



# Deep entanglements: History, space and (energy) struggle in the German *Energiewende*

Franziska Christina Paul

School of Geographical and Earth Sciences, University of Glasgow, University Avenue, Glasgow G12 8QQ, Scotland, UK



## ARTICLE INFO

### Keywords:

Energy geographies  
Energy transition  
*Energiewende*  
Energy struggles  
Energy democracy  
Spatial imaginaries

## ABSTRACT

This paper contributes to recent debates in energy geography, especially to energy transition research and literature, by developing a critical and empirically grounded understanding of energy transitions as expressions of contentious socio-spatial politics, past and present. The paper argues that historical struggles and contentious political practices around energy, so called energy struggles, continue to inform the ongoing and dynamic socio-spatial politics of energy transitions today and often manifest themselves in transition narratives. This analysis is supported by qualitative empirical materials derived from recent fieldwork in Berlin, Germany, which was conducted within the broader left-green movement for a socio-ecological and democratic German *Energiewende*. A historicisation of contentious politics and energy struggles facilitates an empirically robust framing of energy transition projects as dynamic, multi-actor, and more than eco-technical processes. The paper's contribution to energy geographies is threefold; firstly, utilising an empirically robust and historically sensitive analysis of the German *Energiewende*, the paper explores the deep entanglements of history, space and struggle in energy transitions. Secondly, the paper emphasises the need to understand energy transitions as constituted by energy struggles and contentious politics, past and present. Thirdly, the paper examines emergent spaces of energy democracy as part of the *Energiewende* and explores recent energy democracy demands as a spatial politics of energy transitions.

## 1. Introduction

With the increase of public debates around climate change and geopolitical resource conflicts, energy – as both concept and object of study – holds renewed prominence in the social sciences (Huber, 2015; Juisto, 2009). Human geography, too, has seen a small renaissance of energy-related research over the past half decade which has begun to re-explore energy's relation to space (Bridge et al., 2013). Energy transitions in particular have become an important research topic for human geographers, potentially linking (geo)political, environmental, developmental, urban, rural and economic strands of the discipline in complex and dynamic ways. However, recent critiques cite a lack of critical social and political theorising towards energy and wider sustainability transition research within human geography (Becker et al., 2016; Huber, 2015; Juisto, 2009). Following this line of argument, this paper proposes to engage with energy transitions as social, cultural and political projects as much as eco-technical transformations, thus becoming dynamic, multiple and contested. Through drawing on qualitative research and empirical materials from the German *Energiewende*, this paper argues that energy transitions are constituted through energy struggles, past and present, which are characterised by a wider critical

and socio-political engagement with the ownership, organisation and resource preference of energy within society.

I argue that an acknowledgement of both the rich histories of struggle and the spatial politics of contemporary energy transition projects allows for a more differentiated understanding of energy transitions as dynamic, politically transformative, spatial, and often contentious in practice (see also: Bridge et al., 2013). An emphasis on energy struggle and contentious histories challenges conceptualisations of transition projects as predominantly temporal, linear, and abstracted from (past) socio-spatial contestation (cf. Loorbach and Rotmans, 2010; Seyfang et al., 2014). Furthermore, the notion of struggle contributes a critical element to transition studies and highlights the social and political possibilities arising from the spatial organisation of energy systems and infrastructures. The paper argues that historical struggles and contentious political practices around energy continue to inform the ongoing and dynamic socio-spatial politics of energy transitions today, and are tightly woven into both activist and broader socio-cultural understandings of the German *Energiewende*. This analysis is supported through qualitative empirical materials derived from recent fieldwork in Berlin, Germany, which was conducted within the broader left-green movement for a socio-ecological and democratic German *Energiewende*.

E-mail address: [f.paul.1@research.gla.ac.uk](mailto:f.paul.1@research.gla.ac.uk).

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2018.02.017>

Received 7 March 2017; Received in revised form 9 February 2018; Accepted 14 February 2018  
0016-7185/ © 2018 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

The paper is structured into four main sections followed by a conclusion. The next section highlights some of the shortcomings of energy geographies and transition literatures and proposes to study spaces of energy transition through exploring the rich histories of energy struggles as part of transition trajectories. The third section utilises empirical materials from the German *Energiewende* to explore different cuts through the wider left-green movement, including the rich histories and spatial politics of the *Energiewende* project, highlighting the deep entanglements of history, space and struggle as part of transition politics. The fourth section engages with the notion of struggle as constituting energy transitions and explores the inherent social, political, and often contentious character of energy transitions. The fifth section then examines emergent spaces of energy democracy as an expression of the spatial politics of energy transition projects, which address demands for more socially just and democratically accountable sustainability transitions, by drawing on the case example of the *Berliner Energietisch* (Berlin energy roundtable) campaign.

## 2. Towards a socio-historical spatial politics of energy transitions

Debates around climate change, energy scarcity and security, and geopolitical resource conflicts have firmly placed energy, as concept and object of study, back on academic research agendas. Human geographers have begun to think through energy and energy transitions more spatially (see e.g. Becker et al., 2016; Bridge et al., 2013; Coenen et al., 2012), variously engaging with case studies of low carbon transition management (Geels, 2011; Raven et al., 2012) and community energy studies (Hargreaves et al., 2013; Seyfang et al., 2014; Walker et al., 2010). There have also been highly relevant critiques of an increasing neoliberalisation and commodification of nature in relation to energy (Castree, 2008a,b; Juisto, 2009; McCarthy, 2015). However, while the complex relations between energy, society and power have begun to be theorised in these bodies of works, research and literature exploring the particular socio-political, spatial, as well as historical dimensions of energy and energy transitions remains scarce (Becker et al., 2016; Huber, 2015). This paper proposes a renewed focus on the histories, spatialities and political possibilities of energy geographies, which can bridge the gap between more (eco-) technical energy debates, and the, as yet, largely energy-distant political geographies (on the intersection of energy and urban studies, see: Rutherford and Coutard, 2014). Thinking energy and political geographies in dialogue can allow for a more critical and in-depth exploration of energy transitions as dynamic, socio-spatial and politically-contested phenomena, in which history, space and struggle are deeply entangled. The following section critically engages with recent work on energy transitions and stresses the need to examine the spatial politics of transitions projects. Proposing a socio-historically sensitive analysis of energy transitions allows for transitions to be understood as politically contentious and socio-spatially constituted as much as eco-technical (see also: Huber, 2009). These deep entanglements of history, space and struggle are necessary to gain a richer, historically sensitive understanding of political contestation and struggle as part of energy transitions. In this context, the section also engages with literature on the political contestation of energy generation, infrastructures and organisation to introduce the notion of struggle, and more specifically energy struggles, as expressions of a critical ideological engagement with energy systems, energy spaces, and acts of socio-political spatial reimagining. Historical struggles, especially around energy, also play an important role in the imagination and narrative of present struggles. An emerging narrative of socio-political spatial reimagining will also be revisited in the final section of this paper, which explores recent calls for energy democracy as an expression of ‘new’ spatial politics of energy transitions, building on the multiple, evolving and dynamic struggles in and against contemporary energy systems.

In light of recent energy crisis discourses – an energy crisis of environmental limits and/or through resource scarcity – many, if not

most, governments have taken action to reduce their dependence on fossil fuels and consequently researched, developed and invested in low-carbon, and often renewable, energy sources as part of their respective energy transition portfolios. Recent work on energy transitions across Europe, especially the UK, Netherlands and Belgium, has largely focussed on an analysis of socio-technical factors of renewable or low-carbon energy transition management through multi-level perspective approaches (e.g. Geels, 2011; Loorbach and Rotmans, 2010). Despite characterising transitions as ‘socio-technical’ the literature heavily relies on technical language to describe its “theory [of] a modular structure” to frame transition processes (Loorbach and Rotmans, 2010: 239, citing Meadowcroft). Human geographers have criticised the lack of attention to geographical concepts such as space, place and scale within such frameworks (Bridge et al., 2013; Coenen et al., 2012; Raven et al., 2012). Furthermore, transition management literature, while attentive to culture and ideology to a degree, lacks appreciation of the socio-cultural histories of, as well as the long-standing socio-political struggles, conflicts and acts of contestation within particular transition projects. Energy transitions are deeply embedded in wider socio-spatial developments, such as changing energy needs of post-industrial societies or shifting ideologies, for example through increased awareness of environmental issues. Existing transitions literature furthermore often suggests, or at least implicitly assumes, a false linearity and consensus within transition management, and fails to explore the contested nature and multi-actor landscapes of energy transition projects, past and present (see also: Bridge et al., 2013; Chatterton and Cutler, 2008).

Historicising energy politics and transition pathways contributes to richer, more nuanced understandings of energy transitions, past and present, through emphasising the plural, dynamic and contested trajectories of transition. A historically sensitive approach to energy transition studies furthermore reveals the multitude of actors and their contentious political practices and struggles within and against transition projects. As the topic of energy has received more attention in public discourses and news media, it is also increasingly contested – a phenomenon that is described in German public discourse as *Energiekämpfe*, energy struggles. Müller (2013: 7) defines energy struggles as “social struggles over the control of, the access to, and pricing of energy [which] have always been, and increasingly are, at the core of social conflicts around distribution and ecology, modes of production and modes of life”. Energy struggles have transformative potential, especially as they are expressions of a critical ideological engagement with energy and environmental topics, and collectively challenge the prioritisation of expert knowledges and technocratic arguments in public debates. Next to *energy* struggles more specifically, the notion of struggle generally facilitates a critical engagement between energy geographies, transition management studies and related social movements and struggles, including anti-capitalist, alternative ownership, democratic, and social and climate justice based demands. However, much recent work does not directly engage with the particular and dynamic histories of energy transition projects as well as the socio-political struggles that have contributed to the terms on which energy and energy transitions are experienced and contested in different places (Juisto, 2009).

Building on the strong tradition of interrogations of space and the political through the notion of contestation in human geography (Massey, 2005; Featherstone, 2013; see also: Featherstone and Korf, 2012), an engagement with struggle, especially over energy, allows for a more critical understanding of existing and emergent spaces of energy transition. While literature on the geographies of political contestation has recently begun to link debates around neoliberalisation and the political to the environment (Beveridge et al., 2014; Chatterton et al., 2013; cf. Swyngedouw, 2009, 2010), there has been little work which specifically focusses on the political, contestation and energy (as well as transition projects). Existing engagements at the intersection of neoliberalisation, the political and the environment often focus on the political possibilities of acts of contestation for the emergence of

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/7353503>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/7353503>

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