

Abstract for the STS Conference Graz 2015 „CRITICAL ISSUES IN SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY AND SOCIETY STUDIES“

Conference Theme: „Transitions to Sustainability“

Special Session 21: „Energy, society and culture – (sustainable) energy transformations as transformations of social order“

Contact Information:

Dr. Ludger Gailing

Deputy Head of Department „Institutional Change and Regional Public Goods“

Leibniz Institute for Regional Development and Structural Planning (IRS)

Flakenstr. 28-31

D-15537 Erkner

Germany

Fon: +49 3362 793-252

E-Mail: [gailing@irs-net.de](mailto:gailing@irs-net.de)

### **Energy transitions as transformations of power relations. Learning from dispositive thinking and governmentality studies?**

Energy transitions bring about changes in the infrastructural energy system as well as in the social sphere. These changes crucially touch upon existing power relations. Thus, studying the social order through the perspective of the energy system should include an understanding of “power”. On the one hand, power in energy transitions plays out overtly, for example in the form of policies supporting renewable energies. On the other hand, power is a decisive factor in energy transitions on a more subtle level: discourses concerning renewable energies or other aspects of energy transitions have an effect on how individuals fashion themselves into subjects and this affects the role they assume in the whole process.

The paper presents findings from a research project about socio-materiality and power in energy transitions. Dispositive thinking and governmentality studies will be discussed as two promising approaches to conceptualize power relations. Both fields of scholarship are rooted in the original work of Michel Foucault. Whereas dispositive thinking is important for the understanding of the co-production of material and social phenomena, the concept of governmentality has been used as a critical framework for the analysis of societal transformations and governance systems. The value of the two approaches in analyzing energy transitions will be illustrated with empirical cases from the German Energiewende: energy autarky around a rural waste-to-energy initiative and the development of wind energy sites in an “energy region”. The paper concludes with remarks about the limits and possibilities to govern sustainable energy transformations.