



Social movements and urban energy policy: Assessing contexts, agency and outcomes of remunicipalisation processes in Hamburg and Berlin



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ABSTRACT

This paper assesses the influence of social movements as actors in urban energy politics. Presenting two case studies of remunicipalisation processes in the German cities Hamburg and Berlin, a framework is developed to discuss policy contexts, the agency of these movements, as well as the policy outcome in each city. A short comparison shows that agency is based on context features such as legal frameworks and social movement and policy traditions, while policy outcomes are considered the result of agency. Contextual circumstances must be considered if utility and urban energy policies are to be successfully transferred to other settings.

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1. Introduction

Recent studies related to the subject of community energy (Seyfang et al., 2014) highlight the growing role played by cooperative and citizen-led initiatives in energy provision.¹ Especially in the context of the German energy transition (*Energiewende*), “citizen energy” (*Bürgerenergie*) in its various forms has allowed farmers and citizens to become major producers of renewable energy (Kunze, 2012; Radtke, 2013). Beside this, the economic shifts in the course of Germany’s energy transition found expression in the field of energy utilities, too. The German energy sector experienced a number of so-called remunicipalisations, whereby full or partial public ownership over urban energy utilities was re-established after previous privatisations (Hall et al., 2013).

Taken together, these shifts underline the sociotechnical character of the German energy transition (Bolton and Foxon, 2015;

Chappin and van der Lei, 2014), transforming not only technological features of the German energy system, but also related actor landscapes, legal frameworks, and market structures. This shift was often interpreted as a democratisation of the energy sector reflecting the decentralizing effects of renewable energy technology (Scheer, 2012). Moreover, this has established ownership in energy infrastructures and businesses as topic for both policy and research (Cumbers, 2012; Moss et al., 2014).

While these social and economic shifts were often interpreted through the lens of meso-level theoretical approaches such as sustainability transition studies (Gawel et al., 2014), regime shifts (Strunz, 2014) and strategic action field theory (Schmid et al., 2016; Fuchs and Hinderer, 2014), the emergence of these shifts on the local level is still a widely under-researched topic in the German context. Addressing this gap, our work is linked to a number of recent studies highlighting both the importance of cities as sites of energy transitions and the role of potentially conflictive politics therein (Luque-Ayala and Silver, 2016; Beveridge and Naumann, 2016). Our own contribution is inspired by long-standing debates over the influence of social movements on the policy process in general and urban governance in particular (Rochon and Mazmanian, 1993; Meyer, 2005). We thus want to clarify “the potentially growing and significant role of urban actors in energy transitions and policies” which is “justified, but still greatly

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¹ Literature on “community energy” is well developed and has already covered several domains such as the innovative character and business models of such projects (Smith et al., 2016; Yildiz et al., 2015), how projects recruit their members or investments (Hoffman and High-Pippert, 2010), but also local resistance and conflicts towards renewable energy (Cass and Walker, 2009; Devine-Wright, 2011).

unexplored” (Rutherford and Jaglin, 2015: 173).

Weaving together these different strands, this paper analyses the role of social movements in establishing community-based forms of energy infrastructure ownership and governance. Namely, it provides two case studies, one of Hamburg and one of Berlin, in which social movement activism proposed two diverse forms of future ownership of the city's energy grids: cooperative ownership on the one hand, and remunicipalisation in the sense of a re-establishment of state ownership, on the other. These collective forms of ownership would imply a reversal of previous privatisations in both cities, therefore they also provide insight into two major conflicts about urban energy provision. While the stipulations and ideas of the initiatives are discussed elsewhere (Becker et al., 2015; Blanchet, 2015; Kunze and Becker, 2015), this paper focusses on the interplay of different actors in the specific contexts of the two cities.

The aim of this paper is thus to give a structured account of the events in both cities and to gain exploratory insights on the way in which contextual conditions as well as the agency of social movements and local governments produce varying outcomes, that is a remunicipalisation in Hamburg and the maintenance of the status quo in Berlin. The next section of this article introduces the debates on strategic action fields and on the influence of social movements on policy processes. In the third section we present the methodology of our study and give a short introduction to the different forms of organisation covered. Following that, we describe the two cases selected for this study. Finally, findings of this cross-case comparison are discussed, before concluding remarks are set out.

2. Analytical framework: social movements and the policy process in urban energy transitions

2.1. Energy transitions and strategic action field theory

A number of recent studies on the German energy transition sought to explain shifts in power relations and actor constellations by drawing on the theory of strategic action fields, applying it either on the national scale (Schmid et al., 2016; Fuchs and Hinderer, 2014), or on the local level (Blanchet, 2015). In their foundational work for this theory, Fligstein and McAdam (2011, 2012) suggested that society is structured into a number of relational fields that are constructed and maintained through the strategic agency of collective actors. According to their relative position, ‘skill’ and vision for the future development of the field, these collective actors are categorised into incumbents and challengers (2011, 5–6). Incumbents (generally a few political elites) shape the political agenda according to their interests, control the majority of available resources, and the rules of the field tend to support their positions. Challengers, meanwhile, are envisioned as less powerful bottom-up initiatives that operate largely outside of the formal political process. They develop new ideas and alternative policies, and seek to bring about change within the field, thereby threatening the dominant position of the incumbents. From this perspective an energy transition is interpreted as the reorganisation of the field of energy policy or energy provision through different arenas in which new actors emerge and reshape the relative positioning of actors towards the field (cf. Schmid et al., 2016).

As an actor-based field theory, the strategic action field approach helps to understand the relative recalibration of actor constellations and policy fields, but only allows for a limited understanding of the actual interactions between different types of actors. Pettinicchio (2012: 502) has shown instances where the boundary between incumbents and challengers is blurred, for example in the case of incumbent actors supporting the cause of challengers, or of an outsider becoming incorporated as an

incumbent while remaining an activist. Also, one should not conflate single policies with the change of entire fields. Moreover, while focussing on the interaction between groups of actors and broader field changes, strategic action field theory does not shed much light on the concrete influence that opponents may have on the policy process beyond a field change. In other words, is field change the only kind of change triggered by actors within the field? To answer such questions we need another framework that helps us to explain various kinds of changes that can happen within the field, especially those who are less far-reaching than a field change.

2.2. Social movements and the policy process

Recent studies on local energy transitions highlighted the conflicts that arise when different actors reject or propose different pathways or temporal horizons for the transition to a more sustainable energy system (McAdam and Boudet, 2012; Rutherford and Jaglin, 2015). Often, social movements push for an acceleration, democratisation or more socially just realisation of energy transitions (Luque-Ayala and Silver, 2016). For this reason, we now turn to the debate on the policy impact of social movements (Rochon and Mazmanian, 1993; Meyer, 2005; Amenta, 2014) from which we will derive three analytical categories to be applied throughout in the remainder of this paper.

While the emergence and strategies of social movements have been a core research topic since the early days of social movement research, from the 1980s onwards efforts were made to systematically assess their impact on the formulation of policy. While quantitative statistical methods (cf. Amenta, 2014: 18f.) were utilised to tackle this question, more qualitative approaches were used to understand how public policy and social movement activity influence each other, thus allowing for a dialogical method of analysis (Meyer, 2005: 14). Until today, this remains a difficult undertaking as social movement and policy research form distinct epistemic communities. As Meyer (Meyer, 2005: 2) put it, “social movement scholars treat the policy process as a black box within the state, which movements may occasionally shake and upset into action, whereas policy scholars treat movements as undifferentiated and unitary actors who respond (or not) by disruption.”

Those who conceptualise social movement activity and the policy process together generally acknowledge that social movements have their greatest impact during the agenda-setting phase of policy processes as they rely on “demonstrations, education campaigns, and lobbying” (Andrews and Edwards, 2004: 492). Beyond that, Rochon and Mazmanian (1993:77) suggest that there are three main ways for social movements to impact upon policy-making, namely by directly altering government policies, by introducing changes in the policy process through increased participation, or by bringing about change in social values by expanding the range of policies considered feasible. Focussing more directly on interaction, Meyer (2005: 12) proposes different ways through which social movements can influence a close circle of policy-makers. This could happen either by empowering an ally instead of an adversary (replacement), by converting local decision-makers (conversion), by creating a new policy issue (creation), or by reconfiguring a policy issue through the introduction of new actors within it (reconfiguration).

Overall, research on social movements and the policy process resulted in a rather decentered account of social movements by “putting them in their place” (McAdam and Boudet, 2012). As a result, the conception of social movements as a sole explanatory variable was replaced by various relative notions such as “mediation” between movements and governments (Giugni, 2007), or the context or path-dependency of policies was stressed (Goodwin and Jasper, 2012; Uba, 2009). Drawing from theoretical approaches

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