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## The role of labour power in sustainability transitions: Insights from comparative political economy on Germany's electricity transition

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## ABSTRACT

Greenhouse-gas-emission-reductions to prevent dangerous levels of climate change require a global transition away from fossil-fuel energies. Sustainability transitions of such scale present a major redistribution process, and pose severe challenges to national policy-making. While power and politics have recently been addressed by scholars of sustainability transition, the role of labour as a central political actor is still underexplored. This article aims to close this gap by engaging theories from Comparative Political Economy, asking: *How does labour power influence energy transitions?* Specifically, we introduce power resources theory to Kuzemko et al.'s (2016) “forces for continuity” of fossil-fuel regimes and “forces for sustainable change”. We illustrate the resulting framework with the case of the German electricity transition. Our findings include a) the potential of organised labour to tip the scales in energy transition politics towards continuity or change, b) the relevance of unions' political access and their internal homogeneity of interests as power resources, c) the aspect of potential changes in unions' positions over time, and d) avenues for labour in green sectors to gain power resources by organising in small but homogeneous organisations, and/or by prevailing in the internal power struggles of larger but heterogeneous organisations.

### 1. Introducing political economy to transition studies

The political economy of the energy sector is of utmost importance when addressing the challenges of the energy transitions necessary to achieve climate-mitigation goals. The energy sector accounted for 72% of global emissions in 2012 [1]. In recent years, fossil-fuel production and CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from combustion have increased and will most likely continue to do so under current policies, in particular in emerging and developing countries [2]. At the same time, many countries, or sub-national areas, consider fossil-fuel extraction and use as a source of pride, identity, and (energy) security, and as an (historical) promise of wealth through affordable-energy and job creation. These feelings are therefore deeply rooted in current fossil-fuel infrastructures, institutions, and power structures.

In the German area of Ruhrgebiet, for example, heavy industry and hard-coal mining were perceived to be the backbone of the German economic miracle after World War II. The hard and dangerous work in the mines was a source of workers' (group) identity, social cohesion, and pride [3]. Since coal mining became increasingly unviable, the area has experienced a long phase of restructuring. Economic hardships have been part of this process, and the Social Democratic Party and labour

unions continue to have a strong foothold in the area. Even today, the preservation of the area's industrial heritage is identity forming, with industrial and mining sites being turned into cultural venues and museums.

While this treatment of industrial past mitigates biographical and social ruptures, it can also hinder sustainability transitions [3]. Fossil fuels as source of regional or even national pride and security goes beyond the case of the Ruhrgebiet, as Kuchler and Bridge show for Poland [4, in this issue], and Arifi and Späth [5, in this issue] for Kosovo. Identity based on employment has been used by fossil-fuel companies to reinforce their lobbying power in the USA, as shown by Rich and by Bell and York [6,7]. Unions engaged in energy-transition discourses have tended to reinforce the juxtaposition of labour versus the environment, as analysed in the emerging literature on “just transitions” [8].

Progress on the necessary transitions thus requires a thorough understanding of the socio-technical system. While the technical aspects have seen much progress, the social aspects merit further scrutiny. In particular, the political-economic aspect needs to be unravelled and integrated. As referred to in the call for this special issue, the socially constitutive power of energy systems has to be uncovered, especially

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their “capacity [...] to reproduce political power and shape political outcomes”. This resonates strongly with repeated calls for more specific treatment of power and politics in the study of sustainability transitions [cf. 9–12].

Recent scholarship, in particular on the energy sector, has sought to address this [13–15]. In our article, we seek to contribute by specifying a particular type of power relation in energy transitions: shedding light on the role of labour as a central, yet still underexplored, political actor [cf. 16]. We introduce the concept of labour power to sustainability-transitions theory, with a sectoral focus on energy. We then illustrate the developed framework with the case of Germany’s electricity transition.

Our research thus responds to the question: *How does labour power influence energy transitions?* To this end, we draw on two strands of literature. First, we use actor- and politics-centred perspectives in sustainability transitions scholarship [13,14,17,18], and, second, we use classical theories of labour power from Comparative Political Economy as a sub-discipline of political science [19,20].<sup>1</sup>

After a discussion of the theoretical foundations laid by the two strands, Section 2 combines them, striving towards an explicit approach to the role of labour in the political economy of energy transitions. The conceptual insights are then illustrated in Section 3 with the case of German electricity politics. Section 4 concludes with main findings and avenues for future research.

## 2. Politics and power relations in energy transitions

Over the years, it has repeatedly been stated that sustainability transitions are intensely affected by politics, but that this aspect would require further conceptualisation [e.g. 9–12]. Several scholars responded to this critique with a variety of suggestions, which have been comprehensively reviewed elsewhere [13–15,18,21,22]. We focus here on a selection of accounts that directly speak to our subject of interest, politics and power relations in (energy) transitions, and provide conceptual context. They stem from interrelated strands treating three aspects.

First, different understandings and conceptualisations of power are depicted in two recent reviews. Partzsch [23] argues that scholars of sustainability politics should overcome their narrow focus on coerced blockage and gridlock (*power over*), and instead consider possibilities of cooperation and empowerment (*power with* and *power to*). Similarly, Avelino [21] disentangles the variety of power notions in the literature, distinguishes three types and relates them to transition concepts. While *innovative* power is located at the niche level, with the capacity to invent and create new resources, *reinforcive* and *transformative* power reside within the regime level. *Reinforcive* power is defined as the capacity to reproduce existing institutions, whereas established niches (“niche regimes”) possess *transformative* power in the way that they can invent and develop new institutions and structures. This highlights the possibility for labour unions, as a particular actor group with specific power (see below), to use it in either way and become forces for “continuity or change” [13].

Second, approaches of action fields and coalitional “countervailing” power [24,25] conceptualise the political sphere in a similar way to Comparative Political Economy approaches, namely regarding shared interests and varied capacity to influence outcomes.<sup>2</sup> Hess further points out the possibility of overcoming blockage through actor coalitions that build “countervailing” power to bring about transitional

<sup>1</sup> We refer to Comparative Political Economy to avoid confusion with other approaches of “political economy”. Although Comparative Political Economy is not confined to comparisons, it broadly emphasises generalising research designs and positivist methodologies.

<sup>2</sup> “Fields are relations of conflict and cooperation among agents (individuals, organisations, or informal networks) who have a shared stake in a particular outcome (such as the mix of electricity generation).” [24]

change.

Third, the political economy perspective is implied in two exemplary contributions in the transition literature. On the one hand, Kern [26] points out a clear limitation of purely interest-based explanations. Agents in transition politics are constrained and enabled by their discursive and institutional surroundings. Therefore, structural differences indeed matter for transition processes. On the other hand, Grin et al. share the classical understanding of politics being about “who gets what, when and how?” [27], and are therefore close to Comparative Political Economy’s classical, cross-disciplinary understanding in the tradition of such scholars as Karl Marx, Adam Smith, Max Weber or Karl Polanyi [28]. Hence, both perspectives adopt a view of policy-making as giving direction to sustainability transitions through “re-structuration” [27] or re-distribution.

We build upon this conceptualisation of energy transitions as redistributive processes in the next sections. Such a perspective appears empirically warranted [cf. 29–31] and is used as a link to bring in theories from research on welfare-state development as a major societal change. We thus respond to Cherp et al.’s recent meta-theoretical discussion and suggest the analytical angle of labour power as a possible “micro-logic” [18] and building block to further the understanding of actor constellations in energy-transition politics.

### 2.1. “Forces for continuity and change” and heterogeneity in redistributive transitions

The value of political science theory for insights into sustainability transitions has recently been recognised by incorporating the (historical) institutionalism strand into transition research [13,14]. We build on this and specifically render Kuzemko et al.’s [13] analytical framework more nuanced and thus suitable to analysing the different actor groups involved in transitions. Kuzemko et al. identify three influencing factors on domestic energy governance, two of which are located in the sphere of political economy, namely “forces for sustainable change” and “forces for continuity” [13].<sup>3</sup> They argue that transition governance that questions existing socio-technical systems “can be contentious not least because change of profound nature [...] infers new winners and losers and is, as such, deeply political” [13]. This essentially mirrors the political economy understanding of actors in redistributive processes, which we find useful to empirically illuminate the multiple actor groups on which Kuzemko et al. base their analytical framework [13].

The two forces can affect interconnected elements of governance, such as political institutions, energy and climate policy-making, market regulation,<sup>4</sup> and practices and outcomes in energy systems. Applied to our subject of interest, this implies that actors such as unions can be clear and homogenous advocates of continuity or change. Yet, internally conflicting factions can also render them more heterogeneous. Internal power struggles will then decide whether the organisation uses its influence for continuity or change, or, if internal struggles prevail, restrict the capacity of the organisation to act as a force for either direction. In our analysis below, we thus add “internally heterogeneous” as a relevant actor category.

Particularly noteworthy to our research interest is the limited attention paid to the role of organised labour in transitions. Although studies have been conducted on the employment side of energy transitions [e.g. 32], trade unions as a form of organised labour are rarely mentioned in concepts.<sup>5</sup> We thus propose insights from Comparative Political Economy, and its research strands on labour power in particular, to shed light on the micro-foundations of trade unions as a particular actor in sustainability transitions.

<sup>3</sup> The third factor refers to the availability of natural “indigenous energy resources”. Since our framework is actor-centred, we do not include this factor in our analysis.

<sup>4</sup> “(...) objectives, instruments, regulations, market rules” [11].

<sup>5</sup> Avelino and Wittmayer, as well as Hess [24,33], are notable exceptions in mentioning trade unions, but do not further develop the role of unions in their conceptualisations.

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