

# TRANSITIONAL THERAPY

SOPHIE ANDREWS agonizes over the Transition Towns initiative which she finds worthy, but a bit anodyne.

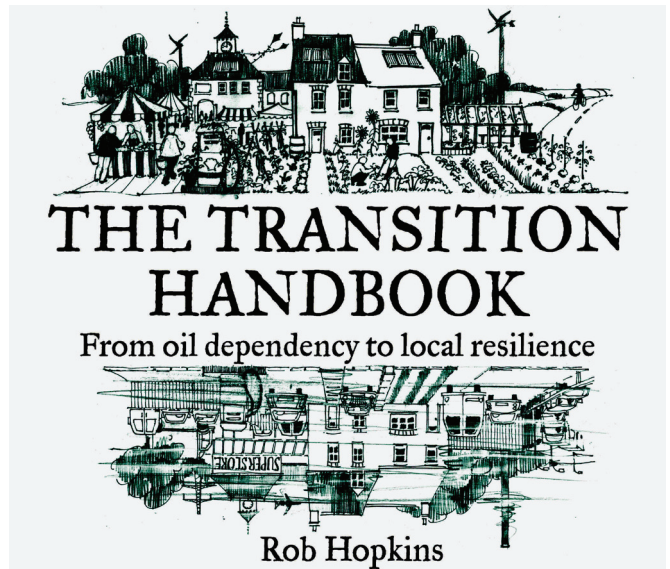
I do like a nice handbook. And this one is lovely; practical, positive, easy to read, and full of anecdotes and interesting info-bites. It takes us smoothly from where we are now (climate change, peak oil), to where we want to be (local resilience – aka self-sufficiency) – and shows us how to organize for the Transition. You could call it the handbook of permaculture politics, written by the founder of the Transition town movement, arguably the only modern movement which is addressing these crucial issues in a practical way.

So what's there not to like? The thrust of this book is towards inclusion, positivity, and alienating nobody, a transition towards a localized future so enticing that opposition will simply fall away, corporations naturally dissolve, and governments join in the party. It has the commendable confidence of success that reflects its middle-class nature, but I'd like to see a bit more political bite.

The book is divided into three parts; the Head: where we are now and why local is best; the Heart: the psychology of peak oil and change; and the Hands: how to create a successful Transition Initiative in a town near you. The first part is rather gloomy. As Hopkins says, "The trends at the moment, I grant you, really are not looking good". But he remains optimistic that we can overcome our oil addiction and "business as usual" lifestyles, because "once a society decides to move, things can happen very quickly." Indeed. And what follows is the blueprint for that happening.

The second part, looks at the reactions people have when they wake up to the cruel truth of peak oil, which Hopkins terms "post-petroleum stress disorder". He argues that the first part of Transition needs to include "pre-trauma counselling" because "I think it is naive to expect that we could give someone a DVD of *The End of Suburbia* or *An Inconvenient Truth*, and expect them to be unaltered by the experience.' Now, I like the fact that Hopkins and this movement have put psychology on the agenda, but I reckon I'm already suffering from "petroleum stress disorder". It's not the aftermath that's doing my head in, it's the here and now.

Hopkins interviews psychologist Chris Johnstone about "oil addiction" — the idea that this society is addicted to the oil lifestyle in the same way that some people are addicted to heroin. But the question "why are we addicted?" doesn't come up. Levels of depression and



anxiety are high in Westernized nations. Maybe lack of direct access to land and nature, or lack of community in a competitive environment, or simply "affluenza" as Oliver James calls it, have something to do with it? For Hopkins, personal empowerment comes from joining a Transition Initiative, because people really do care, underneath. I hope this is the case, but sometimes the pain people carry caused by alienation, homelessness, childhood abuse, etc, makes them despair, and cling harder to their self-medication: the reality of peak oil doesn't even register.

Section three, the Hands part, contains good ideas for revolutionary action (eg local food, local business, local monetary system, or taking healthcare back into our own hands). There are outlines of how to organize your own Transition Initiative "planning for your own obsolescence" or write an "Energy Descent Action Plan" for your area. There are accounts of the many other "viral" initiatives in the UK. Transition Town Totnes are doing great things, including setting up their own local monetary system, bulk buying solar thermal kits for 50 households, working with an allotments group to lobby the council for more allotments, and creating a "garden share" scheme.

Hopkins seems to be advocating a sort of Trotskyite-style infiltration of existing power structures, a revolution from within. "The Transition model" he says on his website "is designed to come in under the radar . . . It is my sense that the tools the environmental movement has had thus far (campaigning, lobbying, protesting) are insufficient for the job in hand, that of navigating a society through energy descent. The idea of things being to make the process as unthreatening as possible . . . in such a way that it is perceived as positive, fun and unthreatening." Well, on second thoughts not very Trot. But this may explain why Hopkins doesn't appear to mention the word capitalism once in this book — the nearest I could find was "economic globalization". It seems that the idea is for people to be aware without really being conscious. This is very much the thrust of the rest of the book; which also includes touchy-feely "talk to the person next to you with post it notes" games to encourage community spirit at meetings and talks (although frankly, they do my head in).



Dominic McGill

Bristol, the Transition City I live in, is at present threatened with losing 90 acres, or 2.4 per cent of its 'low recreational value' parkland in return for an estimated £100m. Transition Bristol, admittedly a very new organization still writing its EDAP, has so far kept schtum. The Transition initiative has brightened up Bristol's greenies, but I wonder how a very very non-violent revolution will be able to secure the land which is vital for successful post-petroleum societies, and for sane and equitable human communities. Bristol's anarchist activists are focused on protesting against climate change, Israel in Palestine, No Borders, Colombia. There isn't much of a cross-over between the two groups, the anarchists and permaculturists, although both come broadly from the same social milieu.

The political scientist Ronald Inglehart coined the term "post-materialism" in the 70s, to describe the effects of affluence on Western politics and society. Post-materialists have their basic needs met, are educated, and secure in their jobs and communities. This means they can "self-actualize" or begin to think about other things outside of their daily survival. But affluence means oil abundance, and the "post-materialists" that this affluence breeds are the middle class people who protest against it. This is the hippy generation, and their heirs the permaculturists, who have evolved so fluffy that I just couldn't read the rest of this book properly, even though I know it makes sense.

There is something in the Transition initiative that seems to be missing, a failure to locate the movement within its social, economic, and historical perspective, and therefore to find an answer to many of its basic questions — including the one I



Chris Johanson

have heard asked a few times in Transition Bristol contexts: "why aren't there any black people in this movement?"

On the other hand, I know from my own experience that the establishment and its supporters don't like it when you propose "direct action" as a last ditch attempt to save community resources. It doesn't sell books, or ideas. Here's hoping that this book will provoke the silent revolution we all need.

Rob Hopkins, *The Transition Handbook*, Green Books, 2008; [www.transitionculture.org](http://www.transitionculture.org)

## UP AND RUNNING AGAIN

**Communities have a reputation for going pear shaped; but they also have a capacity for reinventing themselves. SOPHIE ANDREWS pays a visit to Radford Mill, while JYOTI FERNANDES reports on Monkton Wyld.**

"What would you do with a farm house, straw bale building, conference centre, and a load of sheds? We have got a year to show what we are going to do with it and then the possibilities are endless."

So say the new occupants of Radford Mill Farm. Five miles from Bath, Radford Mill has been an organic farm, run along organic, broadly hippy principles for over 30 years. It already has a reputation as a place for events, conferences, and parties, and supplier of local veg and yoghurt to Bristol through the farmer's market and the Radford Mill Farm Shop in Montpelier. Until recently, it was one of the few places providing a commercial income from hand-milked cows

After internal problems caused the farm to run to a standstill, it was squatted in 2006 when it's disgruntled soon-to-be-ex-tenants had their mates to come stay, who just happened to be seasoned activists. When the place was evicted last year, its owner, Richard Fox, began looking to rent it to another project or farm manager.

From February, a new group has taken over the running of Radford Mill. This new project is the brain child of Deasy Bamford, who is something of a local dignitary on the community circuit in Bristol, with a reputa-

tion for getting things done. Alongside Deasy, there are currently seven people living at the farm, all paying rent to cover the yearly lease, and working towards the farm eventually paying their bed and board.

The group's plans for the farm include food production (vegetable and meat), local food links, catering, accommodation, and also Deasy's original vision as an urban-rural meeting point — an idea she has been culturing for 20 years, and which is now beginning to bear fruit.

"I grew up in the middle of nowhere, but with loads of people around," she says. Her parents ran a mixed dairy farm come B&B in North Cornwall. "I'd always wanted to set up a free school, or an artist's community. I was always a little bit radical, a bit lefty, a bit outspoken." Deasy arrived in Bristol in 1989 after living in the country, in relative isolation. At first, she says:

"I used to watch the kids on Albany Green [St Paul's], and they used to, like, throw a stone, and then they'd be in trouble, and then the police cars would come round, and all they'd done was throw a stone. And I can remember, rolling boulders, down the valley, with my brothers, watching saplings smash, as they bounced, these boulders, down the valley



Deasy and Martin, another inhabitant.