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“The future will be local.” Omställning Sverige – The Transition Towns Movement in Sweden

From Local Communities to Counter-Hegemony?

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Abstract

Neoliberal paradigms and a neoliberal hegemony are increasingly under pressure. Social and environmental movements stand on the forefront of providing alternative ways of thinking. In this paper I look into a newly emerged environmental movement in Sweden, *Omställning Sverige*. My main question is if the Swedish branch of the Transition Towns Movement can be considered counter-hegemonic.

Up till today there has been little research on *Omställning Sverige*. My study focuses on ideas and practices of movement members. I explore how the movement tries to provide alternatives to neoliberal development and attempts to influence negotiations on what is considered legitimate in Swedish society.

The aim of the study is to shed light on this expanding movement in the Swedish context, as well as to relate their actions to neoliberal hegemony in general. Geographically the study was limited to the county of Stockholm. I investigated four active Transition groups, applying a qualitative methodology. The data collection was carried out through interviews and participant observations, followed by a qualitative thematic analysis.

Keywords: Transition Towns Movement, *Omställning Sverige*, Sweden, Stockholm, environmental movement, hegemony, counter-hegemony, common sense, resistance, neoliberal hegemony

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1 Introduction

To this day, 25 years after the implementation of the Washington Consensus, promises of global prosperity through neoliberal programs have not materialized. On the contrary, neoliberal growth dynamics, free markets and unlimited mobility of financial capital have led to multiple economic, social and ecological crises. With the latest expressions being the debt and bank crisis within the European Union, rising CO² emissions or the unsustainable depletion of natural resources – especially in the global south.

Debates have been arising on how to deal with these crises, reaching from neo-Keynesian positions of ‘bringing the state back in’ to substantial critiques of neoliberal politics (Brand 2008, p. 318). Active proponents of these debates are social and environmental movements. A broad anti-globalization movement strongly criticizes ‘the economy first’ politics and the postulated lack of alternatives. Neoliberal politics, however, are still pursued – despite criticism and crises. It has apparently not been possible to fundamentally challenge neoliberal hegemony (Brand 2008, p. 319 f). Still, people get organized, in transnational networks and on local levels, to address a growing dissatisfaction with the current system and express a desire for change. The central question in this paper is how strategies of resistance materialize and how they relate to neoliberal hegemony. Resistance can appear in various forms. The most visible are open forms of confrontations, such as strikes, boycotts, petitions or open revolts (Scott 1990, p. 198). Equally important though are forms of everyday resistance, taking place in “informal assemblages of ... neighbors, family, and community”, under the surface. Discourses developing within these small groups are the foundation for “more elaborate, open, institutional forms” of political life. It is on this level that “counterhegemonic discourse is elaborated” (Scott 1990, pp. 198–200).

The Transition Towns Movement, a newly emerged environmental movement, focuses on this local, neighbourhood level of resistance. Their vision is to create local, self-sustaining, oil-independent communities. Starting in the United Kingdom, the movement has spread fast and Sweden is now among the countries with an active Transition Towns Movement. *Omställning Sverige*, as the movement is called in Sweden, emerged in 2007. Today it consists of more than 170 registered groups (Omställning Sverige 2013a). The question this paper is concerned with is how the Transition Towns Movement in Sweden relates to neoliberal hegemony. Can their local strategies challenge neoliberal hegemony?

The aim of this research is to shed light on this recently emerged movement in Sweden and to explore which place it occupies in Sweden’s political landscape. I will thereby look into concrete practices of movement members, the futures they envision and the strategies they pursue. A focus of the study is how their ideas and practices relate to the neoliberal system. Do they challenge neoliberal hegemony or are they mitigating negative effects of neoliberal politics? The study was carried out in the county of Stockholm.

1.1 Disposition

Prior to looking into the Transition Towns Movement and *Omställning Sverige* I will present the theoretical framework guiding this research. In the first section I will introduce the concepts of hegemony and common sense. The latter plays a key role in the struggle for hegemony and is hence a central concept to this paper. I will therefore as well elaborate on its current form of neoliberal common sense. The second section is concerned with conditions for counter-hegemony and ways to challenge neoliberal common sense. The chapter will conclude by presenting key themes that structured this research. Chapter 3 covers the methodological framework. I will start by introducing the epistemological foundations of my research, the critical realist approach and the research logic. Finally I will discuss the applied qualitative methods: interviews, participant observations and a qualitative thematic analysis. In the subsequent chapters I will turn to the empirical material. Chapter 4 provides the background information to the case study. Starting with a brief overview on the emerging of the Transition Towns Movement in the UK I will proceed by looking into the development of the movement in Sweden and its current form. A scientific background will situate the study in an academic context. The Transition groups I studied in detail, *Omställning Järna*, *Sigtuna*, *Värmdö* and *Midsommarkransen*, are introduced thereafter. The chapter closes with a discussion on why the movement, despite differences of the local groups, can be considered one social movement. Chapter 5 contains the findings of the study. The gathered data will be linked to the initial research questions along themes developed in the theoretical framework. I will analyze how the movement challenges neoliberal common sense and look into the movement's practices, efforts to enter political society, universality of the movement's ideas and the systems attempts to incorporate movement demands. The final chapter is devoted to a reflection on the study findings: are *Omställning Sverige's* strategies in line with neoliberal hegemony or is there a certain potential to challenge it.

2 Theoretical Framework

2.1 Hegemony and Common Sense

The concept of hegemony, as applied here, originates from notions developed by Antonio Gramsci. Hegemony is a form of domination, based on consent rather than force. “[It] involves a leading social group securing the (active or passive) consent of other social strata” (Thomas 2009, p. 161). Hegemony can be understood as a practice of “consolidating social forces and condensing them into political power” (Thomas 2009, p. 194). This consolidation is an ongoing process. Hegemony is therefore not a static concept, but constantly contested and negotiated (Winter 2011, p. 154).

In order to understand the concept of hegemony it is important to clarify Gramsci’s understanding of political and civil society. Both are part of the ‘integral state’, constituting two major levels of the superstructure (Thomas 2009, p. 180 f).

Political society can be understood as linked to the state apparatus, with its institutions, administration, bureaucracy, police, etc. It is the “terrain of the state apparatus’s efficacy” (Thomas 2009, p. 188). This notion of political society corresponds to Habermas’ concept of public sphere. In modern social welfare states it is the field of competing interests, which need to be mediated in order to prevent violent conflicts (Habermas 1974, p. 54). Through critical “public discussions about the exercise of political power”, the public sphere has the potential to control and influence the state authority (Habermas 1974, p. 49f). Laws arise “under the ‘pressure of the street’ “ (Habermas 1974, p. 54).

Although differentiated from the public sphere, civil society is nothing apolitical. It is the main terrain in which hegemony initially emanates (Thomas 2009, p. 146). Here “social classes compete for social and political leadership or hegemony over other social classes” (Thomas 2009, p. 137). It is the place where hegemony manifests itself in social relations. It creates norms, which can be either reproduced or challenged (Sekler 2009, p. 181). Within both, the civil and political society, the ruling class not only “justifies and maintains its dominance, but manages to win the active consent of those over whom it rules” (Gramsci 1971, p. 244). For hegemony to maintain itself it needs thus to progress from civil to political society (Thomas 2009, p. 194).

Central to the struggle for hegemony is the concept of common sense. It evolves within civil society and describes “the uncritical and largely unconscious way of perceiving and understanding the world that has become ‘common’ in any given epoch” (Gramsci 1971, p. 322). Common sense is thus connected to “a system of cultural reference and meaning”. Gramsci’s corresponding phrase “good sense” refers in contrast to a practical attitude. A “capacity to act successfully ... once a subject has understood the ‘rules of the game’ of a given culture” (Thomas 2009, p. 16).

Since the 1970s neoliberalism “has become incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in, and understand the world” (Harvey 2005, p. 3). The central idea is to enhance human wellbeing through strong private property rights, free markets and free trade, which in return lead to increased individual freedom. The responsibility of the state differs from previous forms of liberalism. Most important is its role in providing an institutional framework that guarantees the functioning of free market economy. Public expenditure is cut back, substituted with the creation of new markets. Those markets are in return expected to regulate society and incorporate everything, from social welfare to education, health care and natural assets, like land air and water. The creation of new markets is accompanied by commodification and privatization of those assets (Harvey 2005, p. 2). The state’s withdrawal from welfare state building, as was pursued in the period after World War II (Harvey 2005, p. 11), is hence a key element of neoliberal ideas. In the face of economic crises the focus lies therefore on deficit reduction, inflation control and a balanced budget, rather than income distribution or striving for full employment and social security (Harvey 2005, p. 114f). Neoliberal politics did however not bring forward the promised wellbeing for all. Harvey argues that on the contrary, the neoliberal project caused multiple financial crises, environmental degradation and social insecurity, profiting merely economic elites. Income gaps are increasing in the global North and South (Harvey 2005, pp. 15–19). Neoliberal ideology claims that the goal is wellbeing of the population. The practices of neoliberal politics though leads to the exclusion of those who it claims bringing prosperity to (Demirović 2008, p. 26). Despite these multiple crises, neoliberalism has in many parts of the world turned into a seemingly “necessary, even wholly ‘natural’, way for the social order to be regulated” (Harvey 2005, p. 41). Neoliberal ideas have turned into common sense, where free markets, free trade and a downshifted state have gained popular consent. This leads to a situation in which alternative ways of perceiving the world are denounced as utopian.

2.2 Counter-hegemony – Challenge Common Sense

The concept of counter-hegemony emanates from the following point: It contains the creation and establishment of alternative ways of perceiving society – alternative to the dominant common sense of the ruling classes (Brand 2008, p. 325), or here to the common sense within neoliberal hegemony. Many social movement theories focus on movements’ direct impact on a state apparatus (see Kriesi 2004). This understanding is too narrow. Emancipative strategies of counter-hegemonic actors have to emerge within civil society, wherein consent is negotiated. Alvarez, Dagnino and Escobar also argue that the main field of struggle for social movements is the civil society. Social movements challenge what is considered legitimate and provide alternative forms of socialization (Alvarez *et al.* 2004, p. 37). To challenge common sense thus means to question ‘common understandings’ of the world and to provide alternative understandings.

Creating such alternative understandings is central for understanding the nature of social movements today. According to Alberto Melucci the term social movement does not “refer to a supposedly unified ‘subject’, such as the ‘youth movement’, the ‘women’s movement’ or the ‘ecological movement’.” It can rather be understood as a “form of collective action” (Melucci 1989, p. 29). Individuals thereby decide to act together based on a collective identity. This is “the process through which individuals recognize that they share certain orientations” (Melucci 1989, p. 30). Movement members produce “a more or less stable ‘we’ ” by “creating common cognitive frameworks that enable them to assess their environment and to calculate the costs and benefits of their action”. They negotiate goals of their actions, the means to achieve those as well as possibilities and constraints for their actions (Melucci 1989, pp. 26–27, 35). Departing from a collective identity and collective action, social movements consist of networks of small groups, which function as

laboratories where “citizens can develop alternative experiences” and “challenge the dominant codes of everyday life” (Mier and Keane 1989, p. 6).

The terrain of political organization thereby shifts “away from traditional political parties and labour organizing” towards actions concerning particular issues. “They draw strength from being embedded in ... daily life and struggle” (Harvey 2005, p. 200). Harvey argues that this is a consequence of capital accumulation within neoliberal systems. Since the 1990s neoliberal states privatize and commodify hitherto public services, like social welfare, education or health care. Social protection becomes a personal responsibility and is linked to affordability: Those who have the means can access social security. This individualization and the withdrawal from previous welfare-politics go hand in hand with a weakening of traditional working class institutions (Harvey 2005, p. 168). Local strategies can be understood “as the only adequate way of dealing with the complex injustices and political paralysis experienced as a result of capitalist globalization” (Osterweil 2005, p. 183f).

Both Brand and Harvey, but also Žižek point out though that there is a danger of losing sight of “the whole” when focusing on so called single issues (Brand 2008, p. 322). When mainly engaged with the particular it can be difficult for movements to “extract themselves from the local and particular to understand the macro-politics of ... neoliberal accumulation” (Harvey 2005, p. 200). They lack “the dimension of universality – that is, they do not relate to the social *totality*” (Žižek 2001, p. 198).

Challenging common sense of course opens the question of HOW to. Many strategies of social movements are neither conscious nor publicly visible, especially when it comes to daily practices (Brand 2008, p. 321). Here James Scott’s concept of resistance is helpful. He points out that resistance does not necessarily need to take the form of direct confrontation with authorities or elite norms. Everyday forms of resistance are rather “clandestine, undeclared war(s) beneath the surface”. A formal organization is thereby substituted by “a set of habits and practices that are part of the practical heritage”. They can be effective and widespread, but don’t self-consciously seek broad policy goals (Scott 2013, pp. 69–71). Scott mainly looks into peasant resistance. He argues that these daily forms of peasant resistance have historically been the core of popular dissent. One example being to undermine tax systems by misreporting, not directly confronting state institutions (Scott 2013, pp. 70–72). Although Scott applies ‘resistance’ in another setting, I maintain that the concept can be applied in the context of counter-hegemonic action as well. It corresponds to Gramsci’s concept of “war of position”. The “war of position” involves “an ideological struggle on the cultural front of civil society”, whereas its counterpart “war of manoeuvre ... is targeted directly against the institutions of state power” (Morton 2002, p. 42).

Common sense is hence challenged by counter-hegemonic movements through their own practice of living alternative ways of life, apart from neoliberal logic. They question “normalized knowledge”¹ of neoliberal structuring of society and create spaces for alternative ideas and practice. However, hegemony in the integral state is complex. Counter-hegemonic practices are never all-encompassing. Only partial fields are altered in an emancipatory way. Not all strategies manage to progress into political society (Sekler 2009, p. 181). If progressing into political society, there is furthermore a tendency of the neoliberal system to incorporate alternative ideas and practices. Žižek argues that systemic politics are always ready to listen to social movement’s demands, “depriving them of their proper political sting” (Žižek 2001, p. 198).

¹ This normalized knowledge goes in Foucault’s sense hand in hand with ‘normalized’ subjects within a neoliberal hegemony (Sum 2011, p. 174).

Before moving on to the methodological framework I will first come back to my research question. The following themes derive from the presented theoretical framework. They will be explored in the subsequent chapters in order to answer whether *Omställning Sverige* is a counter-hegemonic movement:

- Does *Omställning Sverige* challenge neoliberal common sense? Is there a potential to create spaces for thinking and practicing alternative ways of life or is the movement rather engaged with mitigating negative effects of neoliberal politics?
- Is there a difference between ideas and practices of the movement?
- If the movement challenges neoliberal common sense: Can their strategies progress from civil society into political society?
- Does the movement focus on 'single issues' or contain a certain degree of universality?
- Is the system 'listening' to the movement's demands, incorporating them to a certain degree and 'depriving them from their sting'?

3 Methodological Framework

3.1 Epistemology and Logic of the Research Inquiry

My theoretical approach can be placed under the umbrella of a tradition of critical realism. There is a reality out there. How it is perceived and what is considered legitimate though, is subjective. Social reality is therefore “neither equal to nor explainable exclusively in terms of the empirical. Instead, scientific explanation of social phenomena necessitates a search in the underlying layers of reality for specific mechanisms that generate the particular events” (Wuisman 2005, p. 368f). This requires an analytical approach where theoretical concepts guide the analysis of the empirical material.

By carrying out a case study I tried to understand how actors within *Omställning Sverige* present the movement, the ways of life they imagine and how their strategies take shape. According to Yin case studies are “pertinent when your research addresses ... *explanatory* questions – ‘How or why did something happen?’ “ (Yin 2012, p. 5). It is “an attempt to systematically investigate an event or a set of related events with the specific aim of describing and explaining this phenomenon” (Berg 2007, p. 283).

Subsequently these observations needed to be related to the underlying structure of neoliberal hegemony: do the movement’s ideas and practices challenge common sense and provide alternatives? Do strategies have the potential to progress into political society? Or are strategies rather integrated into neoliberal hegemony, focusing on single issues?

The logical approach most suited for this inquiry is abduction. Abduction mediates between inductive and deductive positions and between theory and observations. A hypothesis is built, taking its departure from an unexplained fact. This can be understood as a “creative attempt to suggest ... an idea about the underlying mechanism that might act as a kind of general rule” (Wuisman 2005, p. 385). This stage of the research has proximity to deduction. After gathering the data the hypothesis is tested, through ways of induction. If the fact is not properly explained and understood a new hypothesis must be generated (Wuisman 2005, pp. 380–385). The validity of this hypothesis is thereby not a question of simply true or false. Wuisman argues that it is rather important to answer if the hypothesis is “right or wrong, and to what extent” (Wuisman 2005, p. 371).

The hypothesis here is that ‘*Omställning Sverige* is a counter-hegemonic project’. To what extent it is counter-hegemonic depends on

- The potential to create spaces for thinking and practicing alternative ways of life and challenge neoliberal common sense,
- Differences between ideas and practices,
- The potential that strategies progress from civil society into political society,
- The universality of the movement: extracting itself from a focus on single-issues, and

- The systems attempts to ‘listen’ to the movement’s demands, trying incorporating them to a certain degree and ‘depriving them from their sting’.

3.2 Methods

Geographically I limited my research to the county of Stockholm. I investigated the active Transition groups within the county: *Omställning Järna*, *Sigtuna*, *Värmdö* and *Midsommarkransen*.

The data collection was done through participant observations and interviews with key actors within the four *Omställning* groups and key persons active on a national level, from mid-February to mid-April 2013. Furthermore I made use of materials I had gathered in the field during an internship, about one year before. In the course of the internship I carried out an exploratory study on *Omställning Sverige*. Also I reviewed the *Omställning* group’s homepages and Facebook pages, as well as *Omställning Sverige*’s internet forum.

In total I carried out four participant observations (one of them already in 2012), eleven qualitative, semi-structured interviews (three of them already in 2012) and two questionnaire-based interviews.

Participant observation can be conceptualized as “immersing yourself in a culture and learning to remove yourself every day from that immersion so you can ... put it into perspective, and write about it convincingly” (Bernard 2006, p. 344). Removing yourself is thereby connected to going towards objectivity. As Bernard argues, “it is important to hold our field observations up to a cold light and ask whether we’ve seen what we wanted to see or what is really out there”. Full objectivity is not possible, but we should try to “transcend our biases” as much as possible (Bernard 2006, p. 370f).

The participant observations enabled me to enter the field and to get a feeling on *Omställning Sverige* and the *Omställning* groups. As Bernard argues, participant observations can provide an “intuitive understanding of what’s going on in a culture ... It extends both the internal and the external validity of what you learn from interviewing and watching people” (Bernard 2006, p. 355).

Initially I had planned to base a bigger part of my research on participant observations. It became clear though that interviews were more adequate to help me in answering my research questions. The participant observations enabled me to enter the field and meet informants. I needed to access another level of information however, that was not simply observable: practices and strategies of actors, perceptions of neoliberal politics, potential for critique and development of alternatives. These topics were covered through qualitative, semi-structured, face-to-face interviews. As Bernard describes, a semi-structured interview is “open ended, but follows a general script and covers a list of topics” (Bernard 2006, p. 210). It provides “access to interviewees’ views, interpretations of events, understandings, experiences and opinions”(Byrne 2004, p. 182).

In addition to the qualitative interviews I conducted two questionnaire-based interviews. As it was not possible to interview members of the group in *Midsommarkransen* in person, I e-mailed a set of 10 open-ended questions to the group. I received answers of two group members.

The review of the homepages provided me mainly with background information, but also helped me to get in contact with the movement members.

The gathered data was analyzed through a qualitative thematic analysis. The material was first organized along key topics and in a second step related to the original research question. Central for this type of analysis is not only the number of times topics emerge, like it is in a content analysis. In qualitative thematic analysis researchers also take into account the ways in which themes emerge and their context (Tonkiss 2004, p. 372).

4 The Local Communities

4.1 The Transition Towns Movement. The Initial Idea

The Transition Towns Movement emerged in 2005 in the UK. The basic idea is to create resilient, local communities, able to deal with peak oil and climate change. Both are considered bringing forward inevitable change. On the Transition Network website the movement makes the following claim:

“Whether we like it or not, over the next decade or two, we’ll be transitioning to a lower energy future - essential because of climate change and inevitable because of diminishing supplies of fossil fuels (particularly oil)” (Transition Network 2013a).

The movement is organized in local groups, whose aim is to create these resilient communities. The Transition Network is an umbrella organization for the groups, providing an online platform to support active initiatives and share experiences. The term ‘resilient community’ includes a broad range of ideas – depending on the interests of the local initiative. However, all activities take place under the umbrella of transition towards a ‘lower energy future’.

“Communities have started up projects in areas of food, transport, energy, education, housing, waste, arts etc. as small-scale local responses to the global challenges of climate change, economic hardship and shrinking supplies of cheap energy” (Transition Network 2013a).

The Transition Network suggests following “ingredients” for getting started: Form groups that include people with different backgrounds and concerns, envision how low-energy futures might look like in practice, create working groups to put these visions into practice, start awareness raising in the surrounding community and build partnerships with organizations that are interested in or already working with transition-ideas. In the long run the initiative should *“strive to move from running small community projects to thinking and acting much bigger. New skills and ways of thinking will lead Transition initiatives to become social enterprises, such as becoming developers, banks, energy companies and so on”* (Transition Network 2013b). Central to the transition-idea is to start ‘doing’: get active in concrete projects to achieve this local resilience. The movement cannot be considered a classical protest movement. Members do not apply open methods like strikes or demonstrations, targeted against state institutions. It is rather pragmatic and practical. Members take actions towards resilience in their own hands (Quilley and Barry 2011, pp. 14–16).

Key concepts for the movement are “inner” and “outer” transition. The latter refers to a change of societal structures that are perceived as unsustainable, e.g. energy dependency, current food production and energy production. Inner transition refers to “areas of personal

development, psychological, spiritual and philosophical traditions”. The concept is broad. It involves a transition in ways of perceiving the world, beliefs and values: “move from materialism to values such as community, care, love and creativity” (Prentice 2013, Transition Network).

The latest available numbers on the Transition Network homepage suggest that by June 2012, 1000 initiatives were registered, in over 34 countries (Transition Network 2013c).

4.2 Omställning Sverige. The Swedish Case

Omställning Sverige is the Swedish branch of the Transition Towns Movement. It emerged in a very different way than the movement in the UK.²

Transition-ideas were in the beginning included in an already existing organisation, ‘The Swedish Village Action Movement’, or ‘*Hela Sverige Ska Leva!*’ (HSSL) – as it is known in Swedish. Its branches are forms of local initiatives and institutions, like village associations, which mainly work on a voluntary basis. HSSL deals with sustainable development projects in the Swedish countryside since 1989. Its work takes place in the context of rural depopulation and migration to urban areas. Projects include: the creation of local management of nature protection areas, local production of food, waste management, tourism and investments in the continuing existence of schools (Hållbara bygder 2006). It is funded by the Swedish Government and the Swedish Ministry of Enterprise, Energy and Communications.

In 2007 people active within HSSL got in contact with the Transition Towns Movement in the UK, which became the beginning of *Omställning Sverige* (Omställning Sverige 2013b).

The transition-philosophy of creating local sustainable development fitted HSSL’s projects. The term ‘sustainable development’ however is filled with many different expectations. By funding HSSL the Swedish Government aimed at strengthening local activities and local services, expanding involvement of women and children and encouraging new solutions to energy and environmental issues (Swedish Government 2010). Annie Lööf, current minister of Enterprise, Energy and Communications, clarified the government’s view on sustainable development. In a recent report on key challenges for Sweden’s future she stated that sustainable development closely interrelates saving the environment with economic growth:

“Growth requires sustainability, but don’t let us forget that sustainability also requires growth. If we are to continue to lift people out of poverty, eradicate hunger and at the same time save the environment, we need to create a green economy where people are given opportunities to change their lives, to make money, to invest and to be entrepreneurs. By investing in green technology here at home, we can create jobs in Sweden while contributing to reduce emissions in other countries” (Lööf 2013).³

How does *Omställning Sverige* fit into the competing views on sustainable development? During an internship at the Stockholm Environment Institute in 2012 I had the chance to look closer into *Omställning Sverige*’s activities. What became clear to me is that the movement is very diverse. Transition-ideas were not only included into the already existing HSSL projects. New Transition groups emerged, independent from HSSL. Some members

² Because the Swedish branch differs from the international movement I will apply the Swedish term, *Omställning Sverige*, in the following.

³ Unless otherwise noted, all translated quotes were put into English by the author of this paper (Maria Pühringer).

of *Omställning Sverige* are even sceptic towards HSSL, arguing that its hierarchical structure constrains the newly emerging Transition groups.

The transition-idea spread not only via HSSL. It got also integrated in an already active environmental movement, from organizations like *Klimataktion* and *Naturskyddsföreningen* (the Swedish Society for Nature Conservation) to *Jordens Vänner* (Friends of the Earth Sweden). What all the emerging Transition groups had in common though were the frames of inevitable change in the face of peak oil and climate change, which both require local solutions (Pühringer 2012). This was reflected in the interviews I carried out but also on the official homepage of *Omställning Sverige*:

“We need to change in order to manage the consequences of peak oil, global warming, ecosystem erosion, social inequities and shortcomings of the economic system”
(Omställning Sverige 2013a).

A unifying standpoint within *Omställning Sverige* is that a global economic, social and environmental crisis needs local solutions. These include: a change in energy production and consumption, preservation and protection of ecosystem services, create room for a just redistribution of the utilization of global resources, create social and ecologic resilience and change the economic system, so it can serve the transition process (Omställning Sverige 2013a).

Omställning Sverige's homepage serves interested individuals and groups as a forum to communicate with each other. There they can find like-minded people in their neighborhood, exchange information and share experiences. Besides the official homepage it is Facebook that is an important channel for groups to exchange information and get organized. Many initiatives are much more active there than they are on the official homepage. In February 2013 *Omställning Sverige*'s homepage had 171 registered Transition groups. 112 of them are linked to geographical areas, like a city or neighborhood. Not all of these groups are active however. Some are simply registered on the homepage, while others form active Transition groups. Within the county of Stockholm 19 groups were registered, four of them being active: Järna, Sigtuna, Värmdö and Midsommarkransen. These are the four initiatives I focused on in this study.

4.3 The Transition Towns Movement in a Scientific Context

To date there is little research on what Transition initiatives in Sweden actually look like, their ideas and how these unfold in practice. Two master theses engaged with *Omställning Sverige*. Edquist explored the possibilities a transition, according to *Omställning Sverige*'s principles, could have on happiness within the Swedish society (Edquist 2012). Nyfors compared a Transition group in Malmö, Sweden, to an initiative in Bristol, UK. The study provides insights on how the group in Malmö emerged, activities and challenges they faced, and why their activities ended. The author identified mainly group dynamics, leadership issues and a lack of funding as the main reasons for the initiative to fade away (Nyfors 2011).

In contrast to Sweden, where scientific literature on the Transition Towns Movement is sparse, there is a considerable amount of research on its British counterpart. Barry and Quilley provide an overview on the movement's emergence in the UK, the frames of peak oil and climate change that unite individuals within the movement and guide their actions, the focus on a transition of local communities and the organisation of the movement in loose networks (Quilley and Barry 2011). A first quantitative empiric study on the movement in the UK was carried out by Seyfang: “The 2009 UK Transition Movement Survey”. The survey covered 74 Transition initiatives out of a total of 97. The author explored the geographical distribution of the groups, their forms of organizations, their

actions and challenges they are facing. He found that only around one third of the initiatives were active in larger towns or cities. Most groups were present in smaller towns and their surrounding rural areas. The most popular activities among the movement were food and gardening projects. The biggest challenges the groups faced were internal conflicts and group dynamics, a lack of funding and questions on how to involve more people (Seyfang 2009).

Mary Greene carried out an ethnographic research to study the UK Transition Towns Movement. She looked into concrete practices and ideas of Transition groups and connected them to discourses on sustainability. She criticized a sustainability paradigm that relies on inexpensive fossil fuels and resources within capitalist hegemony. On the basis of cultural studies Greene investigated the movement's role in changing culture and resisting the capitalist model of sustainability. She argued that the movement provides spaces for resistance and the creation of new sustainability paradigms, turning away from capitalist growth logic (Greene 2010).

Similar to Greene, this study looks into forms of resistance of Transition groups, based on their practices and ideas. My point of entry is not a cultural studies perspective though. The study is rather situated at the link between theories on hegemony, its current form of neoliberal hegemony and theories concerning resistance to it. Resistance is thereby conceptualized as trying to challenge neoliberal common sense, which corresponds to Greene's understanding of a capitalist model of sustainability. However, my analysis does not stay on an ideological, discursive level. I investigated how the movement relates to a neoliberal system and analysed if it might contribute to mitigating negative effects of a neoliberal hegemony. Also, in a last step, I studied how the neoliberal system relates to the movement.

In the next chapters I will look closer into the four *Omställning* groups I investigated: Järna, Sigtuna, Värmdö and Midsommarkransen. First I am going to present their distinctive characteristics, how they work, what they do and the context in which they are situated. I will proceed by discussing what constitutes them as part of one movement, despite their differences.

4.4 *Omställning* Järna

When I traveled to Järna the first time I was not quite sure what to expect. I had heard and read that it was a kind of alternative center, around 50km southwest of the city of Stockholm. Good connections to public transport enable Järna's citizens to stay in contact with the urban Stockholm area. One can live a small town and even rural live, while accessing urban lifestyle within one hour.

I arrived in the evening to participate in the first big meeting the Transition group arranged after the winter. As I was a bit early I had about one hour to walk around the small town before the meeting started. There I found a few things that I associated somehow with an alternative culture and that called my attention. First I went to the local supermarket. Almost the whole meat section consisted of ecological products. The range of ecological fruits and vegetables were noteworthy as well. There were many regular products too, but at least compared to where I live, a bit north of Stockholm's city center, this was unusual.

I found the little town to be charming, although it was about minus 10°C and windy. Small fair trade boutiques alternate with bakeries, a bank and a public library. While strolling through the streets I saw announcements for the Transition group's meeting on public notice boards. Next to those were a manifold of promotions for courses in 'mindfulness' and yoga or meditation lessons. Some of the houses had moreover advertised alternative medical treatments, like homeopathy. It is not that these things are absent in

other parts of Stockholm. The difference is that in Järna one doesn't have to look for these services or products. They attract your attention immediately.

As a German speaker it also struck me, that I heard a lot of German on the streets. Telling a Swedish friend about my field trip to Järna she commented jokingly: "All these German anthroposophists are going to love you."

Järna belongs to the municipality of Södertälje and is somewhat of an anthroposophic center in Sweden. More than 30 business, schools and health care institutions are "based in some way on anthroposophic principles", with around 2000 employees (Helmfrid and Haden 2004, p. 14). The population in Järna consists currently of 8.800 inhabitants (Södertälje Kommun 2013a).

Anthroposophy originates from ideas of the Austrian Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925). It can be understood as "a humanistic spiritual science" that "seeks to integrate many aspects of human life, and humanity's relationship to the larger cosmos". It includes "specific prescriptions for education, agriculture, medicine, art, music and spiritual practice" (Helmfrid and Haden 2004, p. 14). Waldorfschools and biodynamic agriculture might be the most prominent exponents of anthroposophy.⁴ One of my informants pointed out though that it is only a small group of people in Järna who would classify themselves as anthroposophists. Many people move there simply because they are interested in alternative lifestyles concerning health, ecological issues and spirituality.

There were 35 people present at the meeting I participated in. Some were new to the transition-idea while others had already been involved. *Omställning* Järna kicked off when a group of active people managed to secure funding from the European Union in 2012, via the so called Leader program.⁵ A Transition group existed some years before, but was not active. "It existed merely on paper", as one informant stated. Since 2012 a small project group works on organizing seminars and workshops on transition-issues, such as 'how to repair textiles', 'inner transition', food consumption and production, group dynamics, green businesses and film screenings (Omställning Järna 2013). The Leader project group works thereby not only within Järna, but also tries to engage the whole Södertälje municipality in transition-ideas. Within *Omställning* Järna they try to support the establishment of working groups, which can engage in long-term projects. Currently there are four active working groups on 'inner transition', establishing a farmer's market in Järna, ecovillages and permaculture.

The meeting was facilitated by two members of the Leader project group. After a short introduction participants were asked to go into a five minutes meditation, envisioning how the future would look like after a successful transition. Applying an open space method, a broad range of topics was gathered afterwards and discussed for the next two hours, in small groups and in the plenary: permaculture, water management, food production, local currencies, alternative medicine, art and culture, public relations and basic income guarantees.

The broad range of topics might originate from the diversity of the participants. I took part in the meeting from the beginning to the end, meditated and participated in the water and local currency groups and the plenary sessions. It became obvious that many of the

⁴ Rudolf Steiner's ideas attract many followers. However, there is an ongoing discussion taking place on if Steiner propagated anti-Semitic and racist ideas as well (Schmid 1995, Iwersen 1996). Mediating between these positions Zander argues that it is up to the reader, if he/she interprets anthroposophy racist or not (Zander 1996, p. 246).

⁵ Leader is a program initiated by the European Commission. Project grants are given to rural development initiatives. The aim is to encourage "the implementation of integrated, high-quality and original strategies for sustainable development" in rural Europe (European Commission 2013).

participants are also being active in other organizations and initiatives, such as *Ekobanken*,⁶ ecovillages, cultural groups or Friends of the Earth, but also in political parties. One of my later informants is an active municipal politician for the Green Party, the other one is active in a theater group.

In the end of the meeting people were invited to form working groups and try to get more people engaged in transition-work. The atmosphere was very creative. Discussions continued although the meeting had actually been closed 30 minutes ago. While I was leaving at 9pm on a Sunday evening, many participants were still staying.

4.5 *Omställning* Sigtuna

I was not able to participate in a meeting of *Omställning* Sigtuna during the time of my fieldwork. The group's activities were planned for after the winter, but had not started yet. I therefore began my research by reviewing the group's homepage, to get a picture of their ideas and activities. It became obvious that *Omställning* Sigtuna works somewhat different from the group in Järna. While the latter is more informally organized, the Sigtuna group has a formal board-member structure and calls itself an association (*förening*). Furthermore they work together with schools, the Church of Sweden, public libraries, the Society for Nature Conservation, the Workers' Educational Association (ABF) and *Studieförbundet*.⁷ Together with those organizations *Omställning* Sigtuna arranges seminars and lectures, such as lectures on the unsustainability of the current economic system and biodiversity, or film screenings on issues like nature protection and the Transition Towns Movement, or public meetings for Sigtuna's citizens to debate issues like public transport (*Omställning* Sigtuna 2013a). The issue of urban gardening is becoming a bigger part of the group's work. Recently a study group on "how to grow food" was introduced, in collaboration with *Studieförbundet* and the Society for Nature Conservation. All of these events are open to the public, not only association members. *Omställning* Sigtuna is furthermore engaged in a cooperation with foreign partners, such as the Town of Forres in Scotland.

While studying the group's web presence I tried to get in contact with members of the board. It did not take long to get in touch, but setting a date for a meeting was more complicated. Similar to Järna, the members were very busy, being engaged in other projects, or simply covered with workplace duties. One of the board members could spare some time however, to meet me in Sigtuna.

The city of Sigtuna is situated about 50km northwest of Stockholm city center. Similar to Järna, it is well connected by public transport and thus well connected to urban Stockholm. Travelling from Stockholm city center takes around 1.5 hours. The city is beautifully located directly at Lake Mälaren's shore. It made a very charming impression on me, especially the medieval city center with its small, colorful houses. Sigtuna is Sweden's oldest existing city, dating back to 980 AD. The number of inhabitants today is around 1.100 in the city center and around 41.300 in the whole Sigtuna municipality (Sigtuna Kommun 2013). The charm of the city center might at first sight hide the fact that one of the biggest employers of the region is located within Sigtuna municipality: Arlanda airport with around 16.000 employees (Sweden 2013).

The Church of Sweden is very present in Sigtuna. Besides its ordinary parish Sigtuna hosts educational institutions which have been founded by members of the Church of Sweden:

⁶ *Ekobanken* is a member-owned financial cooperative, supporting local sustainable development by lending money to schools, ecological food production initiatives, social or arts projects (Ekobanken | Startsidan 2013).

⁷ *Studieförbundet* is an organization promoting popular education in Sweden.

Sigtuna Stiftelse and the Folk high school. *Omställning Sigtuna* actively tries to mobilize church members by holding ecumenical religious services around transition-related issues. Apart from the Church of Sweden also other religious groups are invited, such as the Catholic Church and the Buddhist community.

On municipality level the Transition group tries to establish a close contact to political parties with the aim of discussing transition-related issues. An example of the past would be the municipality's oil dependency – which is a sensitive issue with Arlanda airport as a central part of Sigtuna's economy. Platforms for these discussions are seminars, where *Omställning Sigtuna* invites a lecturer and representatives of all parties. These seminars are not open to the public. Everything that is said is confidential in order to achieve collaborations across party borders.

4.6 *Omställning Värmdö*

I hadn't been to Värmdö before meeting my informant in Gustavsberg, the main village in the municipality. Gustavsberg is located 20 km east of Stockholm's city center in the archipelago. The municipality consists only of islands, but Gustavsberg is easy to reach by public transport. Again, similar to Järna and Sigtuna, the place is well connected to Stockholm's urban area. Gustavsberg can be reached by busses and boats.

Värmdö has 39.000 inhabitants, of which 10.000 live in Gustavsberg. The municipality has one of the fastest growing populations in Sweden. During the summer the number of people living in the municipality rises till around 100.000 due to tourism and summer houses (Värmdö Kommun 2013a).

I met my informant in her office, which is situated within the old porcelain factory. The factory was founded in 1825. For a long time it was Värmdö's biggest employer, with a peak of 3.500 employees in the 1970s. Today most of its former activities have been shut down, with only around 20 employees remaining (Gustavsbergs Porslinsmuseum 2013). Nevertheless, the factory is visible on Värmdö. The two porcelain burners decorate Värmdö's coat of arms still today. I wondered what had happened to the workers. My informant said she had not thought about this and that she grew up on the countryside outside of Gustavsberg. The factory was never so central for her. Today the municipality is Värmdö's biggest employer (Värmdö Kommun 2013b).

Omställning Värmdö has like the group in Järna a more informal organization. It is only a few people that take the transition-work forward. Activities include lectures, seminars and growing food in a garden in front of Gustavsberg public library. Recently a working group on growing food was formed. *Omställning Värmdö* works closely together with the local parish of the Church of Sweden. The latest lecture series, futureacademy (*framtidssakademien*), on issues like sustainable building and growing food, was held at Gustavsbergs' church. It was a collaboration between the municipality, the Swedish Church, the Mission Covenant Church of Sweden (*Tallåskyrkan*), the Swedish Society for Nature Conservation, *Studieförbundet Vuxenskolan*⁸ and *Omställning Värmdö*. I observed one of these lectures on growing food, with around 40 participants. The format was that of a classical lecture, with a little get-together and time for small talk during a break. The lecture was open for everyone, not only members of the Transition group. Besides lending its venues to transition-events, the church also holds services together with the Transition group. One informant from within the parish argued that there are some critical voices from within the parish concerning the collaboration. Most of the colleagues adopt a positive stance towards the collaboration though.

⁸ *Studieförbundet Vuxenskolan* is a study association, as well promoting popular education in Sweden.

Furthermore *Omställning* Värmdö, together with representatives from the parish, tries to engage the municipality in the transition-idea. My informants argued though that the municipality is easier to engage when it comes to lectures and seminars, but that it is harder to tackle concrete, practical projects. I will elaborate more on this issue in chapter 5.5.

4.7 *Omställning* Midsommarkransen

Omställning Midsommarkransen is the group I came in contact with first, about one year before writing this paper. I participated in a film screening they organized, showing 'In Transition 2.0', a movie done by the international Transition Network, about transition-projects around the world (Transition Network 2013d). *Omställning* Midsommarkransen was the first to show the movie in Sweden and invited Transition groups, such as *Omställning* Sigtuna, Värmdö and Knivsta. There were also initiatives present that were no *Omställning* groups, but in a way related, like two guerilla gardening groups from Stockholm Söder and Fisksätra. The screening took place at *Tellus*, a cinema that is run by around 70 volunteers as a cultural association (Kulturföreningen Tellus 2013) and was followed by a get-together afterwards in the cinema's café. The auditorium was filled up to the very last seat. The movie provided many examples of what could be done in order to achieve a successful transition and clearly inspired the audience. The get together afterwards was energetic, people had lively conversations and were exchanging phone numbers and e-mail addresses.

Midsommarkransen is the only active Transition group within Stockholm's city center, although many transition related activities are going on in the city, especially concerning urban gardening. Some of *Omställning* Midsommarkransen's members are for instance active gardeners at *Vintervikens trädgård*, close to Midsommarkransen. One of my informants explained that there were attempts to form a Stockholm Transition group when *Omställning Sverige* began to take shape. According to her the group did not really take off, because of two reasons: Stockholm is too big on the one hand and on the other she blamed the format of the activities. Actions that were initiated were very much lecture based. Members of the Midsommarkransen group all argued that they wanted to stop talking and start doing something practical. To get people engaged in the transition-idea the group made use of the network around *Tellus*, inviting people to informal gatherings to exchange ideas on what could be done. This was the situation last year. What had happened so far were workshops on bike repair, rawfood cooking and food preservation, as well as urban gardening. Recycling of clothes is something that the group is considering for the future.

Omställning Midsommarkransen is informally organized. Activities are planned during so called lunch-meetings. Most of the members are living in or close to Midsommarkransen, some are from other parts of Stockholm. What differs from the other groups I investigated is that they have so far not collaborated with other organizations, apart from the gardening group.

Midsommarkransen is a popular living area, situated only a few subway stops south of Stockholm's city center. It has a kind of alternative flair to it, with its small restaurants and shops, lacking a clear center. The area's look is very much influenced by the Ericsson factory, which moved to Midsommarkransen in the 1930s. Building affordable housings for factory employees was a priority. 1000 flats were built only between 1938 and 1940 (Backlund and Nygren 1987, p. 75). These flats, characterized by a functionalistic style, are today set aside for protection as they contain a certain cultural historic value (BOOM-gruppen, KTH Arkitektur 1998). Midsommarkransen has around 10.000 inhabitants. As the city of Stockholm is planning to increase the number of inhabitants, there is also a need to increase the number of residences. Midsommarkransen is one of the areas central to

Stockholm's growth ideas. The aim is to build an extra 1.700 residences until 2021 (Saarinen *et al.* 2012, p. 102, Stockholm Stad 2013). Living in Midsommarkransen today enables access to urban living. The structure of the area however creates a kind of smaller city neighborhood-feeling, especially in the area around *Tellus*.

4.8 Collective Identity and Collective Action

The four Transition groups have their differences. Their members however share a collective identity. The cognitive frame within which they negotiate their goals, possibilities and constraints for actions (Melucci 1989) is that of a coming crisis which is unavoidably going to bring about change and that politics won't be solving these:

"Important for Omställning Sverige are issues like environmental boundaries, energy consumption ... politics don't want to solve these. Our economic system is based on debts. ... Social crises lead to mass unemployment and social problems ... This will also be reality in Sweden. Which of these will strike us first is not predictable" (Informant 1 2013).

"Change is going to happen anyway, with the pressing energy question, oil and so forth. We want to prepare people for that" (Informant 2 2013).

"The problem with politics is that politicians work very shortsighted, only until the next election term. ... The problems we are confronted with are on a whole other scale. We need long-term thinking and planning for at least the next 10-15 years" (Informant 3 2013).

"The Transition Movement is the right way to prevent that climate change will lead to a catastrophe" (Informant 9 2013).

"The movement starts from the idea of total collapse, but those who are active are some of the happiest people I have met" (Informant 7 2013).

Based on these frames the individuals share a common identity. They feel part of a bigger movement, which also motivates members to be active:

"To be a part of this (the movement) feels extremely important and inspiring" (Informant 6 2013).

"Being part of the Transition Movement feels like being part of making history in some way" (Informant 9 2013).

Depending on local conditions and members of the different groups a diverse range of projects can be pursued. There is however a common goal which movement members have negotiated and strive for. All activities are carried out under the umbrella of creating a localized, resilient, oil-independent society.

"The transition-project wants to achieve a local self-sufficiency in the long run ... Society is going to be more sustainable" (Informant 2 2013).

"We have to create social resilience to handle the shocks that will be coming" (Informant 8 2013).

Omställning Sverige is not a unified subject. The groups differ in many ways. Their forms of organization, their size and their activities depend on the local context. But also the members themselves, their interests and perceived local needs structure the group's projects. However, together the groups can be considered a movement, despite their differences. What characterizes them as a movement is that they collectively decide to act together, to achieve their collective goal of creating resilient, local communities. Central is their collective identity, feeling part of a bigger project, an international Transition

movement. An essential indicator of why *Omställning Sverige* constitutes a movement is moreover the strong cognitive frame the groups and the individual members share. Their actions are guided by a rhetoric emphasizing crises and the necessity to prepare for unavoidable change. They may apply different methods and forms of organization. Their cognitive frame however leads them towards the common goal of establishing a localized society.

5 Counter-hegemony in *Omställning Sverige*

I will now turn to my initial research question: ‘Is *Omställning Sverige* a counter-hegemonic movement?’ To what extent it is counter-hegemonic will be explored along the following themes: *Omställning Sverige*’s potential to challenge neoliberal common sense; differences between ideas and practices within the movement; progress of the movement’s strategies from civil into political society; universality of the movement’s ideas and practices; the system’s incorporation of movement demands.

5.1 *Omställning Sverige*’s Potential to Challenge Neoliberal Common Sense

Common sense as applied here is central in the struggle for hegemony. It can be understood as the “the uncritical and largely unconscious way of perceiving and understanding the world that has become ‘common’ in any given epoch” (Gramsci 1971, p. 322). Neoliberal common sense is based on the idea to enhance human wellbeing through strong private property rights, free markets and free trade, leading to increased individual freedom. The state’s role is to create institutional frameworks that guarantee the functioning of free market economy. Essential is the creation of new markets that are expected to regulate aspects of social life, incorporating social welfare, health care, but also natural assets (Harvey 2005, p. 2).

The future that *Omställning Sverige*’s members envision is different from the neoliberal ideas described above. They strongly reject a system that builds on endless growth, mass production and -consumption. This is considered unsustainable as it does not respect planetary boundaries and produces multiple ecological and social crises. The most essential is a vision of creating local, self-sustaining, oil-independent communities. There is no master plan though on how these communities should look like. Central is food and energy production on a local level. This is supposed to tighten the relationship between producers and consumers, as consumers are involved in producing food and energy. These local production services can thereby be backed up by local currencies.

“We need to get organized, locally, where we live and work. Locality is very important: local food production, local social networks, creating a society that builds on the local” (Informant 1 2013).

“The future is more local, with tighter connections between people and the system that supplies us. People will be much more producers than consumers, in a world with less resources, without continuous growth and competition” (Informant 7 2013).

“When I was younger, I was very interested in global development issues. Now that I have children my interest has shifted towards the local. That is why the Transition Movement is so interesting for me: the creation of local resilience in society” (Informant 2 2013).

Within these local communities collectivity is central. Collectivity is understood as creating meeting places but also in terms of organizing life and production: collective travelling, sharing tools, knowledge or growing food together. Contrary to an idea of humans as rational individualists, members emphasize human characteristics like empathy and needs for feeling part of a community. This is reflected in the recurring statements of the importance of having a good time together in a group of like-minded people.

“It is important to create social meeting places, establish social capital. Through celebrating together, for instance” (Informant 8 2013).

“The future after a successful transition would contain a different relation between people ... with more collectivity for instance with property or collective travelling”(Informant 5 2013).

“Important for me (concerning the Transition Movement) is that there is a strong community with likeminded people. ... More people active in transition could lead to a better society, with more solidarity” (Informant 9 2013).

The creation of strong communities is furthermore regarded important as it enhances so called community resilience. Community resilience is supposed to create a situation where the community can absorb shocks, and bounce back through creating a net of support.

“We need to reestablish social resilience, to be able to handle shocks” (Informant 8 2013).

Essential are moreover not only tighter relations between producers and consumers but also between humans and nature. Nature is understood as providing the basic resources for life, which is endangered at the moment. The current situation is perceived as leading unavoidably to a transition of our lives through scarcity of natural resources, climate change, economic and ecological crises and social inequalities. A sense of urgency is hanging over the movement’s ideas and practices: We have to act now, otherwise the world will end in a catastrophe.

“A transition is going to happen anyway. We would like to be an active part in shaping this transition in a positive way” (Informant 7 2013).

“At the moment we don’t even dare to think about what will be happening when oil gets more expensive. ... If we don’t take actions now there will be a big depression for coming generations. We have to create spaces where coming generations can live” (Informant 3 2013).

Trust in the state or the international community to tackle these urgent problems is low. Members are therefore looking for concrete solutions, which they can implement themselves. Collaboration is sought with politics on a municipal level to support local change though.

“We can’t wait for politicians to solve these problems. ... But we are not pushing them away. We have to work together with municipalities, because important decisions have to be taken on this local level” (Informant 1 2013).

The movement manages to create spaces for thinking alternatives to neoliberal common sense. They question a system that is based on capital accumulation, economic growth, private property and a focus on supposed individual freedom. These alternatives are very much based on local, self-sufficient communities that renegotiate relationships between people and relationships with nature.

The movement does not try to bring about change through direct influence on politics. Members feel that they do not want to waste energy on influencing national politics, but rather focus on getting change started on a local level. From there transition-ideas shall spread out.

5.2 Differences between Ideas and Practices

Practices and ideas of the movement correspond with each other. Important is on the one hand to create a community spirit and have a good time together and on the other hand create local systems that bypass global production and consumption patterns.

A first step for the groups is to create awareness on the perceived problems and the urgency to act. Correspondingly, lectures, study circles, film viewings and seminars on transition-related issues are held. *Omställning* Sigtuna for instance recently organized a lecture, “*Sätt inte naturen i konkurs!*”, on the finite nature of natural resources. Depending on local circumstances, and the needs that are perceived by the group members, further projects can be initiated. The most popular topic approached is growing food. All of the groups have working groups addressing this issue. They have either started growing food already or are getting prepared to do so.

Another issue that is looked at is energy production, transportation and the possibility to reduce car usage. Especially outside the urban area this is considered a big challenge:

“Transport, food and energy are the big issues concerning transition. How big of a challenge they are depends on where one lives. Food production is doable on the countryside, whereas transport is a bigger challenge in the rural areas. I am dependent on my car. I couldn’t get to work without it or be active in the community” (Informant 2 2013).

Some groups research possibilities for energy production, like the creation of collectively managed solar energy plants or issues like waste water management. Other groups think broader in the desired development of their local community, inviting a broader public, other organizations and associations and local governments to dialogues. Possible outcomes are the need for meeting places or the creation of children-playgrounds.

“People said that there was a need to create a walkway ... Whoever tries to be a trustworthy partner (in the development of the local community) needs to integrate questions that are not directly related to nature and environment” (Informant 8 2013).

Other issues that are being discussed are the needs for better health care and possibilities to establish basic income guarantees. More practical courses are held on topics like bicycle repair and recycling of different materials, from textiles to electronic devices.

Recently *Omställning Sverige* announced discussions on, and a possible launch of a local currency in Sigtuna, in cooperation with, among others, a Leader project in the area (*Omställning Sverige* 2013c). Local currencies are particularly relevant in relation to counter-hegemonic potential. Alf Hornborg argues that modern industrial societies are causing global inequalities, between the so called centrums and peripheries. Centrums are net importers of resources, like raw materials or working time, whereas peripheries are net exporters (Hornborg 2002, p. 305). These unequal exchanges are based on market institutions that enable global exchanges of time and land- resources via a global monetary system. Through the expansion of industrial technologies capital accumulation is increasing, causing also greater pressure on the environment. The only way towards a post-industrial society is to radically reorganize market institutions. Hornborg proposes to establish separate markets with separate currencies for locally produced goods and services

and those that need a global division of labour. Examples of the former would be food, building materials and energy, the latter telecommunication and advanced medicine. This would make the exchange of global trading profits impossible. Furthermore this would lead to a rationality that focuses on long-term security of people rather than technologies (Hornborg 2002, pp. 297, 315f). The launch of local currencies is still in an early phase within *Omställning Sverige*, but the movement has realized the importance of the project. Beyond its relevance for creating local self-sufficient communities, local currencies can pave the way for a withdrawal from an unequal global trading system.

Taking a step away from study circles and film viewings into concrete practical projects has so far been the most successful when it comes to growing food. Other projects are still on a drawing board. This can partly be traced back to the fact that the movement is still young. Another reason can be a systemic question though. Many participants expressed, that they would like to engage more, but simply can't find the time or energy. Everyday life, with stressful jobs or family duties, does not allow more involvement. Participating in meetings and study circles is a way of being part of the movement, but keeping time engagement and responsibility comparatively low.

5.3 Progress of Strategies from Civil into Political Society

Common sense evolves within civil society. It creates norms, that can be reproduced or challenged (Sekler 2009, p. 181). Are *Omställning Sverige's* strategies progressing into political society? Are they entering so called "public discussions about the exercise of political power" (Habermas 1974, p. 50)?

My informants stated that they were not trying to convince anyone that the transition-idea is good for this person. Those people who join in are the right ones.

"We are not going out there, trying to convince anyone. Those who want to be a part of the movement should be involved; those who are not enthusiastic about the ideas, not"
(Informant 1 2013).

At the same time there is awareness that in order to achieve a real transition and change the system, more people need to be involved.

"Change doesn't happen just like that. More people need to get involved, until we reach a tipping point" (Informant 7 2013).

A lot of energy goes therefore out on awareness-raising, creating networks with other organizations and going out in the public to involve more people. Not all projects influence public discussions, but many try to do so.

One of my informants stated that *framtidssvecka* is a very popular strategy among many *Omställning* groups in Sweden (Informant 7 2013). It is a kind of seminar on sustainable development on a local level. *Omställning* groups are co-organizers among other local initiatives, ranging from the Red Cross, the Swedish church, farmers, environmental and cultural organizations to schools and political parties. It is a forum that starts with the idea that the current system produces crises and invites to discussions on which practical solutions can be envisioned by the participants. Workshops, lectures and film screenings are organized on topics like growing food, waste management, local banks and, among others, renewable energy.

Another attempt to impact public debates is the involvement of churches, especially the Swedish Church. Not all groups are engaging in that, but some movement members made it

clear that the church has a common interest with *Omställning Sverige*: preserving the Creation.

“One of our strategic goals is to mobilize churches, because they are really close to what we do – if you look at religious principles they are based on. It is written in both, the bible and the Koran, that the Creation should be treated with respect. And Buddhism is close to nature anyway. ... We have to act together” (Informant 3 2013).

Churches not only contribute by providing physical resources, like rooms for meetings, but also have the possibility to communicate transition-ideas to a larger public. I participated in one lecture on growing food, co-organized by *Omställning Värmdö*. The lecture took place in a church, with around 40 people present. Only a part of them were active within the *Omställning* group. Furthermore common church services are held. For the church this collaboration is a way to reach out to the local community.

“As a priest I try to bring Omställning as a topic into the church and to get the church involved, to give each other strength. ... Prayer and agency both are part of the church. This is part of a more practical theology... It is important to open up the church as an actor in social issues and to work together with groups who have a better knowledge in certain areas than we have, for instance the environment” (Informant 4 2013).

Omställning Sverige seeks further alliances with environmental organizations and schools. Students are invited to dialogues on practical projects for transitions and workshops are held on environmental issues. This is also an attempt reach out to younger generations. *Omställning Sigtuna* arranged for instance a seminar, together with Sigtuna Folk high school on “stop talking, start doing”. Issues covered were food supply, growing food, ecological agriculture and fair trade (*Omställning Sigtuna* 2013b).

Important for reaching out to the public are moreover blogs with environmental focus, like *Supermiljöbloggen*. A few very active members within *Omställning Sverige*, try to spread transition-ideas via these channels, or through environmental magazines like *Effekt* and local newspapers. Pella Thiel, active in *Omställning Värmdö*, was for instance interviewed for Värmdö’s local newspaper, Nacka Värmdö Posten, on the upcoming *framtidsvecka* and transition-ideas in general (Bäckman 2012).

The latest publication of *Omställning Sverige*: “*Sverige Ställer Om*” (Forsmark *et al.* 2012), presents an overview on projects that are taking place within *Omställning Sverige*, trying to inspire a broader public and decision makers to support the movement and join in.

“The book shows what is going on in Sweden with Omställning groups. We try to use this to get politics to listen” (Informant 1 2013).

The importance to influence public debate is also mirrored in the aim of the movement members to create room for thinking alternatives, that don’t build on consumerism and mass production. There is a wish to provide positive examples of transition, which could attract more people who are searching for change.

“The point is to tell different stories, how we see the world. The media are a big problem, because they only focus on the negative. We have to give also good examples that turn away from a logic of buying and consumerism” (Informant 5 2013).

These positive examples involve being active together, feeling part of a group for instance by growing food together. Some members even considered this a healing process, when confronted with a frightening reality. To see a result of a common effort that can contribute to the bigger project of transition. There are also ideas to tell different stories through art projects, creating different entry points to the movement.

Members try to establish arenas where public debates on transition-issues take place. It is difficult to say how much *Omställning Sverige* influences the public sphere though. In any case, they put a lot of energy on trying to influence public debate.

5.4 Universality of the Movement's Ideas and Practices

Social movements “draw strength from being embedded in ... daily life and struggle” (Harvey 2005, p. 200). *Omställning Sverige* draws its strength from relating its work to a concrete local place. Practical projects are designed to bring about a transition on a local level. But how does the movement relate to the “social totality” (Žižek 2001, p. 198)?

Omställning Sverige is an environmental movement, which makes the environment a key issue. Peak oil and climate change are driving forces for the movement. But there is no focus on simply saving the environment.

“One can ask oneself what people need in a local community, what is closer to them than climate issues. How do we want to live, for instance” (Informant 7 2013).

The movement has no fixed problem definition. Depending on who is active and in which local community the initiatives can look differently. My informants told me that the movement consists to a big part of white, middle class, highly educated people – which was also my impression during the field research – and that people younger than 30 are in a minority. This of course poses the question on which issues are taken up and what is considered to be needed in community development. Questions on social security and stable employment conditions are for instance not as present in the movement's ideas on local resilience as energy and food production issues. Thinking back on the informant in the porcelain factory, this was reflected in her narrative. What had happened to the former factory employees was not part of her problem definition.

Movement members are to a certain extent aware of these biases. Answering my question on how to include people in a transition-project who are not part of the white middle class one of my informants answered:

“I work with illegal immigrants in Sweden. Most of the Transition groups are in a beginning stage here. It is important to understand one's own limits, in order not to break apart. It is therefore also important that the groups have fun together” (Informant 3 2013).

There is a broadly shared understanding of how environmental crises are connected to a current system that also brings forward social inequalities and economic crises.

“I think that local self-sufficiency is very important, to avoid our current system of unequal trade, that makes humans and nature suffer” (Informant 2 2013).

Dealing with this complexity is not easy though. *Omställning* groups have chosen to depart from local, concrete projects. There is thus an understanding that movement members have limited time and resources and that they therefore need to focus on ‘doable’ projects. But besides questions on food and energy production, social issues are being discussed to a certain degree. The importance of creating meeting places where people with different backgrounds and age can feel safe has been expressed. Discussions on economic pressures and the advantages of basic income guarantees are a further indicator that there is at least a degree of universality.

5.5 The Systems Incorporation of Movement Demands

Neoliberal systems have a tendency to incorporate alternative ideas and practices. Žižek argues that systemic politics are always ready to listen to social movement's demands, "depriving them of their proper political sting" (Žižek 2001, p. 198). But what is *Omställning Sverige's* sting? And are the movement's ideas incorporated?

Many local politicians from across the whole political spectrum are active members in Transition groups. So are employees from the public administration. These individuals carry transition-ideas into the political system. Some of the Transition groups are moreover actively seeking contact to municipalities and local politicians. This leads to a situation where local municipalities agreed to support transition-related projects.

Knivsta, close to the city of Uppsala, is one of the municipalities that often is referred to by the movement and my informants. In 2011 they adopted a strategy to make the community 'greener', meaning more self-sufficient in terms of local food and energy production (Knivsta Kommun 2011). Looking into the groups I investigated it is *Omställning Järna* that managed to get support from the Södertälje municipality. It was not such a big step for the municipality to support the Transition group I would argue. They already invest in environmental friendly development (Södertälje Kommun 2013b). One of my informants, an active politician in the municipality argued that

"Södertälje is a very active municipality. In Sweden it has the highest rate of locally grown food. ... The municipality also decided to support transition-projects" (Informant 2 2013).

Also Värmdö Kommun agreed on supporting the Transition group's work, but not on such a broad level. It is apparently easier to receive support when it comes to projects that don't seem very radical. The above described *framtidsvveckor* for instance are being welcomed and supported by the municipalities. When it comes to concrete projects, municipalities are more reluctant to include these in their work. Small community gardens can be supported, but taking on discussions on an overall self-sufficiency in food production is harder to imagine.

"We went to the municipality council. The council members were very reserved and suspicious. They said that they want to support a framtidsvvecka, but when it comes to practical projects they are rather reluctant" (Informant 4 2013).

"Collaboration with the municipality works sometimes. For instance when organizing the framtidsvvecka" (Informant 7 2013).

On a municipality level, the system is partly integrating the movement's demands, but mostly those which don't seem far-fetched. Those issues that have a sting, that would threaten a neoliberal system though are not. It seems to be no problem to support *framtidsvvecka*. Energy and food production questions can be discussed to a certain level. Not so much questions on economic transition, local currencies or social inequalities.

6 Concluding Remarks

Omställning Sverige is a young movement. Nonetheless it has given a new impulse to the Swedish environmental movement. Although it bases itself on ideas of a total collapse, members manage to generate a creative, welcoming, 'fun to be part of' atmosphere. The movement is particularly interesting for people who are tired of talking about (environmental) problems and who want to become active. Being active in concrete projects is perceived as positive as one can see results of one's own work – on a close, local scale. Partly it has even a therapeutic function, as it helps to channel distress about a future that is considered to be insecure and uncertain.

How does the movement relate to a neoliberal system and is it counter-hegemonic?

Omställning Sverige questions neoliberal common sense. Engaging in a 'war of position' within civil society, on an ideological level, the movement manages to create space for thinking alternatives to neoliberal ideas. The loudest criticism is directed towards sustainability politics that focus on economic growth and consumerism. *Omställning* groups counter these politics with visions of local communities that are self-sufficient, avoiding an inclusion in a global free trade and market system. Neoliberal arguments of bringing forward individual freedom are dismissed by movement members. A higher degree of personal freedom is envisioned through investing in communities that can take care of community member's needs. The movement members emphasize furthermore human qualities like empathy and care, not an image of competing, rational individuals.

The movement also carries a different view on the relation between humans and nature. Nature is perceived as an entity that cannot be controlled in a way neoliberal politics try to do. The latter conceptualizes nature and natural resources as assets that can be exploited and managed through market mechanisms. Members of *Omställning Sverige* view nature as much more chaotic, uncontrollable, and even more so with peak oil and climate change.

The movement tries to collaborate with a broad range of organisations and the political sphere, mostly on a municipality level. Movement members are sceptic though that politics can deal with the urgency of the challenges ahead. The level of trust in the political sphere is low. Especially trust in political instruments that are based on long decision making processes. At this point the movement is somehow facing a dilemma. The neoliberal state tries to regulate society via market mechanisms, retreating from investments in e.g. social welfare, dealing with environmental challenges by fostering 'green' economic growth, but not taking more radical measures movement members would like to see. Gaps that are left behind by a retreating state are filled by the movement. Investing own resources to build up local communities, local food self-sufficiency, local energy production, etc. releases the state from its obligations. At the same time *Omställning Sverige* tries to withdraw from these market mechanisms by creating local currencies, avoiding a global trade system that is built on fossil fuel usage, fostering inequality.

When it comes to universality the movement envisions a broad transition of society. It does not just focus on single issues. As the movement is young, resources are limited and fostering local self-sufficiency is complex though, the movement focuses on 'doable' projects. It is natural that projects like growing food together, bike repair or thinking about own energy production are in focus, as these are considered 'doable', supporting the creation of a community-feeling. Issues taken up in a public debate focus very much on the environment: We need a transition of society to deal with peak oil and climate change. Also an unsustainable economic system is criticized for producing social inequalities. However, projects implemented in practice are not dealing with these social inequalities. Neither are these issues taken up by the movement in the public debate. This focus on the environment derives of course from the movement's nature, being close to the environmental movement. I would argue that the composition of the members poses a challenge in this respect. Issues that are taken up of course reflect needs and transition ideas of the members. People from the white middle-class have different experiences and needs than people with a tougher economic and social situation. As members themselves argued, climate issues for instance, might not be as central to everyone. If the movement is striving for a transition of the whole society, members sooner or later have to engage in a broader range of issues.

In line with Mary Greene's argument about the UK Transition Towns Movement I would argue that also *Omställning Sverige* provides space for thinking alternatives to neoliberal common sense, or capitalist growth logic. Together with attempts to withdraw from global market logic, this can be considered an indicator for counter-hegemonic potential.

As the movement is operating within a neoliberal system, it is however not possible to completely extract oneself from it. A key element of neoliberal politics is the state's withdrawal from certain areas of society. The movement in a way assists this withdrawal, taking over the state's responsibilities. *Omställning Sverige* is furthermore rather homogenous in its composition, with an overrepresentation of white middle class members. This prevents certain voices to enter debates on transition-ideas. Neoliberal hegemony is challenged neither by this exclusion of a more heterogeneous multitude of voices nor by such a replacing role vis-à-vis the state. The latter even mitigates negative effects of a neoliberal system. In this aspect I agree thus with Nicola Sekler who argues that counter-hegemonic practices cannot challenge *all* aspects of normality, even if they try to do so (Sekler 2009, p. 181).

At the same time it is impossible to reduce counter-hegemonic strategies and practices to the public sphere and interactions with state actors. Counter-hegemony is a process of creating alternative forms of socialization, which materialize in daily practices, changed relations to nature, changes in division of labour and new political institutions (Brand 2008, pp. 4, 8). *Omställning Sverige* is a young movement. A first step in its strategy is to envision alternative forms of socialization. Movement members oppose neoliberal development schemes, particularly economic growth and market logic. They challenge normalized knowledge of neoliberal socialization by envisioning alternatives.

Alternative interpretations of existing reality are relevant. It is those alternatives that open up possibilities for counter-hegemonic struggles (Sum 2011, p. 174). They are a precondition for a change of socializations.

Omställning Sverige is in a start-up phase when it comes to putting these alternative ideas into practice. Concrete projects so far have not marked a genuine deviation from a neoliberal system. It remains to be seen if future practices will lead the movement away from the system inside of which it was born. *Omställning Sverige* has no strict recipe for its coming development. As one informant put it:

“*This is an experiment. There are many different possibilities to change things*”
(Informant 1 2013).

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