

# BRIEFING 15

## IN PURSUIT OF THE FUTURE

### ESRC PROFESSORIAL FELLOWSHIP 2003-6

(RES051270049) The Research is concerned with the way the future is known, anticipated, planned for, secured and produced. It seeks to connect isolated fields of enquiry and works toward a comprehensive, socially relevant theory of the future.

### TRANSITION TOWNS AND THE FUTURE OF CARE

The Transition Towns initiative (hereafter TT, see <http://www.transitiontowns.org/>) represents an empirical context which resonates with the ideas developed on *In Pursuit of the Future*. One of the technological legacies which seamlessly connect us with our ancestors and our descendents in a web of responsibility is reliance on fossil fuels as the main energy input for social and economic development. The spread of the industrial revolution through trade and imperialism, accompanied by expanding commodity production and later, the extension of welfare and life-chances through the creation of welfare states were made possible by the ability of capitalism and socialism alike to rely on access to supplies of coal and then oil. Fossil fuels were effectively obtained, like other natural resources, for free, in the sense that no-one had to pay to acquire them beyond covering any financial and human costs of extraction.

But now the societies which have been built on cheap coal and oil are faced with the prospect of the growing scarcity of these resources. Our complicity with our forebears, who built the technologies and institutions which rely on cheap energy, rests on our contentment with the affluence that it brings. However, our responsibility for the energy futures we hand on to our descendents is now being brought into sharp relief by the possibility that the peak of oil production has been or is about to be passed. "Peak Oil", as a near-future scenario, refocuses understanding of our responsibility to the past and the future by asking us to evaluate what we care about here in the present, and how what matters to us is linked to the projects of our ancestors and what we wish our children, grandchildren and distant descendents to inherit.

#### Transition Towns

TT attempts to use the values that connect us with the places we inhabit as a means of re-imagining what ways of life are possible, against a

background provided by Peak Oil and climate change. The collective challenge it poses is to think creatively about how a transition to a post-cheap oil world can be managed so that it becomes a gradual process of *energy descent* as opposed to a sudden shock. TT addresses problems of conceptual thought, motivation and practical action within an integrated framework: the Head, Heart and Hands of Energy Descent. By the Head is meant the theories of peak oil and of localisation in production and distribution of resources. By Heart is signified the processes by which communities can draw upon their own (sometimes forgotten) knowledge of coping with past crises and uncertainties to gain new skills and develop a new relationship with their own futures, and a new set of ethical resources. By Hands is meant practical measures surrounding the production of food, generation of energy, provision of housing and so on. Can a town, a region, a nation become self sufficient in food and, if so, how? How much sustainable woodland would be needed to heat a town with efficient combined heat and power systems? Can locally-sourced materials be used to retrofit houses?

By adjusting the balance between the global and local in favour of greater localisation, TT aims to use a renewed sense of place, history and embedded time as a means of awakening collective care and responsibility. Its aim is to tackle collectively global problems that, as individuals, we experience as overwhelming threats which can crush our sense of agency. It aims to redefine these problems as opportunities for us to develop a new understanding of our responsibilities to future generations, and to gain in the process a different relationship to our present.

#### The Contemporary Crisis of Agency

The conceptual link between TT and *In Pursuit of the Future* comes from their respective analyses of a crisis of agency that is occurring in the face of global problems that connect us to the long-term future. Faced with issues like peak oil and climate change, our customary forms of knowing and acting are undermined. The future, which as the philosopher Nicolai Hartmann wrote, is ultimately the object of all ethical concern, suddenly looks like an abyss in front of us. The complexity of the processes involved, what they might mean for the lives of individuals and groups in different parts of the world, and how individual and collective action can make a difference to their outcomes are all factors contributing to this situation. Science and economics give us global scenarios shaped by estimates of financial risk and temperature increase. What they cannot do is shape a narrative which links the global to the local, and which awakens once again the capacity to be intimate with the future we are shaping. The interrogation of ethical approaches begun by *In Pursuit of the Future* and the return by TT to old skills in the light of new knowledge represent complementary attempts to provide such a story.