

Governing innovations in sustainable practice

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In this paper we develop a fresh approach to questions of governance and sustainability by relating concepts of sociotechnical transition to contemporary theories of practice. By focusing, in particular, on the active, creative and constitutive part that consumers and users play in reproducing and transforming complex systems of practice, we re-frame matters of power and agency in such a way as to re-define the challenges and dilemmas around which the workshop agenda is built.

The literature on sociotechnical transitions is marked by a distinctive intellectual ancestry (with roots in science and technology studies and theories of innovation), and by empirical research typically concentrating on the transformation of technical systems and infrastructures of provision and supply. Popular examples have to do with transportation systems (Elzen and Wieczorek 2005), with water infrastructures (van der Brugge et. al. 2005), or with energy and 'the emergence of new technological, institutional or cultural patterns in utility provision' (Voss et al 2006: 175). It is in this context that debate about the potential for steering complex 'emergent' social arrangements has taken hold and in which the potential for multi-level, multi-scalar governance is being explored.

Rather than taking resulting representations of sociotechnical transition for granted, we recover critical processes and questions routinely left out of such analyses. These include matters of consumption, convention and demand (not only production and provision) and shifting ideologies, meanings and understandings (not only different levels of institution, infrastructure, investment and 'public' involvement). The literature on innovations in practice demonstrates that manufacturers and producers are unable to control the fate and fortune of the things they make, and that consumers, far from being external to systems of innovation, are central to them (Franke and Shah, 2003; Shove and Pantzar 2005). As we have argued elsewhere (Shove 2003; Hand, Shove and Southerton 2005), the normalisation of consumer expectations sustain complexes of practice the successful accomplishment of which requires what are probably unsustainable patterns of demand.

In extending ideas about how innovations in practice form, travel and disappear we develop a more rounded concept of sociotechnical transition and, in the process, articulate a somewhat different set of questions about agency, power and governance. In asking how the sustainability (or otherwise) of everyday life is 'governed' we identify conceptually distinct moments and opportunities for deliberate intervention in relation a) to the materials, competences and meanings of which practices are composed; b) to the manner in which these elements are integrated and reproduced in the enactment of specific practices; c) to relations between practices, which define and constitute complex systems of practice or sociotechnical systems more broadly and roundly defined.

In arguing that different modes of governance apply to each of these analytically separable but co-existing 'dimensions' of sociotechnical systems of practice, we develop a new way of approaching the everyday politics of sustainability. Rather than focusing on discrete, ready-made, institutional layers, or on relations between political jurisdictions we pay attention to the sometimes messy pathways and channels through which the elements of sustainable practice circulate and out of which systems and relations between practices arise. This method allows us to take due account of conflicts between systems of practice and to investigate parallel processes of innovation, fossilisation and decay. We elaborate on these ideas with reference to empirical studies of mobility and of domestic energy and water consumption.