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Sustainability transitions: A political coalition perspective



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ABSTRACT

In the case of technology transitions to low-carbon sources of energy, there is growing evidence that even in countries with a strong political consensus in favor of a transition, the pace has been slow in comparison with the need to reduce greenhouse gases. One factor that affects the slowness of the transition is political resistance from the incumbent industrial regime. Using data on the mobilization of resistance from the fossil-fuel industry in the United States, the study builds on the growing literature on the political dimensions of sustainability transitions by drawing attention to the role of incumbent regime coalitions, grassroots coalitions in support of green transition policies, and countervailing industrial power. Case studies of political coalitions for ballot propositions in the U.S. are used to show how countervailing industrial power, especially from the technology and financial sector, can tip the balance of electoral spending in favor of grassroots organizations.

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1. Introduction

The literature on the transitions of sociotechnical systems generally assumes that the changes take place over a long period of time, such as a half century, and that the relatively slow pace of a transition can be beneficial, because a pace of several decades or more can give some time for social practices, industrial organizations, legislatures, and regulators to mitigate disruptions and side effects. However, in the case of sustainability transitions (STs) to low-carbon energy sources, the slow pace has long-term environmental effects (e.g., greenhouse gases) that will prove costly. Many countries continue to increase fossil-fuel consumption, and in many places the gains in renewable-energy production have not been substantial enough to reduce the growth in aggregate emissions (York, 2010, 2011). Even where national governments have embraced ST policies, existing energy regimes have often been affected only at the margins.

This research note will provide a perspective on the problem of the slow pace of STs based on research in the United States, where the fossil-fuel industry has mobilized to block ST policy reforms. Although the focus on the U.S. and especially the state-government level may appear to be parochial, the choice of the U.S. case helps to counter-balance what Markard et al. (2012) describe as the “European bias” in the field of ST studies, that is, the tendency for theories of STs to be founded on a base of European cases.

The well-known cross-Atlantic gap in environmental social theory between ecological modernization theory and treadmill theory suggests the need to attend to the ways in which social theories does not always travel well across societies (Mol and Spaargaren, 2000; Pellow et al., 2000; Scheinberg, 2003). To this point, Kern (2012) flags portability problems in ST theory and practice within Europe, even between the historically related and cultural similar countries of the Netherlands and the U.K. It is possible that attention to the particularities of the blocked ST in the U.S. may provide some general insights into ST theory. For example, van der Loo and Loorbach (2012) note that the Dutch Energy Transition Project has not been able “to challenge the societal energy regime in any fundamental way” and that instead conservatives have debated subsidies for renewables (2012, p. 242). Likewise, Kern and Smith (2008) note that the project was dominated by large energy companies and by a broader ideological climate of liberalization.

To avoid misunderstanding, it is important to clarify that frameworks for the study of transitions of large sociotechnical systems such as the multilevel perspective have been applied to other world regions and with success, such as the transition to the internal combustion machine in the U.S. transportation (Geels, 2005). The study in question also drew attention to the counter-mobilization of farmers who originally opposed sharing roads with motorized vehicles. Rather than arguing that existing transition theory is inapplicable, the point is that a comparative perspective raises the question of what kinds of issues are most relevant for the study of a particular type of transition in a particular country and time period. Certainly, there was no carefully organized political opposition by the horse-and-carriage industry, or if there was, it is not part of the currently understood history. Even Hughes's (1983) detailed, comparative study of the electrification transition only mentions in

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passing political opposition from the gaslight industry. In contrast, in the case of the green-energy transition in twenty-first century U.S., the political contestation by the incumbent industrial regime is so well organized that it should be at the center of the analytical framework. More generally, we can hypothesize that in political systems where there is an open, agonistic political process; a high level of industrial influence on the political field through lax regulation of campaign financing and outright corruption; and a powerful established industry that views a ST as threatening, then it is likely that the incumbent industry will mobilize a powerful and effective political opposition to the proposed ST. In Europe there is a greater tendency for governments to dampen potential conflicts through consultative processes (Badaracco, 1985; Jasanoff, 2004). Although industrial influence on politics occurs, it tends to be through the Commission rather than through a vast network of media, think tank, and campaign financing organizations. By bringing out the specificities of the American case, it is possible to shed general light on STs as a political process. Specifically, this study investigates the thesis that countervailing industrial power can provide a crucial element of support to pro-ST political coalitions when there is a conflict with an incumbent regime that has mobilized to slow or block the transition.

2. Literature review and framework

The study of STs is now an established research field with 60–100 papers produced per year (Markard et al., 2012). An influential perspective is work from a multilevel perspective, which emphasizes the dynamics between niches and incumbent technological regimes (e.g., Geels, 2011). In the case of STs, there is broad recognition that government industrial policy is needed to provide protective support to new industrial niches such as renewable energy firms until they have achieved sufficient scale (Smith and Raven, 2012). In Europe and some other world regions, there is a broad policy consensus in favor of a ST for energy, and thus the issue of political conflict over STs is less important theoretically, and the focus of research tends to involve issues of management and policy implementation. However, there is a small but growing literature on transitions in general and STs in particular that pays attention to the political and power dimensions of STs (Flor and Rotmans, 2009; Geels, 2011; Genus and Coles, 2008; Rotmans and Kemp, 2008; Shove and Walker, 2007; Smith et al., 2005; Smith and Raven, 2012). For example, Meadowcroft, (2009, 2011) also points to the irreducibly political character of STs, the difficulties of defining sustainable technologies, and issues of democratic participation. An important aspect of the politics of STs is the potential for them to become politically contested. Geels and Schot (2007) recognize that in the transformation pathway, the incumbent regime may resist proposed changes, and it may alter its trajectory of development. Elzen et al. (2011) discuss how animal welfare advocates mobilized for better treatment of farm animals, and they also describe how farmers experienced technical difficulties and pushed back on the reforms. Grin (2010) analyzes the broader transition to sustainable agriculture as a contested political process that involved the environmental movement, sustainable farmers, industrial farmers, and government agencies. Likewise, Jørgensen (2012) uses actor-network theory to study the longstanding political conflict between nuclear and wind energies in Denmark. In general, there has been growing interest in the role of social movements as crucial actors in the politics of STs (e.g., Hess, 2007; Geels and Verhees, 2011).

Although research on the politics of STs is growing, it has not yet fully analyzed situations in which organizations associated with the incumbent regime mobilize to halt a nascent or growing ST. To some degree general coalition theory in political sociology is a relevant resource. The literature has studied conditions that facilitate

coalition formation among grassroots groups, including social ties among organizations; shared frames and goals, which are often forged through compromises and are enhanced by individuals who serve as bridge brokers; and political context, which includes both the openness to change of elites and the threats posed to organizations (Van Dyke and McCammon, 2010). However, this literature does not provide a systematic explanation of the mechanisms that enable coalitions to achieve their goals when there is resistance from an incumbent regime that is represented by a politically powerful dominant industry. On this point Showm (2011) suggests that the relative unity or disunity of business interests is one important factor that shapes the outcomes of ST politics. Building on this argument and general work on the political sociology of social movements and technology (e.g., Moore et al., 2011), this study suggests that the conceptual framework for studying STs should include the relations among established industry coalitions, grassroots or green transition coalitions, and countervailing industrial power. Thus, the approach to the issue of power in STs focuses on a conflicted political field in the Bourdieusian sense in which coalitions mobilize to support, block, or modify ST policies (Bourdieu, 2005). As applied to the problem of STs, the approach has three crucial mechanisms of mobilization:

1. Incumbent regime mobilization. Incumbent regimes are viewed not simply as bodies of rules and institutions but as organized agents in the political field. They mobilize against ST policies that are perceived to threaten their short-term profitability and long-term existence. In the cases that follow, the established industry coalition includes the petroleum, coal, and natural gas industries; the electrical utilities with the concerns for baseload generation and an interest in nuclear power; and right-wing think tanks and conservative political leaders who frame the green-energy transition as the improper government role in the economy.
2. Grassroots mobilizations of green-transition coalitions. Social movement organizations will form coalitions to support ST policies, and they will forge frames and discourses that allow cross-movement solidarity (Mayer, 2008). The green-transition coalitions include blue-green (labor-environmental) alliances, urban political constituencies that support green jobs, and the rising industries in a niche positions (e.g., green-energy industries; Hess, 2012).
3. Countervailing industry mobilization. Countervailing industrial power is a concept developed from Galbraith (1952) that is used here to refer to industrial power that can provide the financial and political resources to support grassroots coalitions. Increasingly, wealthy individuals in the high-technology and financial services industries have provided high levels of funding in political campaigns that can counter-balance fossil-fuel industry funding.

3. Political coalitions and the energy transition in the U.S.

3.1. Spatial and scalar unevenness in the U.S.

The cases presented here will focus on the green-energy ST in the US, specifically the conflict over fossil-fuels versus renewable energy at the state-government level, where there is considerable variation and unevenness. The focus responds to what Markard et al. (2012) describe as a second “bias” in the literature on STs, the tendency for the literature to focus on national rather than subnational or urban levels of analysis (2012, p. 961). Likewise, Coenan et al. (2012) also argue for the importance of attention to spatial and scalar dynamics in the study of STs. In the U.S. during the administration of Republican President George W. Bush (2000–2008), the

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