

A Habermasian analysis of local renewable energy deliberations

Stewart Fast*

Department of Geography, University of Ottawa, 036 Simard Hall, 60 University, Ottawa, ON K1N 6N5, Canada

A B S T R A C T

Keywords:

Renewable energy
Futures
Opposition
Habermas
Communicative action
Communicative rationality
Deliberative democracy
Public sphere

This study pursues a Habermasian analysis of citizen discussions and of the local public sphere to shed light on renewable energy futures in rural east-central Canada. Using data from group discussions, it pursues an investigation of utterances, validity claims and of discourses. The analysis is supplemented by participant observation of publicly acting organizations, and together these form the evidence to arrive at some predictions for energy developments. This case study finds governance officials tended to negotiate solar, wind, biomass and small hydro projects with fact-claims, but citizens operated mainly with norm-claims and this along with other factors creates a distortion in communication and in social coordination with implications for the future of various energy types. More generally it also suggests the state's strong reliance on market incentives may have long term costs in terms of diminished public reasoning over renewable energy. Working through Habermas' concepts in this way also pointed towards potential contributions to the theories of communicative action and the public sphere.

© 2013 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Planning for renewable energy is complicated. Despite general public support for alternatives to fossil fuels (Angus-Reid, 2007; EC, 2011), many areas experience social conflict over renewable energy implementation. Wind farm disputes are prominent in the literature (Burningham et al., 2006; Devine-Wright et al., 2009; van der Horst, 2007; Woods, 2003) but this does not indicate a general rule. Some wind developments proceed with little conflict (Brannstrom et al., 2011), and implementation of other renewable sources like biomass and solar experience equally mixed social responses (McCormick and Kaberger, 2005; Pasqualetti and Schwartz, 2011; Upham and Shackley, 2006). Opinion polling, economic modeling and other traditional socio-economic research methods are insufficient to explain opposition or to predict and plan for renewable energy pathways (Devine-Wright, 2007; Fisher and Brown, 2009; Mårtensson and Westerberg, 2007). Researchers are increasingly turning to interpretive methods to gain deeper understandings of the positions of local actors. These include content and discourse analysis of texts (Barry et al., 2008; Hagget and Toke, 2006; Senger et al., 2010), case study comparisons (Mårtensson and Westerberg, 2007; McCormick and Kaberger, 2007), ranking exercises designed to encourage reflection by respondents such as Q-methodology (Brannstrom et al., 2011; Ellis et al., 2007; Fisher and Brown, 2009)

and multiple criteria analysis (Trutnevyte et al., 2011; Upham and Waterman, 2007). There is considerable interest in the development and application of additional research methods that are appropriate for the social and dynamic (not individual and static) nature of social responses to increased renewable energy implementation (Devine-Wright, 2010b; Walker et al., 2010).

A general prescription coming out of this stream of interpretive research is for dialogue between citizens, experts, developers and planners to help prevent and negotiate renewable energy disputes. Deliberation is widely assumed by political theorists to foster “green” choices, but as Lövbrand and Khan (2010) point out empirical evidence is limited. Authors are unsure if current planning practices can accommodate the value differences among the diverse set of stakeholders (Barry et al., 2008; Ellis et al., 2007; Fisher and Brown, 2009). The tension between local interests and national/global interests may be too great. Here the instrumental challenge of meeting renewable energy targets meets more normative critiques that planning efforts should better incorporate the views of local citizens. Is consensus on renewable energy implementation possible or desirable? Should planning instead strive for an “agonism” model recognizing deep differences in values (Mouffe, 1999 cited by Ellis et al., 2007). These questions point to further knowledge gaps about processes of deliberation and of reaching consensus.

This study pursues both challenges. It brings a methodological contribution to what Fisher and Brown (2009) call the “discursive turn” in renewable energy planning studies and it explicitly engages the theoretical concepts of deliberative forms of decision

* Tel.: +1 613 562 5800x1284; fax: +1 613 562 5145.
E-mail address: sfast082@uottawa.ca.

making. It develops and applies tools from Habermas' communicative action theory to an empirical case of renewable energy planning in east-central Canada. The paper examines how citizens in ordinary rural communities identify, discuss and negotiate the prospect of renewable energy production in their territory. It pursues three main questions: (1) What are the conditions of the local public sphere that enable and/or limit deliberation around renewable energy issues? (2) What kinds of knowledge – specifically what claims of truth, rightness and truthfulness theorized by Habermas to be present in all discussions – underpin shared understandings? (3) What evidence exists for the coordinating role of communicative action as it is theorized by Habermas and others?

The paper proceeds in four steps. I begin by mapping out the elements of Habermas' social theory guiding the case study and then describe the case with special attention to the local public sphere. The next section lays out Habermasian discourse analysis as a method to analyze "talk". The third section gives results of this analyses and the final section pursues implication of findings for renewable energy futures in these communities, and the role of citizen deliberation in these issues more generally.

2. Introduction

2.1. Habermas' social theory

Jurgen Habermas (1984, 1987, 1989, 1992, 1996, 2004) seeks to explain how human activities are coordinated, especially how collective interests emerge and are legitimated through public use of reason. At the core of his understanding (Fig. 1) is the theory of **communicative action** which stresses the pragmatic function of language. When actors speak we unavoidably provide and evaluate reasons (this is the meaning of **rationality**). Actors use three types of reasons to support/explain their actions (1) "facts" grounded in the objective world providing reasons based on "**truth**", (2) norms grounded in the social world providing reasons based on "**rightness**" and (3) feelings and desires grounded in our subjective worlds providing reasons based on "**sincerity**" or "**truthfulness**."

Reasons come from the **lifeworld** – our shared set of taken-for-granted knowledge providing each individual the resources to

interpret social situations and to evaluate the three types of claims. When two or more actors reach mutual understanding of a situation if forms the basis for **communicative action**. In modern society, the three forms of lifeworld knowledge accumulate and are transmitted via scientific theories (facts), legal and moral representations (norms) and art (truthfulness) but continue to rely on communicative encounters to be reproduced. Topics of communication become subject to rational argument and **discourse** (i.e., topics are consciously debated rather than evaluated via inherited reasons) when the background knowledge of the lifeworld differs slightly between individuals, or new information becomes available. Pseudo-rational **strategic action** occurs when two or more actors pursue individual goals through independent calculation of another's interests. Strategic action is more likely to involve deception and concealing of true intent but is also highly effective in meeting goals. It is the rationality of the coordinating **systems** of the modern world (the market economy and bureaucratic administration). With no communicative rationality checks these are open to abuse and act to **colonize** the lifeworld, disrupting communicative action and dehumanizing society. Habermas finds hope in the **public sphere** connecting the social coordinating function of language, through the rationalizing process of discourse into a modern political function. His theory of **deliberative democracy** argues that the testing and refining of norms through communicative action gives law their legitimacy. Fig. 1 maps out the connections between these concepts and serves as a guide for the remainder of the paper.

The significance of Habermas' theories for empirical studies is not obvious. His concepts are highly abstract and his use of ideal-types has attracted criticism for obscuring context. Three major critiques of the concepts of communicative action and public sphere should be highlighted. First, by focusing on serious speech acts and calm, reasoned discussion over humor, irony and wit, Habermas creates a false standard of transparency in communication (Dryzek, 2000; Gardiner, 2004; Thomassen, 2010). This leads into a separate critique that in presupposing a universal orientation for actors to search for agreement and consensual problem-solving he relies on an abstract faith that humans are rational when in fact what most often counts as "rational" is defined by power and the

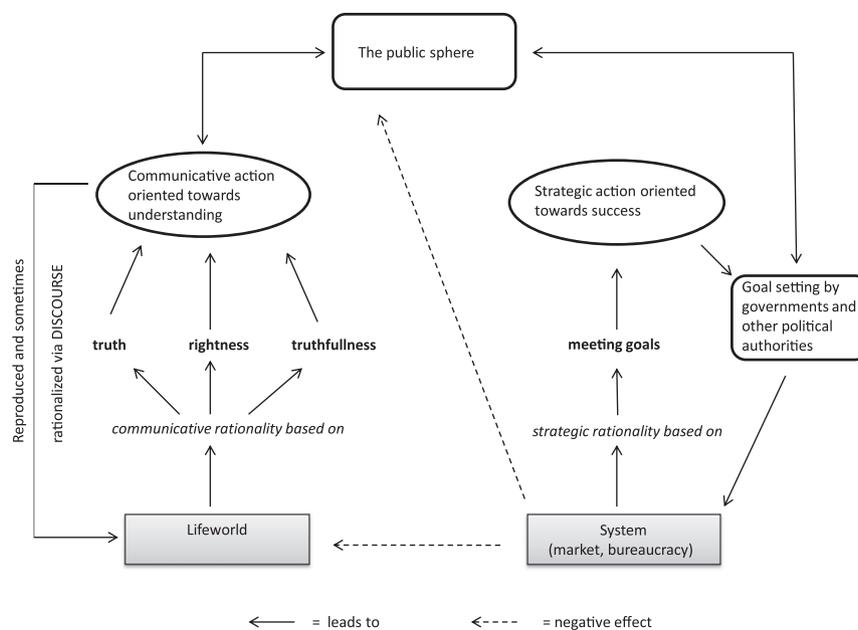


Fig. 1. Habermas' theoretical model (source, author).

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/92546>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/92546>

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