bad

distinction described above threatens to be reinforced as a distinction between the 'reliability', 'admirability' and 'quality' of local products and producers versus the 'unreliability', 'unattractiveness' and 'uncertain quality' of global ones. The locality in this way becomes a kind of 'love story'. *The Transition Handbook* gives the example of Louis King, manager of the Riverford farm shop in Totnes, who refers to the fact that 'we like our own products' as a crucial argument in favour of having a local currency (quoted in Hopkins 2008a, p. 189). Through these kinds of statements, localisation threatens to become imbued with a quasi-chauvinist preference for the own locality.

As Hopkins (2008a, p. 147) emphasises, key elements of the movement are not only 'local food' and 'local crafts', but also 'local history and culture'. Typically, the transition groups in Ghent set up activities intended to revitalise the identity of their neighbourhoods. Such activities included, for instance, theatre plays that aimed at reviving the old village-like neighbourhood, which was portrayed as a form of 'rural city life'. The plays re-envisioned, amongst others, past (often typically rural) crafts, gardening practices, sheep herding and a strong sense of connectedness.

This focus on local history and culture is evidently full of ambiguities, leading to divergences within the movement itself. While some transitioners seem to embrace the local as better in itself, and try to rebuilt local identities, habits or crafts, others are much more sceptical about this. Stressing that this is not her cup of tea, Sophie states for example: 'the local history, the local culture… what I think of that? Something in the sense of patriotism and that kind … well, a bit unhealthy, eh… '. Similarly, Jessica states: 'It makes me think of the rightwing, well, of your own people first, and your own culture first and… While I find diversity so beautiful. That's why it is rather negative than positive like that for me.'

These transitioners notice how appealing to the preference for one's own local tradition can potentially be pushed into a conservative, particularistic or even xenophobic direction. This is a risk which several scholars of local food networks also observed (Feagan 2007, Hinrichs 2003, Winter 2003). As many of them show, favouring one's own local culture, especially when this goes together with the idealisation of a kind of original, homogeneous local tradition, can easily lead to a lack of openness towards outsiders or other cultures who threaten to destroy this 'originality'.

Other motives referred to by transitioners to promote local currency systems risk to reinforce this tendency. In an interview in *The Transition Handbook*, Marjana Kos argues for example about local currency systems: 'It's keeping wealth here' and '[It] prevents money from 'leaking out'' (quoted in Hopkins 2008a, p. 188-192). This type of argumentation is characteristic of what scholars such as Clare Hinrichs (2003) and Michael Winter (2003) refer to as defensive localism. As Hinrichs (2003, p. 37) argues: 'Defensive localisation seeks to reduce the undue flow of resources away from the spatial local and also to protect local members from the depredations and demands of "outsiders"'. Unsurprisingly, one of the crucial features of defensive

localism is its orientation towards 'economic objectives, such as keeping dollars in the community and supporting local businesses' (Hinrichs and Allen 2008).

Again, we have to underline that while some transitioners tend to embrace these forms of defensive localism, others explicitly go against it. William observes, for example:

> I think that this corresponds more with the defensive aspect. Transition that starts from a negative scenario: that you start to protect and defend yourself, so to speak, but in a... I don't know exactly how to describe it, but in a darker way. Perhaps a negative protectionism is then also part of it.

William emphasises that this is not the kind of transition he had signed up for, and several transitioners follow him on this point.

However, the 'official' discourse does not provide many answers. While the problem is recognised in the *Transition Initiatives Primer*[13], the solutions provided are limited. At most there is a reference to the UN Declaration of Human Rights, as Anna, one of our interviewees, correctly notices:

> Yes, there are risks of one's own people first, eh, of one's own community first. But the basic manual very clearly speaks about this, they say, 'adopt in your statutes or in your basic documents the idea that this is an inclusive thing, and that discrimination against certain parts of the population cannot be tolerated'. But yeah…

4.3. THE LOCALITY AS INTERNALLY HARMONIOUS

A final observation concerns Transition Towns' understanding of social relations within the locality. In order to realise a transition, it is argued, we have to accomplish 'a degree of dialogue and inclusion that has rarely been achieved before' (Hopkins 2008a, p. 141). The apocalyptic discourse evoked above is used as a rationale to engage in far-reaching forms of collaboration, as it is suggested we can no longer afford to engage in time-consuming conflicts. Because of the 'urgency' and 'scale of the challenge', we should all work together (Hopkins 2008a, p. 141). '[W]ithout that we have no chance of success'. As a result, the conflict tends to be understood as one of 'society versus CO_2' (Swyngedouw 2007, p. 27), or applied to Transition Towns: 'locality versus CO_2'. In this way, the enemy, and as such every conflict, is externalised. Conflicts within 'the people' are moved aside.

Interestingly, exactly this focus on all-round collaboration and inclusion seems to attract people from a progressive background to the movement. They interpret this focus in terms of the need to involve those people who are currently structurally excluded from society, such as immigrants. Scholars such as Mason and Whitehead (2012) understand the notion of inclusion in Transition Towns in a similar way.

[13] 'We're aware that we need to strengthen this point in response to concerns about extreme political groups becoming involved in transition initiatives' (Brangwyn and Hopkins 2008, p. 14).

However, the question is whether this interpretation is valid, especially if we look at it from a political point of view. Remarkably, Transition Towns claims not only to try to reach out to excluded people, but especially also to people who are usually not seen as evident allies in the struggle for emancipatory change, such as local business leaders or big landlords. Inclusiveness, in Transition Town's discourse, primarily seems to mean being non-oppositional, strongly collaborative, and pursuing harmony through complementarity amongst individuals and their interests. In this way, the movement evokes the utopia of a harmonious local community, created by all for all (Fisher and Shragge 2000), in which every distinction between 'we' and 'them' has disappeared. As authors such as Mouffe (2005) and Swyngedouw (2010) show, such a discourse can have very depoliticising consequences. That this is not evident for all transitioners becomes clear in a comment from Kate*:*

> Well, … I find this a very difficult one. For example, yesterday, there was Thomas Leysen of the VBO [Belgian employers organisation] in the newspaper with an opinion article in which he called for the foundation of a green bank. Well, what do you then have to say: 'yes, but it is VBO who says it, and that is not good', or do you have to say 'oh, great, we will realise something together'.

Further in the interview, Kate states that for her, collaborating with business actors is not evident, since she doubts about their intentions. A more conflictual approach to put them under pressure, might be preferable, she suggests. Yet, Transition Towns firmly 'rejects' every 'we against them' discourse. In 2008, the Trapese Collective (2008, p. 3) published a booklet *The Rocky Road to a Real Transition*, launching a debate on the type of transition the movement aims for: 'to where, and from what?' The authors refer to a transition group that was reluctant to support another local group in Rossport (Ireland) struggling 'against' Shell building a high-pressure gas pipeline through their community. They describe their stupefaction hearing transitioners arguing 'against' organising support since Transition Towns is 'about positive responses and not something that takes positions 'against' institutions or projects' (Trapese Collective 2008, p. 4-5). Answering this booklet, Rob Hopkins states that

> [o]ne fundamental misunderstanding in this document is the belief that change is something that we have to fight for, that those in positions of power will cling to business as usual for as long as possible, that globalisation will only wobble if we shake it hard enough.

As he argues, 'a successful transition through peak oil and climate change will by necessity be about a bringing together of individuals and organisations, rather than a continued fracturing and antagonising' (Hopkins 2008b), and many transitioners agree with him. Sophie emphasises for example: 'There are many people who organise actions "against". And I don't support that. That is something which I experience differently in the transition initiative, and what attracts me to a big extent.' Hopkins (2008a) stresses that it is important to collaborate with other people of the local community, including local authorities and businesses. Remarkably, he assures that these actors will be open to participating in transition projects: 'you will be surprised

at how many people in positions of power will be enthused and inspired by what you are doing, and will support, rather than hinder, your efforts' (Hopkins 2008a, p. 22) and many transitioners follow him in this. Anna explains for example: 'Yes yes. I think that a company that's a little bit smart has understood it for a long time, no? A company that's a little bit smart will join this […]… Yes, I have to say, I don't fear that so much, all this opposition.' Significantly however, a contradiction sometimes sneaks into transitioners' discourse on this point. Arriving at Anna's home, for example, we saw a poster 'against' Electrabel [a big Belgian energy company] behind the window. When we asked her about that, the answer was revealing: 'Electrabel? Oh, I hate Electrabel (laughs). Yes, absolutely. Yes, it is good that you mention it. Now I know it again. Not all companies are nice.' She told us that she ordered no less than 50 of these posters, and offered us one.

Evidently, many people would consider it noble to try to think beyond oppression and conflicts. In reality, however, society is inevitably characterised by power relations, oppositions of interests, inequalities and a multiplicity of voices (Mouffe 2002), and this is as true for the locality as for society at large. From the perspective of the political, the question is whether these divisions or forms of heterogeneity can come to the fore and be dealt with democratically, or whether they remain invisible and unarticulated. It is significant that several transitioners point to such divisive issues, without, however, knowing very well how to deal with them. The problem is that differences of opinion or power inequalities do not disappear just by ignoring them. Mouffe (2002, p. 5) stresses this when she states that 'the political in its antagonistic dimension cannot be made to disappear simply by denying it, by wishing it away [...]'. On the contrary, misrecognising conflict threatens to make it more intense.

Furthermore, as one transitioner aptly observes, if one takes a closer look, Transition Towns seems to use a kind of '*we against them*' distinction, too. However, it is not a political, but a geographical distinction. The local (good) is presented as the opposite of the global (bad). As William notes: 'And then a we/them kind of thinking arises, the people of my neighbourhood or my group against the rest, like that.' The point is that preferring a geographical unity (and corresponding we-them distinction) above an explicitly political one is itself already a political choice, but one which is not recognised as such in Transition Towns' discourse.

5. CONCLUSIONS

5.1. THE LOCAL, THE TRAP AND THE POST-POLITICAL

Writing on the spatial representations of the Transition Towns movement, Bailey, Hopkins and Wilson (2010) leave no doubt: Transition Towns is first and foremost a

localisation movement. Similarly, Mason and Whitehead (2012, p. 498) argue that 'the real heart of transition is the local initiative', and Neal (2013, p. 62) states that while she does 'not want to diminish the level of concern with Peak Oil and climate change it appears to be the community and local context that has so effectively popularised Transition'. In other words, localisation is the proper nodal point in Transition Towns' discourse, around which the other narratives are woven.

This focus on localisation is so strong that it sometimes overruns the movement's other concerns, which thus tend to become mere means to the actual end, localisation. Acknowledging that new discoveries, market swings or technological breakthroughs could 'alter public sentiments towards relocalisation', Bailey, Hopkins and Wilson (2010, p. 603) argue for example that 'for relocalisation to remain salient', '[d]ifferent elements of the message will […] need to be stressed at different times'. In other words, if peak oil would somehow be overcome, other arguments will have to be developed in favour of localisation. Rather than being a new grassroots environmental movement that tries to tackle the twin problems of climate change and peak oil through building resilient local communities, as we suggested in the beginning of this article, it appears as if Transition Towns is first and foremost a localisation movement which refers to climate change and peak oil to reinforce its case.

This diagnosis brings us back to a problem we discussed in the section on the local: localisation discourses often entail a means-ends reversal, as a result of which the real goals behind scalar strategies tend to become invisible (Born and Purcell 2006). However, in the case of Transition Towns, something more seems to be at stake. On the one hand, several concerns of the movement, such as peak oil and climate change, are mobilised, and sometimes even instrumentalised, in favour of the goal of localisation. On the other hand, the local has no meaning in itself. The 'local' can thus be conceived as an empty signifier par excellence (Smith 1998, Glynos and Howarth 2007), a term which acquires a substantive meaning through associations with other elements structuring the discourse around it. This diagnosis corresponds with the statement of Born and Purcell (2006, p. 196) that there is 'nothing inherent about scale', but it also shows how the local can acquire a political thrust, depending on the chain of elements that are associated with it. The local trap easily manifests itself as a post-political trap: conceiving of the local as a goal in itself often relies on an obfuscation of the inevitably political process through which the local is constructed. With regard to Transition Towns, for instance, we saw how 'the local' becomes the pre-eminent nodal point of a post-political discourse as a result of its association with imaginations of harmonious, socially connected 'rural' communities, in which people are in tune with each other and with nature. These imaginations express the kind of 'good life' the movement advocates. Crucial in this regard is that not only the 'local', but also associated terms such as 'community' and 'rurality' are socially constructed in such a way as to become strongly depoliticised. Power, conflict and exclusion are clearly absent from the way the rural is depicted, for example.

Strongly related to this stress on the local is indeed the importance attached to the rural. It is precisely because the pre-eminent goal of Transition Towns is not sustainability but localisation, that Transition Towns can be seen as part of a broader movement towards a different kind of community life and a re-entanglement of social-nature relations, in other words a movement towards ruralisation. More than anything else, the focus on the local is symptomatic for the rural character of Transition Towns.

5.2. THE REVENGE OF THE POLITICAL

The political and post-politics are complex notions. Assessing a movement in terms of its 'political' nature appears to be a controversial endeavour. Both North (2010a) and Urry (2011) try to do 'justice' to Transition Towns by claiming that the movement is without any doubt 'political'. However, in a certain way their diagnoses conflict with the movement's own self-understanding. Indeed, Transition Towns explicitly claims to be apolitical. The crucial question is how this apolitical self-representation should be understood, especially given the fact that the movement underscores at the same time the need to engage with 'political' actors such as local governments and city councils (Brangwyn and Hopkins 2008). If one starts from a common sense understanding of politics, this seems paradoxical. However, from the perspective of the theories of the political we referred to above, Transition Towns' self-description as being apolitical is highly significant: the movement seems to be keenly aware that being apolitical is not about engaging or not with local authorities, but about thinking in terms of power, antagonistic relations between 'we' and 'them', and about struggles between opposing interests.

Interestingly, Transition Towns' attempt to be apolitical seems to be more successful than its pioneers could probably have imagined: it is even what attracts a high number of people to the movement. However, as Mouffe (2005a) perspicaciously observed, getting rid of the political dimension in social relations is probably doomed to fail. Repressing the political or rendering it invisible does not make it disappear: it is very likely to reappear, but in a different guise. At least, repressing the political will have symptomatic effects in the movement's discourse which testify to the presence of an underlying conflict. At worst, it can render a conflict more acute and intense, thereby undermining the possibility to deal with it in a democratic way. If the political is repressed, it threatens to come back with a vengeance. Is not Transition Towns' subtle, geographic we/them distinction (the local versus the global) a manifestation par excellence of the fact that division is ineradicable? Or is the risk of xenophobia (of which we do not aim to accuse Transition Towns as such, although the movement appears to have difficulties immunising itself against it) not a typical reappearance of division under non-political forms, as Chantal Mouffe argues?

A significant example of the return of the political concerns Transition Towns' tendency to frame conflicts in psychological terms (Brangwyn and Hopkins 2008): a conflict strategy is not just a political strategy with which they disagree, but a form of psychological defence or immaturity, which people should 'transcend'. Paradoxically, the 'psychology of change' which Transition Towns promotes is aimed at overcoming conflict, while, at the same time, it subtly reintroduces conflict: conflict within the self, against one's own psychological defences. This psychologisation, whose object is often what in a more political language would be called an 'opponent', shows that something is indeed in need of being repressed: in this case, conflict strategies, and thus the political as such. The problem is that as a result, people who defend conflict strategies are no longer taken seriously, and a genuine political debate is made impossible.

This psychologisation permeates other aspects of the movement as well. The main obstacle for change being our 'addiction to oil' (Hopkins 2008a, p. 86), a whole range of 'therapeutic' (p. 92) tools are developed to help people in a 'supportive, friendly, encouraging and empathetic' (p. 92) way to deal with the 'mixed feelings' (p. 86) that arise when one tries to overcome 'psychological barriers' (Brangwyn and Hopkins 2008, p. 9) in a personal transition. Conflict thus turns back, but in a non-political fashion: as an internal conflict with one's own spontaneous inclinations, desires or psychological defences. Each time, the conflict threatens to intensify rather than to be overcome. Several transitioners witnessed how they became upset when a divergent opinion was put aside with the suggestion that one has to work on her/himself. Others were puzzled by their own feelings of anger if situations (for example forms of collaboration with local government bodies) did not work out the way they expected: feelings which they could not really allow, let alone articulate, and whose repression even increased their discomfort.

5.3. POLITICISING THE LOCAL

As we already stated above: the local is not post-political as such, nor are localisation movements. What matters is how the local is discursively constructed. While many localisation movements depict the local as a site of resistance, as radical and subversive (Allen et al. 2003; Born and Purcell 2006; DuPuis and Goodman 2005), and thus try to turn the local into a terrain of politicisation, this is not Transition Towns' approach, or at least not the approach of the majority of its participants.

The fact that the movement nevertheless presents itself as a break with and renewal of conventional environmental discourses, and thus goes against the grain, makes Transition Towns uniquely complex, ambivalent and fascinating. On the one hand, Transition Towns would not employ words such as resistance or subversion in its self-description, as it stresses the importance of being positive, open, constructive and collaborative. On the other hand, however, transitioners nevertheless depict their

movement in terms of a profound break with current society. According to Allen et al. (2003, p. 61), the crucial question concerning localisation initiatives is: 'are they significantly oppositional or primarily alternative?' In other words, do they recognise the existence of conflict, power and division or are they rather focusing on building small havens without agonising existing society? In the context of current post-political tendencies this question gets an extra dimension.

Interestingly, Transition Towns contributes without any doubt to the imagination of radical future alternatives, and by doing so, it clearly goes 'against the grain'. However, it seems to lack the conceptual tools to understand this 'against'. It is part of a hegemonic struggle on how to frame and to tackle the climate crisis and on how to rebuild society, although it threatens to remain unaware of the stakes and mechanisms of the struggle it is a part of. The point is that in the end, one cannot entirely make abstraction from this struggle: it symptomatically reappears, as we discussed above, and interestingly, exactly this reappearance can provide the starting point for a process of repoliticisation.

The fact that forms of division exist within the movement could contribute to this process of politicisation in a positive way, giving it a focus and direction. As we showed, several transitioners experience a certain unease with elements of Transition Towns' 'official' discourse, arguing that more attention should be paid to social justice issues, and advocating a more emancipatory form of localisation. The development of these germs of contestation could help to put the movement on a more solid 'political' footing: by rendering visible the disagreements and powers that permeate and surround it, it can sharpen the movement's awareness of the stakes and obstacles of its 'struggle' and contribute to rendering it more democratic and effective than it is today.

Concretely, the movement could for example pay more attention to the importance of 'utopian processes' which bring people together in an open-ended trajectory which explores and discusses ways to realise change, rather than promoting 'utopian visions' of how a more localised, rural and socially embedded society in the future could look like (see also DuPuis and Goodman 2005). In Transition Towns' jargon, this could mean stressing the movement's intention to 'act as a catalyst' instead of focussing on 'the good life' and its related normative underpinnings. Politicising the local is then about creating a space in which a multiplicity of future socio-environmental possibilities can emerge or be taken into account. But, above all, politicising the local possibly requires adopting another relation to scale. It means working 'within a place' without being 'about a place' (DeFilippis et al. 2006, p. 686). Indeed, there are several good reasons to take localities as starting points for movement building; but when the local becomes an end in itself, it can have strongly depoliticising consequences.

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CHAPTER 6

CLIMATE CHANGE AND POST-POLITICS: REPOLITICISING THE PRESENT BY IMAGINING THE FUTURE?[1]

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the last two decades, an important debate has taken place in political theory concerning our current 'post-political' or 'post-democratic' condition (Crouch 2004, Marchart 2007, Mouffe 2002b, 2005, 2006, Rancière 1998, Žižek 2000). Broadly speaking, this condition implies that predominant representations of society tend to be consensual or technocratic and thus make power, conflict and exclusion invisible. As Chantal Mouffe (2002a, p. 33-34) has argued, this is a threat to democracy: 'Instead of trying to erase the traces of power and exclusion, democratic politics requires us to bring them to the fore, to make them visible so that they can enter the terrain of contestation'.

This topic has also received significant attention in the fields of geography and ecology, primarily with regards to climate change, an issue that is particularly vulnerable to being represented in a post-political way, as Erik Swyngedouw (2007, 2010a, 2013) has shown. Many authors in these fields have focused on the post-political thesis, either to criticise it (e.g., Chatterton et al. 2013, Featherstone 2013, Featherstone and Korf 2012, North 2010, Urry 2011) or apply it to specific cases (e.g., Bettini 2013, Brand et al. 2009, Celata and Sanna 2012, Goeminne 2010, 2012, Mason and Whitehead 2012, Neal 2013, Oosterlynck and Swyngedouw 2010, Kenis and Mathijs 2009, 2014). A question that has received much less attention, however, concerns what happens when an actor explicitly tries to repoliticise the present to realise the change that the actor has deemed necessary. This is the topic of the present paper: the study of the Climate Justice Action movement (CJA) as one of the most prominent movements in recent history that explicitly took issue with the consensual, post-political logic governing much of the debate on climate change.[1] CJA emerged in

[1] Published as Kenis, A. & Mathijs, E., 2014. Climate change and post-politics: Repoliticizing the present by imagining the future? *Geoforum,* 52, 148-156.

[1] CJA was launched as a network; however, throughout the meetings, activities and organised actions, it became more than that. CJA began to attract people who were not members of one

the year prior to the 2009 Copenhagen climate summit and consisted of a broad range of groups and activists from around the world and especially from Western Europe.[2] After the summit, many CJA groups remained active, setting up various types of activities (e.g., actions around specific issues such as the investments by banks and companies in the exploitation of tar sands or shale gas and larger events such as climate camps), campaigning around the summits in Cancún, Durban and Qatar and engaging in a myriad of education and information initiatives. At the same time, the movement slowly disintegrated.

Interestingly, CJA did not merely advocate a specific cause, as all social movements do: CJA also targeted post-politics as an obstacle for promoting this cause, and this difference is what makes it such a relevant object of study. CJA criticised the fact that in a post-political condition, alternative voices are at risk of remaining unheard. The movement did not merely wage a concrete political struggle about a specific issue, but it also engaged in a type of meta-struggle for genuine political struggle and disagreement to even become possible and visible (Kenis and Lievens 2014). Thus, it aimed to create a space in which political plurality, power differentials, conflicts and oppositions would become visible, and it considered this condition to be essential for tackling climate change in an effective, democratic and socially just way. In this way, CJA attempted to repoliticise the debate on climate change, and it was quite explicit concerning this goal (COP15zine 2009).

In this paper, we will attempt to spell out the difficulties and obstacles that confront such an endeavour. We elaborate two possible strategies of repoliticisation: one based on the work of Jacques Rancière and the other on the writings of Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau. On the basis of our involvement as scholar activists within the movement, we will discuss CJA's practices and discourses from the perspective of these two strategies and spell out the challenges and obstacles the movement was confronted with in its attempt to repoliticise the public sphere. We will pay particular attention to the role of visioning the future as a crucial element in any attempt to repoliticise the present. The paper concludes by analysing the paradoxical nature of CJA's project to repoliticise in the context of post-politics, which helps to explain its relative failure.

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of the founding organisations, and many activists started to identify with CJA as such. In the interviews we conducted, almost all activists spoke of CJA as 'a movement' with which they strongly identified. For that reason, we chose to describe CJA as a movement in this paper, even if it was originally constituted as a network.

[2] CJA was of course only one organisation in a broader field of climate justice articulations, alliances and movements. The claims made in this paper are only aimed to represent CJA in the strictest sense, in particular regarding its current Flemish incarnation. For additional information on the background and activities of the movement, see Chatterton, Featherstone and Routledge (2013) and Featherstone (2013).

2. RESEARCH DESIGN

Our research combined a theoretical exploration of strategies for repoliticisation with scholarly activism or action research (Brydon-Miller et al. 2003, Reason and Bradbury 2008, the Autonomous Geographies Collective 2010), the confrontation between which allowed us to assess these strategies on the basis of the actual experiences and discourses of an existing movement.

As scholar activists involved with CJA, we involved in a movement with others, which required us to set up meetings, engage in strategic debates and actions and perform practical tasks while at the same time, clearly identifying ourselves as scholars.[3] Concretely, we attended more than 40 meetings, activities, demonstrations and actions, both in Belgium and internationally, and actively contributed to organising and promoting these activities. This involvement took place in the year prior to, during and after the climate summit in Copenhagen (including an international preparation weekend in Copenhagen in October 2009 and a stay of ten days during the Copenhagen summit itself), spanning the lifetime of the movement's relatively short and active existence. After the Copenhagen summit, we closely followed the activities of the movement but did not remain as actively involved. However, we analysed an extensive range of leaflets, press releases, booklets and other materials spread by the movement, and to complete our data triangulation, we conducted 20 in-depth interviews with activists who were actively engaged in the Belgian wing of CJA and 20 in-depth interviews with activists from Transition Towns, another grassroots climate movement that arose in the same period in Belgium and had an attitude similar to CJA regarding conventional environmental approaches, although it opted for a much more depoliticised trajectory than CJA.[4] The latter interviews made it possible to add an outsider's point of view, as one of the central questions during the interviews with Transition Towns members was how they perceived CJA. Although CJA was organised on the national level in Belgium, all activists we interviewed were from its Flemish contingent. We opted for 'maximum variation sampling' to discover the most comprehensive spectrum of backgrounds and viewpoints within the movement (Patton 2002). The interviewees were of various ages, education and ideological backgrounds. We also attempted to include a maximum range of opinions and positions as they were articulated during meetings,

[3] Only the first author of this paper was engaged as a scholar activist in CJA. However, for practical reasons, we will speak in the plural form 'we' throughout the paper.

[4] It should be noted that CJA and Transition Towns are both grassroots climate movements that share some features (they both criticise the market approach of conventional environmentalism (e.g., green growth), they conceive of people as citizens rather than as consumers, and they focus on collective instead of individual change) while strongly diverging on several other dimensions. In contrast to CJA, Transition Towns stresses the importance of localisation, resilience, cooperation and the psychology of change, and it firmly rejects every 'we against them' discourse (which, as we will see below, is characteristic of CJA) (Kenis and Mathijs 2009, 2014).

actions and activities. Eleven female and nine male activists were interviewed. Of course, the 'sample' was also influenced by the activists' willingness to be interviewed. However, only two activists refused. In qualitative research, whose goal is not to arrive at generalised statements, samples do not necessarily have to be representative. However, because of the relatively small number of people who were actively involved in CJA, our sample could be observed as quite representative of the voices and perspectives that existed among the Flemish CJA activists.

The interviews consisted of semi-structured, open-ended questions that focused on the subject's motivations to engage in CJA, the characteristics of CJA, the similarities and differences between CJA and other movements, opinions on root causes of climate change, alternatives and strategies, and more specifically, on COP 15, direct action, violence, companies, politicians and the choice for consensus decision making (several of these topics fall outside the scope of this paper). All interviews lasted between one and two hours and were digitally recorded, fully transcribed, coded and analysed in detail with the help of the software program NVIVO® (Doncaster, Victoria, Australia).

The use of interviews in combination with document analysis and our involvement in the movement as scholar activists enabled us to develop a thick and rich image of the movement (Baxter and Eyles 1997, Patton 2002). The trends and thematic findings resulting from this analysis will be discussed in the sections below.

The goal of our research was to develop an understanding of the elements that facilitate or impede a repoliticisation of climate change, which required our research to be strongly theoretically informed. Evidently, the theoretical discussion on 'the political,' post-politics and depoliticisation is quite rich and includes a diversity of voices and perspectives. From the broad spectrum of theories developed within the framework of post-foundational political theory, the work of Jacques Rancière (1998, 2001, 2006) and the discourse-theoretical approach informed by Chantal Mouffe (2006) and Ernesto Laclau (1990, see also Laclau and Mouffe 2001) and further developed by David Howarth, Aletta Norval and Yannis Stavrakakis (2000) appeared as crucially important to our analysis. The choice of these approaches was informed by both theoretical and empirical considerations, and through a continuous process of examining theory and empirical data, we singled out these two approaches because they appeared best suited to describe repoliticisation as conducted by CJA and to analyse the obstacles and challenges the movement was confronted with.

This is not to suggest that both concepts of political action or repoliticisation are compatible. Although CJA integrates elements of both strategies, it must be stressed that the latter diverges in essential aspects, including the role of alternatives. As we will show below, it is the juxtaposition of both approaches that helps us acquire a better grasp of the specificities and limits of CJA's attempt at repoliticisation. This also implies that our analysis slightly diverges from that of scholars such as Slavoj Žižek (2000), who often combines elements of both Rancière and Mouffe and Laclau without fully taking into account the differences that exist between them.

3. TWO STRATEGIES OF POLITICISATION

3.1. RANCIÈRE: MAKING VISIBLE WHAT WAS INVISIBLE

The atmosphere we encountered during the climate summit in Copenhagen (both in and around the conference venue itself, such as on billboards, in press articles and in the slogans of mainstream NGO's, resembled what Rancière has described as post-democracy or consensual democracy. 'Consensual democracy,' he writes, 'is a reasonable agreement between individuals and social groups who have understood that knowing what is possible and negotiating between partners are a way for each party to obtain the optimal share that the objective givens of the situation allow them to hope for and that is preferable to conflict' (Rancière 1998, p. 102). In other words, everyone is turned into a partner in an apparently open deliberation. As a result, dissensus is obliterated, the contingency of the present is rendered invisible and alternative voices remain unheard. According to Rancière (2007b, p. 12), each situation is characterised by a specific 'distribution of the sensible,' which refers to a configuration that only makes certain things visible or sayable. In a regime of post-democracy, this distribution of the sensible functions in such a way as to make exclusion unthinkable even if it is constitutive. It then appears as if there is nothing beyond what is actually visible and sayable, and this is how we can conceive of post-politics from a Rancièrian perspective.

Politics, in contrast, is what subverts this situation. It disrupts the distribution of the sensible. It entails the manifestation of a 'part of those who have no part,' which contests and discloses exclusions and in doing so, makes something new visible (Rancière 1998, p. 9). In other words, political action is concerned with creating a space where something new can be heard or seen. This is also, according to Rancière, what genuine democracy is about: creating a space where the unnamed and uncounted become named and counted. This space arises when a group of people ruptures its invisibility and decides to act on the assumption of equality. People then act as if they are equal to the powerful, and by doing so, they are able to generate certain effects within the distribution of the sensible.

The notion of equality is of central importance in Rancière (1998). Each social order, he argues, is hierarchical while being paradoxically based on a fundamental equality. Even producing an order, which is the hierarchical act par excellence, presupposes a basic form of equality, specifically the equality of intelligences. Giving an order could not be successful if the subordinate person is not capable of understanding and interpreting the order by making use of language and her intelligence in the same way as the superior person. Political action, according to Rancière, is bringing this underlying equality to the surface: it entails acting apart from the (hierarchical) roles attributed by the social order and according to the assumption that all are equal. The most salient example of political action provided by Rancière is

Rosa Parks' refusal to give up her bus seat to a white person. Through such radical acts, the distribution of the sensible is disturbed and something new becomes visible. This specific conception of political action is not about realising an alternative social order; it is a theatrical performance that disrupts the inequalities of the social order by exhibiting a more fundamental equality.

3.2. MOUFFE AND LACLAU: COUNTER-HEGEMONY

Chantal Mouffe's and Ernesto Laclau's approach to repoliticisation also starts from a constitutive notion of exclusion. A social order, Mouffe (2006) argues, is constituted by hegemonic practices that always repress certain possibilities and activate others. However, the exclusions that are constitutive of every hegemony generate antagonisms that can become the starting points for the articulation of counter-hegemonic practices. Because exclusion is constitutive, antagonism is unavoidable: the political, therefore, is an ontological dimension of social relations.

Certain discourses, however, misrecognise this dimension, and post-politics is the result. The problem, according to Mouffe (2005, 2006), is that antagonisms can be tempered or constrained only when they are fully acknowledged. Through their acknowledgment, antagonisms can be turned into 'agonisms,' whereby opponents recognise each other as adversaries rather than full-blown enemies. According to Mouffe, this is a crucial feature of democracy. If antagonisms are misrecognised, the opponent tends to become invisible or is criminalised, which pushes the relation of adversity to extremes.

Within this framework, repoliticisation consists of what Laclau and Mouffe (2001) have called the articulation of a chain of equivalences against the prevailing hegemonic order (see also Howarth 2000; Howarth and Stavrakakis 2000). This entails the equivalential grouping of a series of demands under a core signifier or nodal point (such as 'Solidarity' in the case of the Polish workers' movement in the 1980s (Laclau, 2005)). This core signifier evolves to represent an entire series of demands, with a collective identity forged around it. Thus arises a we/them distinction that Mouffe and Laclau described as the hallmark of 'the political.' For Mouffe (2006), democracy can only be safeguarded through the visible existence of a plural and conflictual space of encounter between different hegemonic and counterhegemonic discourses.

3.3. DIVERGENCES

Within the framework of this paper, we cannot delve into the intricacies of the philosophical divergence between Rancière's (2007b) innovative 'aesthetic' theory of politics and the poststructuralist approach of Mouffe and Laclau (2001). For our purposes, it suffices to describe several core differences. Mouffe (2006) stresses the importance of collective identities, and therefore requires a concept of representation

that inevitably entails a certain inequality and the exercise of power. Rancière, however, focuses on the effects of people acting as if they are equal (Hallward 2006). Such actions imply that individuals subtract themselves from the identities and roles attributed to them by the existing social order (Rancière 1998, see also Dikeç 2012). His aim is not the construction of an alternative collective identity but disidentification and the manifestation of the equality underlying every social relation. If there is a collective subject in the Rancièrean political act, it is not based on identity but on the refusal of identity.

The crucial difference between both approaches, however, is their relation to the construction of an alternative social order. Mouffe's (2000, 2006) counterhegemonic practices are intended to embody a future alternative for the existing order. For Rancière (1998), however, genuinely political action constitutes an event in the *present* (this focus on the present is one reason why space becomes more interesting than time from a Rancièrian perspective (Dikeç 2005, 2012, 2013)). From the moment one begins to build an alternative order, one also begins to construct an inevitably inegalitarian 'distribution of the sensible.'

We thus arrive at two possible 'models' of politicisation: one in which the political resides in the plural space of encounter between different projects (including certain demands, visions of future alternatives and strategies) and the other in which politicisation occurs as a result of acts of disidentification and subversion of the existing distribution of the sensible. In this paper, we will use both frameworks to shed light on the way CJA attempted to repoliticise climate change. We will argue that while CJA produced discourse that can be described in terms of the discourse-theoretical approach of Laclau and Mouffe, the movement epitomised the Rancièrian political act: subversion aimed at making visible what was invisible in the consensual logic of the climate summits by acting under the postulate of equality. CJA thus focused less on alternative hegemonic projects and more on enabling new voices to be heard. As we will show, this was at once its strength and its weakness, especially when winning over enough people for an alternative political project was at stake. In a way, the limits of Rancière's notion of the political act mirrored the limits of CJA's attempt to repoliticise.

4. POLITICISATION AND ITS LIMITS

To analyse CJA's discourse in terms of its relation to the political, we will make use of a set of distinctions that Bjarne Bruun Jensen (2002, 2004) introduced in the domain of environmental education. Jensen distinguishes between four dimensions that environmental education can consist of: (1) the nature of the problem and its effects, (2) the human-societal root causes, (3) strategies for change and (4) visions and alternatives. Jensen's thesis is that mainstream environmental discourses focus too exclusively on the first dimension, whereas democratic, emancipatory and action-

oriented discourses have to encompass all four. As we will show in the following, this fourfold distinction is particularly useful for delineating the differences between environmental discourses, particularly in terms of the place they attribute to the political.

4.1. FROM THE NATURE OF THE PROBLEM TO THE ROOT CAUSES

Hegemonic climate discourse clearly focuses on the nature of the climate problem and its effects, and this is the dimension that is nearly absent in CJA's discourse. Climate justice activists Ulrich Brand, Nicola Bullard, Edgardo Lander and Tadzio Mueller (2009, p. 11) critically noted that 'In spite of its obviously political nature, the issue of climate change is often perceived as a question of *science* rather than *politics'*. This critique of the one-sided focus on science in mainstream discourses is shared by scholars: 'For more than 15 years now,' Gert Goeminne (2010, p. 208) states, 'the IPCC panel has been trying to frame the climate issue as a scientific puzzle.' This is manifested in the focus on CO_2 in the famous slogan of the British government: 'Act on CO_2' (Urry 2011, p. 90). Being the central nodal point of mainstream discourse, CO_2 comes to stand for the entirety of the catastrophe we are facing: thus, to avoid catastrophe, we simply have to reduce CO_2 emissions (Swyngedouw 2007, 2010a). The result is a strange type of pseudo-politicisation wherein conflict and struggle are occurring with an externalised and socially disembodied enemy such as CO_2, against which we all appear to be united. The focus on CO_2 narrows the debate to ignore the human-societal root causes and processes of change and focus on technical solutions that remain within the parameters of what currently exists. Such discourses have depoliticising and disempowering consequences (Wynne 2010). As David Demeritt (2001, p. 329) argues, 'the highly technical and undifferentiatedly global basis of its appeal simply turns people off.'

CJA, in contrast, explicitly tried to politicise climate change by broadening the frame: 'it is not just about CO_2' but also about 'land grabs, state repression, corporate control, carbon trading, neo-colonialism' (CJA-Leaflet 2009b). As Alice, one of the activists we interviewed, explained: 'I think traditional environmental movements have little to tell about the *cause* of the environmental problem. Of course one can say that the climate is heating because we emit too much CO_2. But why is that? Why did we evolve towards a society that needs to emit so much CO_2 in order to function? If you try to answer that question, you start to question the system as such.'[5]

This observation led many CJA activists to state that climate change is not so much a problem of nature but of society. 'Why climate change is not an environmental issue,' reads the title of a CJA booklet (2009), implying that it is impossible to tackle climate change without fundamentally questioning the way our current society is

[5] All first names used in this section refer to activists we interviewed. They have been modified for reasons of anonymity.

organised. Furthermore, by pointing to the heterogeneity of and the antagonisms that cut through the concept of 'the people' (Swyngedouw 2010a), CJA explicitly dismissed the rhetoric of 'all together against CO_2.'

In contrast to hegemonic discourses, CJA strongly focused on the second dimension: the root causes of climate change. It was also on this level that CJA particularly aimed at repoliticising climate change, pointing to capitalism and its fundamental structures as its root cause (CJA-Leaflet 2009a, 2009d). For example, the title of a CJA leaflet (2009d) reads: 'Climate change is a symptom, capitalism the crisis.' As Alexis put it: 'companies, clever politicians and supranational institutions remain within a capitalist framework. And I don't think just and sustainable solutions will come within that system – you know, you then get situations as in Copenhagen, where carbon trading is being promoted.'

4.2. STRATEGIES

Concerning the third dimension, which is strategies, the dominant discourses are liberal, managerial and technocratic (Demeritt 2001, Kenis and Lievens 2014, Swyngedouw 2007, 2010a). They are concerned with creating new markets and commodities (emissions trading or developing a 'green' sector in the economy), creating new techniques or maintaining old ones, such as nuclear energy, and sustainable consumption (Kenis and Lievens forthcoming). Interestingly, all these strategies were explicitly dismissed by CJA. Even individual behaviour change, as promoted by many NGOs, was waved aside by CJA's activists. As Paul Sumburn (2010, p. 39) aptly articulated in a book edited by the activist Turbulence Collective: 'It's important that, where they can, people make individual changes, but switching light bulbs doesn't connect a person with real causes of climate change, the political and economic system.' 'Forget shorter showers. Why personal change does not equal political change,' reads the title of an article written by Derrick Jensen (2009) in a booklet edited by CJA activists. Many of the activists we interviewed made a similar point. Stacy, for instance, criticised the dominant approach as follows: 'I've had quite an allergic reaction to it for a while. […] You know, you have to become aware of the climate, and what you can do about it yourself is to buy green products. But there is a bigger picture, you know, and that is what I find important.' Alice noted, 'It is simply much more structural; it is the system you have to question and not whether you go shopping by car or not.'

Strategically, CJA aimed at empowering people and actively involving them in a struggle against the root causes of climate change. In a widely distributed CJA booklet (2009, p. 1), people are urged to 'join together in taking control over our lives and real solutions …' Many activists related their struggle with feelings of powerlessness before they joined CJA or similar movements (Kenis and Mathijs 2012). Kenneth explained:

> You have a certain image of society, and you want to change things, but you feel powerless. You know that things don't change automatically. Starting from this

> experience of powerlessness, however, you start to question what the limits are and whether there are other people who have the same experience, and then … slowly, ideas emerge about possible actions. First, you search for things with a low threshold, which are not or not very confrontational, and then, well, you start to go further.

To realise its goals, CJA deliberately opted for more adversarial and confrontational strategies, such as direct action. As was stated in a CJA booklet (2009, p. 24): 'creating and defending real solutions from below will not come without a struggle.' In the words of Timothy: 'the reason why direct action is absolutely necessary is that there are a number of established interests that do all they can to maintain the status quo – and the status quo will not be challenged by encouraging people to go shopping by bike.' Therefore, Timothy argued, more confrontational strategies are necessary. Alexis echoed the sentiment: 'When do companies become afraid? Not when someone starts to negotiate with them, but when their property is being threatened.' According to her, direct action is the adequate response to the challenges we are confronted with today.

Moreover, direct action, as conceived by CJA in a Rancièrian fashion, is not only about engaging in conflict but also about making something visible or audible that formerly remained hidden. The Reclaim Power action at the Copenhagen summit was a case in point: the action started from the idea to enter the conference venue under the assumption that the activists had as much right to speak as the diplomats and government representatives negotiating inside. Because this idea could not be fully realised, the activists decided to attempt to get as close as possible to the venue and to organise an alternative People's Assembly on its doorstep. Furthermore, they asked sympathetic conference delegates to walk out of the conference venue and join the alternative assembly. The aim was to create a space where alternative voices, such as indigenous people, trade unionists and women's groups from the Global South, could engage in a debate on a socially just climate agenda. In this way, they tried to 'produce a voice to those who are not being heard' at the summit (CJA-Leaflet 2009c). As Tina underscored: 'Personally, I am especially in favour of the Reclaim Power action: to just stop the summit and then have people, especially from the Global South, who present their own agenda, so that it becomes possible to talk for once about what is really at stake.' As Beth emphasised: 'Well, the point is that you actually try to force them to listen to you. […] The fact that you try to get so close and you really try to disturb the conference itself makes, perhaps, that these people inside will start to think: if they go this far, we have to take them seriously, if only for a minute.' According to CJA activists, such direct actions cannot be neglected and inevitably trigger a response by helping to put something on the agenda in an immediate and visible way. Jason stated: 'At least you will not allow the status quo to remain as it is. A simple demonstration can be neglected, but direct action cannot. An answer or a reaction is bound to come. Or it will be repression, or a kind of invitation to dialogue. But there will be a reaction.'

The Reclaim Power action also tried to bring visibility to other issues. For example, it aimed at 'breaking' the consensus ideology of the climate summit and

turning the spotlight to what was neglected in the hegemonic discourse. As Gregory told us:

> What we actually wanted to do is to make visible to the whole world that there is a problem with the summit, that there is resistance against it, that there is critique. Symbolically, it is enormously important that everyone who watches the news understands that the summit is contested, that there are problems. Making that visible is the crucial thing which CJA is doing.

Almost all activists referred, implicitly or explicitly, to the necessity of making unheard voices hearable and invisible causes visible, to the breaking of consensus by showing what is present behind the 'superficial theatre of the climate summit' and to questioning the hierarchical distinction between those who are allowed to talk and those who have to stay outside the conference venue. Even when asked about the 'violence' that such actions sometimes trigger, many answered in similarly to Jason: 'The violence that will occur during such a summit to a large extent just embodies or displays what is actually structurally present.'

Furthermore, the choice for direct action was presented as crucial for democracy 'from below' (CJA-Booklet 2009, p. 24). As Gregory explained, 'because of the enormous hegemony of the neoliberal market ideology and the enormous power of lobbyists, the only thing we can do to make our voices heard is to take radical action.' In this way, he claimed, direct action contributes to democratising the public sphere and should be distinguished from the undemocratic practice of taking the law into one's own hands: 'You engage in civil disobedience not because you want to take the law in your own hands, but because you want to make a political point, you want to make something visible.'

4.3. ALTERNATIVES

With regard to the fourth dimension, which concerns alternatives, the picture is more complex, both for the hegemonic discourse and for CJA. To the extent that the future is captured in the hegemonic discourse, it is often either as a futuristic image of spectacular new technologies or as an apocalyptic threat (Swyngedouw 2010a). 'Now or never' was an often heard slogan during the Copenhagen summit, and the apocalyptic undertone was omnipresent. Quoting Goeminne (2010, p. 207):

> 'Copenhagen or the apocalypse' – that is how one might describe the atmosphere that ruled the build-up to the UN climate summit in Copenhagen in December 2009 [...]; not only would the climate change war be settled in Copenhagen, but the fate of humanity would too.

This type of observation led Swyngedouw (2010b, p. 308) to state that 'fear' is a 'crucial node through which much of the current environmental narrative is woven' and Žižek (2008, p. 1) to argue that ecology could become the 'new opium for the masses' that keeps 'the people,' who are benumbed by fear, silent and calm. The point is that when fear becomes the overwhelming sentiment, the space for asking

fundamental political questions about our current society is strongly restrained. This situation can then be manipulated to impose an apparently broad consensus concerning a set of technocratic and market-driven measures. Swyngedouw (2010a) notes that in contrast to other struggles, climate change has no positively embodied name or signifier. It does not posit positively embodied content with regard to the future, articulated vision, myth or imaginary ideal waiting to be realised. Climate change is only something one has to ward off 'to make sure that things remain the same, that nothing really changes, that life (or at least our lives) can go on as before' (Cook and Swyngedouw 2012, p. 1973).

CJA similarly dismissed apocalyptic imaginaries: 'Yes, we also feel the clock ticking, but we refuse to be rushed into draconian solutions that will only increase inequality and social injustice around the world' (CJA-Booklet 2009, p. 1). However, an apocalyptic vision sometimes appeared in its discourse: 'The stakes have never been higher: revolution or death is the last scientific certainty' (CJA-Booklet 2009, p. 24).

CJA left no doubt that capitalism had to be abolished to ward off catastrophe. However, if we asked activists what a post-capitalist society would look like or which alternatives CJA was fighting for, the answer was far less clear than when we asked questions about root causes or strategies. Thus, two observations can be made: visions of alternatives were either vague or they diverged widely. First, to the extent that they existed, visions of alternatives were rather vague. Several activists admitted that they did not know what an alternative would look like. Tina, for example, mused: 'Yeah, this is not so easy, of course. It is more easy to criticise the existing system than to invent something new or alternative … In fact, I have no alternative, I don't know … there will be many theories about this, without any doubt.' When asked about his vision of an alternatives, Kenneth explained:

> No, I don't have that, and I have to admit that I also struggle with that, eh, I think I consider myself as a postmodern human being or so [laughs]… I am having difficulties with whichever ideology, and I know that is also an enormous weakness because the effect is that you have less focus on your goal. The problem is that you want things to change, but you don't know how this could look like. I especially think it is important that it takes place in a very basic democratic way.

Some activists stressed the need for 'system change' but had a hard time explaining what a different 'system' would look like. Kelly explained it as follows: 'Your production and economy should stand at the service of the well-being of the people and their environment,' but she admitted she could not say much more about it. Others stated that they did not believe in a blueprint, and that they considered having to articulate an alternative as a prerequisite to being able to formulate a critique of what exists to be an unfair expectation. Jason stated:

> Hm, I do not believe in a blueprint. […] I find it a bit an unfair critique – like, ok, you criticise current society, but what are your alternatives? No, I don't think you should have alternatives before one can formulate a critique. One can also formulate a critique out of concern.

Second, to the extent activists were able to formulate visions of alternatives, they diverged widely: from living differently and more soberly in one's personal life to a democratically planned economy, from political reform to a change of mentality, from communal living and cooperative production to a stronger state. Some CJA leaflets made reference to demands such as keeping fossil fuels in the soil or establishing community control over production. Focusing on self-sufficiency and localisation, Linda's alternative was one 'that we can live quietly in our own way, make our own products or buy them locally,' while Beth stated that she 'would rather evolve back towards communism.' Nick emphasised that he 'would reform politics, and promote a change of mentality.' However, he immediately added that 'it's difficult to make it concrete because we live in a complex society.'

Such a lack of focus on the development of an alternative social order is paramount to Rancière's conception of political action. In this sense, CJA's attempt to repoliticise follows Rancière's path. As we explained, for Rancière, the political is about action in the present. It is not about developing future alternative imaginaries. From the moment one attempts to realise an alternative social order, one starts to establish and fixate on a new distribution of the sensible, including new hierarchies and inequalities. Controversially, Rancière (2007a) even distanced himself from radical alternatives such as self-management. In that sense, Rancièrian political action generates a space where conflict can appear, something new can be seen or heard and the unnamed can be named. However, it is not a space for what Swyngedouw (2010a, p. 229) calls 'the naming of different possible socio-environmental futures,' or the formulation of a 'new great fiction,' which can present an alternative to the current neoliberal hegemony, as Badiou (2005, p. 78) advocates (see also Swyngedouw 2011). Following Rancière, the politicisation of the present remains stuck in the present. This peculiarity of Rancière is also the likely Achilles heel of CJA.

In the following section, we develop an analysis of CJA's discourse concerning alternatives (or the lack thereof) by approaching CJA from the perspective of Laclau and Mouffe's conception of politicisation. As we explained earlier, this conception focuses on how a discourse is articulated around a number of demands for alternatives. We can read CJA's discourse from this perspective, and thus discover hints of the nascent counter-hegemony CJA might embody. However, we will also note that CJA's discourse is articulated around a number of elements that appear to epitomise alternatives for the future but that function to intensify the we/them distinction in the present.

5. CJA'S DISCURSIVE NODAL POINTS

Our analysis of CJA's discourse from the perspective of Laclau and Mouffe's (2001) framework yielded a straightforward result: CJA's discourse was centrally structured around three core nodal points. Central to CJA's discourse was a defence of 'climate

justice', which was opposed to what it called 'false solutions' for climate change, such as nuclear energy, biofuels, carbon capture and storage and emissions trading (e.g., Climate Collective 2009, Müller and Passadakis 2009; Virtanen 2009). Stacy commented about this type of solution: 'They are stopgap measures. They don't question the *cause* of the problem.' Alexis expressed this position as follows:

> The solutions they propose are often worse than the current situation. Think about agrofuels – these are presented as green, but, I know it is perhaps a crude statement, but fossil fuels are probably less bad than agrofuels. With agrofuels, you simply create a food crisis, especially in the South. People become dependent, their land is being taken to produce fuel for us, etcetera. And on top of this, they can present this as a reduction of CO_2 emissions and earn money with it. That is completely hallucinating, isn't it?

Opposing these false solutions, CJA developed a counter-hegemonic discourse centred around the nodal point of 'climate justice.' From a discourse-theoretical perspective, we can state that through the construction of this nodal point, CJA attempted to organise and represent a variety of people and groups (from indigenous movements to workers unions and from no borders activists and landless farmers to anti-industrialists and peasant movements) within a broad alliance that linked climate politics with issues of social justice. Paul Chatterton, David Featherstone and Paul Routledge (2013, p. 615) wrote that for CJA, 'climate justice [...] functioned [as] a key discourse through that articulations were made between these diverse struggles.' Furthermore, many activists argued that they became interested and involved in climate activism because of this new focus on 'climate justice.' One could even say that for many, it was the 'justice' aspect rather than the issue of 'climate' that won them over to the struggle against climate change. Jason argued, for example, that 'Originally, I was one of those people who regarded the idea of a climate movement with a bit of suspicion […], but with the emergence of the concept of climate justice, which added the justice aspect, this strongly changed.'

Many activists considered the idea of 'climate justice' as a starting point to rebuild or revitalise a previously existing broader movement for social justice, which many framed as the alter-globalisation or global justice movement. Jason explained how he arrived at this idea by reading an article of Tadzio Müller (2008) in Turbulence:

> In this article, Tadzio Müller said the alterglobalisation movement has made a number of very valid points, but on this moment, it has lost its dynamic, and we now have to focus on the climate movement. Originally, I had a sceptical attitude towards this, but I started to understand the logic of it better and better. There was a truth to it. And then I thought: climate is indeed an actual topic, a hot item. It allows you to mobilise people, and you can bring that same story in a new way, a way which stands even closer to the people. Therefore it is actually a better way to convey the same fundamental social critique.

Gregory made a similar argument when he stated:

> 'I think that what is also at stake, Copenhagen is a great chance to give a new boost to the global movement against neoliberalism and capitalism. The movement of

> antiglobalists that exists since ten years has known ups and downs. During the last years, the movement was a little bit less active, and so Copenhagen, for me, is also a chance to give that movement a new dynamic.'

Similar to many activists, both Jason and Gregory linked the concept of 'climate justice' with a strong focus on 'system change,' which could be identified as CJA's second nodal point. Similar to 'climate justice,' the notion of 'system change' was constructed to a large extent to realise a convergence between different struggles that all start from a system critique and plea for justice. As Jean-Francois told us, 'There are many themes around which you can become active, but climate actually symbolises all other crises, and the definitive character of the climate crisis underlines more than anything else the horror of the current system.' Alexis explained her concept of climate justice as follows:

> The interesting thing is that all elements which require political action are united in the overarching denominator of climate change. Because basically it is about system critique, and the system manifests itself in several ways. Climate is one of them, and everything else can be subsumed under it.

'System change' conveys different ends and meanings, as is typical for a discursive nodal point. It not only tries to bring different groups and struggles together, but it also refers to the fundamental transformation aspired to by CJA and the importance of attacking what CJA called the undemocratic 'circus' of the summit and the measures proposed by the official climate negotiators. Using 'system change not climate change' as a central slogan, CJA argued that the 'system' is the problem – not only as a root cause of climate change but also as the reason why the climate crisis is not being solved adequately (e.g., CJA-Leaflet 2009d, Climate Collective 2009).

'Direct action' could be observed as a third nodal point, and was supposed to represent an adequate response to the need for climate justice and system change. With its focus on 'climate justice,' 'system change' and 'direct action,' CJA provides an example of a movement that tried to move beyond the post-political state of affairs with regard to climate change by publicly contesting the measures and approaches that are currently predominant, and by trying to build a counter-hegemonic discourse as an alternative. However, the question remains as to what extent these nodal points actually express a set of alternatives. As we will show, they actually function as a way to sharpen a we/them distinction rather than stimulate the imagination of genuine future alternatives.

6. Alternatives for the future or antagonisms in the present?

As Mouffe argues, the notion that 'there is no alternative' is a crucial element of today's post-political atmosphere: '[i]n fact, the main consequence of visualising our societies in such a "post-political" manner is to impede the articulation of any possible

alternative to the current hegemonic order' (Mouffe 2002b, p. 61). Of course, demanding 'system change' is an important step in repoliticising the present. However, Mouffe (2002a, p. 7) suggests that repoliticisation requires, in addition, a 'debate in the democratic political public sphere about possible alternatives to the existing hegemonic order.' In other words, 'being against' is not enough for becoming political: one needs a constructive political project. Interestingly, an often heard critique of CJA is that it lacks such a project. As Sophie, a member of Transition Towns, stated: 'Yes, it is easy to criticise […] but if you really want do something, you need a good alternative, and one that is workable.'[6]

The nodal points of 'climate justice' and 'system change' could function as a point of inscription for ideas about an alternative social order. However, as we showed, the actual demands they are supposed to represent are rather vague. Of course, as Mouffe and Laclau (2001) would argue, nodal points are inevitably tendentially 'empty' signifiers. In the case of CJA, however, this emptiness tends to become extreme. Furthermore, the coupling of the nodal points of 'climate justice' and 'system change' in CJA's discourse yields complex results. 'Climate justice' is a signifier that permits CJA to broaden itself and open up its discursive chain of equivalences to a wide variety of forces and demands. Even more moderate NGOs and policy bodies have been supporting 'climate justice' as a central demand for several years (De Lucia 2009). However, this signifier has also made CJA's chain of equivalence inherently weak; it can easily be dislocated by other forces that also adopt the notion of climate justice and fill it with their own content, such as by equivalentially linking it to equal access to markets, the rule of law, or ensuring poor populations can also profit from carbon offsetting. Climate justice thus became a terrain of contestation (Chatterton et al. 2013). It is not surprising, therefore, that more radical voices began to criticise the concept of 'climate justice' as the possible starting point for more emancipatory climate politics (Featherstone 2013).

'Climate justice,' however, acquired a political intensity in CJA's discourse through its linkage with 'system change,' which primarily expressed a strong position 'against' the current system rather than a vision of an alternative system, as our research indicated. The function of the signifier 'system change' is best described through Laclau's (1990, p. 61, see also Howarth and Stavrakakis 2000) concept of 'myth,' which he defines as 'a space of representation which bears no relation of continuity with the dominant structural objectivity.' In other words, myth creates a distance from what actually exists, and thus also contributes to demarcating a cleavage between 'us' and 'them.' This is also how the nodal point 'system change' functions in CJA's discourse: it establishes a radical discontinuity with the extant, dominant ideology.

However, there is a price to be paid for this is discontinuity. Because of the strong focus on political rupture, the chain of equivalence inevitably narrows again.

[6] For more detailed analyses of the interviews with people from the Transition Towns movement, see Anneleen Kenis and Erik Mathijs (2009, 2014).

Although 'system change' remained relatively empty in CJA discourse, many forces might have found it difficult to link up with CJA because their respective discourses lacked a reference to the 'system' and its transformation, let alone to radical forms of direct action that were presented as necessary.

However divergent the meanings attributed to 'system change,' the function of this signifier appear to remain the same: to sharpen one's opposition to the extant 'system' or to establish an antagonism, rather than promote a vision of a future alternative.

7. How to repoliticise the present?

Interestingly, many environmentalists outside CJA tended to take a distance from CJA because of its politicised discourse. For instance, participants of the Transition Towns movement found CJA to be too radical, violent and extreme and based on a 'we against them' discourse. Sophie stated that 'When I first heard about it, the action aspect scared me a bit. I immediately imagined that these will almost be violent actions, to damage or overthrow certain things […] and I don't like that, I don't like confrontation.' Marc is convinced that CJA is 'too extreme for mainstream people.' According to him, CJA's actions 'are no longer accessible for people' and 'disconnect people from the message.' Therefore 'they will not realise much.' This judgement was mainly based on his own experience within the movement; he once participated in a CJA meeting, but his proposals were dismissed for being 'too soft' and 'too calm.' The other activists argued that they 'had to go further if they wanted people to listen.' However, in his own opinion, it is exactly this radicalism that makes 'people will not listen anymore.'

Is CJA too extreme, radical and politicised? That is a possibility, but another hypothesis exists: in a post-political context, the chasm between 'common sense' and a strongly politicised discourse might simply be too large to bridge. People clearly have difficulties understanding a discourse whose explicit goal it is to repoliticise. This brings us to a paradoxical observation. Establishing a cleavage between one's own ideology and existing discourses is a crucial ingredient for repoliticisation, but it can lead to minorisation or an inability to gather people beyond the strongly convinced and politicised activists. As a result, movements such as CJA are confronted with a fundamental challenge: democratic change requires both politicisation and the involvement of a large number of people. Both goals can be at odds with one another in post-political times. The central question is: how is it possible, within a post-political constellation, to broaden one's chain of equivalence without becoming post-political? This question points to an ambiguity that every struggle in a post-political era is likely confronted with: to fight for an alternative vision of society, one must first fight against post-politics. However, this can become an obstacle to broadening and strengthening the movement when politicisation becomes an end in itself.

The fight against post-politics, including arguing for 'we-them' distinctions, is required, but it is not enough to establish the 'we' necessary to realise effective and democratic change, which can be illustrated by the following anecdote: CJA activists distributed leaflets in Copenhagen depicting the president of World Wildlife Fund (WWF), with the inscription 'WANTED' underneath. They denounced WWF for going too far in subscribing to the 'false solutions' of companies and governments, such as emissions trading. By radically attacking WWF's president, the activists attempted to make cleavages within the climate movement visible. They tried to show that there is a variety of 'environmentalisms,' and that 'being green' is not enough. In other words, they tried to politicise the climate struggle by turning the broad climate movement into a political space where different options can clash. However, many people who sympathised with CJA did not understand why it was so important to intensify these political divergences and why it was necessary to attack WWF instead of the 'real enemies,' such as big polluting industries or even climate change defined as 'CO_2.' In other words, establishing cleavages is crucial for politicisation, but when 'we-them' antagonisms becomes too strong or predominant, the chain of equivalence could become closed for new people, groups or demands.

The fact that CJA did not provide elaborate future alternatives appeared to contribute to this problem in an important way. Providing an alternative vision, it appeared, could have helped to correct the idea that repoliticisation (establishing 'us versus them' distinctions) had almost become a goal in itself.

8. CONCLUSION

Intentionally pursuing repoliticisation in post-political times is a highly paradoxical endeavour, and CJA embodied a number of the tensions involved. It attempted to demarcate a strong we/them distinction while simultaneously struggling with the question of how broad 'we' should be. At times, its fight against post-politics tended to overshadow the actual cause it was fighting for, at least to outsiders. CJA invoked the need for alternatives without always being able to spell them out concretely. As we explained, CJA's actions remained close to a Rancièrian conception of political action by attempting to make something visible that was previously invisible or to make unheard voices heard rather than advocating for a specific alternative social order. They accomplished this in the radical act of presenting themselves as negotiating partners on par with the official diplomats in the conference venue while at the same time demarcating a strong conflict line. This is a typically Rancièrian paradox: political action requires intense conflict to make oneself visible as a speaking agent who has equal standing with its adversary.

We further analysed this conflictuality through the lens of discourse theory, which resulted in a number of nodal points, some of which seem to reference alternatives such as climate justice and system change. However, as we showed, these

nodal points served to mark a cleavage with existing discourses. They were primarily aimed at repoliticising the debate rather than starting a discussion on genuine alternatives.

CJA combined both repoliticisation strategies in an unstable way: in a Rancièrian fashion, CJA activists attempted to make the circus of the negotiations visible and the unheard voices hearable and presented themselves as equals to the official negotiators at the Copenhagen summit. At the same time, however, CJA's lack of alternatives, which is typically Rancièrian, was not completely overcome via the discursive nodal points of climate justice and system change.

The end result is a paradox. Repoliticisation is a condition for new movements to make their voices heard and realise social change. However, discourses aimed at repoliticisation can have great difficulties in reaching out to broader audiences in post-political times. In these times, the desire and hope for an alternative and the belief in its possibility appear to be crucial preconditions for enthusing a critical mass of people for a political project. Making something visible that was previously invisible, as Rancière advocates, appears to be necessary, but it is not a sufficient basis upon which a movement can genuinely repoliticise because it risks preventing the movement from gaining a sufficient social basis. The problem is that one risks being perceived as politicising for politicisation's sake, which can end in a paradoxical situation in which this politicisation is not taken seriously, thus undermining its own goal. Repoliticisation engenders a strange dynamic: if the constitution of a 'we-them distinction' becomes too explicitly a goal in itself, then it appears to become more difficult to constitute a 'we' at all.

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CHAPTER 7

SEARCHING FOR 'THE POLITICAL' IN ENVIRONMENTAL POLITICS[1]

1. INTRODUCTION

'Global warming is too serious for the world any longer to ignore its danger or split into opposing factions on it', Tony Blair (2005) famously stated in a speech in 2005. Blair thus explicitly calls for a depoliticisation of climate change. Similarly, one of his well-known advisors, Anthony Giddens (2009, p. 114), argues: '(c)limate change should be lifted out of a right-left context, where it has no place […] there has to be agreement that the issue is so important and all-encompassing that the usual party conflicts should be suspended or muted'. Such statements are significant in several regards. They not only show how mainstream environmental concerns have become but they especially express how environmental questions, such as climate change, are at the same time depoliticised (Swyngedouw 2007, 2010a): if we want to effectively tackle the problem, it is argued, there ought to be consensus, usually around managerial and technocratic solutions that remain within the parameters of what currently exists.

These depoliticised discourses, often put forward by defenders of the newly popular Green Economy project, are of course only the latest expression of a trend that has deeper historical roots. Over the last few decades, the discourse on environmental politics has shifted significantly: while many eco-political discourses in the 1970s focussed on a fundamental transformation of social structures, from the 1980s onwards they have increasingly been characterised by the search for greener versions of the modern, market and growth-oriented, liberal democratic model.[2] Typical examples include the advocacy of ecological modernisation (Mol and Spaargaren 2000, Spaargaren and Mol 1992), post-environmentalism (Buck 2013), the

[1] Published as Kenis, A. & Lievens, M., 2014. Searching for 'the political' in environmental politics. *Environmental Politics,* 23 (4), 531-548.

[2] Of course, the field of discourses on environmental politics has always consisted of a variety of currents, differing, amongst other things, in terms of the extent to which they thought it would be possible to reach environmental progress within the boundaries of the existing form of society. Nevertheless, as Blühdorn (2013) aptly shows, there is a significant difference between discourses on environmental politics that are predominant now, and discourses of some decennia ago.

Green New Deal (Group 2008), Green Growth (OECD 2010) and the Green Economy (UNEP 2011, 2012).

One of the most forceful conceptualisations of this shift is Ingolfur Blühdorn's (2013) theory of the 'post-ecologist turn' (see also Blühdorn 1997, 2002). '(B)oth the ecologist critique of modernity and the ecologist belief in a comprehensively different society have become largely exhausted', Blühdorn (2013, p. 19) argues. '(T)he historically radical and transformative elements of environmental movements and eco-political thought are blunted through mainstreaming and have been reconfigured by comprehensive cultural change' (Blühdorn and Welsh 2007, p. 185). Due to a modernisation-induced value and culture shift, the initial radical critique has been replaced by the attempt to use market-driven, industrial and growth-oriented policies. The result is a paradoxical situation: a general awareness of the seriousness of the environmental crisis is combined with what Blühdorn (2007b) calls 'the management of unsustainability': the attempt to sustain the unsustainable characteristics of current society. Indeed, what brings ecological modernisation, Green Growth, the Green Economy and a number of other contemporary environmental discourses together is their attempt to present themselves as taking the environmental crisis very seriously, while at the same time refraining from any fundamental questioning of existing social systems and structures (Blühdorn 2013). In other words, what is characteristic of current eco-political discourses is that they try to answer environmental concerns in a way that makes '[...] sure that things remain the same, that nothing really changes, that life (or at least our lives) can go on as before' (Cook and Swyngedouw 2012, p. 1973). Significantly, as we already suggested, these new eco-political discourses go together with a call for all-round cooperation and the rejection of conflict. Confronted with the urgency and scale of the challenge, it is argued, we no longer have the luxury to engage in time-consuming struggles that only hamper the cooperative action that is needed now. That is why these discourses can be called fundamentally post-political (Swyngedouw 2007, 2010a).

Blühdorn (2013, p. 16) makes a parallel diagnosis when he argues that recent shifts in eco-political discourses have their counterpart in simultaneous shifts in democratic politics: 'democratic values and the innovative modes of decentralised, participatory government [..] are metamorphosing into tools for managing the condition of sustained ecological and social unsustainability'. According to Blühdorn, the result is a condition of post-democracy.

Here we aim to contribute to this debate on the post-democratic shift in eco-political discourses by focusing on the problem of post-politics or depoliticisation. According to political theorists such as Claude Lefort (1988), the loss of the political is the central element threatening to undermine democracy. Indeed, the very condition of possibility of democracy is to make the political dimension of social relations and of our relation to 'nature' visible, and to turn it into the object of debate and conflict. Underlying the post-democratic trend in eco-political discourses, we will argue, is therefore a tendency towards post-politics. On the basis of the work of political

theorists such as Jacques Rancière, Claude Lefort, Carl Schmitt, Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau, we aim to develop the tools to better conceptualise this post-political (and related post-democratic) development.

In our view, what Blühdorn calls the post-ecologist turn is a specific manifestation of a more general tendency to depict society in post-political terms. Yet, with regard to environmental discourses, this depoliticisation adopts specific forms. Therefore, we aim here to contribute to a better understanding of what depoliticisation with regard to environmental politics is about, and to explore the conditions for repoliticisation. Through this contribution, we also aim to think beyond the post-ecologist condition. Admittedly, Blühdorn's diagnosis is strong and comprehensive. Yet, as Derek Bell (2013, p. 14) has argued: 'We must, at least, hope that Blühdorn's diagnosis of the contemporary condition is incorrect, or that it is a condition that we can transcend'. Blühdorn's analysis has indeed been called pessimistic (Szerszynski 2007). The reason for this pessimism is perhaps that Blühdorn grounds his diagnosis in a deeper process of modernisation, which he analyses through the lens of Ronald Inglehart's theory of value shifts in modernity and Niklas Luhmann's thesis of increasing system differentiation. The disappearance of the conditions of possibility for a genuine ecologist politics results from this on-going modernisation process, Blühdorn suggests.

His sociological, rather than political, explanation of this shift has important implications. Does the attempt to provide a sociological foundation for the post-ecologist turn not reinforce this apparent pessimism? Is it not possible, and perhaps desirable, to develop a political interpretation of this turn, which at the same time explains the resulting depoliticisation, and makes it possible to think about repoliticisation? In his response to scholars who criticise his so-called pessimism, Blühdorn (2013, p. 17) argues that it is important to make a 'rigorous distinction between eco-political campaigning and socio-political analysis'. In other words, criticising the post-ecologist thesis from a voluntaristic or substantively normative point of view threatens to disregard the need to analyse the contemporary terrain of environmental politics in an unprejudiced way (see also Bell 2013, p. 12).

Following Blühdorn's warning, we will try to reconceptualise repoliticisation while at the same time avoiding the pitfall of a voluntaristic or normative standpoint. Here we develop a rather 'sober' descriptive-analytical conception of the political, which tries to circumvent any normative *a priori* and moves beyond conceptualisations of the political that start from a social subject (e.g. the 'excluded') and/or a normative principle (e.g. equality). We argue that such conceptualisations often unduly limit 'the political' to actions and discourses that have a normative or emancipatory basis, and thus narrow the scope of what 'the political' can mean in the environmental domain.

In the next section, we will first discuss what the concept of 'the political' specifically means, and we will defend the thesis that there is indeed a problem of depoliticisation in current eco-political discourses. We then move on, in the third

section, to pinpoint the crucial determinants that make these discourses more vulnerable to depoliticisation than discourses in other domains. The focus of the article, however, is on how we can find possible sources of (re)politicisation. Surveying the literature on post-politics, it seems to be easier to diagnose depoliticisation than to provide effective suggestions for overcoming it.

In order to rethink the conditions for repoliticising environmental issues, in the fourth section we point to a paradox that is present in many post-political discourses: in a subtle way, the latter are often significantly polemical. Depoliticisation, paradoxically, always entails a struggle, but then on a meta-level. Drawing on the analysis of this meta-struggle, we will in the fifth section shed new light on the post-ecologist turn, showing that it is based on a fundamentally political process of re-appropriation and meta-political struggle. On this basis, we argue in the final section that the same characteristics that make environmental issues so liable for depoliticisation could, interestingly, turn it into a field of politicisation *par excellence*, understood as a scene composed of a multiplicity of conflicting positions which can become visible and therefore contestable. The appearance of such a scene is of crucial importance for effective and democratic environmental change.

2. POST-POLITICS

In his book *Climate Change and Society*, John Urry (2011, p. 90) takes issue with the thesis that we have entered a post-political era. There is a 'range of different politics surrounding changing climates', he states, referring as an example to direct protests such as climate camps, which sharply critique capitalism as one of the root causes of climate change. He points out that the public debate about climate change displays a variety of approaches and answers, and concludes that it is 'hard to argue that this huge array of different arguments is all "post-political"' (Urry 2011, p. 93).

Urry is arguably right when he questions overly generalised depictions of the present as 'post-political'. However, when he suggests that post-politics is not an issue at all, he tends to miss what is truly at stake. Urry argues that the multiplicity of actors putting forward different analyses and answers to climate change proves that the environmental scene is (still) highly politicised. Political theorists such as Lefort (1988) or Mouffe (2006) would argue that the presence of this multiplicity is evident: the social is always torn by conflict, division and the exercise of power. Post-politics involves something else: it concerns whether or not the discourses through which the social is interpreted account for these realities – i.e., conflict, division and power - and make them visible. Fundamentally, depoliticisation is situated on the level of representation.

In order to understand what is at stake, it is important to heed the distinction made by many political theorists (Lefort 1988, Schmitt 1996, Rancière 1999, Mouffe 2006, Marchart 2007) between 'politics' and 'the political'. Leaving aside important

differences for the moment, we can say that many of these authors understand 'politics' as referring to the conventional notion of politics as a differentiated sphere within society that is centred around the state. 'The political', in contrast, has a broader scope in that it refers to a symbolic or discursive order that represents the social in a particular way: 'the political' is a discourse that acknowledges the existence of conflict, power and division.

Schmitt (1996) was the first author to draw this distinction. In his book *The Concept of the Political*, he argues that the political cannot be defined in terms of the state, as it usually is, but that the concept of the state presupposes the concept of the political. The latter, therefore, needs its own criterion, which, according to Schmitt, is the distinction between friend and enemy. He coins his concept of the political in order to analyse depoliticisation, which he sees as the result of discourses or symbolisations that conceal conflicts, decisions and power. For Schmitt, (re)politicisation is about openly declaring and disclosing friend/enemy distinctions: only when conflict is acknowledged and given a place can it be fought in a more or less orderly way.

A core question for theorists of the political is whether it is possible to get rid of power and conflict, or whether they are constitutive social realities. From a discourse-theoretical perspective, Laclau and Mouffe (2001, Mouffe 2006) have argued that there is no social relation that is not the product of power, because the social is always hegemonically constituted. Crucially, each hegemonic construction entails certain exclusions, which can generate forms of antagonism. Depoliticisation occurs when the exercise of hegemonic power and the antagonisms that result from it are covered up. When ecological modernisation discourses become hegemonic, for example, voices that formulate a radical criticism of technocracy tend to become excluded. With the increasing hegemony of green economy discourses, voices criticising the downsides of the marketisation of nature (for example through emission trading schemes), are at risk of remaining unheard.

In his influential interpretation of the concept of 'the political', Lefort (1986, 1988) argues that society does not have a spontaneous self-understanding, but always needs to be interpreted and symbolised. The political, in his view, is the symbolic order through which the social is interpreted, and therefore symbolically instituted. This interpretation generates a constitutive split in society: a division between representation and that which is represented. The loss of the political occurs in forms of ideology that do not recognise this division and the conflict that it can provoke. When the predominant representations of society no longer recognise their contingency, but are grounded in technical or natural necessity, for example, the space of the political is foreclosed.

Rancière (1999, 2007) adopts a more emancipatory view of politicisation. For him, political action is about making something visible that was previously invisible in what he calls the 'police order'. The police is a managerial practice of maintaining order whose logic is that there is nothing to see or hear beyond the dominant discourse, yet, its order is inevitably unequal and generates exclusions. Politics is

about rupturing this order and making audible or visible what previously remained unheard or invisible. Specific to Rancière's approach is that he seems to give the political act a normative content: a political act always happens on the assumption of the equality of each and every one. A typical example is Rosa Parks, who acted on the assumption that she was equal to all other Americans by refusing to give up her seat to a white passenger. Many forms of environmental action follow this model. Think about activists who try to enter conference venues during climate summits, in order to take the floor and advocate a climate justice approach (Kenis and Mathijs, 2011), or indigenous groups who engage in direct action to stop mining projects (Bond 2012). They make a voice heard which was previously inaudible, and act as if they have an equal say as compared with much more powerful agents. By doing so, they not only expose the inegalitarianism, but also the contingency of the 'police' order. Even though political action always springs from a particular grief or demand, Rancière argues, it always has a universal dimension due to its egalitarian assumption.

Slavoj Žižek (2000) has strongly relied on both the work of Rancière and that of Laclau and Mouffe to coin his own notion of post-politics. According to Žižek, a situation becomes politicised when a particular demand [e.g. climate justice] starts to function as a metaphoric condensation of an opposition against a concrete other [e.g. advocates of the green economy], in such a way that this particular demand acquires a universal dimension (Žižek 2000, p. 204). Post-politics, in contrast, is when this us/them distinction disappears:

> In post-politics, the conflict of global ideological visions embodied in different parties which compete for power is replaced by the collaboration of enlightened technocrats (economists, public opinion specialists...) and liberal multiculturalists; via the process of negotiation of interests, a compromise is reached in the guise of a more or less universal consensus (Žižek 2000, p. 198).

What remains invisible in post-politics is the fact that a social order is fundamentally contingent, and that grounding a social order always generates exclusions, and therefore, antagonisms.

It is beyond the scope of the present discussion to go much deeper into these often sophisticated articulations of the difference between politics and the political and of the notions of post-politics and depoliticisation that can be inferred from them. What is important to stress here is that, in these different political theories, the political is each time of a symbolic nature, and entails a discourse that recognises and makes visible the reality of conflict, power and the contingency of society. The point of the matter is that if society is no longer understood as divided and liable to be contested through political means, this undermines its democratic nature in a fundamental way (Lefort 1988). Democracy is before all else the form of society that acknowledges that it does not have an ultimate foundation, and that it is characterised by indeterminacy and contingency (Marchart 2007).

Urry (2011) seems to have misunderstood this symbolic or discursive nature of the political, and therefore fails to appreciate what is at stake in the discussion of post-politics. This is most obvious when he speaks about the Transition Towns movement

as being 'significantly political since it challenges the sedimented systems of twentieth-century carbon capitalism' (Urry 2011, p. 92). While it is true that the movement advocates a kind of radical change in local communities, this is not sufficient to make it properly political. Indeed, the movement's stress on consensus-seeking, all-round cooperation and the psychology of change, as well as its aversion to conflict and its blindness to power relations in fact qualify it as an outstanding example of post-politics (Kenis and Mathijs 2009).

This does not mean there are no actors who genuinely try to repoliticise and build a counterhegemonic discourse; think for example about the 'climate justice' movement (Schlosberg 2013), mentioned above, which explicitly questions the new hegemonic discourse around the green economy (Mueller and Bullard 2011). However, the very existence of such forms of resistance does not disprove the critique of the post-political nature of hegemonic eco-political discourses. Similarly, the fact that there might be disagreement among international negotiators during UN summits about whether emissions trading rather than a carbon tax is the best suitable measure for putting a price on carbon does not disapprove the post-political thesis. Being largely of a technical and managerial nature, this is not the kind of conflict or debate that makes visible and therefore contestable the fundamental political principles in terms of which our society is instituted or organised.

3. THE ENVIRONMENT

Though post-political tendencies seem to permeate society as a whole today, post-politics seems to be particularly persistent in eco-political discourses (Swyngedouw, 2007, 2010a). In this section, we bring out some of the features of the latter that make it so liable to post-politics. This evidently brings us to question the notion of the 'environment' itself, a notion that, as many scholars have noticed, cannot easily be determined (e.g., Castree 2005, Swyngedouw 2007, 2010b, Morton 2007). As Noel Castree (2005, p. 8) explains, everyone will consider trees, butterflies or hurricanes to be part of 'nature' or the 'environment'. In their commonplace definitions, the 'environment' and 'nature' simply refer to the non-human world. However, a deeper examination shows that bounds are not that easy to demarcate. Castree gives the examples of Occidental's former Canvey Island site (a disused oil refinery that has turned into one of the most biodiverse sites in Western Europe) and biotechnical labs. Do these still belong to the 'environment'; are they 'nature', or not? Furthermore, as Castree (2005, p. 8) indicates, if one looks a little further, nature encompasses humans as well: '(a)t some level, our biological capacities condition what we are able to do at all stages of our lives. In this sense, nature is always already here – intimately a part of us – not just somewhere else or beyond us'. So much is clear: 'nature continues to be understood in a multitude of ways, many of them incompatible' (Castree 2005, p. xvii). Still, the term 'environment' suggests we are talking about something unambiguous,

something 'out there' that surrounds us. This connotation does not appear out of thin air. It corresponds to the way 'nature' has been externalised throughout modern history (Adam 1998; Fitzsimmons 1989; Magdoff and Foster 2011).

The representation of nature as external to the social has important depoliticising effects since it makes the political nature of certain events and processes invisible, and therefore, uncontestable. Think for example about the floods in Pakistan, the drought in Moscow in the summer of 2010, or hurricane Katrina. Should we consider them mere 'environmental' disasters (Žižek 2009b)? Imagine, in the case of Katrina, that there would have been better preparation (reinforcement work on the levées, evacuation of people at the announcement of the hurricane, targeted intervention after the hurricane); then large parts of the disaster could then have been avoided. Does this not show that 'nature' and 'society' are inextricably linked, and that misrecognising this link and externalising nature can be a royal road to post-politics? It seems significant that many Americans started to pray to God in order to save them from the flood instead of demanding political support.

It could be argued that exactly this discursive separation of nature from society and the lack of reference to social relations make environmental issues so vulnerable for post-politics. From another perspective, this suggests that the repoliticisation of environmental issues requires the latter's connection to social issues. These are often more divisive and can be more easily politicised by relating them to an emancipatory discourses on equality, for example. Further elaborating upon the work of Rancière, both Swyngedouw (2010a) and Žižek (2008) suggest such a way out of post-politics.

In several of his articles, Swyngedouw (2007, 2009, 2010a) argues that one of the reasons why environmental questions are so easily depolicitised is because they lack a privileged subject of change. According to him, this distinguishes environmentalism from other 'social' movements, such as feminism, the civil rights movement or the labour movement. In the latter, the subject of oppression, struggle and change is easily identified: women, African-Americans or workers, respectively, are amongst the first to speak out about what is wrong and what needs to change. When these subjects appropriate democratic or emancipatory language (e.g., egalitarian discourse), their condition can be politicised and altered.

Swyngedouw is not alone in focusing on the role of the subject in processes of policitisation and depoliticisation. Laclau and Mouffe (2001) have equally argued that social movements produce new subjectivities that can politicise social relations or spaces that were not previously considered political, and through this, they can become the bearers of a process of radicalisation of democracy. Similarly, Schmitt (1996) has argued that if political action and thought is about conflict, decision and the exercise of power, the question of the subject is unavoidable. According to him, politics is even the realm of subjectivity *par excellence*.

But who is the subject that fights the environmental struggle? This is far from easy to answer. In some environmental circles, environmental disasters are portrayed as 'nature's' revenge for human pollution, but this is of course a very mystifying way

of speaking (Chase 1991). Nature does not act, take revenge, or struggle. Someone has to speak about or in the name of nature for nature to become politically salient (Castree, 2005). Climate change has been taking place for many decades, but extensive scientific reports and numerous actions were required in order to bring visibility to the problem and to put it on the agenda. Environmental problems only exist as political problems to the extent that there are representations of them in the public sphere.

Environmental struggles are often not framed as emancipatory struggles of a particular subject, in contrast to feminism, the civil rights movement or labour struggle. They are about how we, or human society, relate to the planet. Since we all belong to the planet, everybody (or nobody?) seems to be in a position to speak in nature's name. As a result, environmental questions lend themselves easily to a discourse suggesting that 'we are all in this together' and that we, therefore, have to cooperate, create partnerships and reach consensus. If 'everyone together' is the subject of environmental questions, post-politics is the evident result (Swyngedouw 2007).

Žižek (2008, 2009a, p. 91) goes a step further by claiming that the repoliticisation of environmental questions is a matter not only of affirming political subjectivity but of redefining them as emancipatory struggles. He distinguishes four possible contemporary antagonisms that could lead to repoliticising the present. These are, summarily: the environmental crisis; the inappropriateness of private property principles for 'intellectual property'; new techno-scientific developments (especially in bio-genetics); and what he calls 'new forms of apartheid', or 'new walls and slums' that separate the 'Excluded' from the 'Included'. After elaborating on these four themes, Žižek (2008) states:

> In the series of the four antagonisms, the one between the Included and the Excluded is the crucial one, the point of reference for the others. Without it, all others lose their subversive edge: ecology turns into a 'problem of sustainable development', 'intellectual property' into a 'complex legal challenge', biogenetics into an 'ethical' issue.

In other words, the question of the excluded subject is the critical one, it forms the vantage point through which all the other questions should be approached and politicised.

Žižek thus turns environmental questions into emancipation struggles. The risk of such an approach, however, is that it creates other forms of depoliticisation. It starts from a normative idea of what politicisation should consist of – the struggle for equality for example. In this regard, Žižek's approach is vulnerable to the critique that Oliver Marchart (2007) formulated against Rancière's notion of the political, upon which Žižek heavily relies. Marchart's critique is that Rancière relies on an 'emancipatory apriorism', and in this sense restricts the scope of what politicisation might consist of and unduly closes the openness and contingency that is inherent to 'the political'.

Without doubt, there are good reasons to repoliticise environmental questions by pointing to social subjects striving for equality and emancipation, thereby showing

the intertwinement of environmental affairs and social relations. Think, for instance, about many eco-feminist movements (Mellor 1997), or about indigenous peoples striving for their rights confronted with nature conservation projects in a post-colonial constellation (Reimerson 2012) or fighting against the exploitation of tar sands (Nikiforuk 2008). More than others, these people are affected by environmental crises, and one could argue that a solution to those crises requires that they – in a genuinely emancipatory fashion – raise their voices and demand change.

By focusing on the social relations that cause environmental destruction, one not only acquires a view of possible subjects of change, but also of the objects of change. Indeed, the fact that environmental issues are so easily depoliticised should be attributed not only to the fact that there is no privileged subject, but also to the fact that no specific objects appear as the evident focus for environmental change.[3] Strictly speaking, every single social relation, practice or event has an environmental impact. There is hardly a social practice that cannot be said to partake in the process of throughput, in which energy and matter is appropriated, and subsequently emitted in a deteriorated form (Foster et al. 2010). As all things have an environmental impact, the object of environmental concern is, in principle, everything. It is also in this sense that environmental issues differ from 'social' struggles. The peace movement provides a good illustration. On the one hand, the peace movement also lacks a clear *subject* of change: in this regard, it readily lends itself to a consensual and cooperative discourse suggesting 'we should all march together against war'. Yet, on the other hand, the peace movement has a precise *object* or opponent, namely, war and, more specifically, the actors engaged in and responsible for war. The same cannot be said so easily of many environmental questions.

That everything is or can be in principle the object of environmental change could lead to the conclusion that an extremely profound transformation is needed, one that embraces every human or social practice. In actual contemporary eco-political discourses, however, another conclusion dominates the scene. In the case of climate change, for example, what one opposes first and foremost are not necessarily specific, particularly polluting practices, let alone specific social actors who bear special responsibility for these. Rather, one opposes CO_2 as such, which is the by-product of almost all thinkable practices (even breathing). The result is a discourse of 'society versus CO_2' (Swyngedouw 2007, p. 27). The 'enemy' and every conflict are thus externalised. 'Act on CO_2' becomes the motto of this discourse, as a slogan used by the British government aptly summarises (Urry 2011, p. 90).

Policy options like emissions trading reinforce this approach, as they equalise all CO_2 emitted, whatever its source (Lohmann 2006, see also Descheneau 2012): the CO_2 emitted by a steel factory is rendered equal to that emitted by a hospital, by a wild camel in the remote regions of Australia, or by a tree being cut down. The CO_2 emission saved by building more efficient coal-fired power stations is equalised with

[3] We thank Gareth Dale for his inspiring input during a seminar in Leuven on this issue.

that saved by building windmills. The fact that the latter is a step on the pathway to a sustainable energy system while the former remains within the fossil fuel model is no longer of any account. This equalisation prevents people from making conscious political choices or choosing priorities.

The foregoing seems to lead to an easy conclusion: if we want to repoliticise environmental issues, not only 'nature', but also every enmity and conflict should be 'internalised' again. Indeed, insofar as environmental crises are not crises of 'nature' but of society and how the latter relates to its 'natural' conditions (Foster et al. 2010), real solutions require social change. In other words, we should turn environmental crises into social ones.

As already suggested, however, such a move involves risks, even if it has many merits. While it is crucial to make the antagonisms that cut through 'the people' and their socially constructed relation with nature visible (Swyngedouw 2010a)[4], there is a risk that by upholding a normative, emancipatory conception of politicisation related to specific subject positions, the space of 'the political' in environmental politics is unduly narrowed down, and we lose sight of other types of politicisation that might occur on this terrain.

4. PARADOXES

How, then, can we repoliticise environmental issues without turning them into mere social or normative issues? In order to address this question, let us first investigate a paradox that is present in post-political discourses. Emphasising over and over that we should reach consensus, or that certain technical or managerial solutions are neither politically left nor right (Giddens 2009, p. 114) but neutral, seems suspicious: even behind the most neutralising discourses seems to lurk a polemical dimension. What this means can be illuminated with the help of an insight from Schmitt (1996), for whom conflict is the essence of the political. In his book *The Concept of the Political*, he states that one cannot understand a discourse if one does not know whom it is affecting or targeting:

> Words such as state, republic, society, class, as well as sovereignty, constitutional state, absolutism, dictatorship, economic planning, neutral or total state, and so on, are incomprehensible if one does not know exactly who is to be affected, combated, refuted, or negated by such a term (Schmitt 1996, p. 30-31).

Political discourses, he argues, always have a polemical thrust, and their meaning can be truly understood only when this polemical dimension is disclosed. Even though certain discourses do not refer to a concrete opponent, there is always one, at least implicitly. A humanitarian discourse, for example, always entails an implicit reference

[4] Erik Swyngedouw strongly warns against the reduction of the political to the social, but at the same time he follows the rancièrian approach to repoliticisation and, as a result, also tends to end up with a form of emancipatory apriorism.

to something or someone that lies outside humanity, to an inhuman being, a radical enemy that has to be crushed (Lievens 2010, 2012). From this perspective, it is possible to engage in a symptomatic reading of post-political discourses that argue for all-round cooperation and consensus-seeking. From a Schmittian perspective, the repeated invocation of the need for consensus would appear meaningless if there were no other strategies or discourses that reject consensus-seeking. The political meaning of discourses arguing for cooperation can only be revealed by pointing to the implicit opponent they aim to polemically affect, namely, discourses that openly advocate the need for a more conflictual approach. Discourses stating that the conflict approach is obsolete and that we all ought to work together are, in a paradoxical fashion, very polemical.

'There is a war between the ones who say there is a war and the ones who say there isn't', Leonard Cohen sang in 1974. He thus adequately captured the metaconflict that is at stake here. Many post-political discourses would be utterly meaningless in the absence of an opponent on this meta-level. It makes perhaps more sense, therefore, to consider post-politics as a type of discourse that, despite itself, takes sides and engages in conflict. This conflict is situated on a meta-level, but it is a conflict nevertheless. Its opponent is not a particular agent, but the conflict approach as such. The relevance for revealing this meta-conflict is that it can provide the conditions for repoliticising supposedly post-political discourses and for moving beyond pessimistic diagnoses of post-politics. It enables a kind of reversal of perspectives, through which we are able to see politicisation as a potentiality within post-politics. After all, even the discourse about the need for consensus against an externalised enemy such as CO_2 subtly refers to yet another enemy. This approach can also help to deconstruct post-political representations in the framework of the post-ecologist turn.

5. THE POST-ECOLOGIST TURN AS A HEGEMONIC STRUGGLE

We can now return to Blühdorn's 'pessimistic' account of post-ecological politics. While agreeing with the basic tenets of his analysis, we would like to suggest a political re-reading of the process that has led to this post-ecological condition. The question is whether the post-ecologist turn cannot better be described in terms of struggle, defeat and victory rather than as a fatal result of the process of modernisation.

A famous remark by William Morris, the 19th century utopian socialist, hints at a possible alternative description of the roots of this shift. In his novel *A Dream of John Ball*, Morris writes: 'Men fight and lose the battle, and the thing that they fought for comes about in spite of their defeat, and then it turns out not to be what they meant, and other men have to fight for what they meant under another name' (Morris 1886).

This seems to be exactly what is at stake in the shift towards post-ecological politics: political and economic elites have appropriated and even recuperated environmental concerns of genuine environmental movements, but in so doing fundamentally transformed these concerns. Significantly, Blühdorn and Welsh (2007, p. 192) point to such a logic of recuperation when they argue that 'sustainable development has been appropriated by established political parties and re-spun in such a way that the state/corporate nexus, operating through deepening public-private partnerships, emerges as the central means of delivering sustainability'. What happened, indeed, was a 'selective mainstreaming and post-ecologist reframing of environmental concerns' (Blühdorn and Welsh 2007, p. 195).

Interestingly, Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt (2000) have used Morris' quote to refer to the complex process through which constituted powers appropriate ideas, practices and demands from resistance movements, translate them, and use them in order to restructure their own modes of operation.[5] We could argue that ecological modernisation, green growth or the green economy partake of the same logic: economic or political elites appropriate and translate environmental concerns and integrate them within a process of technocratic and market-oriented modernisation (Mueller and Passadakis 2010, Mueller and Bullard 2011, Kenis and Lievens 2012). What is at stake here is not an inexorable social process but one that is fundamentally political: it is a struggle for hegemony; in other words, a struggle through which central elements of eco-political discourse are appropriated and integrated within a specific political project (Mouffe 1979).

Significantly, however, the political success of economic and political elites in appropriating environmental concerns and integrating them within a market-driven and technocratic project has to a large extent been conditional upon rendering invisible the very hegemonic struggle that underlies this shift. In other words, the new eco-political discourses could only be effective to the extent that the stakes of this shift became invisible or were depoliticised. The technocratic or neutral self-description of ecological modernisation or the green economy have thus been a crucial element of the hegemonic process.

Yet, symptomatically, a remainder of this hegemonic struggle inevitably pops up. Is not the invocation of the need for consensus and the recurring arguments against conflict approaches and against the need for making difficult choices and trade-offs a significant form of struggle on a meta-level? The quotes from Blair and Giddens at the beginning of this discussion are significant examples of this. Similarly, the advocates of the green economy are at pains to reject the idea that addressing environmental crises requires difficult trade-offs and that this might entail sharp conflicts. The (in)famous slogan 'People Planet Profit' that is central to many green economy discourses precisely suggests it is possible to reconcile these very different values, and thus to evade conflicts between them. It is 'a myth', the UNEP report on the green

[5] Antonio Gramsci (1998, p. 106) has understood such processes as 'passive revolutions'.

economy argues, for example, 'that there is an inescapable trade-off between environmental sustainability and economic progress' (UNEP 2011, p. 16). 'People, planet, profit is the mantra already adopted by many companies in the pursuit of corporate sustainability', Achim Steiner, under-secretary of UNEP, states, 'but if we are to truly transform the economic paradigm then it needs to be adopted by many, many more' (UNEP 2012). Significantly, all these statements do not primarily state that there is consensus or reconciliation, but invoke the very need for consensus, and subtly hint at invisible others who think conflict, trade-offs, difficult decisions and power struggles are perhaps inevitable.[6]

6. BEYOND POST-POLITICS?

The argument developed in the previous sections opens the door for a repoliticisation of environmental questions that does not necessarily require a reference to a particular subject and its emancipatory struggle. In this section, we want to argue that, paradoxically, environmental questions are not only easily depoliticised, but in an interesting and paradoxical way, also have the potential for a kind of politicisation *par excellence*.

Importantly, two conclusions can follow from the observation that environmental issues lack an undisputable subject and object of change. On the one hand, it can support the idea that we are all in this together, that we should therefore collaborate, and that, for example in the case of climate change, CO_2 is the common externalised 'enemy' to which we are all opposed. On the other hand, however, it can broaden the terrain for hegemonic struggle around the appropriation and translation of environmental concerns. If everything can be the object of environmental action, there can be an all-round struggle over what ought to be the proper object of this action. Furthermore, if everybody can constitute herself as the subject of this question, there is no a priori exclusion of who can present herself as the bearer of a project that can overcome environmental crises. This potentially allows for the most radical forms of political plurality and politicisation imaginable. Hegemonic struggle and politicisation can then appear in their purest form.

Of these two possible conclusions, the first tends to be predominant, but nevertheless remains unstable, representing a kind of political struggle in disguise. In a subtle way, active attempts to depoliticise exhibit or reveal that which they want to cover up. In this sense, the repoliticisation of eco-political discourses should start by confronting these discourses with their own political assumptions, thus turning them against themselves.

[6] Blühdorn (2007a) argues that current self-descriptions of society lead to forms of self-deception. Discourses of change are used in order to retain the unsustainable status quo. However, the very invocation of the need for consensus betrays society's divided nature, as a result of which self-deception can only be partly successful.

7. CONCLUSION

In the beginning of this discussion, we argued that recent shifts in eco-political discourses, as they have been theorised, amongst others, in terms of the 'post-ecologist turn', are part of a broader post-political trend. Pointing to the possibility of a political re-interpretation of the post-ecologist turn, we have argued that the latter is perhaps not merely the consequence of ongoing and unavoidable modernisation processes, but that it at least partly results from a hegemonic re-appropriation and translation of environmental concerns, while this hegemonic process is at the same time concealed. The very fact that this concealment is never complete, as the invocation of the need for consensus reveals an underlying polemic, allows us to move beyond pessimistic accounts of the current predicament of environmental politics. Indeed, the presence of this polemic in disguise shows that, more fundamentally, a political process is at stake, and the revelation of this fact can provide the starting point for a repoliticisation of the environmental sphere.

Significantly, environmental questions are not only easily depoliticised, as we have shown, but could also become the terrain of politicisation *par excellence*: because everyone can appropriate these questions and give them a specific content, a genuinely political space of plurality can appear, where conflict, contingency and power can become visible and contestable as such. Because repoliticisation brings different voices to the fore and shows the contingency of current societal structures, this is not only intrinsically important from a democratic point of view, but also helps to open the door for real and effective change.

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CHAPTER 8

CONCLUSION

1. POST-POLITICS CONTESTED

I started this dissertation with John Urry's (2011) and Peter North's (2010) statement that the existence of new grassroots climate movements such as Transition Towns and Climate Justice Action would prove that post-politics is not a problem with regard to climate change at all. They are not alone in this position. While a number of authors has described predominant discourses on climate change as profoundly depoliticised (e.g., Bettini 2013, Goeminne 2010, MacGregor 2014, Machin 2013, Pepermans and Maeseele 2014, Swyngedouw 2007, Swyngedouw 2010a, Swyngedouw 2013), at the same time, a steadily growing number of scholars has questioned the 'post-political thesis' for not taking the multiplicity of voices and actually existing forms of contestation enough into account (e.g., Chatterton et al. 2013, Featherstone 2013, Larner 2014, McCarthy 2013, North 2010, Urry 2011). Not only do they argue that several climate movements are contesting the current post-political atmosphere, the concept of post-politics is increasingly contested itself. As I will argue below, the paradox, in my view, is that in the contestation of the concept of post-politics in the environmental field, recourse is often made to post-political representations of that very field.

The research conducted in the framework of this PhD helps to assess this paradox, and the related positions. Indeed, my own empirical research not only provided me with a lot of information on the degree to which both movements are contestatory in nature, it also urged me to subject the statements of North, Urry and others concerning post-politics and the idea that the relations between grassroots climate movements can be understood in terms of convergence spaces, to closer scrutiny.

It is important to note that the two grassroots climate movements which I studied have both been the topic of a scholarly debate concerning post-politics. In that context, Transition Towns has variously been depicted as profoundly political and depoliticised by different scholars (Chatterton et al. 2013, Featherstone 2013, Mason and Whitehead 2012, Neal 2013, North 2010, 2011, Urry 2011). A crucial question is of course what is the ground of these 'divergent' diagnoses, and what this tells us about the state of 'the political' (and its theorisation) today. As I will argue in this concluding chapter, in many of the present debates it is overlooked that it is on the level of discourse or representation that the diagnosis of post-politics has to be made.

This is a key point many critics of the post-politics thesis fail to acknowledge, as a result of which their argument runs into tensions.

Indeed, if one strictly focuses on practices, one could easily conclude that the two movements studied need not be incompatible: why would Transition Towns planting nut trees in public parks be at odds with Climate Justice Action activists blocking a coal-fired power plant? The point is that environmental movements are about more than 'doing things': they are about ideas. Ideas are what motivate people, guide the initiatives they take, steer the debates they participate in, provide orientation for the future. Ideas are the resource of hegemonic constructions which are inevitably present in the broad field of climate action. It is also on the level of ideas or representations that post-politics should be assessed: a practice is not depoliticised in itself, but its representation can be. Or broader: it is not reality as such which is post-political, but the way reality is portrayed. If we start from this perspective, post-politics soon turns out to be a real problem for climate movements, as I have tried to show in the preceding chapters.

The aim of this concluding chapter is twofold. On the one hand, I will situate my own research in the recent scholarly debate on these issues. On the other hand, I will also formulate a number of conclusions which relate back to my research questions and the main steps of my research.

The chapter is structured as follows: in the next section, I will compare the discursive nodal points of Transition Towns and Climate Justice Action's discourses as I developed them throughout my study. In particular, I will point to the key differences between both movements' discourses. In a third section, I will argue that despite these substantial differences, the discourses of both movements share a key *formal* feature. In both cases, a mean-ends reversal takes place. This common formal feature does not refute the divergence observed on the substantial level. On the contrary, it shows that under the surface, a more important hegemonic struggle is taking place. In a fourth section, I will elaborate upon this hegemonic struggle which is present in disguise. I will show that even more than the differences in nodal points, what is key is how these movements make sense of their own struggle, or, more precisely, which place they attribute to the political. Importantly, as I will show in the fifth section, the difference in dealing with the political is what I would consider as fundamental. In the sixth section, the argumentation takes a turn: if the debate gets centred too much around the issue of the political, what really matters, namely the content of the debate, risks to be lost out of sight. In the last sections, I will first come back to the question of convergence spaces, after which I will discuss the importance of a focus on discourse in the debate on post-politics and the latter's relevance for climate change and democracy.

2. NODAL POINTS

Without any doubt, Transition Towns and Climate Justice Action have much in common: both are new grassroots climate movements that challenge conventional environmental approaches. Both can be said to be radical and innovative. However, as I have tried to show in this dissertation, despite these commonalities, on a more fundamental level the movements strongly differ. To start with, their defining discourses are centred around very different 'discursive nodal points' (Howarth 2000, Howarth and Stavrakakis 2000, Mouffe and Laclau 2001): 'community' and 'localisation' in the case of Transition Towns (see chapter 4 and 5) versus 'climate justice', 'system change' and 'direct action' in the case of Climate Justice Action (see chapter 4 and 6).

This becomes clear both in the discourses of participants and in the descriptions of these movements by scholars. To give the example of Transition Towns: localisation and community building are framed as key ways in which Transition Towns wants to tackle climate change and peak oil. For instance Ian Bailey, Rob Hopkins, and Geoff Wilson (2010, p. 598) argue: '"Transition Towns" 'solutions are construed as intrinsically local, in the general sense of relocalisation and in a specific focus on community-scale action'.

However, some authors at times go a step further in portraying Transition Towns as essentially a movement focused on localisation and community building. Sarah Neal (2013) states that while she does 'not want to diminish the level of concern with peak oil and climate change it appears to be the *community* and *local context* that has so effectively popularised Transition'. Kelvin Mason and Mark Whitehead (2012) write that 'the real heart of transition is the local initiative'. All other elements of Transition Towns' discourse (resilience, social connectedness, transition etcetera) acquire their specific meaning by the way they are part of a discourse woven around these nodal points.

Therefore, describing Transition Towns as a grassroots climate and peak oil movement insufficiently captures its essence. The latter is much more about localisation and community building, whereby the movement refers to climate change and peak oil to underpin its project. Other arguments can also be used in view of supporting localisation, if necessary. Or, to use discourse-theoretical language, other elements could also have been part of the chain of equivalence woven around the nodal points of localisation and community formation. For example, Transition Towns protagonists point to the fact that new discoveries, market swings or technological breakthroughs, could 'alter public sentiments towards relocalisation' (Bailey et al. 2010, p. 603). To make sure that localisation remains 'salient' despite these changing circumstances, '[d]ifferent elements of the message will […] need to be stressed at different times'. In other words, peak oil and climate change could be exchanged for

other elements or arguments, whereby localisation and community remain nodal points (see chapters 4 and 5).

The discourse of Climate Justice Action, in contrast, is structured around entirely different nodal points, as was argued in chapter 6. The first is 'climate justice', which is intended as a point of demarcation from what are called 'false solutions' for climate change, such as emissions trading, agrofuels, carbon capture and storage and nuclear energy. Through the construction of 'climate justice' as the unifying signifier of a chain of signifiers, Climate Justice Action explicitly aims at bringing together and representing a range of movements and individuals within a broad alliance connecting climate politics with the question of social justice. Climate justice, in other words, operates as 'a key discourse through which articulations were made between […] diverse struggles' (Chatterton et al. 2013, p. 615). Moreover, my interviews revealed many people became involved in the movement precisely because the notion of 'climate justice' attracted them. More than the issue of climate change as such, many of them apparently were won to the movement by the reframing of the climate struggle in justice terms. Having been part of previous movements, such as the global justice movement, they often considered climate justice as an opportunity to rebuild or revitalise previous cycles of struggle and movement building. The second nodal point, closely related to climate justice, was 'system change'. As with the latter, it was constructed in such a way as to facilitate a large convergence of different movements against the 'system', usually understood as capitalism. 'System change, not climate change' being its central slogan, Climate Justice Action posited that this system is not only as a root cause of climate change, but also a main obstacle impeding adequate solutions from being adopted (CJA-Leaflet 2009, Climate Collective 2009). A third nodal point, finally, was constituted by the notion 'direct action'. Its purport is both strategic, referring to the type of action needed to ward off climate change, and democratic, implying a specific vision of bottom-up participation in realising social change.

3. Reversals

Despite these substantial differences, the discourses of both movements have one peculiar formal feature in common, as they both undertake a similar discursive operation. Namely, in both cases, a means-ends reversal seems to be taking place. For none of them, tackling climate change seems to be the main or final objective. Both movements, to a certain extent, appear to use the language of climate change in order to frame their more fundamental concerns and societal projects: localisation and a revitalised community life in the case of Transition Towns, and social justice and system change in the case of Climate Justice Action. This is not to suggest that climate change as such would not be important and even essential for both movements (and especially for many of their participants). But their real focus appears to lie elsewhere.

To elaborate upon the example of Climate Justice Action: as I showed in chapter 6, many activists state that climate change is a red thread which enables them to connect a series of social and ecological concerns, integrate these into one overarching story, and put them on the agenda (again). The goals of 'system change' and 'climate justice' in a way appear to be more important than tackling climate change as such, as they are the primary nodal points around which their discourse is woven. In other words, Climate Justice Action not only, or especially, wants to realise system change and justice in order to tackle climate change, but also, or even especially, *uses* the language of climate change as a starting point to advocate social justice and system change. Its focus on climate change seems to serve its fight against the capitalist economy and its perverse effects.

Interestingly, in a way, Climate Justice Action thus enacts a move that is somehow similar to the typical argument of its strongest opponent, the project of the so-called 'Green Economy' or 'Green Growth', the emerging policy framework which is becoming increasingly hegemonic amongst international institutions, environmental lobby groups and a number of corporations (World Bank 2012, OECD 2011, UNEP 2011). The Green Economy project crucially supports market mechanisms in order to tackle environmental problems, arguing that this will not only help realising a sustainability transition, but it will also create plenty of economic opportunities. This amounts to a peculiar means-ends reversal whereby tackling climate change is presented as the royal road to overcoming the problems and crises of the market (Kenis and Lievens forthcoming, 2015). The interesting point is that to the extent Climate Justice Action refers to climate change as a way to promote system change and climate justice, it does something similar as the project of the Green Economy, albeit with the opposite goal: climate change becomes the starting point for Climate Justice Action to put the anti-capitalist struggle on the agenda again.

Significantly, Transition Towns also seems to operate such a reversal: the building of vibrant local communities is its main project, while peak oil and climate change often appear to especially provide a frame which allows the movement to advocate localisation and community building, or to underpin the discourses which have to justify this advocacy (see chapter 5).

Under the surface, a more important hegemonic struggle thus seems to be taking place. This struggle is not only, or in the first place, about which strategies are most appropriate to ward off climate change, but about divergent societal projects, which are re-framed in terms of climate change and ecological crisis in order to give these projects a new boost and credibility. In other words, the choice for the Green Economy, for Climate Justice Action or Transition Towns is a choice for a specific societal project. Each of these projects amounts to a re-invention of previously existing projects, which are now reconfigured in the light of climate change.

4. HEGEMONY IN DISGUISE

Although they all realise a formally similar means-ends reversal, the discourses through which these initiatives make sense of their own activity strongly differ. While the Green Economy uses an economic, technocratic and managerial, and thus often profoundly depoliticised narrative (Kenis and Lievens forthcoming), Climate Justice Action, on the other hand, strongly politicises, and sometimes even tends to overpoliticise, in the sense that it frames the whole field of environmental struggle in terms of adversaries and allies, friends and enemies (see chapter 6). The pinnacle of this was a controversial campaign during the Copenhagen climate summit against the head of WWF, who was accused of working too closely together with large corporations. The question can even be asked whether Climate Justice Action's repository of actions is not too much limited to confrontational actions, lacking instruments which are less intensely politicising, but which might be necessary for a movement to acquire deeper roots in society.

While the Green Economy thus tends to conceal its political stakes, thereby complicating a debate about its proper aims, Climate Justice Action risks to go so far in its conflict approach that a proper debate, for instance with advocates of the Green Economy, is neither possible. To the extent that the latter tend to be considered as enemies rather than adversaries, they become actors that merely have to be defeated (instead of also convinced).

Transition Towns provides the most ambiguous picture in this regard. The movement explicitly breaks with conventional environmental discourses, and its individualising and marketising thrust (see chapter 4). By providing people with an alternative type of commitment whereby they no longer see themselves as mere (sustainable) consumers, but also as (ecological) citizens who can participate in shaping society, a limited process of politicisation occurs at the level of the individual. However, at the level of the community as a whole, the politicising capacities of the movement are far less convincing. On the one hand, the movement puts forward radically different future alternatives (see chapter 5). By thus revealing, at least implicitly, the contingency of current societal structures, the movement in principle could contribute to the politicisation of the climate debate. Yet, remarkably, it does not recognise the (potentially) political dimension of its own radicalness itself. On the contrary, while being radical in what it proposes, the movement wants to establish itself as much as possible as 'normal', 'familiar' and 'something for everyone'. The promotion of all-round dialogue, collaboration and inclusion is characteristic of the 'cosy' consensus atmosphere the movement wants to create. Conflict approaches are dismissed, every we/them discourse is rejected, and the psychology of change is put forward as the way to get this all done. In particular because of the latter elements, the movement's narrative can be said to be fundamentally depoliticised, albeit in a very different way than is the case with the discourse of the Green Economy.

Interestingly, post-political tendencies thus not only seem to be present in hegemonic climate discourses, but also in counterhegemonic ones.

The point is that Transition Towns' call for far-going inclusion and dialogue, its dismissal of every conflict discourse and the promotion of a psychological vision of change make a proper political debate between them and, for instance, climate justice activists (or proponents of the Green Economy) difficult, if not impossible. When engaging in conflict is represented in psychological terms, the conflict risks to get stranded from the very beginning. The opponent then does not merely have a different opinion. Her opposition is the symptom of the psychological defences she sets up in order not to have to transcend and question her own assumptions and habits. The reproach is that she rather starts to blame others, or vindicate the correctness of her own views, failing to open herself for other perspectives.

To sum up, two major differences separate Transition Towns and Climate Justice Action: first, their divergent discursive nodal points, and second, the way they deal with conflict, we/them oppositions, agonism, inclusion and exclusion, or, in one words, the political. Engaging in an open confrontation or debate between the movements' societal projects is not evident, both because these projects lay covered behind a climate change discourse, *and* because the movements deal very differently with the political. The combination of these elements also makes the search for convergence between the movements difficult. No convergence is possible without an open acknowledgement of the legitimacy of conflict and the creation of new spaces and practices where these can be dealt with.

5. AGAINST (BEING AGAINST)

In my view, the difference in how both movements deal with the political is fundamental. More than the different nodal points structuring their respective discourses, and even more than the concealing effects of the means-end reversals mentioned above, this divergent relation to the political seems to establish a real cleavage or chasm between both movements, making it difficult, if not impossible, for them to engage in a real debate.

Interestingly, several transitioners would surely argue in favour of climate justice and system change (though probably giving a slightly different meaning to these notions), and quite some climate justice activists are not against localisation, let alone community building, as such. However, their dissatisfaction about Transition Towns' unwillingness to engage in more confrontational actions, the pressure to always think positively and to deal with each other in an almost psychotherapeutic way, made several activist flee from Transition Towns or reject it strongly. Similar things happened on the opposite side as well. Several transitioners felt sympathy for Climate Justice Action's aims, such as community control over natural resources, food sovereignty, settling the North's ecological debt to the South, and a 'just transition' to

a low-carbon economy. At the same time, they had more difficulties with the idea that these solutions would 'not come without a struggle'. While some transitioners undertook a genuine attempt to engage with the Climate Action Camps organised by the Climate Justice Action movement in Belgium, they soon withdrew. Discussions quickly arose around some more confrontational elements: the fact that the terrains of the camp were occupied illegally, that security teams were set up to protect the terrains from invasions by the police, that the camps had a radically political outlook, which made that 'not everyone would feel welcome', that blockades and other direct actions were organised. But also, and maybe even in particular, the more conflictual discourse which was present in its outreach texts, on websites and leaflets led to strong feelings of unease on the side of transitioners.

In chapter 4, I presented the discourse of both movements about each other. Is it not striking that almost all expressions of 'disagreement' relate to issues which pertain to the political?[1] Interestingly, even the way people talk about the other movement reveals their own political stance. If one asks transitioners about the Climate Justice Action movement, they often engage in a psychologising (and sometimes moralising) discourse, suggesting Climate Justice Action is something for young people, or that climate justice activists have not reached Transition Towns' level of maturity yet. Again, the difference between both movements is not understood politically, in terms of divergent projects, but as resulting from different degrees of psychological (or moral) development. This leads transitioners to a slightly paternalistic attitude towards Climate Justice Action: they want to relate sympathetically to it, as it is apparently assumed climate justice activists will realise sooner or later that Transition Towns has a point, and transitioners want to warmly welcome these activists to change their minds and join the movement when they are ready for it.

In contrast to this psychologising, moralising and sometimes paternalistic attitude, Climate justice activists rather express straightforward indignation about Transition Towns' positions. If they disagree with a particular point of view, they are happy to get involved in an often polemic and offensive debate. They do not mince their words, and loudly and clearly declare for everybody to hear that they find this or that point of view of Transition Towns really unbearable. Their firm and open announcement of disagreement is, in its turn, interpreted by transitioners as a lack of openness to engage in a real 'dialogue' and 'transcend' personal or particular positions which after all just divide us in what should be a common transition to another, less oil-based and more agreeable world.

Interestingly, the respectively depoliticised or over-politicised positions of transitioners and climate justice activists thus also determine the way their participants relate or react (in a way that is always at least a bit problematic) to the other movement. The point is that a depoliticised approach (as present in Transition

[1] Note that transitioners would probably never use the term 'disagreement'.

Towns, but also in predominant discourses such as that of the Green Economy) makes it difficult to confront different societal projects with each other. If one sees the other as psychologically or morally immature, or if one believes in the possibility to arrive at an all-inclusive consensus, whether it is at the local or the international level, there is a structural obstacle to acknowledge potential disagreements (which cannot be solved merely by dialogue). To put it simply, within a depoliticised mind-set, it is very difficult for two actors to come to the conclusion to agree that they disagree.

Climate Justice Action recognises the existence of disagreement, but its participants sometimes seem to find it difficult to recognise proponents of other perspectives as legitimate others. This is particularly valid if these others are advocates of the Green Economy, but it also matters to a certain extent for transitioners. As Mouffe (2006) shows, the other then becomes an enemy. The result is not only a specific difficulty to engage in a proper debate. It can also open the door for adversarial actions in spaces which are no longer political in the proper sense of the term. Think about actions which trespass the limit of the private sphere, whereby action is undertaken, for example, at the doorstep of a CEO's home, where her children and partner also live. Even though 'the personal is political', as feminists state, the politicisation of the personal sphere can lead to disrespecting the adversary and making the conflict very moral, thereby again missing what is of the essence of the political. Paradoxically, climate action then becomes individualised and privatised again, which is precisely what I criticised the sustainable consumption approach for (see chapter 3 and 4).

6. (CONTESTING) THE POLITICAL: A NON-DEBATE?

As argued in chapter 7, even in depoliticised discourses, a symptomatic form of conflict pops up again: even consensus-seeking discourses engage in a peculiar kind of conflict against more adversarial discourses. In fact, the discourse of Transition Towns is an outstanding example of this. In so far as the movement feels the need to state, time and again, that we should be positive and collaborative, that we should avoid 'we versus them', that we do not win anything with 'continued fracturing and antagonising' and that we should stop thinking that 'change is something that we have to fight for' (Hopkins, 2008), Transition Towns' discourse is in fact very polemic and conflictual in itself.

The point is that the meaning of political discourses can only be fully understood if this always present polemical dimension is disclosed. Without the presence of discourses which advocate conflict, as is the case with the Climate Justice Action movement, a discourse calling for inclusion, dialogue and consensus would be entirely redundant and outright meaningless. Therefore, one could state that, despite its claim to the opposite, Transition Towns' discourse is subtly polemical. More concretely, it is polemicising against conflict discourses such as put forward by Climate Justice Action.

Paradoxically, therefore, depoliticised discourses often do take sides in a conflict. This conflict is situated on a meta-level, but it is a conflict nevertheless.

This argument again underscores the importance of a comparative study. Juxtaposing both movements yields insights which a separate study of both movements apart could not have produced. In this case, the contrast reveals the extent to which Transition Towns is actually polemicising, despite its rejection of 'we against them' discourses. It is therefore not surprising that, as I showed in chapter 4, the identity of Transition Towns becomes particularly evident for its members when it is contrasted with the discourse of Climate Justice Action.

Interestingly, it could be argued that Climate Justice Action makes a similar, though opposite move as Transition Towns. Indeed, is a conflict discourse implicitly not always directed towards consensus too? In so far as you suppose that your opponent will understand the point you are making, you start from the assumption that there is a kind of common understanding underlying the different arguments. This is a point Rancière stresses, as I showed in chapter 6. He argues underlying a command is always a fundamental equality. This leads to his paradoxical analysis of the political act, which at the same time affirms conflict and the possibility to discuss between equals (Rancière, 1999).

This also seems to be the point where Climate Justice Action is balancing unstably. While its activists engage from time to time in debates with their adversaries, and thereby implicitly acknowledge that 'the other' (or at least the public) can understand their point of view, there is also a tendency to refrain from these debates exactly for this reason. The assumption appears to be that the common basis is too small, or even inexistent to make a genuine debate meaningful. In Mouffe's (2002, 2006) terms, this is also the moment when the adversary again turns into an enemy.

The point of the matter is that something must be shared for enemies to be turned into adversaries, antagonism into agonism. This is not the proper place to engage in a philosophical discussion, but it appears that both complete consensus and outright antagonism are both detrimental to the political. For my topic, the key question is to what extent movements acknowledge the inevitability of conflict, on the one hand, and the need for a minimal consensus which makes reciprocal recognition of adversaries possible, on the other hand.

As I suggested, there is a polemic between both movements. But it is a strange one: it is a polemic which is not in the first place about what is of substantial importance for both movements. The debate is one between a collaborative approach and a conflictual one, between being 'against', and being 'against being against', between an often depoliticised and sometimes over-politicised approach. In other words, it is a debate about the place of the political *as such*, as a result of which the *content* of the debate, *what really matters,* risks to disappear from the agenda. To put it differently, the fundamental society projects lurking behind each position tend to disappear (once

again) out of sight to the extent that the conflict about the political as such, and more in particular about the preference for conflict versus consensus, takes the upper hand.

To sum up, it can be argued that both movements' (and the Green Economy's) discourses contain three different levels: (1) a fundamental political project or ideological viewpoint (e.g. anticapitalism, communitarianism, green neoliberalism), (2) a framing of climate change on the basis of this fundamental viewpoint (e.g. Climate Justice, Transition Towns, Green Economy), and (3) an more or less explicit inclusion of 'the political', e.g. through references to the need for consensus or struggle.

The most fundamental clash is the one between different political projects or ideological visions. However, precisely this debate does not really come to the fore. But also the open confrontation between different ways to frame climate change is often concealed within a general post-political atmosphere. What remains is a struggle on the third level, between the desirability or not of conflict and consensus, but even the presence of this struggle is partly disguised.

7. CONVERGENCE SPACES?

My argument thus far has pointed to a number of obstacles for establishing convergence between Climate Justice Action and Transition Towns. It is not only the case that a number of elements stand in the way of a joining of forces, at the level of the political both movements seem to even counter or thwart each other's projects, as one discourse objectively functions so as to dislocate the other. In other words, both movements' discourses do not remain neutral to each other. Therefore, it should not only be questioned whether they can be considered as part of the same convergence spaces, which means they would share 'common concerns', 'articulate collective visions', and 'generate sufficient common ground to generate a politics of solidarity' (Routledge 2003). My questioning goes a step further in the sense that the way both movements frame or conceal the political is so different, that they can actually become each other's opponents.

The question is also what is the effect of framing both movements as convergence spaces. As I claimed in the introduction of my dissertation, this framing results in a paradox. Several scholars argue that there is no problem of post-politics in relation to climate change, but one can wonder whether talking in terms of convergence spaces is in itself not already a post-political representation of the environmental field. Post-political discourses do not only portray social reality in neutralising terms, but also neutralise or depoliticise their own relation to social reality. Not only this idea of convergence spaces, but also the critique of Urry and others concerning the post-political should therefore be subjected to closer scrutiny.

One of the points I have tried to make in this dissertation is that the very existence of a multiplicity of voices and actually existing forms of contestation does not disapprove the post-political thesis. Scholars such as Mouffe (2006) argue the social is inevitably and always torn by conflict, division and the exercise of power. The post-political thesis does not deny this: it rather focuses on the question whether or not the discourses through which the social is interpreted *account* for these realities and make them visible. That is what the political and depoliticisation are about.

Furthermore, it is important to note that discourse does more than portraying social reality: it co-produces this reality (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, Mouffe 2006). Discourse or representation is therefore far from an innocent affair: without discourse, society could not possibly exist as something meaningful. In this sense, both political and post-political discourses have performative effects on society, on how it interprets itself, or how social actors understand their own place within it. Post-political discourses do not only conceal the political nature of society, but also remain blind to the inevitably political nature of their own relation to society, namely to the fact that they co-produce it (Kenis and Lievens 2015).

The point is that if one is convinced that these movements constitute convergence spaces, there is no longer a need to think this space in political terms: it is then no longer an arena where important choices have to be made between different strategies to tackle climate change and between the societal projects which are related to these. The problem with a post-political representation is that it conceals struggles which are present below the surface. The fundamental differences between both movements thus tend to be disguised. However, these differences are not unimportant.

8. MULTIPLE VOICES

Since the start of my research, several scholars have started to write about post-politics and climate change, and even about new grassroots climate movements, including the ones that I studied myself. The emergence of this type of scholarship is intriguing in itself. It owes of course much to the influential work of Erik Swyngedouw (2007, 2009, 2010a, 2010b, 2013). But it undoubtedly also responds to a real problem in the environmental field itself, which demands novel approaches and conceptualisations. However, as I showed, different conclusions are drawn from scholarly investigations into post-politics in environmentalism: some authors reject the post-political thesis, whereas others confirm or defend it. This is both the case in general, and applied to the examples of Climate Justice Action and Transition Towns.

How can we explain this? In a certain way, the concepts of 'post-politics' and depoliticisation have been the victims of their own success. They have been used so often and in such a diversity of contexts, that their precise meaning got lost to a certain extent, as I have tried to show. The political then becomes associated with 'going

against the stream'. Everything else is then turned into 'post-politics'. A simplification of the notion of 'post-politics' is the result, which makes it all too easy to radically criticise it, as some scholars have done (Barnett 2013).

Three developments have tended to undermine the salience of the analysis in terms of post-politics. First is an issue I already pointed at, namely the question what is the object which can be said to be post-political. I argued that practices or situations are not post-political in themselves, but the discourses in terms of which they get meaning can be depoliticised. Second is the tendency of defendants of the post-politics thesis to limit the scope of 'the political' to an emancipatory and radical type of action. As I showed in chapter 7, these approaches are often inspired by the work of Rancière (1999) or Žižek (2000), who tend to limit political action to egalitarian and emancipatory acts. In that chapter, I have tried to present a more sober and encompassing notion of the political (even if, in actual political struggles, I would personally embrace an egalitarian and emancipatory point of view). Such a more sober interpretation is about recognising and making visible power, conflict and decision. Third is a tendency to consider our whole era as post-political. Chantal Mouffe (Hendrickx and Hillaert 2012, Mouffe 2003, 2006) and Erik Swyngedouw (2007, 2010a, 2011) have given credibility to this tendency by speaking about the 'post-political condition', 'the post-political Zeitgeist' or a 'post-political era', a terminology which has subsequently been taken over in different variants by others (e.g., Hilding-Rydevika et al. 2011, Kythreotis 2012, Maeseele 2015). While I agree in principle with these analyses, they have often been interpreted as if the era in which we live, and thus also all aspects which are a part of it, has become post-political as a whole, which leads too easily to the counterargument that there actually are movements of resistance and opposition, 'from Occupy the COP to multiple groups articulating theories and demands regarding climate justice', as James McCarthy (2013, p. 23) argues.

It is therefore important to restore the precise meaning of the concept of the post-political and depoliticisation. Most importantly, only *discourses* can be called post-political or depoliticised, as I have argued throughout this dissertation. Post-politics is about a way to represent or interpret social reality. Namely, a discourse is post-political when it conceals power, exclusion or conflict, or more precisely, when it conceals the fact that a discourse is in itself an exercise of power, generating exclusions and intervening in a conflictual terrain. The critique of post-politics is therefore a critique of discourses, of ideologies. It is a form of ideology critique: it aims to reveal what a discourse conceals, namely the contingent and therefore changeable political nature of society and of a discourse's relation to it. Looking from this perspective to consensual discourses, it is important to stress that there is no intrinsic problem with consensus-seeking as such, unless such discourses conceal and thereby repress really existing oppositions and disagreements, or when they misrecognise that they are only one contingent way to conceive of society, or in this context, of climate

politics. Saying that we live in a 'post-political condition' can at best mean that the dominant or ideological discourses in our society are post-political.

9. THE CHALLENGES FOR CLIMATE CHANGE AND DEMOCRACY

In his book *Climate Change and Society*, Urry (2011, p. 90) argues that 'if Swyngedouw were right in these claims about the forming of the post-political, this would be highly problematic for developing a positive and progressive response to the multiple risks of changing climates'. But is this really the case? Post-politics is indeed an obstacle for tackling climate change in an effective and democratic way. But it is not this diagnosis that is responsible for this situation. Quite the contrary, the diagnosis exactly allows us to grasp what is at stake and to provide us with the conceptual tools to move beyond post-politics.

As I have already evoked elsewhere in this dissertation, Chantal Mouffe (2002, p. 5) argues that '(t)he political in its antagonistic dimension cannot be made to disappear simply by denying it, by wishing it away [...]'. I want to argue that the same is valid for the post-political. Instead of denying a certain reality, the art is to understand it, in order to change it**.** In contrast to Urry, I want to argue that coming to terms with post-politics is essential if we want to tackle climate change in a democratic and effective way.

To start with, Mouffe (2006) has forcefully established that the critique of post-politics is essential for democracy. It is of the essence of a democratic society that it acknowledges the legitimacy of disagreement and conflict, and it is only by making disagreement or conflict visible that one can deal with them in a democratic way. Moreover, recognising division is a precondition for freedom, as it enables the free choice between different projects for society. In the context of environmental issues, we similarly need to create a plural and democratic space in which it becomes possible to make visible the existence of 'conflicting and alternative trajectories of future socio-environmental possibilities and of human–human and human–nature articulations and assemblages' (Swyngedouw 2010a, p. 228). Importantly, democracy is not a regime in which power, conflict or exclusion is absent. Such a regime cannot exist, despite what proponents of, for instance, deliberative democracy argue (see chapter 4). Democracy is about making power, conflict and exclusion visible, and thereby contestable and debatable. It is a specific way of dealing with power, conflict and visible, by giving them a place in the political arena and in specific institutions.

Although I did not address the problem of effectiveness head-on in this dissertation, there is an important link between the critique of post-politics, effectiveness and democracy. In an often quoted blog post, Kevin Anderson (2013), Deputy Director of the Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research, states that

'evolutionary changes *within* the political and economic hegemony' will no longer suffice to avert catastrophic climate change. As we lost precious time during the last two decades, we actually need 'revolutionary change *to* the political and economic hegemony'. If that is indeed the case, we can no longer remain within the parameters of our political, economic and cultural systems, but will have to fundamentally put the basic parameters of our society into question.

That requires recognising the contingency of current societal structures and acknowledging that radically different choices are possible. Evidently, post-political representations of society and our political system stand in the way of such a radical questioning of the current framework. We therefore need to uncover its contingency and transformability again, through the critique of post-politics. More than ever, we have to move beyond the confines of the 'possible', and show that the boundary between what is considered possible and what impossible is politically determined and therefore contingent. Taking this idea to its radical conclusion, Slavoj Žižek (2000, p. 199) argues that 'the political act (intervention) proper is not simply something that works well within the framework of the existing relations, but something that changes the very framework that determines how things work'. In other words, framing policies in terms of 'what works' is essentially post-political, as it hinges on a technocratic logic. Even if political action can also be moderate, it always requires acknowledging the existence of radically different possibilities.

However, the critique of post-politics has yet another connection with the problem of effectiveness. Given the far-reaching change that is necessary to ward off catastrophic climate change, the required policies will need a high degree of democratic legitimacy in order to be acceptable in the eyes of citizens. That is the paradox of technocratic or managerial approaches: they are often advocated in the name of effectiveness, but potentially lack a key condition for large-scale transformative processes to be effective, namely democratic legitimacy and citizen support.

Admittedly, the critiques of theories of the (post-)political are not entirely off the mark, in the sense that focusing primarily on processes of depoliticisation indeed bears the *risk* of shifting attention away from actually existing alternative voices and forms of contestation and repoliticisation. However, this does not mean that the notion of post-politics would deny the existence of these forms of contestation. Furthermore, it remains the case that predominant representations of climate change tend to make their contentious nature invisible, and as a result, the post-political also retains its relevance. A crucial point is that the concept of post-politics is not a descriptive, but a critical term. It does not describe reality, but it criticises the way reality is given meaning. Its goal is to reveal, to unmask, to make some things visible which were previously concealed. Many authors use the term precisely to make resistance and opposition visible, or to generate a space, a discourse, in which they can become visible (Mouffe 2006, Rancière 1999, Žižek 2000). In this sense, I

completely disagree with the suggestion that theories of post-politics would make us blind to actually existing forms of resistance. At most they risk to shift attention away in so far as this becomes the only or main focus.

This is not to suggest that there are no problems with the existing literature on post-politics. This literature especially criticises post-political representations, but often fails to theoretically and empirically point out what repoliticisation can actually mean, or how it can take place. How can movements go against post-political representations? I have addressed this question in a number of chapters in this dissertation, but obviously much more research needs to be done, also concerning other types of movements, to fully grasp the challenge of repoliticisation.

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EPILOGUE

AT THE END OF A CYCLE OF MOVEMENT BUILDING

Where are the movements now, a few years after finishing the activist part of my research? Throughout this dissertation, several hypothesis have been formulated about the potential of both movements to politicise the climate struggle, to build themselves and to contribute to tackling climate change in a democratic and effective way. Have they fulfilled their promises? How does their story end?

1. THE END OF CLIMATE JUSTICE ACTION

"So if that company is green, not out of environmental reasons but because it allows them to make money, but the same logic of profit is still present, workers are still exploited, the same capitalist practices are continued… If it only jumps upon that bandwagon because there is money to be found there, then… Whether you call it an enemy or an opponent, I cannot see it as an ally. In no possible way, and especially because, somehow, I find this a worse category, a worse opponent because you see that in the end, they create a kind of confusion. Because some people say: look, now these activists are also against green companies. They thus make it more difficult for us."

(Jason, climate justice activist who has also been active in Transition Towns)

Climate Justice Action has not been able to survive for a very long time as an organised international movement. Its high point was the mobilisation around Copenhagen in 2009. Afterwards, many local and national groups and networks continued to build on the momentum of Copenhagen, and tried to set up similar events and campaigns in their respective countries. Climate camps and other actions were set up, amongst others, in Britain, Germany, Belgium, France, Denmark and Wales. On an international level, there have been coordinating meetings, but with fewer people attending than before the Copenhagen summit. Climate Justice Action has been involved in setting up and coordinating Global Days of Action for Climate Justice, in international campaigns against tar sands, and around the subsequent climate summits in Cancún and Durban, but it was never able to gain as much strength as in 2009. By the end of 2012, the movement was virtually dead, even though groups which can be considered

the offspring of Climate Justice Action were still active, sometimes using another name or slogan.

Several reasons can be put forward for this 'end of Climate Justice Action'. First and foremost, as I have explained in chapter 6, it is far from evident to build a strongly politicised movement in a post-political context. Such a project faces specific tensions and paradoxes which are particularly challenging for a young, nascent movement. The pressure to join the mainstream tendency to unite 'against CO_2' (Swyngedouw 2007, Swyngedouw 2010), to focus on technological solutions, and to remain within the market paradigm, is real (see also Kenis and Lievens 2015). Furthermore, the strong influence of the current post-political atmosphere impedes the development of visions on and the belief in real alternatives. To the extent that a belief in an alternative is a crucial motivating factor behind collective action, the lack of a vision on such an alternative, or the lack of belief in its very possibility have effects on the dynamic of a movement that must not be underestimated (Jensen 2002). Last but not least, this post-political atmosphere also implies that a double struggle has to be waged: one not only has to struggle for particular demands, one also has to wage a struggle to make sure struggle as such is considered a legitimate way to raise one's voice or to change something (see chapter 7).

Second, and related to this, is the complexity of Climate Justice Action's story. Climate Justice Action not only reintroduced a we-them or friend-enemy discourse, it also chose a difficult enemy. Indeed, in a constellation in which the dominant approach is 'to all work together', it is already not evident to point to the fossil fuel industry as 'the enemy' against whom one has to build an opposition. As could be witnessed during the climate summit in Warsaw in 2013, even fossil fuel industries are sitting around the table, as if they were partners.[1] Similarly, NGOs such as WWF work together with companies like Monsanto or Coca-Cola, in an attempt to transform these 'from the inside'. Questioning these kinds of 'partnerships' in the reigning climate of 'all against CO_2' is already not evident (although positions on this issue are evolving, witness the large number of NGOs leaving the 'circus' of the climate summit for the first time in Warsaw in 2013). The difficulty is that Climate Justice Action goes beyond considering these companies as opponents: it also targets *green* companies, progressive governments and mainstream NGOs that defend so-called 'false solutions' for climate change. More in particular, Climate Justice Action increasingly attacks the discourse of the 'Green Economy', which somehow synthesises these 'false solutions' (Kenis and Lievens 2015). Insofar as NGOs and green parties also promote this discourse, the terrain of struggle becomes rather complex: it includes a struggle within the ranks of the green movement. Many argue that this divides the movement, that 'we' cannot afford to lose our time with these 'internal' struggles and debates, and that we even risk to undermine some environmental realisations by creating doubt and suspicions about 'green actors'. Such criticisms surely played an important role in

[1] http://www.cop19.gov.pl/partners

the difficulty Climate Justice Action experienced in broadening its ranks, or in guaranteeing its very survival. Climate Justice Action developed a discourse which was maybe simply too distant from the common sense to gather enough people and energies around a common discourse and consolidate itself. Climate Justice Action's tendency to develop a kind of 'overpoliticised' discourse certainly contributed to this in a negative way, in the sense that such a discourse risks to even alienate people who generally sympathise with the movement.

Third, repression has definitely played a role which cannot be neglected. During the climate summit in Copenhagen, many places where activists were staying were searched by the police at night. Hundreds of activists have been arrested, often preventively, and detained in cages for up to 12 or even 36 hours, often without sufficient food, drinks and medical care. During a large demonstration in Copenhagen whereby almost 100.000 people took to the streets, about 1000 demonstrators have been arrested. They happened to walk in the same section of the demonstration as a few persons who had broken some windows by throwing stones. The organisers of the demonstration were solving the problem, making clear to the respective persons that there was no place for violence in the demonstration and asking them to leave (which they also did). Moreover, the large majority of people had nothing to do with this incident, but they were handcuffed and had to stay for four hours on the street, in freezing temperatures, without the possibility to go to the toilet or drink or eat something. Tadzio Mueller, who was considered by the police as one of the 'leaders' of the movement was preventively arrested for several days. A few years later, the court of Denmark declared all these preventive arrests illegal. However, the damage done to the movement cannot be underestimated. Moreover, for some, court decisions were not favourable at all: Stine Gry Jonassen and Tannie Nyboe, two Danish climate activists involved in the mobilisations around the summit, have been sentenced to two months of prison and two months of suspended prison (one year of probation) by the High Court of Denmark for their involvement in the protests (Heppenstall 2011). Although the movement set up solidarity campaigns for the people who were sued, this heavy repression inevitably reduces the space for political action. It hinders the enlargement of the movement beyond very convinced activists, and has a freezing effect upon even the latter, who might think twice before taking new initiatives in the future. Furthermore, this criminalisation can also make it more difficult for the movement to convey its story to the outside world. The risk of criminalisation is that not only the movement, but also its story becomes marginalised and untrustworthy, and thus threatens not to be taken seriously. Considering an opponent a criminal rather than a political subject is a typical depoliticising move. To put it in Mouffean terms: it turns an 'agonistic' struggle between adversaries into an 'antagonistic' struggle (Mouffe 2000). A criminal is not someone whom one should recognise as a political actor, but someone who should simply be punished.

A fourth factor has been pointed out by Tadzio Mueller and Nicola Bullard (2011). They argue that the development of a social movement paradoxically often

depends on the vigour of its opponent. Indeed, movements such as Climate Justice Action do not merely act upon climate change and fossil capitalism as such, but also or especially react to the so-called Green Economy project, its offsprings and antecedents. The rise of this project has undoubtedly triggered a recomposition process within the environmental movement (Kenis and Lievens 2015). Parts of it started to embrace the Green Economy and considered it as a chance for a green project to finally become hegemonic. Others started to ask critical questions and to stress the value of social justice and democracy, the necessity of structural change and the incompatibility of tackling climate change (in an effective, democratic or socially just way) with maintaining a capitalist paradigm or with the neoliberal focus on free markets. Large parts of the environmental movement, however, remain undecided, and have not yet positioned themselves very clearly on this new terrain. However, in so far as the Green Economy constitutes the new hegemonic force on the environmental terrain, not positioning oneself *against* the Green Economy often leads to a de facto reinforcement of the new paradigm. The point is not only that to the extent that many environmental movements embrace the Green Economy or remain uncritical of it, the political space for Climate Justice Action's discourse threatens to remain limited. Added to this is the fact that the newly arisen Green Economy project is also already in crisis, which is, amongst others, manifested in the repeated failures of international climate summits and in the crisis of the European emissions trading system. However, without a strong 'them', it is very difficult to produce a strong 'we'. As I explained on the basis of Mouffe in chapter 4: political identities are relational, they are always constructed in contrast to a concrete other (Mouffe 2006, 2013). From this perspective, it could be argued that the lack of impetus of the other also impacts on the self. As Mueller and Bullard (2011, p. 12) write, '(T)he disarray within the negotiations themselves makes it difficult for any movement to coalesce in opposition to a common "enemy" (e.g. neoliberalism' or 'green capitalism') or in support of a common "friend"'. Their conclusion is clear: '(i)n the absence of […] a strong global push towards a green economy, global movements for climate justice must similarly remain weak, at least for now'. My hypothesis of this strong dependence of Climate Justice Action on the vigour of its opponent is related to the fact that establishing a 'we-them' distinction to a certain extent became a goal in itself for Climate Justice Action, as I argued in chapter 6. Perhaps, if Climate Justice Action would have focused more on developing alternative visions, the movement might have gained a more independent political status. Fundamentally, it would still not be able to produce a 'we' without reference to a 'they', but the direct dependence of the development of the 'we' upon the vigour of the 'they' might have played a lesser role.

The evident option that remains for Climate Justice groups is to change enemies again. If the Green Economy is in crisis, a struggle against the Brown Economy is not only more realistic, but maybe also more than ever necessary. Maybe not surprisingly, many groups inspired by Climate Justice Action increasingly started to target (unconventional) fossil fuels such as shale gas or coalbed methane during the last

years, instead of typical Green Economy targets such as emissions trading or carbon offsetting. These actions and campaigns often had a strong climate justice component, for example, focusing on the environmental rights of indigenous people living in areas of tar sand exploitation, or on the effects of shale gas extraction on the livelihood of people living in the surroundings. However, the factor 'system change', and in particular the struggle against the Green Economy paradigm became less predominant.

2. THE END OF TRANSITION TOWNS

"It is like: peak oil is coming, so folks, prepare yourself for chaos and make sure you're organised so you can escape the turmoil. That is so… while I somehow agree, in the sense that I like to live locally, and produce your own energy, your own food, well if you can realise this within a small community, I fully support that. But to justify this because of peak oil, as if, if times become harder, we will survive… No, I simply don't find that a good motivation. I think you then leave the environment, and… Well I can't really explain."

(Alice, transitioner who left the movement and became a climate justice activist)

Speaking of the 'end of Transition Towns' is perhaps controversial and provocative. In contrast to Climate Justice Action, the movement still exists, and is embedded in many cities and regions in different parts of the world. Transition Towns is big and rooted enough not to implode very fast. At the same time, however, the original impetus and ambition seems to be lost to a certain extent, at least in Flanders. Several elements are of interest in this regard. I will elaborate upon those that are most relevant for my analysis.

First, while Transition Towns' apocalyptic discourse can be seen as one of the elements that allowed the movement to attract quite a lot of people in a short lapse of time, it can also be a reason why enthusiasm and momentum was quickly lost again. If the apocalypse does not come (so fast as predicted), why than organise yourself in view of local survival? One of Transition Towns' core messages is indeed that the system is about to collapse, and that the task ahead is therefore especially to survive this collapse and prepare for what comes afterwards. This should be done by building local and resilient communities. As Ian Bailey, Rob Hopkins and Geoff Wilson (2010, p. 598) write, referring to peak oil scenarios, Transition Towns starts from 'a conviction that relocalisation is the only viable solution to hydrocarbon scarcity'. According to them, '[t]he corollary of this […] is the need to prepare for the end of economic growth'.

Peak oil scenarios are central to this argument, and have a crucial place in Transition Towns discursive framework. As John Barry and Stephen Quilley (2009, p. 25) write about the movement:

> it is peak oil that provides the differentiating frame. The two critical pillars of the peak oil frame are (i.) that an impending energy crunch will cause unprecedented social upheaval, threatening the immediate safety and long term survival of individuals and groups who do not benefit from resilient food provisioning, economic, administrative and local political systems. (ii.) Actions that individuals and communities take now can significantly enhance their resilience and increase their survival chances regardless of what happens in the rest of the world.

From the point of view of movement building, a discourse predicting big upcoming events and crises typically gives an initial boost. Interestingly, to a certain extent, this apocalyptic discourse seems to be a conscious choice by Transition Towns founders. As Bailey, Hopkins and Wilson (2010, p. 602) state, 'its [= Transition Towns'] pessimistic view of hydrocarbon reserves and technology helps to give the issue greater urgency'. Moreover, they argue

> it is important to acknowledge the greater immediacy of peak oil and climate change compared with the vague metaphors of planetary systems collapse used by 1970s survivalist groups (e.g. Gaia, Spaceship Earth). Links between ecosystem damage and societal disintegration were, and remain, largely unimaginable but the vulnerability created by oil shortages are strikingly apparent.

The focus on peak oil particularly also functions so as to reinforce the focus on self-preservation: 'whereas poorer regions of the world are predicted to bear the brunt of climate change and biodiversity loss, the severest impacts of peak oil are likely to be felt in the advanced North.'

However, the mobilising effect of such discourse only lasts until people begin to realise that the coming collapse is being delayed or averted, and that more needs to be done than to prepare for the post-apocalyptic era. Even apart from its problematic 'side'-effects, there is thus a risk involved in the use of apocalyptic discourses (Swyngedouw 2010). Surely if, in a similar vein, Transition Towns founders argue 'that making the movement appear larger than it is helps to inspire people that they are part of something "big" and thus generate momentum for further expansion' (Bailey et al. 2010, p. 603). The point is that this could also backfire.

In a way, it could be argued that Transition Towns reproduces the 'now or never' discourse that was very present during the Copenhagen climate summit and contributed to the creation of a 'post-political' atmosphere during the summit and led to an enormous disappointment afterwards (Goeminne 2010). Even apart from its depoliticising consequences, using a 'now or never' discourse is strategically not without risks. Indeed, if it turns out not to be 'now', it easily becomes 'never'. After the failed summit, only two possibilities still seemed to remain. Either one could bet on miracle solutions, such as geo-engineering, or one could prepare for the upcoming collapse. The latter is partly what Transition Towns is doing. But what if the forecasted storm is delayed (at least in the Global North)? What if it adopts other forms than expected? What if 'the system' appears to be more resilient than previously thought, and partly reinvents itself, for instance via Green Economy projects (which can have

'apocalyptic' consequences for particular groups, but maybe not for transitioners themselves)?

At first sight, it seems intelligent to appeal to what can be considered 'egocentric' concerns of people, namely the fact that they might also be hit by climate change and especially peak oil, and therefore have an interest in building local resilience. However, if predictions do not materialise, people's motivation to get engaged, largely built on 'egocentric' interests, also threatens to lose its foundation. Moreover, the way these issues have been framed in the meantime is not without consequences for participants' way of looking at current crises, as I extensively showed.

Second, the perhaps naïve enthusiasm of a nascent movement inevitably clashes with reality sooner or later: reality appears to be more recalcitrant than what could be hoped for. Transition Towns promises politicians' and companies' doors will be open for the transition approach, but in actual reality, this (evidently) turns out not always to be the case. One can start looking for more accurate ways to approach city counsellors or business leaders, but success is far from guaranteed, as a number of transitioners could experience. The disappointment that the enthusiasm about the transition approach was less generally spread than hoped for, and that change did not come that easily, is therefore a second reason why many transitioners have started to doubt about transition's approach. Similarly, people can get demotivated as other expectations (such as a more general influx of new members) or real transitions are late in coming. Even in Totnes, the exemplary Transition Town, the main physically visible symbols of the announced transition are some nut trees on the main square.

The way transitioners reacted to these evolutions, however, differed. While some simply lost their enthusiasm and inspiration, and turned back to their daily lives, others tried to change the movement from within and still others got engaged in other organisations, or decided to go on being active in the movement, but with more modest ambitions. The goals of the movement were thus adapted, and the focus on community building and relocalisation often became even more important, without, however, really aspiring to tackle peak oil, let alone climate change, in this way.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Transition Towns has difficulties in dealing with the political nature of the terrain it is engaged on. As this has been a key concern of the present dissertation, I will not rehearse my argument in detail. A crucial question is how the movement will evolve on this terrain. As already noted in chapter 4, some transitioners and climate justice activists suggest that if the movement becomes successful, it will sooner or later have to experience whether or not there is a 'we' and a 'them' and whether a choice will have to be made. For them, the question remains open. As Jason states: 'it is my personal conviction that in the end, Transition Towns […] will also be forced to take sides'. Depending on the choice the movement makes, he argues, it will become an ally, an opponent, or it will become irrelevant. Interestingly, he also points to the possibility for the movement to fall apart, or for different local 'Transition Towns' to make divergent choices:

But I think that even when the movement becomes an opponent, the chance is real that many local initiatives will choose the other side. In this sense, the Transition movement could also break up. It would be a bit, yes, almost… paradoxical if it turns out that the Transition movement, opposing all we/them distinctions, would split into hegemony and anti-hegemony. But it is not unthinkable in my view. As far as I heard, sometimes there are already conflicts around this kind of themes. And, either they will have to find an answer, a common denominator, or it will collapse at a certain point.

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ANNEX 1. INTERVIEW SCHEDULE TRANSITION TOWNS

A. INTERVIEW SCHEDULE TRANSITION TOWNS

(1) INTRODUCTION + MOTIVATION

- How did you come into **contact** with Transition Towns (TT)? What made you decided to [launch such an initiative in Flanders, order the book, register for the introduction days, come to the open day… [1]]?
- What made you decide to **engage** yourself in/for TT? What was your **motivation** to become active in TT?
- What has been your **commitment** inside TT **until now**? Have you always been as active, or were there periods during which you had a higher or lower level of commitment? If yes, which periods? Why was that?
  - When exactly did you join the group?
  - Did you participate in the introduction days? In the organisation, as a participant? If yes, which introduction days? How did you like them?
  - Did you read the book/the primer? If yes, how did you like it?
  - Are you involved in the core group of one of the initiatives, in the HUB? On what level have you been particularly engaged until now?
  - …
- Which engagement do you plan to take on in the **future**? Do you consider giving up your involvement, or would you rather become even more active? Would you perhaps want to commit yourself in another way, or is your current commitment also the type of engagement you want to have in the future?
- Are you or have you also been involved in **similar**[2] **movements**?
  - Why did you get involved in TT and not in another movement?

  OR Why did you become active in TT, next to your involvement in other movements? OR Why do you engage yourself in other movements, next to your involvement in TT?

(2) PROCESS

[1] To be filled out depending on how the respondent got in touch with Transition Towns.

[2] The respondent is asked to interpret what 'similarity' is her/himself. If I give a particular meaning to the term, by asking for example whether the respondent has been involved in other environmental movements, I might exclude organisations which the respondent considers similar, but which I had not thought about (for example, zen meditation or trade union work). It is interesting in itself to see what the respondent considers 'similar', it says much about how s/he sees TT.

- **How is it going** at this moment **with TT** according to you? Do you think the movement is on the right track, or not? Why (not)?
- Is there a **difference** in how you looked at TT **in the beginning**, **and** how you relate to the movement **now**? If yes, what was your original perception of TT? How do you perceive it now? What has changed? What has happened which caused this change?
    - If (periodically) dropping out: What caused you to drop out from time to time?
- What has been your **most positive experience** with TT until now? Why? (It is of course also possible that you have had NO particularly special experiences)
- What has been your **most negative experience** with TT? Why? (It is of course also possible that you have had NO particularly negative experiences)

(3) FEATURES OF TT'S OWN APPROACH

- How would you **describe** TT? What, according to you, are the crucial **features** of TT? I mean the features which distinguish TT from other movements …
- Is this also what you particularly **liked** about TT? Why (not)? Are **these** the **strong sides** of TT, according to you, or rather the less strong aspects / are these possible **success factors**? Why (not)?
- Are there **things which you miss** in TT? If yes, which things?

(4) ETHICS, STRATEGY AND POLITICS

- What is, according to you, the **strategy** that TT uses to change the world into a 'sustainable' direction?
- Do you believe in this strategy of change? Why (not)? Do you think TT can really change something in this way? If yes, what makes they can make a difference? If not, why?
- Are there things (events, discussions…) which make you doubt about this strategy?

- What does it mean for you to be an **ecologically committed citizen**? What does ecological citizenship mean exactly for you? Is it mainly a question of your own lifestyle, or is it also, or especially, about other things?
- What do think of **people who do not engage in this** form of ecological citizenship, who apparently are still not convinced of the importance of sustainability?
- Do you think that **TT** provides **a good model** for involving these people? Does it provide a good model to realise change on this level? Why (not)? Explain.

- Do you consider TT a **political movement**? Why (not)? What are its similarities with political movements? What are its differences?
- Are you a supporter of cooperation of TT and the **local (or other) government**? Why (not)? What are the opportunities according to you? Are there also risks involved?
- Are you a supporter of cooperation between TT and **local (or other) companies**? Why (not)? What are the opportunities according to you? Are there also risks involved?

(5) THESES

- I brought 18 cards with **theses** drawn from the Transition Handbook or the Transition Initiatives Primer, concerning the features of TT.[3] It is important to know that all these theses are somehow 'controversial', which means that some people are very fond of them, while others are not. Sometimes, it is only a small aspect of the thesis which someone might find fascinating while someone else finds it problematic. The question is what **you think about these theses**.

(6) COMPARISON WITH OTHER APPROACHES

- Is there, according to you, a difference between TT's approach and that of the **big (conventional) environmental movements** such as WWF, Natuurpunt, Greenpeace? If yes, what is the difference? (Possibly to be differentiated according to which environmental movement TT is compared with …)
- Many of these big (conventional) environmental movements organise **awareness raising campaigns** around what you could call **'individual behaviour change'** (for instance, 'weer de peer' (get rid of the incandescent light bulb), 'met belgerinkel naar de winkel' (go shopping ringing your bell)). What do you think about these campaigns? Do you think the approaches of TT and of these campaigns are in line with each other, or do you think that there is a fundamental difference between what TT aims at, and what these campaigns try to do? If yes, what is the difference according to you?

- Do you know the **climate neighbourhoods**? (If not, explain: 'Climate neighbourhoods' is a campaign developed by Bond Beter Leefmilieu. A climate neighbourhood is a group of about 15 families which make a bet with the

[3] I started with 18 theses, but this turned out to be too much. While conducting the interviews, I evolved towards a series of about ten theses which I submitted to every respondent, and about 8 supplementary theses.

municipal authority to save eight percent of energy in house in six months' time. One person of the group is educated as an energy master. The energy master advices families on how they can save energy at home, s/he organises exchanges and monitors the meter readings for gas and electricity which the families communicate to her/him each week.) What do you think of this, do you consider these climate neighbourhoods as similar to TT, or not? Why (not)?

- This summer, a **climate action camp** will be organised **[let the respondent read the motivation text]**. What do you think about this camp at first sight? Would you consider going yourself? Why (not)?
- The climate action camp is being organised by Climate Justice Action (CJA), which also mobilises towards **Copenhagen** in order to demand a decent climate agreement and to take action against the false solutions which are lying on the table during the international climate negotiations. Do you consider this useful? Would you envisage to join them? Why (not)?
- Are TT and CJA in their vision similar, complementary or contradictory, according to you? And in how they function? Do you think they could reinforce each other, or are you afraid they will make each other's lives difficult?
- Should TT, according to you, support the climate action camp and the mobilisations towards Copenhagen? Why (not)?

(7) ANALYSIS

- What is the **root cause** of the current ecological crisis according to you?
- You stated that … [see previous answer] is the root cause of the current ecological crisis. Do you think in this perspective that TT represents a good way to do something about this?

(8) CONCLUSION

- Would you want to add something?
- Thanks

B. THESES

1. The transition initiatives currently in progress throughout the world represent the most promising way of engaging people and communities to take the far-reaching actions that are required to mitigate the effects of Peak Oil and Climate Change.
2. Given the likely disruptions ahead resulting from Peak Oil and Climate Change, a resilient community - a community that is self-reliant for the greatest possible number of its needs - will be infinitely better prepared than existing communities with their total dependence on heavily globalised systems for food, energy, transportation, health and housing.
3. Transition Towns' aim is to act as a catalyst for a community to develop its own answers. In this framework, Transition Towns appeals to the collective genius of the local community.
4. We can create a way of life that is far better than the atomised, disconnected unsustainable and inequitable society that we've grown into, largely on the back of super-abundant cheap oil.
5. There is a fear among some green folks that somehow any initiative that actually succeeds in effecting any change will get shut down, suppressed, attacked by faceless bureaucrats or corporations. If that fear is strong enough to prevent you taking any action, if the only action you're willing to take is to abdicate all your power to some notional "they", then you're probably reading the wrong document.
6. With corporate awareness of sustainability and Climate Change building daily, you will be surprised at how many people in positions of power will be enthused and inspired by what you are doing, and will support, rather than hinder, your efforts.
7. How to establish contacts with existing groups and activists? Make clear to them that that the Transition Initiative is designed to incorporate their previous efforts and future inputs by looking at the future in a new way.
8. If there was to be a job description for someone to start this process rolling it might list the qualities of that person as being;
    - Positive
    - Good with people
    - A basic knowledge of the place and some of the key people in the town.
9. Peak oil and climate change are the result of a sum of many individual actions. Therefore, it is very important to work on psychological barriers to personal change – after all, this is all about what we do as individuals.
10. Scratch a bit deeper though, and you'll find that the most surprising people are keen advocates of key elements of a Transition Initiative - local food, local crafts, local history and culture.

11. One fundamental misunderstanding is the belief that change is something that we have to fight for, that those in positions of power will cling to business as usual for as long as possible, that globalisation will only wobble if we shake it hard enough.
12. A local currency keeps wealth here. It keeps local trade alive, and supports local companies. Moreover, we like our own products, and therefore, it is only logical to have our own currency.
13. You will not progress too far unless you have cultivated a positive and productive relationship with your local authority. Whether it is planning issues, funding or providing connections, you need them on board. Contrary to your expectations, you may well find that you are pushing against an open door.
14. Resilience indicators might look at the following:
    - percentage of food grown locally
    - amount of local currency in circulation as a percentage of total money in circulation
    - number of businesses locally owned
    - percentage of energy produced locally
    - …
15. Transition is determinedly inclusive and non-blaming, arguing that a successful transition through peak oil and climate change will by necessity be about a bringing together of individuals and organisations, rather than a continued fracturing and antagonising.
16. The scale of the challenge of peak oil and climate change cannot be addressed if we choose to stay within our comfort zones, if 'green' people only talk to other 'green' people, business people only talk to other business people, and so on. The Transition approach seeks to facilitate a degree of dialogue and inclusion that has rarely been achieved before. This is seen as one of the key principles simply because without it we have no chance of success.
17. Research among the older members of our communities is instructive – after all, they lived before the throwaway society took hold and they understand what a lower energy society might look like. Some examples of courses are: repairing, cooking, cycle maintenance, natural building, loft insulation, dyeing, herbal walks, gardening, basic home energy efficiency, making sour doughs, practical food growing…
18. This journey involves fully feeling the unbearable weight of accountability for what's happening, the complicity we all have in supporting this unsustainable paradigm. For some, it involves feeling the pain of the planet, and that can be overwhelming. This journey into realisation is best undertaken with fellow travellers to share the burden and provide support. Taken alone, it's a lonely path that many, lacking sufficient emotional support, turn back from.

C. INTRODUCTION TEXT ON THE CLIMATE JUSTICE ACTION MOVEMENT

On November 30th, 2009 the governments of the world will come to Copenhagen for the fifteenth UN Climate Conference (COP-15). This will be the biggest summit on climate change ever to have taken place. Yet, previous meetings have produced nothing more than business as usual. Once again, the people who created the problem are telling us they also have the solutions: carbon trading, so-called "clean coal," more nuclear power, agrofuels, even a "green new deal." But these are not real solutions. It is time to move beyond these illusions.

There are alternatives to the current course that is emphasising false solutions and market-based approaches. If we put humanity before profit and solidarity above competition, we can live amazing lives without destroying our planet. We need to leave fossil fuels in the ground. Instead, we must invest in community-controlled renewable energy. We must stop over-production for over-consumption. All should have equal access to the global commons through community control and sovereignty over energy, forests, land and water. And of course we must acknowledge the historical responsibility of the global elite and rich Global North for causing this crisis. Equity between North and south is essential.

It is with all this in mind that environmental organisations, youth groups, community organisations and individuals from throughout Belgium and the Netherlands have come together to create this summer's Camp for Climate Action. Taking inspiration from both the UK and German climate camps, our camp will be a week-long event focusing on education, direct action, carbon-neutral living and movement building. This is our way of building a climate justice movement capable of tackling the root causes of climate change.

We want the camp to be as inclusive as possible and we are reaching out to all those who share our vision. The camp is a place for anyone who's fed up with empty government rhetoric and corporate spin; for anyone who's worried that the small steps they're taking aren't enough to match the scale of the problem; for anyone who thinks present climate policies are only increasing inequalities and injustices; and for anyone who's worried about our future and wants to do something about it. It is not only a place for experienced activists, but also for all those who are interested, who want to learn more, and are looking for ways to become active.

Get involved! Come to the camp, or, even better, join in the preparation process. We are all volunteers and all help is welcome. Whatever your background, there is a role for you.

ANNEX 2. INTERVIEW SCHEDULE CLIMATE JUSTICE ACTION

A. INTERVIEW SCHEDULE CLIMATE JUSTICE ACTION

(1) INTRODUCTION + MOTIVATION

- What has been your **involvement** in Climate Justice Action (CJA) **so far**?
  - Did you come to the **Climate Action Camp**? If yes, what appealed you in the camp? Why did you decide to participate? How did you like it? Which aspects of the camp did you like most? Which did you like least?
  - Did you contribute to the **preparation process** of the **camp**? If yes, what did you do exactly? Why did you commit yourself in this process? What do you generally think about the preparation process? Was it a positive or rather a negative experience? Why?
  - Are you involved in the **preparation towards Copenhagen**? If yes, how exactly? What was your motivation to get involved? How do you like the process? Will you go to Copenhagen?
- How did you enter into **contact** with CJA? What made you decided to get engaged with CJA? What was/is your **motivation** to get involved and participate in CJA, rather than in another movement?
- Will you engage yourself in CJA in the **future**?
- Are you or have you also been involved in **similar**[1] **movements**?
  - Why did you get involved in CJA and not in another movement?

  OR Why did you become active in CJA, next to your involvement in other movements? OR Why do you engage yourself in other movements, next to your involvement in CJA?

(2) PROCESS

- **How is it going** at this moment **with CJA** according to you? Do you think the movement is on the right track, or not? Why (not)?
- Is there a **difference** in how you looked at CJA **in the beginning**, **and** how you relate to the movement **now**? If yes, what was your original perception of CJA?

[1] The respondent is asked to interpret what 'similarity' is her/himself. If I give a particular meaning to the term, by asking for example whether the respondent has been involved in other environmental movements, I might exclude organisations which the respondent considers similar, but which I had not thought about (for example, zen meditation or trade union work). It is interesting in itself to see what the respondent considers 'similar', it says much about how s/he sees CJA.

How do you perceive it now? What has changed? What has happened which caused this change?
    - If (periodically) dropping out: What caused you to drop out from time to time?
- What has been your **most positive experience** with CJA until now? Why? (It is of course also possible that you have had NO particularly special experiences)
- What has been your **most negative experience** with CJA? Why? (It is of course also possible that you have had NO particularly negative experiences)
- What do you think about the way decisions are made during the camp itself, or during the preparation process towards the camp or towards the summit in Copenhagen? Do you think this happens in a democratic way? Why (not)? Do you have the impression that everybody has a say? Are there, according to you, risks involved in such structures of consensus decision making?

(3) FEATURES OF CJA'S APPROACH

- How would you **describe** CJA? What, according to you, are the crucial **features** of CJA? I mean the features which distinguish CJA from other movements …
- Are there **things which you miss** in CJA? If yes, which things?

(4) COMPARISON WITH CONVENTIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENTS

- Is there, according to you, a difference between CJA's approach and that of **conventional environmental movements** such as WWF, Natuurpunt, Greenpeace? If yes, what is the difference? (Possibly to be differentiated according to which environmental movement CJA is compared with …)
- Many of these conventional environmental movements organise **awareness raising campaigns** around what you could call **'individual behaviour change'** (e.g., campaigns such as 'weer de peer' (get rid of the incandescent light bulb), 'met belgerinkel naar de winkel' (go shopping ringing your bell)). What do you think about these campaigns? Do you think the approaches of CJA and of these campaigns are in line with each other, or do you think that there is a fundamental difference between what CJA aims at, and what these campaigns try to do? If yes, what is the difference according to you?

(5) THESES

- I brought 15 cards with **theses** drawn from texts of CJA and which express some of the 'features' of CJA. It is important to know that **all** these theses are **somehow 'controversial'**, which means that some people are very fond of them, while others are not. Sometimes, it is only a small aspect of the thesis

which someone might find fascinating while someone else finds it problematic. The question is what **you think about these theses**.[2]

(6) ETHICS, STRATEGY AND POLITICS

- What is, according to you, the **strategy** that CJA uses to stop climate change?
- Do you believe in this strategy of change? Why (not)? Do you think CJA can really change something in this way? If yes, what makes they can make a difference? If not, why?
- Are there things (events, discussions…) which make you doubt about this strategy?
- Do you consider CJA a **political movement**? Why (not)? What are its similarities with political movements? What are its differences?
- Are you in favour of direct action? Why (not)? Why do you use this type of actions? Do you consider them more meaningful than other actions, such as demonstrations, petitions…?
- What do you think about the actions which have been taking place during the **climate action camp**? What do you think about the Lange Wapper action? The SUV action? The action against coal?
- What do you think of the plans to block the harbour of Copenhagen for one day? Do you think this is useful? Why (not)? And what do you think about the plan to 'take over' the conference for one day?
- Don't you think that by disrupting the negotiations between government leaders, you stop them from arriving at a solution for the climate problem?
- Do you think these actions will end violently? What do you think about that? Do you support violent direct actions? Does everyone support this violence, according to you, or only a small group? …. When is an action peaceful or violent in your view?
- What gives you the right to disrupt the **legal activities** of companies? Where will we end if everyone can break the law?
- Don't you think direct actions are a form of '**terror'**? What if for example the far right would also start to engage in direct actions? For example blocking our gatherings…? Does direct action not lead to a society where the law of the strongest prevails?
- What do you think about **green companies**? Are they **friends or enemies** in your view? Should we support them or not? Why (not)?

[2] I started with 15 theses, but this turned out to be too much. While conducting the interviews, I evolved towards a series of about ten theses which I submitted to every respondent, and about 5 supplementary theses.

- What do you think of the **government**? Are they **friends or enemies** in the struggle against climate change according to you? Should we cooperate with them or not?

- What does it mean for you to be **engaged regarding climate change**? Is it about your own lifestyle, or also, or especially about other things?
- What do you think of **people who do not commit themselves in any way**, who apparently are not convinced of the importance to take action?
- Do you think CJA provides **a good model** for involving these people? Why (not)? Or do you think other models are better?
- Do you think CJA has the capacity to mobilise many more people? Why (not)? Explain.

(7) COMPARISON WITH TRANSITION TOWNS

- Do you know **Transition Towns**? (If not, short explanation on its emergence in Flanders) **[+ let the respondent read the introduction text]** What do you think (at first sight) about Transition Towns? Would you engage yourself in this movement? Why (not)?
- Are the visions of CJA and Transition Towns according to you rather similar, complementary, or very different, perhaps even contradictory? Where are the differences and similarities according to you?
- And regarding their concrete practice, their mode of operation? Do you think they can reinforce each other, or are you afraid that they will rather thwart each other's objectives?
- Should CJA support Transition Towns in your view? Why (not)?

(8) ANALYSIS

- What is the **root cause** of the current ecological crisis according to you?
- Is there, according to you, an alternative for the way we are acting today? And if yes, how does that alternative look like? In a couple of sentences…
- You stated that … [see previous answer] is the root cause of the current ecological crisis. Do you think in this perspective that CJA represents a good way to do something about this?

(9) CONCLUSION

- Do you want to add something?
- Thanks

B. THESES

1. Just and sustainable solutions will not come from companies, current politicians or supranational institutions, but will have to be created and imposed from below.
2. We cannot trust the market if our future is at stake.
3. Governments and companies such as E.ON and Electrabel are only oriented to economic growth, and that is the reason why they impose decisions to keep open nuclear power plants or to build new coal plants. We therefore have to raise our voice, perhaps take some risks, to stop this foolishness, and to start turning things into a better direction.
4. We are convinced that climate change can only be stopped through collective action. Individual lifestyle change and lobbying with governments will not suffice. The needed change requires a fundamental transformation of society.
5. Once again, the people who created the problem are telling us they also have the solutions: carbon trading, so-called "clean coal," more nuclear power, agrofuels, even a "green new deal." But these are not real solutions, but neoliberal illusions.
6. If no one would ever have broken the law to create a more just society, there would still be slave trade, women would not have the right to vote, and there would not be a right to free expression or to build trade unions. Social change happens when normal people take the initiative in their hands, and raise their voices.
7. With the *Reclaim Power!* Action, we will get into the conference, disturb the sessions and use this space to put 'our' agenda on the table. Our action is one of civil disobedience: with only the force of our bodies we will overcome physical barriers standing in the way, but we will not answer violently when the police tries to escalate the situation.
8. The UN climate negotiations especially legitimise a new kind of colonialism whereby the last resources are being distributed amongst the powerful in the world.
9. In Copenhagen, we come together from different backgrounds, movements, experiences and struggles. We are indigenous people and peasants, workers and ecologists, feminists and anticapitalists. Today, our diverse struggles for social and ecological justice find common ground in the struggle for climate justice and our desire to take our common future back into our own hands.
10. Rather than trying to mend a destructive system, we argue for alternatives which offer real and socially just solutions. We need to leave fossil fuels in the ground. Instead, we must invest in community-controlled renewable energy. We must stop over-production for over-consumption. All should have equal access to the global commons through community control and sovereignty over energy, forests, land and water. And of course we must acknowledge the historical responsibility of the global elite and rich Global North for causing this crisis.

Equity between North and South is essential. There is no solution for the climate crisis without drastic redistribution, both between North and South as within the countries of North and South.

11. If we prioritise the planet above profit, and solidarity above competition, we can live great lives without destroying the earth.
12. Of course we have to change our lifestyle, but more than that, we need to take collective action to realise those changes that are needed, and inspire others to do the same. It is not enough to change your own life, we will have to get out of this misery together, or none of us will.
13. We have to act quickly and responsibly, in function of what is ecologically needed, whatever the laws which the government imposes – these laws are actually part of the root causes of the problem. Current laws hinder rather than promote a sustainable society.

C. INTRODUCTION TEXT TRANSITION TOWNS

The transition initiatives currently in progress throughout the world represent the most promising way of engaging people and communities to take the far-reaching actions that are required to mitigate the effects of peak oil and climate change.

Given the likely disruptions ahead resulting from peak oil and climate change, a resilient community - a community that is self-reliant for the greatest possible number of its needs - will be infinitely better prepared than existing communities with their total dependence on heavily globalised systems for food, energy, transportation, health and housing. Resilience indicators might look like the following: the percentage of food grown locally, the percentage of energy produced locally, the number of businesses locally owned, the amount of local currency in circulation, …. Local currencies are important because they keep wealth here. They keep local trade alive, and support local companies. Moreover, we like our own products, and therefore, it is only logical to have our own currency. Furthermore, these relocalisation initiatives are developed to create a way of life that is far better than the atomised, disconnected unsustainable and inequitable society that we've grown into, largely on the back of super-abundant cheap oil.

Transition Towns' aim is to act as a catalyst for a community to develop its own answers to peak oil and climate change. In this framework, Transition Towns appeals to the collective genius of the local community. Luckily, you'll soon find out that the most surprising people are keen advocates of key elements of a Transition Initiative, such as local food production, local crafts, local history and culture.

Importantly, transition is determinedly inclusive and non-blaming, arguing that a successful transition through peak oil and climate change will by necessity be about a bringing together of individuals and organisations, rather than a continued fracturing and antagonising. We therefore want to go against the fear which lives among green people that each successful initiative for change will somehow be stopped, repressed or attacked by faceless bureaucrats or corporations. Rather the contrary is true. With corporate awareness of sustainability and climate change building daily, you will be surprised at how many people in positions of power will be enthused and inspired by what you are doing, and will support, rather than hinder, your efforts. You will also not get very far unless you have cultivated a positive and productive relationship with your local authority. Whether it is planning issues, funding or providing connections, you need them on board. Contrary to your expectations, you may well find that you are pushing against an open door. One fundamental misunderstanding is the belief that change is something that we have to fight for, that those in positions of power will cling to business as usual for as long as possible, that globalisation will only wobble if we shake it hard enough.

We have to consider peak oil and climate change as the result of a sum of many individual actions. Therefore, it is very important to work on psychological barriers to personal change. After all, this is all about us as individuals. This transition journey

involves fully feeling the unbearable weight of accountability for what's happening, the complicity we all have in supporting this unsustainable paradigm. For some, it involves feeling the pain of the planet, and that can be overwhelming. This journey into realisation is best undertaken with others to share the burden and provide support. Taken alone, it's a lonely path that many, lacking sufficient emotional support, turn back from.

ANNEX 3. INTERVIEW SCHEDULE INDIVIDUAL BEHAVIOUR CHANGE

1. The respondent is asked to read an article about climate change.
   1.1. How does this text appeal to you? What do you think or experience if you read this text?
   1.2. Do you think that enough steps are being taken today to turn the tide?
   1.3. Do you think a solution will be found in the end, or do you fear the worst?
   1.4. What feelings or ideas do you generally have when reading or hearing these kinds of messages? Do you often think about the climate problem? Does it keep you awake? Or do you forget about it immediately when you close the newspaper again?

2. Are you doing something to tackle climate change? If you do, then what exactly?
   2.1. Why do you choose to be active in this way rather than another? Why do you do what you do?
   2.2. Do you have the impression that what you are doing makes sense, that it can change something? Why? In the case of a 'no': what is then your motivation to do it nevertheless?
   2.3. Did you have environmental engagements in the past which you no longer have today?
   2.4. Is what you are doing today what you would like to do ideally? In the case of a 'no': What would you like to do? Why would you like to be active in this other way? Why don't you do what you would like to do?

3. What do you think of other kinds of engagements? Do you think they can have a real contribution to tackle climate change?

   3.1. More specifically:
   - Do you think it makes sense to consume less or differently?
   - Do you think it makes sense to set up collective alternative ways of living, such as eco-communities, ecological neighbourhood gardening or LETs systems?
   - Do you think it makes sense to take to the streets?
   - Do you think it makes sense to sign petitions, to join direct actions, to write reader letters, to strike and so on?
   - Do you think it makes sense to take a political engagement, either or not within the existing political parties and structures?

3.2. What do you think of environmental activists who fly to the other side of the world to participate in important conferences such as the Bali conference last year? And if they do so just to participate in street actions?
3.3. What do you think of environmental activists who refuse to participate in debates in more remote villages that are difficult to reach by public transport, just because they don't want to travel by car?
3.4. What do you think of environmental organisations that print thousands of leaflets on the problem of climate change to distribute them at schools, lectures or train stations? Do you think their action is worth the use of this amount of paper?

4. What is, according to you, the root cause of climate change? With this, I don't mean that there is, for example, too much CO_2 in the atmosphere, but I mean, what is the human-societal root cause?
   4.1. What do you think of people who take the airplane for a holiday trip two times a year?
   4.2. Do you think climate change is the result of a mass of environmentally destructive individual behaviour choices, or do you think climate change is rather something that is rooted in the socio-structural way society is organised today?
   4.3. Who bears the main responsibility for climate change according to you? Are some people, groups, countries more responsible than others?

5. Imagine: you get five minutes speaking time on television to speak to people about what has to happen to tackle climate change, and you know that millions of people are listening, what would you say?
   5.1. Do you think we can find a solution for climate change through a myriad of individual pro-environmental behaviour choices or do we rather need socio-structural change?
   5.2. Often we read in the newspaper about climate pollution by companies such as Shell or ExxonMobil. Do you think we should try to work together with these companies or rather protest against them in order to realise change?
   5.3. Some big environmental movements receive money from companies. What do you think of this practice? These environmental organisations state that you can change more by working together than by going against them, do you think they are right?
   5.4. What do you think of energy companies that organise environmental awareness campaigns to motivate people to change their behaviour, and to use, for example, less energy?

5.5. Do you think there is a solution for climate change within the current social structure, or do you think that a solution for climate change requires radical societal change? If you think we need radical societal change, what should exactly change? How would this future society look like? In which way would it differ from the current one?

5.6. Do you think the market can tackle climate change? For example, some people argue that green products will become a new market niche, and that companies that now already shift to a greener type of production will have competitive advantages. Do you think the market can possibly regulate climate change in this way? Or do you think we rather need more market regulation, or even a totally different economy?

5.7. Do you think we need more, or less democracy in order to tackle climate change? What do you think of the following quotes?

- 'We need strong leaders to push people to change their behaviour.'
- 'Let the experts decide on which measures we have to take, not the citizens.'
- People are too stupid and too lazy to engage in something in which they have no immediate interest.'

6. If you think that . . .

6.1. . . . the solution to tackle climate change consists of a mass of people who change their individual behaviour, which strategy do you think is appropriate to reach this?

- Do you think this is something people will do out of themselves and on a voluntary base? Do you think the government should encourage or even steer them by awareness-raising campaigns, market incentives, or by the prohibition and obligation of certain services and goods?
- Environmental movements campaign to make people aware of climate change, e.g. the recent campaign to convince people to leave the car at home and take the bicycle to go shopping. What do you think of this kind of campaigns?

6.2. . . . we need socio-structural change, which strategy do you think is appropriate to reach this?

- Should this be elaborated by experts and imposed on the population? Should citizens have the possibility to participate? Should citizens take the initiative to enforce societal change? In the case of a 'yes': How should they do this?

7. Which strategy do you prefer to tackle the current energy problem and its contribution to climate change? I give three possibilities, you are of course free to add more . . .
    7.1. We should develop good awareness-raising campaigns on a large scale. These campaigns should encourage people to better insulate their houses and to use less energy.
    7.2. We need a kind of house inspection system, in which the government systematically has a look into how well houses are insulated and how people deal with energy use. Subsequently, if necessary, people should be obliged to improve the situation, otherwise they receive a penalty.
    7.3. We need a new public service which systematically insulates all old buildings and houses with public money raised through taxes.

8. What do you find most frustrating in relation to climate change? What gives you most hope? What do you fear the most?

9. Thank you very much. Is there something you still want to add to the interview?