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From 'me towns' to 'we towns': activist citizenship in UK town centres

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Abstract

Britain's town centres have witnessed economic, social and physical upheaval over more than half a century, linked to sweeping changes in retailing and consumption. Yet they are also places where activists are seeking to fashion alternative futures and test social and economic models that challenge neoliberal norms. Reflecting on recent developments in the UK, this paper explores the potential of citizen-led economic activism in British town and city centres. Focusing on three case studies of urban activism, it contrasts policies and practices that frame the users of urban space as consumers with the marginal acts that seek to assert wider rights to the city. The article shows how ideas of 'resilience' have become a stake of struggle in debates over the future of urban centres and urban citizenship, deployed both to defend neoliberal economic configurations and to signal radical transitions towards more participatory and economically autonomous forms of society.

Keywords: activism, right to the city, participation, citizenship, resilience, retail centres

From 'me towns' to 'we towns': activist citizenship in UK town centres

Introduction

Town and city centres in Western countries have become emblematic of contemporary neoliberal society, reframing citizens as consumers (Cronin 2000, Trentmann 2007) and expunging uses that present alternative 'orders of worth' (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006) to the capitalist market. These changes have gathered pace in post-industrial societies, as town centres have been recast as places of leisure and entertainment for the well-off. Popular angst over the 'death of the high street' (Hughes and Jackson 2015) has focused on the crisis in retailing that followed the financial turbulence of 2007/08.

Yet that crisis has also provided an opportunity for local activists to present alternative visions of town and city centres - visions that assert non-commercial rights to the city (Lefebvre 1996) and the rights of citizens to intervene in public space (Iveson 2013). In this contest over the future of physical space and economic activity, resilience has emerged as an essentially contested concept (Gallie 1956), deployed both to defend existing configurations and as a banner under which alternative socioeconomic visions may be advanced. By focusing on these narratives of resilience, it is possible to discover how actors in urban space are positioning themselves as claim-staking citizens in new ways (Isin 2008, 2009).

In this article I draw on and develop research undertaken for *How to Save Our Town Centres* (Dobson 2015) to explore how practices of citizenship are emerging in the contested spaces of town centres and 'high streets' in the UK, and how resilience has become a pivotal concept in both galvanising and resisting visions of change.

While similar contests over the use of central urban spaces have emerged in many parts of the world (Bogad 2010, Iveson 2013), I focus here on the UK and on three case studies of citizen activism in England in particular. I consider how such activism has highlighted a continuing struggle for ownership of the narratives that define what it means to flourish or to be 'resilient' in the 21st century urban environment.

The UK presents a paradigmatic case (Flyvbjerg 2006) of how the physical and economic state of town centres is imbricated with notions of identity, belonging and thriving. In the country Napoleon reputedly derided as a nation of shopkeepers, angst over the changing nature of the urban fabric in town centres is deeply entrenched in the public psyche. Laments over the loss of traditional stores go back nearly a century (Richards 1938). Similar anxieties were raised as out-of-town retail centres began to replace traditional town centre shopping from the late 1980s (National Economic Development Office 1988; Hallsworth et al 2010). They came to a head after the 2008 financial crash, when familiar names such as Woolworths collapsed and thousands of jobs were lost in retailing across the UK; and they were exacerbated by the exponential growth of internet shopping, which by 2016 accounted for 13.4 per cent of retail spending in the UK (Office for National Statistics 2016), undermining the commercial viability of many traditional town centre stores.

Together, the effects of recession and structural changes in the retail industry resulted in a proliferation of empty shops across British town centres, belying narratives of urban 'renaissance' (Power and Mumford 1999; Urban Task Force 1999). The visual impacts and consequent political pressures were so severe that by 2011 they prompted the British prime minister, David Cameron, to commission Mary Portas, a TV presenter known mainly for a makeover programme in which she rumbustiously takes shopkeepers to task for their poor presentation and service, to

review the state of Britain's high streets (Portas 2011).

The typical policy response to town centre decline is to ask how such places might return to their former glory, becoming 'vital and viable' (Department of the Environment 1994). The conflation of high streets and town centres with retailing, however, is relatively recent. Historically, urban centres have been home to a wide range of activities, from small-scale manufacturing to places of worship, libraries, markets, courthouses and places of public entertainment (L. Mumford 1961). Mumford traces this heritage back to the ancient Greek agora as a site of participatory citizenship alongside market activity.

By framing town centres largely as retail destinations, I argue policymakers and academics (for example Dawson 1988 and Wrigley and Lambiri 2014) have bypassed vital aspects of what makes a town function as a town: the intersection of human life and activity in locations where exchange encompasses ideas, beliefs, civic engagement, public welfare and a spectrum of non-retail business activities. This paper explores how town centres can become 'places of possibility' where individual agency is seen in terms of citizenship, not merely as consumer choice (Dobson 2015), and expressed through struggles for the use of space and inclusion within it (Isin 2008).

I discuss these struggles first by outlining how current notions of the 'high street' frame citizens as consumers. I consider how economic and social alternatives to such framing have been advanced through notions of 'the right the the city' (Lefebvre 1996), 'DIY urbanism' (Iveson 2013, Finn 2014) and 'insurgent citizenship' (Crawford 1995, Holston 2011). I then examine how notions of 'resilience' have been deployed both to account for the survival and adaptation of the retail economy, and to

support activist challenges to the neoliberal order. After introducing my research I consider the three case studies - the People's Republic of Stokes Croft, Incredible Edible Todmorden, and Transition Town Totnes - as examples of activist articulations of citizenship and resilience. Finally, I reflect on how the case studies show citizenship is being expressed through 'marginal acts' (Huault et al 2014) and how 'resilience' has become not only a justification for activism but a central aspect of what is at stake.

From consumer rights to tactical urbanism: citizenship in the agora

The right to the city, in the high street and town centre of the early 21st century, is the right of the consumer. Bowlby (2000, p. 7) explains how the rights-demanding consumer has emerged from the more subservient notion of the customer:

> *The consumer has ceased to be seen as part of a jellyishly susceptible mass, having become instead an individual endowed with rights of which, by implication, his or her previous incarnations had been deprived. She (or he) is no longer a fool, but the model of modern individuality, the one who, as patient or passenger or parent, demands and gets the deal to which, implicitly, she was always entitled but that she was never granted before.*

The consumer's rights are to standards of service and quality of products and to return goods that are unsatisfactory. They are rights of weights and measures, framed by a service relationship between consumer and supplier. But they also include the right to reject goods and services that do not meet the consumer's social and ethical standards. Trentmann (2007, p. 147) describes citizenship and consumption as 'porous, overlapping domains' and argues that the politics of consumption, expressed through purchasing power and boycotts, is replacing the politics of labour and

production, aligning with a focus on 'choice' in public policy. But as Pow (2013) argues, access to consumer citizenship is profoundly unequal, and is intertwined with 'everyday politics of fear and privilege'.

In public policy and consumer citizenship alike, the central business district or shopping hub is framed as a place of consumption. Its measures of success are thus overwhelmingly those of commercial trade (Bowlby 2000, Wrigley and Lambiri 2014, Hughes and Jackson 2015). A successful town centre is one where shops are occupied and trade is brisk. In recent literature the high street has been presented as a place of commercial decline and crisis (Hallsworth et al 2010); as a site of economic recovery and reconstruction (Wrigley and Dolega 2011); or as a space to be managed, often with shades of social sanitisation and the exclusion of 'undesirables' through the 'hybrid policing' of private security firms (Eick 2012).

To support this transactional relationship between traders (from retailers through to property managers and developers) and the public, the vision of 'urban renaissance' beloved of architects and planners (Urban Task Force 1999) has been truncated into a concept of 'retail-led regeneration' led by large-scale property and retail developments (Dixon 2005, Emery 2006). Such schemes boomed in the UK during the New Labour era of 1997-2010 but their hegemony persisted even after the 2007/08 crash. By 2014 commercial property accounted for nearly one eighth of the value of all buildings in the UK, a total of £683 billion (British Property Federation, 2014). Of this, 45 per cent was retail property, of which around one fifth consisted of shopping centres. These property-based schemes are viewed by economic planners as indicators of success. Local economic development strategies encourage such 'inward investment', often predicated on prestige property-led projects (Loftman and Nevin 1996).

Although there is limited evidence for the regenerative effects of such developments (Findlay and Sparks 2009), local economic planners have continued to favour large-scale retail and leisure schemes as a solution to the individual and collective troubles of town centres. At the same time the austerity policies of the Coalition government that came to power in 2010 and the Conservative government elected in 2015 brought about an unprecedented squeeze on public spending, particularly by local authorities. Local government services in town centres, such as libraries and further education colleges, are increasingly at risk of closure and cuts (House of Commons Culture, Media and Sport Committee 2012) as 'austerity urbanism' (Peck 2012) takes hold.

But the consumer-citizen is a relatively recent construction of urban citizenship. Earlier observers would have struggled to conceive of cities without a broader concept of civics (Geddes 1904). The relationship between the agora and the polis was always symbiotic, whether presented as cooperative (Howard 1902), controlled (Le Corbusier 1987 [1929]) or adaptively creative (Landry 2000). The civic humanism of late 20th century urbanists such as Jane Jacobs (1993) and the more contemporary work of the likes of Jan Gehl (2010) rests on a belief in cities as diverse, social spaces in which civility is fostered through multiple interactions and encounters. Such urbanism places a premium on exchange between citizens, exemplified by Gehl's comment that 'at its core walking is a special form of communion between people who share public space as a platform and framework' (Gehl 2010, p. 19).

Such civic humanism is finding a contemporary expression in what has become known variously as DIY urbanism, tactical urbanism, or even 'vigilante urbanism' (Finn 2014). Finn describes this as a philosophy of 'spontaneous interventions' in

urban space, grounded in the heritage of the Situationist movement and finding expression in street art and pop-up shops, social enterprises and protests. Encompassing everything from naked bike rides to yarn-bombing (covering urban structures with knitted decorations), tactical or DIY urbanism asserts the right of the commercially disempowered to intervene in urban space (Iveson 2013, Mould 2014). Beyond the playful and ephemeral character of many activities so described, there are more enduring groups and movements with more or less overt political and social agendas, such as the BUGA UP billboard graffiti movement in Australia (Iveson 2013) and the three case studies discussed below. For Iveson, such practices show how 'the right to the city is not so much demanded as declared through political action' (p. 949).

DIY urbanism, as an omnibus term for an expansive range of activities, is not expressly concerned with citizenship; indeed it is often not expressly about anything, other than an assertion of the participants' presence in urban space and the desire to weave some form of alternative narrative about that space to the one presented by the homogenous frontages of high street shops and offices. But it shares some of the central concerns of citizenship in its focus on participation in the public realm. Citizenship studies speak not only of rights to representation but of rights and opportunities to participate in and shape society. They deal with identity and belonging, inclusion and reciprocity (Grugel 2003, Isin and Turner 2007, Joppke 2007, Staeheli 2011).

More directly, the notion of the 'right to the city' and the citizen as activist (Lefebvre 1996, Brenner, Marcuse and Meyer 2009) highlights the performative aspects of citizenship that are echoed in expressions of DIY urbanism. Citizenship is frequently a site of struggle and contention, characterised by a constant tussle over the

boundaries within which citizens may operate (de Certeau 1984, Staeheli 2011). Campbell and Cowan's manifesto for urban interventions (Campbell and Cowan 2016) advocates an explicit agenda of 'enabling communities to shape their own environments' (p. 11). At the same time, scholars have voiced concerns that unaccountable DIY urbanists are either damaging to good governance and democratic participation (Finn 2014) or, like Richard Florida's 'creative class' (Florida 2002), part of the neoliberal urban agenda - 'the latest iteration of "cool", creative urban policy language' (Mould 2014). In Holston's phrasing, the development of peripheral or insurgent citizenship is characterised by entanglements and contradictions (Holston 2011).

As much of the local infrastructure that supports traditional forms of citizenship and participation is being physically removed from UK town centres (in the case of courts, colleges and local government offices, for example) or closed (in the case of libraries, advice centres and youth facilities), these central areas are increasingly ceded to commercial interests. This raises the question of what kind of citizenship can now be practiced in such urban spaces. The contested notion of resilience helps to illuminate this question, as it is a concept that has been seized on both as evidence that urban capitalism is fit for purpose and as a banner under which DIY urbanist responses to commercial agendas have mustered.

Contested resilience: bouncing back, bouncing forward

By making the high street an object of political attention in 2011, David Cameron's Coalition government set in motion a new wave of academic and policy discussion on the nature and function of town centres. In this debate, two approaches

to 'resilience' have emerged: as an explanation of evolution and adaptation, and as a framing device to promote alternative and marginalised views of the city.

For those commentators who view town centres primarily as markets, the concept of 'resilience' has become an important framing device. Wrigley and Dolega (2011) conceptualise the resilient high street as a complex adaptive system that responds to shocks by 'bouncing forward' to reconstitute itself in new ways. The UK government-appointed Future High Street Forum, similarly, has asserted that 'the same adaptive flexibility which has kept our urban centres alive over centuries is still a creative presence' (Wrigley and Lambiri 2014). Wrigley and Dolega (2011) and Singleton et al (2016) argue that such resilience is influenced by 'the mix and interdependencies of existing business, the dynamics of centres, diversity, attractiveness, accessibility, national planning policies and the socio-demographic characteristics of local catchments' (Singleton et al, 2016, p6).

Such thinking has its origins in notions of resilience that are both overarching and contested. Wrigley and Dolega's view of resilience draws heavily on notions of economic resilience (Martin 2012) which in turn trace their genealogy through four different traditions of resilience scholarship. Early resilience studies dealt with the ability of an individual or system to 'bounce back'. Psychosocial resilience considers the ability of the individual to withstand and recover from shocks and trauma (Werner 1993), while engineering resilience poses a similar question of materials and structures (Holling 1996). Two other resilience traditions deal with the ability to 'bounce forward', or to move from one state to another. These are ecological resilience, which can be traced back to the work of Holling (1973); and evolutionary resilience, which translates the ecologists' work into wider scales and processes (Folke 2006, Alberti 2016). The notion of the complex adaptive system belongs to the

'bouncing forward' tradition. It has found its apogee in the concept of 'panarchy' (Gunderson 2001) in which a system moves through different states of 'adaptive renewal' characterised by small, rapid changes at one scale and slow, extensive changes at the other.

Scholars have advised caution against the casual use of 'resilience' on various grounds. As Martin and Sunley have observed (2015, p. 35) resilience is a simple label that masks a world of complexity. They argue that it is 'a set of multi-scale processes that need to be explained, rather than being a singular explanatory characteristic, or a catchword invoked without due definition and elaboration'. Davoudi (2012) warns against the uncritical adoption of a positivist ontology from the natural sciences into social settings. Welsh (2014) goes further, identifying resilience with the post-political maintenance of the neoliberal order, an order within which questions of power and equality are silenced. When social life is conceived of as a system, the functioning of the system is privileged above any question of gainers and losers. Porter and Davoudi (2012, p. 329) worry that resilience may become 'an empty signifier which can be filled to justify almost any ends', while Coaffee (2013) questions the value of resilience in analysing how urban systems respond to crises. MacKinnon and Derickson (2012, p. 255) advocate that resilience should be jettisoned in favour of 'resourcefulness' as 'an alternative concept to animate [progressive] politics and activism'. Brassett et al (2013), however, note 'a productive ambiguity' about resilience 'that both resists exact definition and allows for a spectrum of interactions and engagements between policy and the everyday' (p. 221).

An alternative use of 'resilience' is as a discursive frame to challenge neoliberal norms. Welsh (2014, p. 22) highlights the use of resilience by the Transition Town movement to argue for 'regime shift'. MacKinnon and Derickson (2012) discuss the

use of resilience as a prefigurative concept, deployed to advance alternatives to the capitalist order. Conceptions of adaptive resilience, which could easily be translated as commercial laissez-faire, may be reframed as social-ecological resilience (Beilin and Wilkinson 2015). Beilin and Wilkinson describe social-ecological resilience as 'less about stability and more about resistance, persistence, remembering and recovery' (p. 1207). They frame such resilience in opposition to homogenising tendencies of commercial markets and neoliberal governance, claiming that it represents the 'power of utopian thinking' to galvanise change (p. 1215). For Lewis and Conaty (2012, p. 18) resilience is inseparable from notions of economic transition, characterised by five 'exit ramps' from a fossil-fuel economy: 'strengthening our resilience, reclaiming the commons, reinventing democracy, constructing a social solidarity economy, and putting a price on the services nature provides to humans so we might awaken to the real costs of our current profligacy'.

Weichselgartner and Kelman (2014, p.263) call for 'critical resilience-thinking through locality and marginality', while Norman (2017) describes the rights-defending actions of indigenous peoples as 'acts of resilience'. For Goldstein et al (2015, p. 1289):

> *... resilience is not simply the capacity for change, but an ability to adapt without losing the culture, community ties and local traditions that make a place home. It is envisioning a kind of change that nurtures communities here and now without tearing them apart. This type of visioning process comes to life through narrative.*

There are alternative stories of resilience, in other words, and those alternative stories may be harnessed to advance the rights of citizens to the city. They are stories told by insurgent citizens (Holston, 2009, p. 245) whose marginality and exclusion

spawns 'fragile and contradictory movements for new kinds of citizen power and social justice'. It is this second, prefigurative, notion of resilience that I draw on in the discussion that follows, showing how it points towards a 'new figure of citizenship' (Isin, 2009).

Research context and methods

The questions addressed in this paper stem from the author's involvement in national policy and practice in the UK over the period of the Portas Review and subsequent years. I draw on extended personal participation in and observation of the policy process, followed by further research involving visits to towns and cities across the UK and extended interviews with key stakeholders. My approach derives from a relational ontology in which places and spaces are 'constituted through interactions' (Massey 2005), including the interactions of power dynamics (Emirbayer 1997).

The background to the research was my involvement in coordinating a submission to the Portas Review jointly authored by nine organisations (Urban Pollinators 2011); subsequent work as a member of the team commissioned by the UK Government to produce an evidence review alongside the Portas Review (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills 2011); and participation in events across the UK and internationally in the years following the review. These included organising an informal 'unconference' in 2012 attended by nearly 100 community activists and stakeholders from different parts of the UK (Urban Pollinators 2012). Throughout this process I took extensive notes, wrote blogs and articles and contributed to policy discussions. A selection of this material is publicly available at urbanpollinators.co.uk.

The research proper - which has been further developed in this article - was conducted between 2012 and 2014 and resulted in the monograph *How to Save Our Town Centres* (Dobson 2015). My aim was to interrogate notions of success and decline in UK high streets and town centres, understand how the 'problem' was conceptualised by various actors, and investigate where and how alternative economic and social models for the future of town centres were being developed that might challenge the dominant neoliberal framing of the high street as a place of consumption.

The research methods were partly ethnographic, involving observational walking as a way of immersing myself in the detail of place (De Certeau 1984, Hamdi 2010, Yi'En 2014). I visited 18 towns and cities in the four nations of the UK, as well as the places discussed in the case studies below - Bristol, Totnes and Todmorden. I relied on detailed notes and photographs from these visits to compile 'thick descriptions' (Geertz 1972), edited versions of which were included in the text of *How to Save Our Town Centres*.

I also conducted 20 extended qualitative interviews, which were audio recorded and transcribed, with urban activists, planners and professionals in order to elicit a broad range of understandings of the issues facing town centres and the actors within them. These included local activists in Bristol, Totnes and Todmorden; the then chief executive of the British Property Federation; the coordinator of a nationwide 'shop local' campaign; market traders; political leaders; and an academic with expertise on retailing and town centres. What drew these interviews together was a focus on how actors conceptualised a thriving town centre, what factors prevented such thriving, and how change might be brought about. The three cases considered below were chosen as examples of citizen activism in town centre environments that had grown

and persisted over a period of several years. In each case members of local communities had begun by intervening in public space (in Todmorden and Stokes Croft) or articulating alternatives to the current order (in Totnes); had used their interventions to challenge commercial interests; and used concepts of community, or community resilience, to enrol and mobilise actors over an extended period.

Developing citizenship through activism: three case studies

In each of the examples considered, space is contested through actions rather than through participation in the traditional processes of representative democracy. In each case, too, space is contested in order to advance normative values that, one way or another, challenge the dominant narratives of neoliberalism and frame citizens as actors in urban space regardless of their economic clout.

While the activists I met seldom had a comprehensive understanding of how a town centre might function, they shared an overriding concern that local economies should work for the benefit of their host communities. Such benefits were rarely framed purely in monetary terms. Examples of citizen activism were characterised by opportunism and fluidity, but also by a strong sense of local identity and reciprocity, which interviewees tended to contrast with the commercial (and spatially distant) interests of the property and retail industries and their supporters in local and central government. As Hess (2010) notes in his study of localist economic movements, such enterprises 'represent one avenue for building communities that also break down the ties of dependence on large corporations that many cities have had to confront'. Blokland et al. (2015), however, have also observed fragmentation and competition among such movements. Below I examine what kind of urban citizenship is being promoted in each of the three cases, employing Isin's taxonomy (2008) of four areas

of rights to the city: autonomy, appropriation, difference, and security.

The People's Republic of Stokes Croft, Bristol

Stokes Croft is an area on the northwest periphery of Bristol city centre at the foot of the arterial Cheltenham Road. It is a mix of residential and former industrial buildings with shops and cafes along the Cheltenham Road, leading at the southern end to the Broadmead shopping centre. After many years of neglect and blight it has become home to a bohemian community of artists and small-scale entrepreneurs. Prominent among them is the People's Republic of Stokes Croft (PRSC), a loose collective with a goal of establishing the Stokes Croft community as 'Bristol's cultural quarter' and doing so through interventions in the urban fabric, especially through street art.

PRSC describes its mission as 'to help Stokes Croft to recognise its special qualities, by improving the streetscape through direct action, by creating a sense of identity, a sense of belonging and of self-worth' (People's Republic of Stokes Croft, n.d., a). These activities have resulted in confrontations with property owners, retailers (including a well publicised protest against the supermarket giant Tesco) and the local municipality (*Bristol Post*, 13 March 2010). PRSC's slogan is 'We make our own future', and the related Stokes Croft China company sells mugs inscribed with the slogan, *Citizen not Subject*. The PRSC website declares:

> *It is the belief of PRSC that local government has lost the right to determine,*
> *from its lofty heights, the future of our area, after decades of lack of interest*
> *and lack of service. We welcome the support of government agency, but this*
> *support will have to meet our terms, as decided by ourselves through public*

debate. (People's Republic of Stokes Croft, n.d., b).

PRSC pitches itself as opposed to the interests of many property owners, shopping centre developers and municipal planners, and to the privatisation of public space that results from shopping developments. It draws on anarchist thinking (Sellars 2010; Buser et al 2013) with its hopes of creating an 'autonomous zone' of community-led activity on the edge of the city centre; its support for alternative economics, including a local currency, the Bristol Pound; and plans to create a community land trust to provide a base for local activists. PRSC's founder and spokesperson, Chris Chalkley, comments:

> *We fought and fought by painting things in areas where we weren't allowed to paint and then they got scrubbed off and it culminated in a criminal damage conviction for myself. I got nicked but it completely changed things – suddenly the council was interested in walking round the Bear Pit [an open space in the centre of a gyratory road system]. The reason this sunken 1960s area had nothing going on is that there were five different government agencies charged with looking after the space and they couldn't organise a piss-up in a brewery. It's a massive piece of real estate in the centre of the city and if we can make it work it has the possibility to become an autonomous zone. If we can get a market to work in there, and it's not an easy ask but we've started, if we can get that to happen that could be a model for everywhere. (Dobson 2015, p164).*

However, the relative success of the People's Republic has encouraged developers to begin to see the area as an investment proposition, while the neighbourhood's alternative vibe has attracted well-heeled younger residents. What has been achieved in Stokes Croft is fragile. The danger is that its ideals of citizen-led activism will

wither as the area becomes gentrified (Frenzel and Beverungen 2015). In such a scenario, property owners' assertion of their legal rights and the power of municipal authorities may well combine to snuff out the alternative forms of community encouraged and supported by PRSC. In the face of that risk, PRSC continues to declare its anarchist ideals:

> *We do not accept that top-down dictatorial government is the only possibility for decision-making in Society, nor that the rule of the State is the only possible way for people to organise themselves. A State that often favours the interests of those who are direct beneficiaries of Financial Institutions, that continues to favour the interests of excessively powerful Corporations over the interests of the Local Community whom they were elected to serve, is necessarily suspect. (People's Republic of Stokes Croft, n.d., c).*

What is at stake in this narrative is autonomy - the right to decide what kind of neighbourhood Stokes Croft will become; appropriation, in claiming rights to trade and channel the benefits of enterprise into the local economy, and rights to transform public and private space through visual art; difference, in laying claim to a distinct narrative about Stokes Croft as a 'cultural quarter'; and security, in the demand to be left alone to build community on actors' own terms. These rights are all grouped under an umbrella of independence, characterised by Chalkley's comment on property rights:

> *In Stokes Croft there is a big squatting community and you've got a scenario whereby we step back one step and ask who are the people who fucked up this area, is it the squatters who take on buildings and work with them and keep them in some kind of very rough repair, or is it the property developers who have been sitting on empty buildings for the last thirty years and leaving them*

to decline…? (interview with author, 4 April 2013).

Incredible Edible Todmorden, Yorkshire

Todmorden is a small town on the Yorkshire/Lancashire border that experienced a long decline after the demise of the textile industry in the late 20th century. It has been the subject of numerous 'regeneration' initiatives, with limited evidence of impact (Powe, Pringle and Hart 2015). A turning point for Todmorden was the emergence of the Incredible Edible movement, which encourages local people to grow and share fruit and vegetables. Incredible Edible began as a community-led response to the challenge of climate change, with a focus on encouraging local food production, fronted by a former council leader, a community worker, and environmental activists. From ramshackle and informal beginnings, it has now spawned a worldwide movement with several hundred organisations using the 'Incredible Edible' banner. These include Incredible Edible Todmorden, two spin-off social enterprises in Todmorden (an aquaponics project and a farm), and the UK-wide Incredible Edible Network, as well as numerous local groups.

In Todmorden, as in Bristol, activism began with a visual statement of intent: neglected spaces, including a derelict health centre, a canal towpath and a graveyard, were planted with edible produce. All this activity took place in and around the town centre, both as a way of maximising visibility and as a contrast to the lack of activity by official agencies. Within a few years organisers were seeking to reimagine the town centre, creating a 'green route' linking together the station, market, theatre and community growing spaces. In a neat twist on the work of commercial place branding agencies, they effectively rebranded the town as a hub of environmental action. The

difference was that the impetus came from local activists, rather than originating in local government or the commercial sector. Warhurst sums up their approach with the comment: 'We don't ask permission. It takes too long and anyway we're improving the place' (Dobson 2015, p165).

Unlike PRSC, Incredible Edible shies away from politically loaded terminology. It focuses on what it calls 'radical community building' with the slogan, 'If you eat you're in'. Notions of conflict or struggle are replaced with an emphasis on 'kindness'. Incredible Edible - both Incredible Edible Todmorden (IET) and the wider Incredible Edible Network - presents itself first and foremost as an environmental movement, modelling ecologically sustainable approaches to food production and consumption. But the question of the future of urban places is at the heart of the Incredible Edible project, and through its direct forms of intervention (what members call 'propaganda planting') and its articulation of a localist agenda that values localised economic networks and social benefits, it expresses a politics that confronts and challenges the values of the global market.

Incredible Edible Todmorden describes itself as a group of 'passionate people working together for a world where all share responsibility for the future wellbeing of our planet and ourselves … All with no paid staff, no buildings, no public funding: radical community building in action' (Incredible Edible Todmorden, n.d.). The Incredible Edible Network has set out an agenda of 'using the Incredible Edible model to rethink what we mean by prosperity' (Incredible Edible Network, n.d., a). In the words of one Incredible Edible brochure, the founders could see that

> *… ideas like peak oil, transition and sustainability sounded more like*
>
> *academic concepts than something people could engage with in their everyday*
>
> *lives. They were far more likely to make people switch off than leap into*

action. But everyone understands food. Food could get people talking; even

better, it could inspire people to take action. To get started where they were,

without waiting for a report, for funding or for permission from on high.

(Incredible Edible Network, n.d., b).

Incredible Edible was briefly associated in some quarters with the short-lived 'Big Society' agenda of David Cameron's Coalition government of 2010-2015 (Thompson 2012), although the Todmorden project predated it by several years and has outlasted it by almost as long. An early mission statement (Incredible Edible Todmorden, 2010) declared that:

Incredible Edible is the enactment of a belief that, if you play to the strengths

of any community, or group of people living their lives around a street, a

neighbourhood, a town, and if you share within that group a common focus

(for us food), then you can create resilience and cohesion that will make us all

stronger and happier.

Far from representing a government-driven agenda of self-help and voluntarism, Incredible Edible aims to influence the political agenda by championing local networks and promoting what Paull (2013) describes as 'open source food'. The Incredible Edible Network has an explicit intention of working with and influencing public services and policymakers, promoting environmental values through its focus on local food production. Paull (2013, p. 342) describes IET as 'a vehicle to argue for systemic change'. Behind the apparently ingenuous acts of planting carrots and chard lies a challenge to the corporate control of food systems and the co-option of urban planning to serve the ends of global food industries. 'Propaganda' planting in town centres bears witness both to alternative economics and alternative uses of public space.

In terms of Isin's four categories of citizenship, IET demonstrates an overriding concern with autonomy, reflected in its pride in local voluntary activity and its freedom from government or municipal funding. There are parallels with PRSC's anarchist values. There is appropriation, in direct action to use and transform public space, and in its negotiations with planners to establish the 'green route' through the town. Difference is asserted in contrast to the neoliberal values embodied in supermarkets and global food supply systems, and security in IET's insistence on the need for locally-based food networks and an economy based on local and personal trading relationships.

Transition Town Totnes, Devon

The third example of citizen-led action is from Totnes in Devon, southwest England. Totnes has long been associated with a strong culture of independent and 'alternative' activity, and has been the centre of the Transition Town movement. Like Incredible Edible, Transition Towns have become a worldwide movement with an emphasis on moving from a fossil-fuel based economy to one that is environmentally sustainable (Taylor 2012). With its grounding in permaculture and organic horticulture, ecological notions of resilience have been central to the Transition Town concept from the beginning.

Hopkins (2010, p. 54) adopts a definition of resilience offered by Edwards (2009): 'the capacity of an individual, community or system to adapt in order to sustain an acceptable level of function, structure and identity'. However, he deploys the term to call for transformation rather than continuity:

It could be argued that resilience is not merely about 'sustaining an

acceptable level of function', rather, in the light of peak oil and climate
change, it could be reconceptualised as a fundamental rethink of assumptions
about infrastructure and systems which could lead to a more sustainable and
enriching low carbon and more resilient economy, rather than just
'sustaining' current models and practices.

This 'fundamental rethink' is intertwined with the fortunes of town centres because it focuses on the case for reinventing local economies. It emphasises the importance of local supply chains and the damaging effects of removing spending power from localities through the domination of national and multinational retailers. Environmentally sustainable, locally based enterprises, Transition practitioners argue, can create genuine local resilience (Hopkins 2010). Such alternative local movements have the potential to create 'autonomous geographies' (Pickerill and Chatterton 2006).

How to Save Our Town Centres highlights a campaign in Totnes to stop a national café chain, Costa Coffee, from opening a branch in the town; it also focuses on the town's Local Economic Blueprint, drawn up in partnership with a range of local stakeholders including the town's Chamber of Commerce and educational institutions (Transition Town Totnes 2013). There is evidence of the strength of local feeling against the proliferation of chain stores and the desire to maintain the town's distinctive identity; there are also signs that in the Local Economic Blueprint a significant group of the town's residents wish to challenge the globalising and homogenising effects of contemporary capitalism.

Transition Network founder Rob Hopkins wrote in the *Guardian* newspaper:
Surely it should be our choice if we want a high street resilient to predatory

markets and remote corporations? It is the reweaving of local food webs,
community-owned enterprises, a culture of entrepreneurship focused around
community resilience that, in the long term, truly offers choice, rather than the
no-holds-barred dash for economic growth at all costs that is currently being
forced upon us (Hopkins 2012).

Of the three case studies, Totnes offers perhaps the most advanced example of
citizens coming together to seek to change their locality, examining how spending
flows might be redirected to support community-based enterprises. Rooted in a
consciousness of the folly of pursuing fossil-fuel based economic development,
Transition Town Totnes has grown from occupying an environmentalist niche to
developing alliances with a wide range of community interests. Hopkins' use of
resilience as a framing device surfaces the tussles over sensemaking and interpretation
that point to more fundamental struggles over what happens within shared spaces and
who benefits. While the concept of resilience being pursued is grounded in natural
rather than social science, recent discussions in the Transition movement have
highlighted the value of resilience as a quality that 'can be built from the bottom up
by people mobilising in communities and communities collaborating in mutually
supportive ways at all levels, and [that] has intrinsic ethical implications concerning
inclusivity, equity and freedom of choice' (Transition Network 2017).

One should not overestimate the impact of Transition Town Totnes. It has become
an important player in local civil society, but it relies on a relatively small core of
activists. Its position continues to be that of an agitator rather than a civic leader in
conventional terms, raising questions of inclusivity and legitimacy (Connors and
McDonald 2010). Like the other cases described here, it exists mainly on the margins
of local discourse and action. This marginality is characteristic of environmental and

community action, although there are some indications that mainstream discourse is beginning to shift (Bichard 2013).

Nevertheless there is evidence that Transition Town Totnes, and the wider Transition Towns movement, are advancing claims of citizenship that tend towards Isin's conceptualisation (2009) of 'acts of citizenship' through which actors claim a right to be heard and to participate in urban space. The Transition Towns network does this by contesting economic norms and privileging the local, thus asserting autonomy; by appropriating urban space as a stage for events, celebrations and activism; and by weaving new narratives of security that challenge the neoliberal order. Claims of difference or distinctiveness as a social group are less evident, although notions of community, identity and belonging are very much to the fore, and posed in contrast to the sameness of the capitalist economy, which is manifest through the syndrome of 'clone towns' (New Economics Foundation 2004) and fossil fuel-dependent global corporatism.

Rights to the high street?

The debate over rights to the city, and the construction of citizens within it, remains a fertile area of scholarship. Isin (2009) has identified activism as heralding a 'new figure of citizenship':

> ...acts through which claims are articulated and claimants are produced create new sites of contestation, belonging, identification and struggle. These sites are different from traditional sites of citizenship contestation such as voting, social security and military obligation though these continue to be

important. (Isin 2009, p. 371).

These claims may be articulated by and within activist groups, but they are freighted with normative assertions that impinge on other social groups and urban actors. Such assertions take the form of 'micro-spatial urban practices' (Iveson 2013) that may be small-scale and ephemeral but nonetheless demand to be seen, heard and considered, challenging 'traditional notions of planning and governance' (Finn 2014). While the language of DIY urbanism risks being co-opted by the very interests it claims to oppose (Mould 2014) the acts so described, being outside the control of corporate and state actors, remain open to those who wish to assert their presence in the city in the 'casual time' of happenings and events (De Certeau, 1984). As Blokland et al observe (2015, p. 664) the processes of claim-making implied or explicit in such actions 'are often fragmented, yet bridge to other claims in often unexpected ways'.

The town centre, and the commercial hub of the town centre known as the high street, has not hitherto been considered as a space in which non-commercial rights are claimed or demanded. Yet in different ways the case studies considered above do make such demands. First, they demand that those who use these central spaces are considered as participants in society, not simply as consumers. In different ways each case challenges the neoliberal narratives of validation through consumption that dominate town centres and define who can use urban space and how. The People's Republic of Stokes Croft led a campaign to boycott the supermarket chain Tesco, claiming its presence on Cheltenham Road would threaten independent local traders. Incredible Edible Todmorden, while avoiding direct criticism of supermarkets, challenged their economic model by growing and sharing food without charge in public spaces. The Transition Town network explicitly calls for a shift of spending

from multinational companies to local producers and retailers.

Second, in each case activists demand a right to influence the wider public realm. PRSC has delineated an area it has claimed as a 'cultural quarter'. Incredible Edible Todmorden has sought to recast the town centre as a hub of urban growing through the creation of a green route linking different parts of the town centre. Transition Town Totnes sees its calls to rethink local economies as part of a wider transition from fossil-fuel dependency that will affect all users of urban space.

Third, each group has demanded a right to be heard, and has expressed this through actions rather than through submissions to policymakers or representations to elected politicians. At root this is a demand to tell different stories about the purposes and prospects of particular places, and a call for those stories to be given attention. If planning is at least in part a matter of persuasive storytelling (Throgmorton 2003), the articulation of alternative stories 'can invoke an imagined future' (Goldstein et al 2015). As Goldstein and colleagues put it (p. 1290), 'change the story, and you change the city'.

These acts and activities may be marginal and ultimately unsuccessful, if success is construed as the realisation of a vision or programme. The margins matter, though, enabling the articulation of dissensus, interrupting 'the order of the sensible' (Huault et al 2014). In contesting enclosed spaces through 'a combination of resistance and creation' (Pickerill and Chatterton 2006) such spaces, whether they are physical locations or spaces of policy and decision-making, may be opened to new influences and directions. Such contestation may range from individual acts of defiance (Reyes 2016), as seen in Stokes Croft, to forms of 'insurgent citizenship' (Crawford 1995, Holston 2009), testing alternative practices of occupying and utilising space.

In this respect, the vulnerability of citizen-led action in town centres, which is unsurprising, may be less significant than its potential. Action that contests space, blurring the boundaries between its designated functions and uses that recognise alternative 'orders of worth' (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006), can turn locations that are restricted by ownership or zoning into places of possibility – what Lees (1994) calls the 'attempted reimagining of a civic community'. Central urban spaces can thus become liminal, providing habitats for the uninvited.

Performative acts – whether through visual art, the theatre of food-growing in public places, or the declaration of alternative proposals for the local economy – provide a platform for subaltern narratives of the future, allowing citizens to envisage the towns and cities they inhabit in novel ways (Throgmorton 2003, Van Dijk 2011). In doing so such performances may help to revive and rework notions of the agora as a civic space as well as a market.

They also allow the reframing of narratives of adaptive resilience, which could easily be translated as commercial laissez-faire, as politically engaged social-ecological resilience (Beilin and Wilkinson 2015). Beilin and Wilkinson describe social-ecological resilience as 'less about stability and more about resistance, persistence, remembering and recovery' (p. 1207). They frame such resilience in opposition to homogenising tendencies of commercial markets and neoliberal governance, claiming that it represents the 'power of utopian thinking' to galvanise change (p. 1215). Such resilience may be seen as a step towards a participatory low carbon society (Lewis and Conaty 2012), challenging the interests that currently dominate urban space.

A right to the story

The right to the city is thus not only the right to space, but the right to tell a story of space. The story concerns not only how space is or may be used and what rights may be exercised within it, but how such actions are considered and conceptualised. Resilience, far from being an empty signifier, emerges as an essentially contested concept (Gallie 1956), a banner under which citizens' interests may coalesce and for which opposing interests and groups struggle. While resilience was not part of the vocabulary of the People's Republic of Stokes Croft, the associated ideas of self-organisation, persistence, adaptability and change are very much part of the PRSC agenda, and have been described in terms of resilience in contrast with the accumulative agenda of property owners (Frenzel and Beverungen 2017). And both Incredible Edible Todmorden and, more explicitly, Transition Town Totnes, use resilience as a rallying cry to advance their own stories of urban transformation. These contrast with notions of economic resilience and adaptability that assume that the problems of the market - the homogenisation of town centres, the under-use and neglect of retail space, and the pricing out of independent and non-retail activity - will be resolved through the evolution of the market.

Within an activist reframing of resilience, the commercial heart of a town can become a site for experimentation in economic models that value local networks, products and distinctiveness beyond the economies of scale and similarity practised by mainstream retailers and commercial property developers (Hopkins 2010), allowing 'me towns' of consumption to be reshaped as 'we towns' of coproduction. Resilience becomes a characteristic of transition (Aiken 2012) rather than simply a form of resistance or an accommodation to change.

Through such activism, citizenship in town centres may be reclaimed from reductionist notions of consumer choice and recast as a creative, fluid and inclusive shaping of localities and societies, expanding citizenship's 'spatial, temporal and subjective boundaries' (Bullen and Whitehead 2005). As Davoudi (2012, p. 306) puts it, 'in the social world, resilience has as much to do with shaping the challenges we face as responding to them'. Exploring the understandings of resilience at work in contested town centre environments points us towards the 'new figure of citizenship' (Isin, 2009) by highlighting the places and spaces in which acts of identification and contestation take place, opening them up to analysis in terms of autonomy, appropriation, difference, and security (Isin, 2008). To lay claim to narratives of resilience and stories of the possibilities of place is to engage in acts of citizenship.

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