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Parliamentary and press discourses on sustainable energy in Italy: No more hard paths, not yet soft paths

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the way hard and soft energy paths are discussed by policy makers, key informants and the press in Italy. Adopting a psycho-social and constructivist perspective, we explored what representations of energy and users, and what technologies are associated with centralised and decentralised energy systems. A large textual corpus was gathered from the online archives of the Chamber of Deputies, using as search criteria the Italian keywords *energ** and/or *sostenibil** [sustainab*] for the period 2009–2012. Selected corpora ($N = 143$ parliamentary debates and $N = 841$ newspaper articles) were submitted to content analysis. Results show that contents related to hard paths prevail over those typical of soft paths. However, while the contents expressed by the press fit with the hard/soft path dichotomy, political discourse is largely polyphasic and mixes elements of the two systems. These traces of incoherence suggest that energy transition is far from being completed and that sustainable energy is still a contended object of representation.

1. Introduction

Back in the 1970s, Lovins [1,2] introduced the well-known distinction between hard and soft energy paths. Thirty years on this seminal contribution, the scenario of energy production and consumption in Europe is determined by the '2020 Package', the '2030 Framework' and the '2050 Roadmap'. At the same time, European countries are facing a critical phase: the process of energy transition being coupled with deep economic recession and political crisis. In this difficult moment energy and its sustainability have become salient issues: will green technologies bring new jobs? Shall our community defend the environment or the industries? Are incentives for renewables still the best option? The outcome of such public debate is a meaning-making process where new ideas about energy, energy systems and users may rise and become explicit, with potential significant effects on national and international policies.

This meaning-making process underlines, once again, the central role of the human dimensions of energy use [3] and the importance of societal considerations in shaping effective and well-accepted energy policies [4]. However, the social dimension and related themes still remain under-examined in the literature on energy issues [5]. In particular, psychological and psycho-social perspectives – when adopted – have been mainly addressed to gain understanding of the relationships between individual processes and behaviours [6,7]; nevertheless, energy issues may also be interpreted "as a product of social and cultural factors on collective rather than individual terms" [5, p. 26]. In this respect, a constructivist psycho-social approach to energy issues can contribute to examining "the meaning-making [. . .] processes involved in: (1) the creation and elaboration of new laws and policy decisions; (2) the action of mediating systems [. . .] such as the media or environmental NGOs; and (3) the reception of legal innovations by individuals, groups, and communities who are required to change everyday ideas and practices" [8, p. 363].

Drawing on these premises, the present contribution examines social representations of sustainable energy currently shared in Italy, a key player in international energy sector and a country that is in line with the targets determined by EU as regards carbon reduction and development of renewables. In particular, we focus

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on how policy makers, key informants and the press discuss hard and soft paths. We followed a societal approach and analysed the national level of discourses to achieve two main objectives. Firstly, to grasp the forms of shared knowledge that intervene in individual cognitive functioning [9]; and secondly, to provide data for cross-national comparisons in Europe and beyond. In the next sections, before we present our study, hard and soft paths, critical issues in transition from one to another path, and the decentralisation of energy sources in Italy are briefly introduced.

1.1. Hard and soft paths

Far from being a solely technical process, sustainability requires the awareness and involvement of populations [10]; the inclusion of energy issues within this larger framework thus requires policies to take into account caring for future generations and the attempts to conceal economic, social and environmental dimensions of development [11]. For these reasons 'sustainable energy' can be defined "as a continuous learning process that occurs when a given society acquires the necessary knowledge to reduce its energy consumption without diminishing its quality of life or creating new social inequalities" [12 cited by 13, p. 2929]. Although there is no agreement on what current energy transition is and what implications it has, research in this field shows its multi-faceted nature that involves technical, economic, and societal transformations [14]. As stressed by historical studies on energy transition, "previous energy transitions have involved significant cultural and societal shifts. As well as helping the availability of new technologies and emergence of associated actors, governments may well have a role in stimulating the cultural and social conditions of a low carbon transition" [15, pp. 3–4].

In this regard the distinction between hard and soft energy paths [1,2] – even if this single dichotomy is an over-simplification as already declared by Lovins himself – continues to offer insights into the relationship between energy policies, technological advances, approaches to environmental issues, and societal transformations.

Hard energy paths are the classic approach to energy management: they are characterised by centralised, top-down governance, the use of non-renewable sources (fossil and nuclear), and the presence of few large-scale production sites, distant from the sites of energy consumption. Hard paths are coherent with hierarchical myths of nature [16] according to which resources are scarce, their exploitation should be regulated by authorities, and the risks connected with energy production controlled by experts.

Soft energy paths, on the contrary, have been advocated for a fully sustainable development. Soft energy paths should be characterised by efficient energy consumption, large-scale use of renewables, small production sites close to users, decentralised and bottom-up governance, and a gentler impact on the environment and on communities. The soft path is coherent with egalitarian myths of nature [16]: individuals are responsible for nature and are asked to act personally to defend the fragile equilibrium between human beings and nature, and risks can be reduced only by controlling human needs and by avoiding the depletion of resources.

1.2. Energy and social representation

Individual choices in energy consumption or acceptance of energy technologies have been largely examined focusing on factors such as values, beliefs, norms, affects, and behavioural control [17–19]. Constructivist, discursive and rhetoric turns in social psychology call for further analyses on how environmental issues and practices are socially constructed and managed [20,21]. Among the theories interested in social construction of knowledge, the theory of social representations has proven to be a fruitful framework that contributes to a deep understanding of environmentally related issues and of the underlying power struggles [e.g. 22,23].

In particular, as regards energy, the social representation approach has been proposed to examine the relationship between policy makers and citizens, and overcome the deficit model of public understanding of energy technologies [24–26].[1]

In this perspective, hard and soft paths can be connected to different social representations of energy, energy systems and the public [27]. Arguments advocating hard paths are based on the idea that energy is a matter of national interest, largely use techno-scientific rhetoric, and propose a deficit representation of the public as lacking knowledge of capacities for dealing with – and interesting in – such difficult issues. On the contrary, arguments in favour of soft paths are based on representations of energy as an ecological resource that should be saved, insist on the idea that energy systems can be decentralised, give value to lay knowledge and propose a view of the public as active and environmentally concerned. Arguments for soft paths see them finally as fostering the development of a new 'energy citizenship': "a view of the public that emphasises awareness of responsibility for climate change [...] and the potential for (collective) energy actions, including acts of consumptions and the setting up of community renewable energy projects" [27, p. 72].

1.3. Coexistence of different representations and polyphasia

The transition from a hard to a soft path is not linear and raises important questions as regards the relationship between technological and social advances, conflicts among stakeholders, and the internal coherence of the two socio-technical systems.

Firstly, the mere implementation of small-scale technologies does not necessarily lead to new environmental consciousness [28]. Decentralisation, in fact, has an impact on the environment but may be driven by causes (e.g. savings, incentives) other than sustainability. On the contrary, a soft path is taken when technical advances towards decentralisation are coupled with the development of psycho-social features such as environmental awareness and concerns [28–30]. In other words, a soft path requires decentralisation to be framed as significant behaviour: activities consciously enacted for their effects on the environment [17,31]. As already stated, a crucial role in this regard is played by media, decision makers and stakeholders, who act as 'epistemic authorities' defining meanings and policies and providing the larger framework in which behaviours become meaningful [3,8,15].

Secondly, centralised and decentralised energy systems do not necessarily exclude each other. Technological, organisational, regulatory, governance and social components are involved in both systems and at different scales. As a result, future energy systems might combine centralised elements – such as international regulatory agencies and large scale technological infrastructures – together with community-owned heating plants, and household micro-generation equipments [32]. Thus, future energy systems will probably realise the co-existence of multiple pathways promoted by diverse bodies [33].

Thirdly, the two types of path are hypothesised as coherent sets of technological, political, economic and psychological features. However, especially during transitions, old and new elements coexist in often conflicting ways at societal and cognitive levels, as has been observed regarding the rise of new environmental world-views in the last decades [22]. Fragmentation of knowledge and estrangement between lay and expert knowledge have been

[1] In line with this goal, a group of Italian scholars has recently launched a NoNimby manifesto http://nonimby.tumblr.com/manifesto.