



Advocacy for Energy Transitions - Mapping the Dynamics

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This workshop maps the landscape of advocacy for 'energy transition', a decisive shift away from fossil fuels to varying forms of renewable energy. We consider the diverse players – scientists, industry, policy networks, media, NGOs, local community groups – and the strategies they employ, and address questions of energy democracy, what constitutes a 'just transition', and how it might be achieved.

'Energy transition' – a decisive shift away from reliance fossil fuels to varying forms of renewable energy – is an increasingly urgent priority in the context of advancing climate change. Across the globe, both high and low-income countries are now committed to a substantive shift in energy policy, expressed in 'Intended National Contributions' to emissions-reduction as ratified by the United Nations in 2015. Yet the Paris mandate, for a global ratcheting-up to reach 'net-zero emissions' by 2050, presents profound challenges for policy. It also presents challenges for social and political theory: there are wide concerns voiced, among others, by the World Bank (2012) and the United Nations Development Program (2008), that socio-political barriers pose the most difficult challenge for decarbonisation.

The workshop explores how the social sciences can help re-conceptualise energy and its role in society, enabling new paradigm-shifting agendas and re-framings. How can scholars bring these broader perspectives to bear, with policy practitioners, to help address the obstacles to transition?

The sociology and politics of energy is a relatively under-researched field: one leading scholar in the field found less than 5% social science or humanities citations in the field (Sovacool 2014). There are book-length studies of the politics of renewable electricity, but much of the research is focused primarily on the policy field, discussing the technical capacity of renewables, the economics of transition, and questions of legislative and administrative capacity. There is, however, a growing literature on 'social acceptance' for renewable energy, which identifies socialised ownership and participation in distributed renewable energy, along with regional planning, as important factors encouraging acceptance. The workshop builds on these latter studies, seeking a deeper understanding of the social and political imperatives and dynamics of transition.

Energy transition has become a key focus of political contention, especially in high-income, high-emitting countries with an entrenched fossil-fuel sector. While in the US a Senator brought a snowball into the Senate to disprove global warming, in

Australia the Treasurer brought a large piece of coal into Parliament, to taunt Labor and Green supporters of renewable energy. Such examples of political theatre reveal a deep and seemingly intractable contradiction between climate policy and entrenched reliance on fossil fuels. Thus, at the Paris summit, India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced the formation of a World Solar Alliance and ambitious targets for domestic renewable energy production, while stressing that India and other developing countries "need carbon space to grow".

The contradiction is double-sided – and the paradoxes are evident. In Australia, major fossil-fuel energy corporates now employ the rhetoric of energy transition; in 2017, AGL announced it would close the Liddell coal-fired power station in the Hunter Valley and replace it with a 'renewable energy hub'. Critics of renewable energy seek to frame energy policy as a choice between energy transition and "energy security", stressing the need for continuing reliance on coal and gas to guarantee "baseload power". Advocates of transition stress that a range of low-cost technological options already exist for solving the "energy trilemma"; the problem of providing an energy supply that is reliable, affordable and environmentally sustainable. This focus on technocratic solutions and financial benefits, though, ignores the reality that the energy transition is not simply a series of technical or cost imperatives, but is also a social process: as Ortwin Renn (2011) has written, "a better understanding of the human drivers for initiating, promoting or hindering change ... is as crucial to effective decision-making as are the findings of the natural and climate sciences".

The proposed workshop seeks to better understand these "human drivers" for energy transition. It will explore and map the landscape of advocacy for energy transition, and analyse its socio-political dynamics. We will consider the different actors – scientific groups, corporates, media players, policy networks, think tanks, non-government organisations, campaign groups, local community groups, and other civil society formations – who are advocating for transition, the relationships between them, and the strategies they employ for promoting their particular visions.

Broader theoretical, comparative and historical perspectives will be brought to bear on socio-ecological conflicts and energy transitions, in order to help develop strategic capacity. Successive energy transitions have enabled radically different social formations, with contrasting ecological impacts. Coal-fired power engendered a mass urban citizenry capable of deepening liberal democracy (Malm 2016). Oil, a fuel that could be easily transported and transformed into plastics, enabled new forms of social organisation, associated with new patterns of settlement and mobility (Mitchell 2012). Today's transition from fossil fuels is similarly establishing new socio-ecological relations of energy, driven by the underlying climate contradiction (Moore 2015). The result is profound social antagonism, but also transformation. As Mitchell argues, in relation to renewables, the "building of solutions to future energy needs is also the building of new forms of collective life" (2012).

In this socio-political context, questions of “energy justice” are central, both for climate policy and the energy regime. As borne-out in the Australian context, debates about who pays for the transition, and who stands to benefit - for instance from anticipated “green jobs” in the newly-emerging industrial sector - are critical in shaping the logic of political contention. With the simultaneous “phase-out” of fossil fuels, the issue of “just transition” for coal regions has become a key political fulcrum. In terms of “phase-in”, issues of “energy democracy”, and associated models for distributed and socialised provision (Jungjohann & Morris, 2017), are increasingly on the agenda.

Climate NGOs, unions, and local communities are becoming key agents in advocating for, and implementing, varying models of energy transition. These models are themselves hotly debated and contested, with questions of social ownership, agency and legitimacy, at the heart of these debates.

We expect the workshop will provide the basis for further research on the interactions between these different actors and models, and how they might influence, promote or hinder the process of transition. Questions of justice will guide this research: how can “energy justice” – and indeed “climate justice” – be advanced in the context of this highly contested process of transition, and what might a “just transition” look like?