



Original research article

# Struggles in European Union energy politics: A gramscian perspective on power in energy transitions

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## ABSTRACT

Over the past decades, a profound energy transition has begun. In 2014, the EU agreed to increase the share of renewable energy sources in its final energy consumption to at least 27 percent by 2030. This goal indicates that the transition will continue even as the speed of the transition is contested. To an even greater extent debates over the social character of the future energy regime also persist. This article argues that the energy transition is increasingly taking the shape of a passive revolution in a Gramscian sense, i.e. that transnational energy corporations (TNECs) are strengthening their efforts to dominate the new energy regime. Aside from its empirical focus, this paper also contributes to the attempts to better understand the role of politics, power and conflicts in energy transitions. Gramsci's integral understanding of structure and agency and the mediation of material interests and discursive constructions in struggles over hegemony offer a novel framework for the analysis of energy transitions.

## 1. Introduction

While in 2004 the share of renewable energies in the EU's gross final consumption of energy accounted for only 5.5 percent, in 2014 this share rose by 16 percent. In the electricity sector, renewables even accounted for 28 percent of total gross generation. The transition dynamics behind these figures have been widely investigated. The impulse for a transition to a renewable energy regime came through social movements that linked the search for an alternative to the fossil-nuclear energy regime with the aim of establishing less hierarchical social relations [1]. In recent years there has been a lot of research demanding an efficient path towards a renewable energy regime that focuses on the policy instruments needed to support the transition. Especially during the 2000s, there was intense debate over whether renewables are best supported by quota obligations with tradeable green certificates or by the so-called feed-in-tariffs (FiT) that guarantee investors a fixed remuneration for every kWh of electricity they produce [2,3].

Another line of research focuses more on the social and technological developments in niches that fueled the momentum towards a renewable energy regime. Emblematic of this line of research is the so-called 'Dutch' school of transition research ([4]: 10). On the ontological level, all research approaches share the view that the energy market is a dualist one. On the one hand, there exists a traditional, fossil and nuclear energy regime that is supported among others by huge transnational energy corporations (TNECs). On the other hand, there is an

emerging renewable energy regime that is mainly supported by new actors like renewable energy cooperatives, environmental movements or NGOs. However, as renewables gain a growing share of the electricity market and TNECs try to adapt to these developments, a more integrative perspective that reflects the interplay and strategic reorientation of the conflicting regimes and actors is needed.

In this article, I argue that a Gramscian perspective on Europe's energy transition can be helpful in understanding recent developments. In particular the discussions on hegemony projects and the concept of a passive revolution can help us to comprehend the strategies of incumbent operators in the electricity markets and their allies. I argue that the social forces related to the old fossil and nuclear energy regime have been relatively successful in recent years in shaping the social character of Europe's energy transition. Or, in line with Gramsci, they are heading towards a passive revolution by slowing down the growth of renewables and pushing the transition in the direction of large-scale renewable projects.

This article is structured as follows: first I discuss the main findings and shortcomings of existing transition research on Europe's energy transition. Building upon this, I introduce the Gramscian perspective on politics by outlining its main concepts such as hegemony, passive revolution and the integral state as well as hegemony projects. After presenting my methods and data I structure the empirical field by constructing two competing hegemony projects. Following on from this I outline the main developments at the European level in renewable

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energies. The work's seventh section forms the empirical core of the article. I will argue that there are at least five dynamics that clearly go in the direction of a passive revolution in Europe's energy transition. Finally, in the conclusion I discuss the work's main theoretical and empirical findings.

## 2. Insights from transition theory

Against the background of multiple crises, in the last 15–20 years sustainability transitions in social science research have been the subject of increasing attention. Markard et al. ([5]: 955) define four leading transition approaches: transition management, strategic niche management, the multi-level perspective (MLP) and technological innovation systems. Geels ([6]: 504) distinguishes seven different ontological perspectives on sustainability transitions. The common denominator of these approaches is that they try to grasp the social and technological developments that underlie the movement towards more sustainable paths of development.

Transition studies have without doubt made a huge contribution to a better understanding of the socio-technical momentum towards sustainability. Regarding the spatial point of reference, most studies focus on the national context. In accordance with the background of the researchers, the focal point is on European countries, especially the UK and the Netherlands. Only very few studies analyze Europe-wide developments ([5]: 961).

Aside from the critique concerning the bias towards the national level, other criticisms of transition theory have been expressed in recent years. Gailing and Moss ([7]: 6) argue that transition scholars often take 'a broadly apolitical approach to socio-technical change'. As a consequence, societal power relations that are articulated within all socio-technical transitions are not adequately taken into account [8]. This aspect is mirrored by the very influential MLP approach. The MLP 'attempts to capture the way in which technological and political change is embedded within and affected by broader global processes' ([9]: 4). It differentiates between the niche (micro-level), the regime (meso-level) and the landscape (macro-level). MLP scholars generally conceptualize sustainability transitions as a process starting with the development of new, innovative technologies (e. g. photovoltaic or wind power) within protected niches. Niche innovations at some point challenge the dominant socio-technical regime (e. g. the centralized electricity regime largely based on fossil and nuclear energies), while the socio-technical landscape constitutes the wider/exogenous context of transition processes ([10]: 441–2).

While some scholars criticize that the socio-technical landscape is a kind of residual category that lacks a theoretical determination, Geels ([11]: 36) concedes this to be a 'fair criticism' and offers three suggestions to make the concept of socio-technical regimes more fruitful. First, by conceptualizing it in a more dynamic way. Second, by assigning greater importance to forces and developments that help to stabilize existing regimes. And third, by reflecting the interplay between the three different levels, especially the interconnections between the regime and the landscape. But, as will be shown later in this article, these approaches fall short as the MLP lacks a profound basis in social theory. It is, as Geels admits, at best a middle-range theory ([11]: 26) or even less, a sequence of heuristic and classificatory concepts used to understand the dynamics of socio-technological change. Due to this shortcoming 'it often remains rather non-specific and ambiguous what exactly will constitute these widely mooted "green transformations" or "transitions to sustainability"' ([12]: 55).

In recent years, several papers have placed emphasis on developments that tend to stabilize existing regimes. Turnheim and Geels [13] analyze the role of the British coal industry, Baker et al. [9] elaborate on the efforts of South Africa's Mineral Energy Complex to stall the switch to renewable energies, Kungl [14] explores the strategies of Germany's incumbent energy providers, Lauber and Sarasin [15] compare German and Swedish incumbent utilities.

These studies broaden the empirical range of transition theories and contribute to a better understanding of the obstacles preventing fast sustainability transitions and the social forces that try to maintain existing power relations. However, the claim that power and politics should be introduced into the MLP [70] falls short as there is no theoretical basis within the framework that allows for it to be widened so profoundly. Instead, there is a need to develop a theoretical perspective on energy transitions that reflects the social relations [16] that form the context of sustainable or 'green' transformations in capitalism [17,18]. Furthermore, we need to analyze transition dynamics not in a dualist way by investigating either the forces of change (niches) or the forces of inertia (regime actors), but in a more dialectical way by considering the dynamic interplay between social actors and their permanent strategic reorientation.

Against this backdrop and in pursuit of the claim to further developing the theorization of energy transitions [19], several authors offer different analytical perspectives in order to explore the structural and institutional dynamics of energy transitions [9,20–22]. This paper contributes a Gramscian perspective to this debate.

Aside from theoretical issues, transition studies must also develop a greater sensitivity towards supranational developments, especially in the European context. Geels [23] conducted an early and important work which questioned the impacts of the financial and economic crisis on sustainability transitions. His conclusion indicates the importance of overall, supranational political developments for sustainability transitions: '[...] it is hard to avoid the impression that climate and energy policies are actually moving in the wrong direction in response to financial-economic pressures (austerity) and declining public attention [...]' ([23]: 26). I will show later that the interplay between austerity-driven crisis management in the EU and struggles over energy politics are crucial to understanding Europe's energy transition.

To sum up, overcoming the above-mentioned shortcomings of leading transition approaches implies a twofold challenge. Firstly the challenge is to develop a theoretical framework that encompasses overall social relations, including the power relations that lie therein. Second, the framework should avoid overemphasizing structural developments, but should instead leave enough scope for actors and the creation of values and meaning. To do so, I will develop a Gramscian perspective on politics in the next section.

## 3. A Gramscian understanding of politics

Antonio Gramsci was a leader of the Italian communist party in the 1920s and was imprisoned in 1926. Gramsci focused his analysis on the interplay between the social structures (the economy) and super-structures (civil society and the state in a narrow sense), becoming a source of inspiration for International Relations and (heterodox) International Political Economy scholars [24]. While Gramsci acknowledged the importance of social structures, he also emphasized the importance and partial contingency of social struggles, fought out by specific actors with different resources and strategic approaches. This refers to the necessity of developing a profound understanding of the context, the actors and the processes related to social struggles [25]; a theme that will be developed further below. In the following, I will outline four of Gramsci's concepts that are useful for understanding the struggles over the EU energy transition: hegemony, passive revolution, the integral state and hegemony projects (the latter was not developed by Gramsci himself, but by scholars building on his work).

Driven by his epistemological interest, Gramsci developed a very specific understanding of hegemony. Hegemony is a mode of bourgeois power that combines the coercion and consent of the subaltern within social structures. Gramsci's understanding of hegemony is linked to the material base of society. He distinguishes between a ruling class whose power is mainly based on coercion and a leading class that is able to embed the subaltern in the power nexus. This hegemonic capacity lies in the ability of ideological leadership to structure the common sense of

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