

Opening up and closing down energy futures: energy scenarios in Germany and France

Several developments, including the climate crisis, the growing energy hunger of emerging economies, the nuclear catastrophe of Fukushima and the recent shale gas and tight oil boom in the US, have contributed to putting energy policy more than ever at the center of policy attention. Energy scenarios are central nodes in these discussions. They structure debates about the necessary “energy transition(s)” and represent stages in the negotiation, enactment or reaffirmation of global, national and local energy futures. Despite their growing importance as a policy tool, social sciences have not yet given scenarios the attention they deserve.

This contribution to the 12th IAS-STS Annual Conference (conference theme “Towards Low-Carbon Energy Systems”) therefore concentrates on the role of energy scenarios in current debates and policy decisions in Germany and France, in order to elucidate the ways societies think about energy futures, and under which conditions scenarios can help to successfully prepare sustainable transformations of energy systems. The contribution is based on fieldwork in both countries (interviews with experts, archives) and aims at answering two questions: First, despite increasing integration of energy markets, efforts to collectively manage global environmental risks and other transnational dynamics in the field of energy policies, some countries have rather accentuated their differences. While neighboring Germany and France have decided to both engage in “energy transitions”, they give very different interpretations to this term: Germany has decided to ban nuclear energy and dramatically expand electricity production from renewable sources (and to a lesser extent natural gas), while France has launched a national debate on its future energy policy, but continues to rely heavily on nuclear energy for its electricity production. How can we make sense of these developments from a social science point of view? In what way can the analysis of energy scenarios and public debate help to understand the persistence and even increase of differences? Second, scenarios are highly ambivalent tools: on the one hand, they can help to open up discussions by presenting alternatives to current trends and thus politicize energy questions. On the other hand, energy scenario development, generally concentrated in the hands of a few actors, can lead to a delegation of policy questions to experts. Furthermore, scenarios often tend to over-estimate path-dependencies and current trends, thereby de-politicizing the energy debate. Thus, starting from empirical examples, we will see under which conditions energy scenarios encourage discussions about sustainable energy futures, helping alternative scenarios to emerge and to influence energy debates, and when they close such discussions down.

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