



ELSEVIER

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Environmental Innovation and Societal Transitions

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/eist



News

The double hermeneutic of sustainability transitions



René Audet*

Département de stratégie, responsabilité sociale et environnementale, École des sciences de la gestion, Université du Québec à Montréal, Case postale 8888, succursale Centre-ville, Montréal, Québec H3C 3P8, Canada

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 16 July 2013

Received in revised form 16 December 2013

Accepted 12 February 2014

Keywords:

Double hermeneutic

Discourse

Transition

Action research

Epistemology

ABSTRACT

How should sustainability transitions deal with the fact that 'transition' has become a buzzword in political discourse and a label for social ecology movements? Building on Giddens' conception of a double hermeneutic, the paper explores the current appropriations and interpretations of the transition category by political and social actors, and outlines the challenges and opportunities of this double hermenetic in terms of symbolic politics and transformative research.

© 2014 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

How should sustainability transitions deal with the fact that 'transition' has become a buzzword in political discourse and a label for radical ecology movements? Of course, the diffusion of the sustainability transitions ideas bears good news for transition researchers as it could bring more public and institutional attention for their work. It is however striking that the notions of transition circulating in public spaces only adopt partial aspects of the conceptual background of sustainability transitions. This may suggest that the study of sustainability transitions has arrived at a point where more reflection is needed on its role in society.

Giddens proposed the term 'double hermeneutic' for the process by which the framing of new concepts in the social sciences changes the way social actors understand the very phenomenon that these concepts aim to describe: "The theories and findings of the social sciences cannot be kept wholly

* Tel.: +1 514 987 3000x5254.

E-mail address: audet.rene@uqam.ca

separate from the universe of meaning and action which they are about. But for their part, lay actors are social theorists whose theories help to constitute the activities and institutions that are the object of study of specialised social observers or social scientists [...] The point is that reflection on social processes (theories and observations about them) continually enter into, become disentangled with and re-enter the universe of events that they describe” (Giddens, 1984, p. xxxii–xxxiii). Inevitably, distortion happens both in the meaning and the scope of theories as they are appropriated for public discourse and social practices. This appropriation may bring both challenges and opportunities to the fields of sustainability transitions. I illustrate this here by describing two discourses on transitions and by showing how they overlap with certain aspects of sustainability transitions research. I then outline one epistemological challenge and one methodological opportunity given by the double hermeneutic of sustainability transitions.

The recent years have witnessed the emergence of a ‘managerial-technocentrist’ discourse on transition towards a ‘green’ or ‘low-carbon economy’ in international organisations like the [United Nations Environmental Programme \(2011\)](#), the [International Energy Agency \(2010\)](#) or the [Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development \(2010\)](#). This discourse has a technocentrist basis as it presents transition as an opportunity for growth through technological modernisation, and environmental innovation (Bailey and Wilson, 2009). It also bears a strong managerial orientation with the idea that change can be coordinated through state interventionism (Adger et al., 2001). In fact, the managerial-technocentrist discourse insists on stimulating investments in green technologies by introducing financial, fiscal, technical and normative incentives in order to compensate for the incapacity of the private sector to overcome the perceived risks associated with such investments. Interestingly, the managerial-technocentrist discourse approximately pictures transition as a ‘transformation pathway’ as defined in the multi-level perspective: a response of regime actors for “modifying the direction of development paths and innovation activities” in a context of “moderate landscape pressure” (Geels and Schot, 2010, p. 57).

Another discourse on transition is the ‘radical-ecocentrist’ version proposed by the transition movement (Hopkins, 2008) and various networks of cities and local authorities (Energy Cities, 2012; Bailey and Wilson, 2009). It proposes a grassroots, localist approach to deep social, environmental and cultural transformations, focusing on the role of local actors in delineated spaces (cities, villages, neighbourhoods, etc.) broadly understood as ‘metabolisms’ or ‘resilient ecosystems’. An interesting aspect of the radical-ecocentrist discourse is the fact that it provides a frame for emerging practices – such as envisioning technics and systemic metaphors – that recall in many aspects the transition management approach (Loorbach, 2007). In contrast, however, this discourse tends to bear a preference for small-scale social units and it counts on social innovation rather than technological (Bay, 2013).

In sum, while both the managerial-technocentrist and the radical-ecocentrist discourses only partially adopt aspects of sustainability transitions frameworks, they nevertheless give ground to new policy-making options and new social practices. These discourses correspond to what Giddens calls ‘theories-in-use’. Thus, the core theoretical question posed by the double hermeneutic of transition is ‘How may transition discourses and theories-in-use influence future transitions?’

Recent debates on sustainability transitions have emphasised a certain lack of consideration for political conflicts and critical perspective (Meadowcroft, 2011; Shove and Walker, 2007). The fact that transition thinking leads to theories-in-use makes the point even more salient because it creates new conditions at the level of socio-technical regimes. If regime actors and norms are now drawn by a managerial-technocentrist discourse, they might legitimise and re-enforce regimes reforms instead of fostering radical innovations and transitions. The danger is that of ‘symbolic politics’ – a process where the transition category would qualify the green policy of regime actors, but without leading to the needed transformations to mitigate the ecological crisis (Bluhdorn, 2007). The remedy to this could be to engage, as transition researchers, in a much more reflexive and critical relationship with the discourses that we influence. Giddens suggests about this: “The formulation of critical theory is not an *option*; theories and findings in the social sciences are likely to have practical (and political) consequences regardless of whether or not the sociological observer or policy-maker decides that they can be ‘applied’ to a given practical issue” (Giddens, 1984, p. xxxv). I would argue that a critical perspective should lead to recognizing the possible consequences of sociotechnical epistemologies

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/108225>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/108225>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)