



# Geographical perspectives on grassroots innovations: diffusion and place-making

*Geography of Sustainability Transitions (GeoST) Webinar*

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## Grassroots innovations: definition

“[...] networks of activists and organisations generating novel **bottom–up solutions** for sustainable development; solutions that respond to the **local** situation and the **interests and values** of the **communities** involved. [...] grassroots initiatives operate in **civil society arenas** and involve committed activists **experimenting** with **social innovations** as well as using greener technologies”.

## Grassroots innovations: characteristics

- Inclusiveness (knowledge, processes, outcomes).
- Local communities in the lead; in control.
- Local appropriateness.
- Alternative forms of social organizing.
- Emergent (vs planned).
- Reaction to injustice.
- Not a blueprint for 'proper' innovation, but valuable in their own right; source of reflexivity and diverse sustainability pathways.

# Grassroots innovations: Examples



# Research questions

1. How does a geographical perspective help us better understand grassroots innovations? → *diffusion and place-making*
2. What theoretical approach could inform a geographical analysis of grassroots innovations? → *critical human geography*

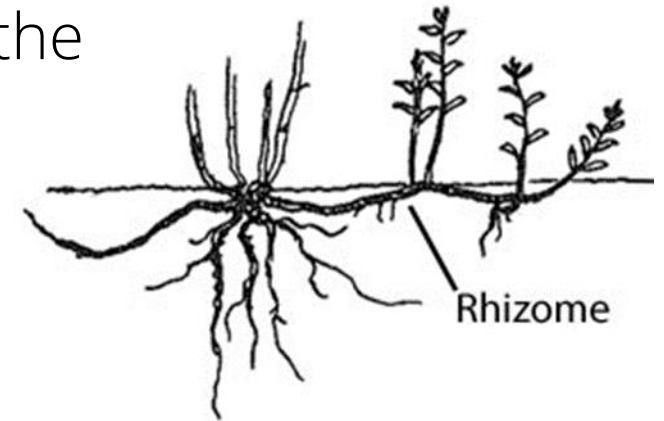
# This talk



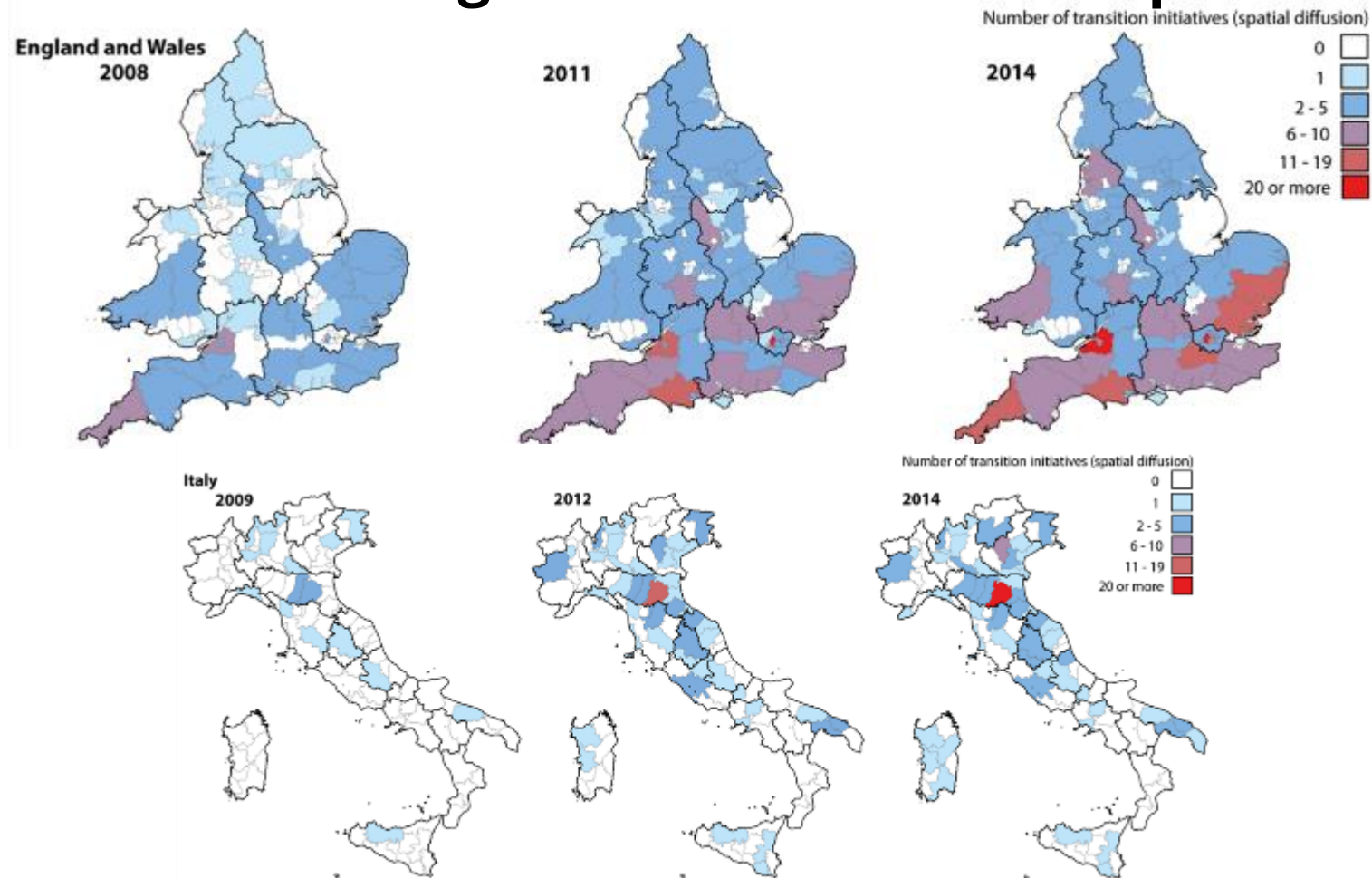
1. The diffusion of grassroots innovations
2. Grassroots innovations as place-making
3. For a critical perspective on sustainability transitions from the bottom up

## The diffusion of grassroots innovations: uneven patterns

- The “Transition Model has gone viral and has been adopted in towns and communities across the globe” (Rob Hopkins, founder).
- Rhizome-like diffusion (Scott-Cato and Hillier, 2010)
- But also cases of failure, barriers, discussion of pre-conditions (Walker, 2011; Mulugetta et al., 2010; Ornetzelder and Rohracher, 2013).



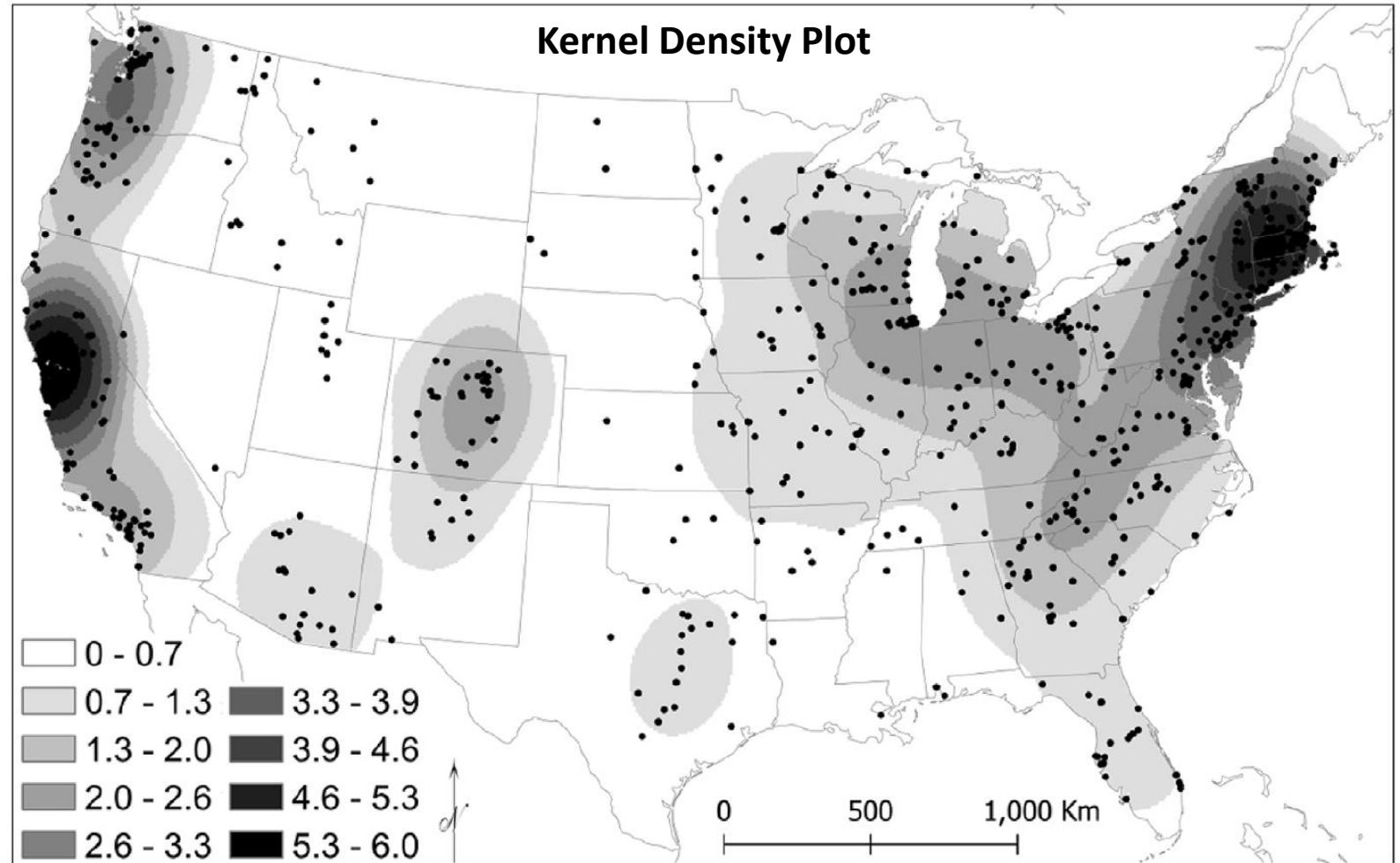
# The diffusion of grassroots innovations: patterns





# The diffusion of grassroots innovations: patterns

- Seed banks
- Cohousing initiatives
- Bike coops
- Community currencies
- Ecovillages
- Permaculture initiatives

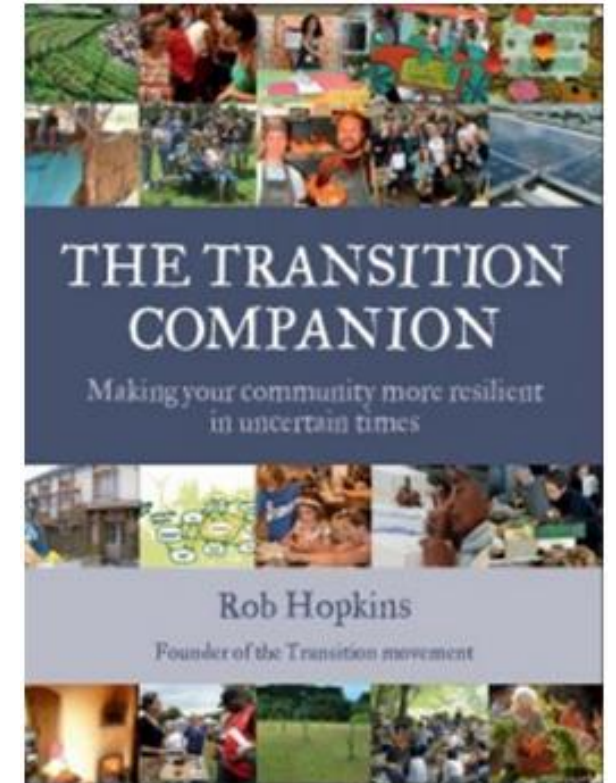


## The diffusion of grassroots innovations: location, location, location?

- (Pre)conditions such as civic culture (Feola and Butt, 2017), sociodemographic profile, place attachment (Feola and Nunes, 2014), alternative milieu (Longhurst, 2013, 2015).
- Proximity (esp. social and geographical) (Bailey et al., 2010; North, 2010; Shawki, 2013; Feola and Nunes, 2014).
- Possible cross-fertilization between movements (Feola and Butt, 2017; Nicolosi, Feola, Pleune, 2021).

# The diffusion of grassroots innovations: models that travel

- Balance between place-based and generalized principles and practices (Feola and Nunes, 2014; Nicolosi and Feola, 2016).
- Extensive translocal and intensive local relations (Feola and Nunes, 2014; Nicolosi and Feola, 2016).
- Role of relational and non-relational channels (Shawki, 2013).



# The diffusion of grassroots innovations

- Important and practically useful questions, such as:  
*What conditions do we need to create in order to foster grassroots innovations? What barriers do grassroots innovations need to be able to overcome? What social and cultural dynamics enable the 'embedding' of transition models in different contexts?*
- Resonance with **economic geography**: diffusion and mobility of ideas and innovations, networks, inter-organization (movement) relations (e.g., Hansen and Coenen, 2015).
- Place as a **site of transition**. Focus on conditions and ability of grassroots to exploit or create those conditions.

# This talk



1. The diffusion of grassroots innovations
2. Grassroots innovations as place-making
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## Grassroots innovations as place-making

What do grassroots innovations *do* when they pursue change toward sustainability?

A geographical perspective informed by:

- Relational approaches (e.g., Pierce et al, 2011; Murphy, 2015)
- Political ontology, territorial approaches (e.g., Escobar, 2018)
- Transformative geographies and diverse economies (e.g., Gibson-Graham, 2006; Schmid, 2019; Schmid and Smith, 2020)
- Autonomous spaces (e.g., Böhm et al., 2008; Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006; Chatterton, 2016)

## Grassroots innovations as place-making

A perspective that is useful for understanding grassroots initiatives in general, but specifically those for which a sustainability transition is a **post-capitalist** (or at least **post-growth**) transition.

# Grassroots innovations as place-making: TCA

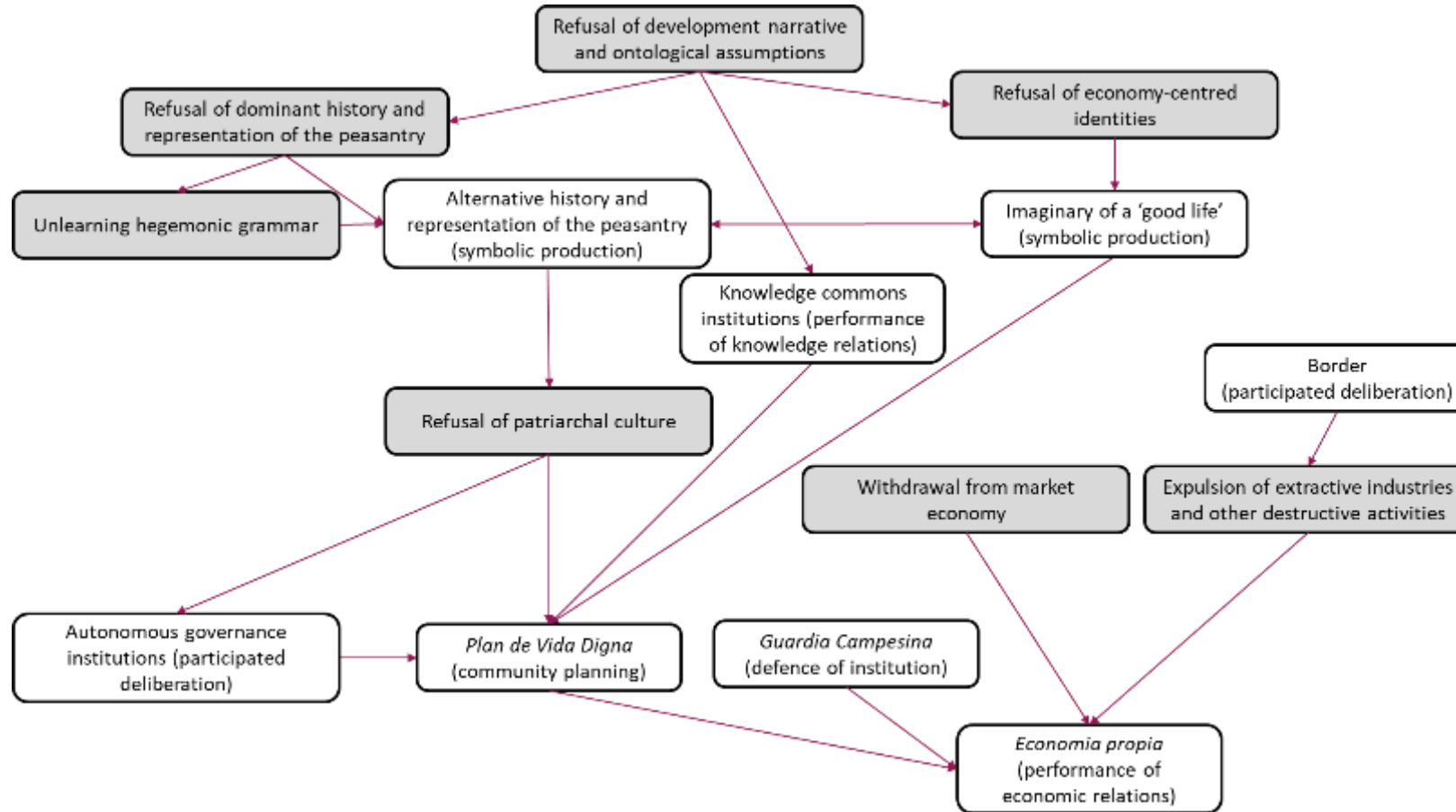
## Territorio Campesino Agroalimentario (TCA)

- a collective vision of an alternative future;
- a political tool for institutionalization of a peasant society (and economy);
- a physical area.



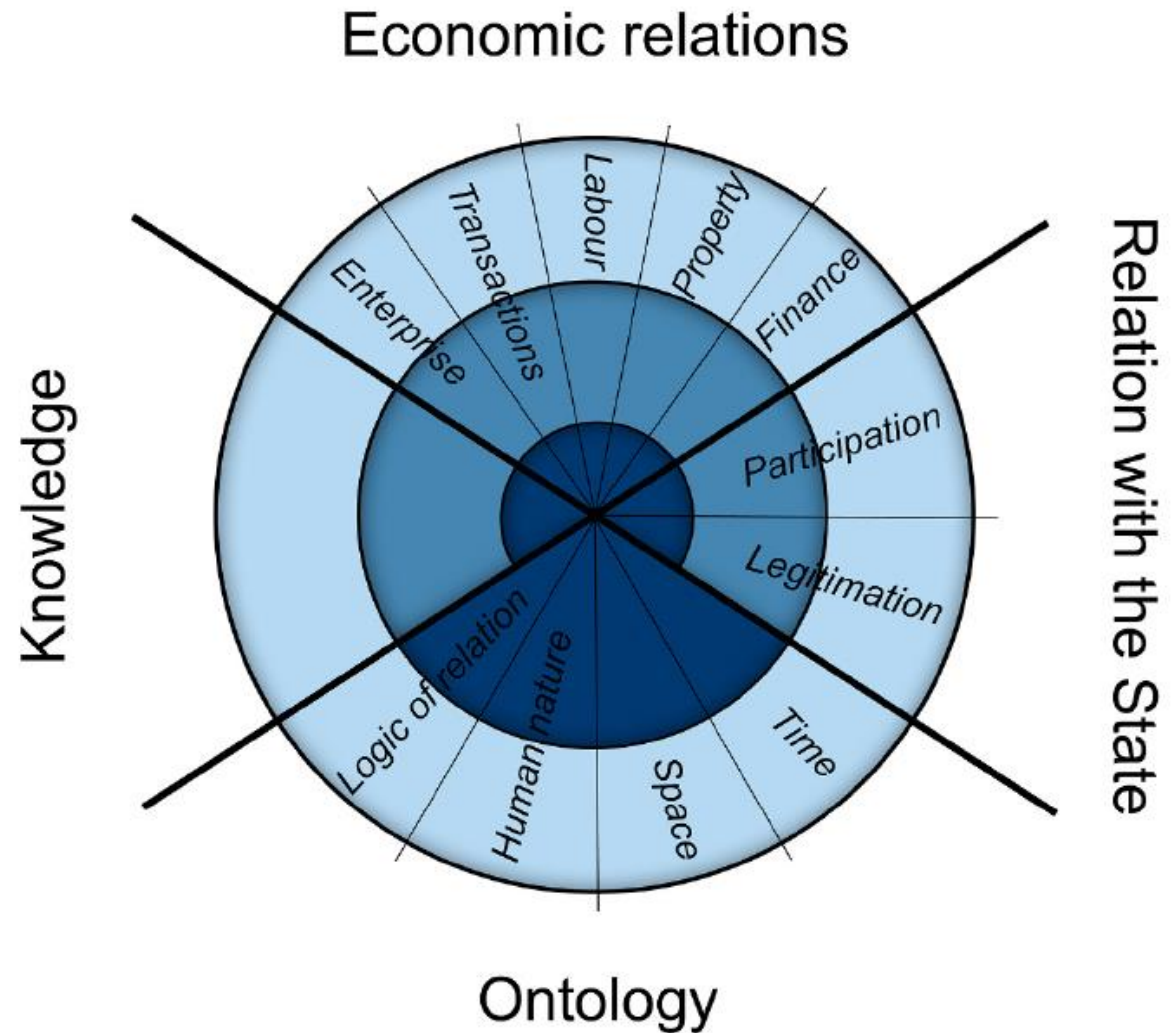


# Grassroots innovations as place-making: TCA



# Grassroots innovations as place-making

Community Supported Agriculture is more than grassroots social or socio-technical innovation.



# Grassroots innovations as place-making

Community energy projects in Taiwan:

- place (development) history and identity;
- decolonial vs modernization discourse;
- identity politics and indigenism.



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## For a critical perspective

- Place-making is a fruitful ground for **crosspollination of theories**.
- To understand ongoing processes of transformation beyond capitalism, what they entail, what they achieve, what supports them in ways that are generative for the people involved, etc. **the notion of 'grassroots innovations' is somewhat constraining.**

## For a critical perspective

Bottom-up processes that are community-led, inclusive, locally appropriate and emergent, but:

- not for sustainable development but **against Development**,
- not about solutions but **world-making** and -performing,
- not necessarily innovating; recognize **existing diversity**,
- defend justice (and/or sustainability), through **disabling** as much as through enabling,
- foreground **contestation** and antagonism, not consensus
- do not break-in the regime (MLP-like), but **break-out**;
- act through **differentiation** and **autonomy**, not through complementarity...

## For a critical perspective

...can we understand them as grassroots innovations?

Or:

- Diverse economies? (Gibson-Graham, 2008)
- Autonomous spaces? (Chatterton and Pickerill, 2010)
- Nowtopias? (Carlsson, 2010)
- Concrete utopias? (Muraca, 2017)
- Real utopias? (Wright, 2010)
- ...

# Thank you for your attention

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