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Track: Transitions to Sustainability

Session 21: Energy, Society, and Culture

Title: “The mutual transformation of energy and spatial mobility? The electrification and smartification of transportation.”

Abstract:

The automobile is often regarded as the quintessential artefact of late-industrial modernity, an iconic motif in popular culture, and for the vast majority of the population, it is an indispensable part of everyday life. Today, international climate conventions as well as the general trend towards sustainable technologies have put unprecedented pressure on both governments and car manufacturers, not just to develop and deploy new technologies, but also to tell new stories that reimagine space, mobility, and social life. The range of possible innovations stretches from sophisticated charging systems that integrate “smart” electric vehicles as “swarm batteries” into the electrical grid to plans that envision future mobility as an interconnected, multi-mode system of various means of transportation beyond the personally owned car. I will argue that the increasingly dominant visions of the electric car have shifted away from a mere substitute for conventional vehicles. Electrified mobility has become a field of discourse far beyond the automobile, where – often implicit – questions of urban planning, (energy) autonomy, (de-)centralization, participation, privacy, and social control become more prevalent. That raises crucial questions with very practical consequences: What configurations of actors, artefacts, and discourses are associated with what kind of future? How are forms of social life and social order reflected and enacted within such scenarios? I draw upon two years of fieldwork in Germany and the US, using a mixed methodology of document analysis and multi-sited ethnography.