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Hydraulic fracturing, energy transition and political engagement in the Netherlands: The energetics of citizenship

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses how citizens (re)define their relation to the state in the contestation of hydraulic fracturing in the Noordoostpolder (the Netherlands) in the context of energy transition. It approaches citizenship as the negotiations between governments and citizens about in-and exclusion in decision-making processes and argues that these are also produced at the site of energy transition. It focuses on how residents of the Noordoostpolder construct their citizenship, resisting the advent of fracking in their environment while at the same time negotiating their own inclusion in decision-making processes. Our ethnographic material encompasses almost a year of these negotiations starting shortly after the announcement of the Noordoostpolder as a site for exploratory drilling, when people feel highly disempowered and excluded. We closely follow a process of gradual empowerment in the face of energy transition as inhabitants start to produce their own knowledge base and coalesce into unusual partnerships to negotiate their inclusion. Our main argument is that negotiations about hydraulic fracturing in relation to energy transition goes beyond energy issues. It is also -if not mostly -about who gets to decide on energy and land use.

1. Introduction

This article analyses how citizens (re) define their relation to the state through the contestation of hydraulic fracturing in the Netherlands in the context of energy transition. Hydraulic fracturing, commonly referred to as 'fracking', is a technique for recovering shale gas (and oil) from underground shale rock layers. In the context of climate change and transforming political energy relations, it has been heralded to provide a cheaper and cleaner energy source than coal and oil. Moreover, it has been presented as a solution for dwindling gas reserves and as a way to become energy independent [1]. As such, it has been presented as a 'transition fuel'. Being cleaner than coal and oil, it would be a way to bridge the transition from fossil fuels to sustainable energy. However, transitions in energy are not simply exercises in swapping fuels and changing technologies, but events that go hand in hand with political change and struggles over rights [2,3]. Also plans for 'swapping' to shale gas is subject to intense conflicts, especially in relation to controversial production technologies and the potential to pollute the environment and profoundly transform landscapes (see for example [4]). Whereas supporters of fracking might consider shale gas as a contemporary solution and not unsustainable per se, opponents think of fracking as a break with a transition towards sustainable energy.

Plans for hydraulic fracturing have encountered major resistance in communities close to proposed 'fracking' locations, expressing concerns about the environment, drinking water, traffic noise, landscape pollution and health [5–9]. The way such resistance is organized is distinctive in terms of the actors involved; resistance toward fracking in many cases blurs the lines between professionals, entrepreneurs and activists, as well as between local governments and social movements. It is also distinctive in terms of the substance of the demands made and the ways resistance is given form and content to by citizens, activists and politicians. In this article we aim to, first, describe the ways that citizens engage in the political processes related to energy transition and, second, to understand and explain such political engagements as 'citizenship from below'. Our main argument is that new forms of citizenship are produced in the course of social mobilizing and resistance towards hydraulic fracturing. To understand how politics and policies related to energy transition turn out at the local level, energy transition should be seen as a field of force; a site of citizenship construction. Negotiations about hydraulic fracturing in relation to energy transition go beyond energy issues. It is also – if not mostly

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– about who gets to decide on energy and land use; it is about citizenship.

This argument consists of four interrelated claims. The first three claims are theoretical. First, energy transition is a field of force on which categories of in—and exclusion are produced and reproduced with regard to political decision making on (and) energy use (see also [10]). It is a field of force on which citizens construct citizenship. Second, during this process, which we call the energetics of citizenship, traditional categories of 'the state' and 'social movements', but also of 'activists' and 'entrepreneurs' become blurred and, third, conventional forms of understandings practices of citizenship such as 'participation' do not capture the multiple ways citizens engage in processes of citizenship construction. The fourth claim is methodological. To understand the ways in which people respond to decisions related to energy transition, it is necessary to look into how people experience possible changes in energy policy and how they develop knowledge as well as practices related to sustainable energy, i.e., using qualitative field research methods to disclose the complexities of energy transition [11,12]. These claims coincide with the suggestions made by Sovacool in a recent issue of Social Sciences and Energy Research: the need for more human centred research, based on qualitative methodologies in order to disclose complexities of energy transition. This is, says Sovacool, important because individuals and their choices matter for the ways energy transition can evolve [11].

2. Theoretical context: citizenship

In this article we analyse how citizens of the Noordoostpolder demand to be included in decision making processes in the domain of energy transition. We theorize the link between energy transition and politics from out a perspective of citizenship. We conceptualize citizenship as a process of negotiation between governments (granting rights to their citizens) and citizens (demanding, practicing and experiencing citizenship from below) about who is included and excluded from participation in decision making processes. To capture the multiple ways that people experience, express and practice citizenship we combine the analytical framework developed by Isin [14] in which citizenship is analysed in five facets: the sites of citizenship; the scales of citizenship; the actors of citizenship; the substance of citizenship and the acts and practices of citizenship, with notions of 'citizenship from below' and 'citizenship as a process' [15–17]. We will now briefly elaborate on these two approaches to citizenship.

Within the analytical framework developed by Isin, the 'sites of citizenship' constitute the arenas on which subjects enact their citizenship; the fields of contestation [13]. We propose a two-sided analysis of energy transition as a site for citizenship: an analysis of how citizens define their relation to the state when it comes to energy transition issues, combined with an analysis of how citizens are in- and excluded from this site in terms of participation in political processes. In the framework of Isin, such an analysis takes place on different levels, the 'scales of citizenship' [13]. In our case study of resistance towards hydraulic fracturing in the Noordoostpolder, the following scales of citizenship can be distinguished: the local (village) level, the municipal level, the national level and the international level.

At the site of energy transition a wide variety of actors join forces to enact and claim citizenship; they are what Isin calls the 'actors of citizenship' [13]. Entrepreneurs, men and women, 'professional activists', farmers and even politicians become claimants of rights. Actors of citizenship and the alliances they form in the process of citizenship construction can change, revealing the dynamic and flux character of citizenship. Actors of citizenship are the claimants of the 'substance of citizenship': the rights and demands that are made. In this case study the two main claims that are made are, one, 'No test drilling in the Noordoostpolder, nor in the rest of Holland' and, two, the right to have access to knowledge about possible consequences of hydraulic fracturing, as well as about the political process.

The exact ways of enacting citizenship are well captured by the term 'acts of citizenship'. The idea of 'acts of citizenship' is closely related to 'participation' but is not the same. Through participation, people exercise voice through (new) forms of deliberation, consultation and/or mobilization designed to influence larger institutions and policies [17]. Acts of citizenship is broader than this, also capturing practices that traditionally might not have been seen as citizenship: blogging, knowledge production, acts of resistance. Actors of citizenship are involved in numerous acts of citizenship that change over time and space. Such acts of citizenship—like writing poetry, twitter and facebook updates, designing buttons and investing in solar panels, could not be captured by the term 'participation', but they do take part of the process in which citizens redefine their relation to the state. The actors, acts and substance of citizenship are always in interaction with scales of citizenship, i.e., levels of policy making and with the specific sites of citizenship.

These analytical facets capture the wide variety of actors, practices and claims that inform the process of citizenship construction on different scales and make it possible to analyse these acts and actors as interrelated in the field of energy transition as a site of citizenship construction. What we add to this framework is the notion that it is important to take into account local history in order to be able to understand and explain the specific ways that the elements play out, i.e., who the actors are, the substance of the claims made, the practices that are enacted and whether the interplay of these elements are indeed experienced as a process of inclusion, as a process of citizenship construction. The ways citizens experience and practice citizenship is often rooted in (local) history and power relations, and thus important for explaining the ways citizens negotiate and enact energy policies. We thus follow other authors who take as a point of departure that citizenship is more than a legal status and that the processes and practices are as important as the end-result itself [14–16]. Such processes and practices are shaped through rights struggles and informed by people's own citizenship aspirations [18,19].

To summarize, the 'energetics of citizenship' capture the dynamic and ever changing relation between politics, citizenship and energy. We analyse these relations by examining the acts, actors and substance of citizenship, not only taking into account how these analytical facets are interrelated and constructed on different scales of citizenship, but also by analysing how these constructions are anchored in local history and (power) relations.

3. Empirical context: energy transition policies and politics

3.1. Energy transition policies and politics as a site of citizenship

In this article we analyse the ways citizens negotiate their relation to the state through the contestation of hydraulic fracturing in the Noordoostpolder. We consider energy transition, and the related policies and politics as a site of citizenship [18]. The Netherlands is one of the most 'fossil' countries of Europe [20]. Although this has been characterized as very 'trustworthy' by the International Energy Agency as by the Dutch Minister of Economy [21], it is difficult to associate with the transition towards sustainable energy, which should be completed in 2050. In 2014, only 4,5% of the energy produced could be earmarked as sustainable. The 20% target that was set for 2020 has been adjusted to 14,5%. Natural gas is an important source for energy production; most of it being extracted from the Groningen gas fields in the North of Holland.