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Panel:

Distributing Power: Civil Society Engagement in Urban Energy Distribution.

Keywords: Energy Grids; Civil Society Engagement in Energy Distribution; Urban Energy Governance; Networked Infrastructures

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1st Paper

Title: Distributing Power: Civil Society Group engagement in arenas of urban energy distribution

Presenters:

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In many countries, civil society groups have become part of the actor-landscape of energy systems. In these projects, citizen groups strive to participate in decision-making for and/or profits of energy production and provision. This entails not only technological and political, but also social or grassroots-innovations (Seyfang et al. 2014). These projects challenge conventional energy systems on symbolic, political, economic and material grounds.

Most of the existing research on community energy or grassroots-initiatives so far has focused on groups that are producing renewable electricity in rural settings. While this does mirror the empirical reality, we argue that in order to fully grasp the potential of civil society engagement in the energy system, attention must also be paid to groups engaging in the energy distribution sector—and hence in the politics of energy grids. This is the more important as energy grids are not only networked material artifacts, which are subject to a prevailing institutional setting of centralized energy systems, but also heavily imbued with vested interests and entrenched power.

In our paper, we will present different civil society groups who engage in the energy distribution system. Using Adele Clarke's situational analysis, we conceptualize civil society groups as social worlds, which are engaging in social arenas of energy distribution (policy?). While all of them strive to change the system of energy distribution, they aim to do so in very different ways, thereby challenging different aspects of the system's entrenched power structure. Using situational analysis enables us to analyze how the different social worlds try to alter the established relationships between actors, norms, material artefacts, and discourses within the system of energy distribution.

Keywords: Civil Society, Energy Distribution, Situational Analysis, Berlin, Hamburg

2nd Paper

Title: Do different societies sustain differential capacities for civil engagement in urban energy systems?

Presenter

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Sociologists treat civil society as a creation of modernity, and the rise of individualism, rationalism and the nation state. The idea of a private or civil sphere, separable from the political and the commercial, opens up potential for voluntaristic crafting of personal and social identities, beyond states and markets. This sphere of personal responsibility and relative autonomy is expected to sustain capacities for choosing to associate with others in projects to change society. In the context of climate disruption, some of those projects have formed around demands to end fossil fuel exploitation, and to develop new energy sources and uses. Many initiatives have focused on small-scale stand-alone systems in particular neighbourhoods. But in some places more significant political questions about ownership and control of large-scale distribution grids are being posed.

In this paper, I explore whether these more challenging civil society projects are more likely to emerge in some societies than others. Our qualitative research finds differences between the formation and engagement of civil society groups in Germany and Britain. Both countries have community groups investing for example in wind or solar power. Comparing Glasgow and Hamburg however shows that campaigns led by civil society groups and organisations in Hamburg have resulted in significant change in ownership and control of the city's energy grids. These groups sought a mandate for democratic control in order to ensure that the city could respond directly to the need for clean energy. In Glasgow, no such movements have developed and any community initiatives have remained small scale. How can this difference in the formation of social identities oriented to innovation in energy systems be explained? In the paper I argue that at least part of the explanation stems from the different political institutions, and market systems of Germany and Britain.

Keywords: Ownership of large-scale distribution grids, international comparison, Glasgow, Hamburg

3rd Paper

Title: The democratic challenges of the territorial energy transition: an investigation into Jena's citizen energy cooperative

Presenters:

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Since several years, citizen energy cooperatives have been becoming central actors in the German energy transition, supporting a decentralised, democratic, social and ecological energy transition. Tacking stock on the literature on energy democracy, this article aims to examine the democratic foundations and impacts of participative energy projects. For that purpose, we rely on a qualitative case study analysis of the city of Jena, where a citizen energy cooperative was created in 2011 and bought 2% of the shares of the municipal energy utility the following year. Through semi-directive interviews, a document analysis and observations, this article examines the work of political legitimation which was necessary to create and maintain this project. It also investigates the concrete impact of this project on local energy policy. Overall, the energy cooperative has contributed to reinforcing local deliberative arenas in the field of energy. However, the case of Jena also shows that tensions may arise between the overall goal of the cooperative's founders (support an inclusive and participative energy transition) and the financial interests of its members. These tensions contribute to threatening the legitimacy of the cooperative.

Keywords: Energy democracy, citizen cooperatives, municipal utility, energy transition, Jena