P271 / Power systems: the energy transition as an interpretive struggle

Topic : Discourses, Ideas, and Narratives

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GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

In current geopolitical constellations, energy transitions towards decarbonization and electrification of energy production and consumption are politically deprioritized, despite urgent drivers of change including climate change, energy autonomy, resilience and adaptivity. Energy transitions are widely acknowledged as requiring changes in the socio-technical system encompassed in the configuration and interplay of technology, policy, markets, user practices, and infrastructure that fulfills societal functions (e.g., energy, mobility) (Kanger, 2021). Furthermore, transitions are often governed from a rational-technocratic perspective focusing on the techno-economic system at different 'sites': (inter)organizational, projects and programs, and at local, regional, national, global scales.

Increasingly, academic literature calls for more radical thinking about the changes needed to escape 'captured futures' (Hajer and Oomens, 2025), thus shifting from "transition" to "transformation" of energy systems. A transformation involves third order learning aimed not at optimizing existing practices, but exploring unknown futures (Termeer and Metze, 2019) and adaptive changes. Transformation also involves multiple shifts, including "…shifts in perception and meaning, changes in underlying norms and values, reconfiguration of social network and patterns of interaction, changes in power structures, and the introduction of new institutional arrangement and regulatory frameworks" (O'Brien et al., 2012, 436). Such transformational change foregrounds emergent policy conflicts and their relational, material, cultural/meaning, and emotional aspects (Verhoeven and Metze, 2022; Berglund et al. 2022;), while foregrounding power dynamics in transformational change. In other words, transformations are deeply culture, meaning-oriented, relational, and material, including the interactions of these elements.

Following this line of inquiry, this panel focuses on the ways sustainability transformations evolve relationally, materially, culturally and emotionally. Our interpretive approach foregrounds power dynamics – in their discursive and material dimensions – in the interplay between these elements as they cut across 'sites', including offline engagement. Discursive power foregrounds shifting interpretations of meaning, changing systems of knowledge and practices that support authority, and new materialities, all of which may open or close future possibilities toward transformation.

CALL FOR PAPERS

We invite conceptual and empirical papers that take an interpretive approach and policy perspective to energy transitions that foreground the interplay between transitional and transformational dynamics. Papers can further conceptualize and empirically investigate the complexities and deep uncertainties in the governance of energy transitions/transformations coming from an interplay between their relational, material, cultural (meaning) and emotional dimensions. Questions central in the panel are: Where is there opening up or closing down for transformational space along these dimensions, and why? What are the roles of relations, meaning, emotions, practices and materialities in opening or closing transformational change? How does discursive and material power operate in these dynamics to open or close the potential for transformation? What are the dynamics of transformation at the interpersonal, interorganizational, or systemic levels? How can our research – including action research – contribute to not only better understanding these dynamics, but also designing and intervening to contribute to more sustainable, adaptive and resilient energy futures? We are interested in including papers that aim to not only analyze but also design and cocreate interventions to contribute to adaptive, resilient energy transformations (Dodge, 2024).

Our aim is to propose an interpretive framework for energy-system transformation that draws on the unique insights offered by an interpretive policy perspective, and to work collectively to further articulate this framework. Interpretive policy analysis approaches offer important insights for deepening our understanding of transition/transformation dynamics in the energy field. It is out contention that socio-technical approaches

have provided important foundation for thinking about energy transitions/transformations but they elide important interpretive dimensions that are at the heart of transformational change. Elaborating on these dynamics will not only generate better understanding of these societal-policy dynamics but also more effective interventions toward a sustainable future.

References

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