



# Exogenous shocks, social skill, and power: Urban energy transitions as social fields

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## ABSTRACT

The constantly growing scholarship on urban energy transitions needs a framework to analyze these transitions. This article proposes the Field Perspective (FP) as an approach for the study of urban energy transitions. FP analyses how the interplay of actors, who are dedicated to a similar purpose, and the structures guiding this interplay, co-evolve. By applying FP to the energy transition in the German city Emden, the article shows how the transition evolves through (a) alterations in the exogenous context of the city (e.g. national feed-in-tariffs for renewables), (b) the social skill and changing interplay of local actors engaged in the transition, and (c) the emergence of power-constellations and rules.

## 1. Introduction

Urban energy transitions depend upon the interplay of various types of actors such as businesses, politicians, municipal employees, intermediaries, citizen initiatives, and scientists (Busch and McCormick, 2014; Blanchet, 2015; Gabillet, 2015; Mattes et al., 2015; Späth and Rohrer, 2013). Given the often substantial amount of actors, activities, and relationships in urban transitions, theoretical frameworks are needed to facilitate handling this complexity (cf. Truffer and Coenen, 2012). This article proposes the field perspective (FP) as a tool to describe the interplay of actors in the course of urban energy transition processes. FP is a social theory that analyses social action at the meso-level by focusing on relevant actors and their interests, the relationships between them, and the shared rules and understandings that frame their actions (Fligstein and McAdam, 2011, 2012). It provides a heuristic framework that enables researchers to systematize actors and their interactions and to describe the co-evolution of social order and action, in the form of rules and power structures resulting from these interactions. Thereby it allows for the studying of how structures and actions in urban spaces change over time in ways that shape transitions towards sustainability.

This article explores the potentials of FP for the study of urban low carbon transformations by applying it to the energy transition in the German city, Emden. Employing this approach shows how the transition evolves through (a) alterations in the exogenous context of the city (e.g. national feed-in-tariffs for renewables), (b) the social skill and changing interplay of local actors engaged in the transition, and (c) the emergence of power-constellations and rules.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows: starting with the particularities of urban low carbon transitions, it proceeds by introducing FP as a framework to address these particularities in Section 3. Before coming to the case study, a description of the methodology and an introduction to the context of the case will be presented in Section 4. Section 5 illustrates how FP can be employed to study urban energy transitions by applying it to the case of Emden. Section 6 discusses the particularities of the case study in juxtaposition to research on other urban transitions and compares FP with the prevalent Multi-Level Perspective (MLP). The article ends with a conclusion (Section 7) highlighting policy implications and indicating further potentials for transition research.

## 2. Urban low carbon transitions: agency, networks, and institutional contexts

Research on sustainability transitions has flourished in recent times (cf. Markard et al., 2012). As much of the research—implicitly or explicitly—focuses on the national level, the spatial dimension and particularly the local level have received less attention (Coenen et al., 2012; Truffer and Coenen, 2012). Nevertheless, growing scholarship on urban low carbon transitions highlights the importance and ever-rising engagement of cities in tackling climate change (cf. Bulkeley et al., 2013a; Bulkeley et al., 2013b; Bulkeley et al., 2014; Hodson and Marvin, 2010; Lehmann, 2014; Rutherford and Jaglin, 2015). This scholarship indicates that the dynamics of urban low carbon transitions strongly depend on (a) local agency/actors, (b) the often close social relationships in the dense urban space, (c) the institutional

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configuration of the local space, and (d) embeddedness in a wider socio-spatial context.

Firstly, studies outline the importance of agency in urban transitions. Powerful alliances of actors can significantly influence the shape and pace of local transitions (Hoppe et al., 2015). Different types of actors such as mayors, citizen initiatives, municipal administrations, businesses, and intermediaries may assume crucial roles, acting as initiators, facilitators or networkers of local transitions (cf. Busch and McCormick, 2014; Blanchet, 2015; Gabillet, 2015; Hargreaves et al., 2013; Mattes et al., 2015; Späth and Rohrer, 2013).

Moreover, existing insights indicate the importance of social networks, proximity, and shared visions (Darby, 2006; Hodson et al., 2013; Hoppe et al., 2015). Urban transitions are negotiated and enacted in dense social networks of key actors who often form strategic alliances. The evolution of shared guiding visions, stressing the local opportunities of the transition, further helps to align heterogeneous local actors and orientate their activities along shared goals (Späth and Rohrer, 2013; Hodson and Marvin, 2010; Hoppe et al., 2015). Aside from collaboration and shared visions, urban transitions are also marked by disagreement and power struggles: these are not limited to conflicts between sponsors and detractors of low carbon transitions, but also take place among its very supporters, as these follow divergent interests and promote competing visions of the local “low carbon future” (Gabillet, 2015; Rutherford and Jaglin, 2015; Späth and Rohrer, 2015). Urban low carbon transitions constitute heavily embattled matters that are negotiated in the often closely interconnected social networks of local actors.

The institutional configuration of the locality also shapes its transition dynamics: the physical space (e.g. mountain region, rural space), infrastructure (e.g. municipal utility), climate conditions (e.g. solar or wind-intense region), formal and informal norms and rules (e.g. norms of exchange), and the industrial structure of a locality set preconditions that predefine resources and barriers of local transition processes (cf. Blanchet, 2015; Broto, 2017; Mattes et al., 2015; Monstadt, 2007).

Furthermore, transition dynamics are embedded in specific regional, national and international contexts. This contextual “landscape” predefines the leeway for the given transition processes (cf. Coenen et al., 2012): for instance, absence of national political support (Rohrer and Späth, 2014; Späth and Rohrer, 2013) and the dominance of neoliberal market rationales conflicting with local ambitions (Webb, 2015) can have drastic implications for the local transition pathway.

In general terms, a theoretical approach to urban transitions has to make allowances for the specific characteristics of these transitions: local actors with heterogeneous interests, their dynamic interplay in close social relationships, and the institutional context. Taking this into account, the following section presents the Field Perspective (FP).

### 3. The field perspective

There are several field approaches that, despite differences in conceptualization, share a focus on the genesis, maintenance, and change of social order, for instance, Pierre Bourdieu's field theory (Bourdieu, 2006), the institutionalist field approach (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983), and Fligstein and McAdam's theory of Strategic Action Fields (SAFs) (Fligstein, 2001; Fligstein and McAdam, 2011, 2012). The Field Perspective (FP) presented in this article draws mainly from Fligstein and McAdam's elaborations and partly recombines it with elements from Bourdieuan and institutionalist approaches as well as transition theory.

Fligstein and McAdam define fields as a “meso-level social order where actors (who can be individual or collective) interact with knowledge of one another under a set of common understandings about the purposes of the field, the relationships in the field (including who has power and why), and the field's rules” (Fligstein and McAdam, 2011: 3). Accordingly, the following elements are essential: (1) a minimum of two actors that are aware of each other, (2) (inter)action,

(3) shared structures/rules, and (4) relationships including hierarchies.

Motivated by the advantages that they can generate from a privileged position and equipped with resources (e.g. money, social competences, knowledge etc.), actors within a field compete with each other over the dominant positions and advantages that are in play. The array of strategies that they employ in these struggles is limited, as the action in the field is framed by institutions: collective views, rules, and norms. The “rules of the game” (Bourdieu, 2006: 226) determine what types of action are regarded as legitimate and illegitimate. In this way, shared views, rules, norms, and models of action structure the activity in the field, often leading to resembling behavioral patterns among actors (see also DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). Moreover, hierarchies evolve out of competition, for which SAF-theory suggests distinguishing between incumbents and challengers (Fligstein and McAdam, 2011, 2012). Incumbents are actors that have reached a dominant position and therefore have the highest potential of shaping the field. By contrast, challengers strive for a dominant position, competing with the incumbents. While incumbents have an interest in maintaining the status quo within the field, since their power rests on the given structure, challengers are likely to campaign for structural changes that will favor their positioning in the field.

Employing the terms “incumbents” and “challengers”, SAF-theory emphasizes competition. However, fields can also be marked by high levels of collaboration, as Fligstein and McAdam (2012: 90) acknowledge. An important resource for the collaboration of actors is “social skill” (Fligstein, 2001). It refers to “the idea that people want to produce collective action by engaging others” (Fligstein and McAdam, 2011: 7). Since social skill allows actors to transcend their own interests and take other actors' interests into account, Fligstein and McAdam regard it as paramount for collaboration: it enables actors to mobilize others and create alliances. Thus, socially skilled actors are essential for field formation processes (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012: 46, 92).

A puzzling question concerns the boundaries of fields. Often membership to a field is not determined by strict rules and/or a governing body. Moreover, in many cases, field boundaries are diffuse and are themselves subject to power struggles. Bourdieu's (2006) work on the French field of art, for instance, suggests two opposing poles within the same field: The “art for art's sake” pole rejects the idea that art should be driven by any other motive than the dedication to art itself. The opposite pole is dominated by artists seeking mass appeal and economic benefits. While the “art for art's sake” pole promotes exclusive membership and closure against economic and other “profane” influences, the opposing pole of “mass-culture” endorses a more inclusive approach and stands for openness towards other fields and their logics. Accordingly, the struggle around the boundaries and membership of the field may become itself subject to the power struggles in the field. Moreover, the aforementioned example illustrates another feature of fields: conflicting poles hold dissimilar views regarding the legitimate purposes and rules of the field. Actors will strive to establish their view as the dominant vision of the field. In this undertaking, actors with similar views are more likely to form coalitions than actors with opposing views.

Field states and structures may change over time. Fligstein and McAdam distinguish between three field states: emergent, stable, and crisis (Fligstein and McAdam, 2011: 11–19; Fligstein and McAdam, 2012: 86, 170). While emergent fields lack encompassing rules and structures, stable fields have developed a settled structure, in the form of routines, norms, rules, and relatively established relationships between actors. A field crisis occurs when the field structures are threatened by external or internal events and potentially become subject to extensive transformations. As none of the three aforementioned states are limited to a particular time span, fields can remain for long periods of time in the state of an emergent field or even in the state of crisis. The emergence of fields can be related to state intervention or grass-roots experimentation. Transition theory highlights the importance of protective niches: these allow for the experimentation with alternatives to

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