

Abstract for the „Politics & Governance“-TM-Workshop in Berlin, Sept. 2007

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Mobbing for socio-technical transitions?!

The normative dimension of transition dynamics as observed in Energy Regions

The Problem

The ‘transitions literature’ has been criticised for adopting an overly optimistic managerial approach. While governance theory can add some realism with regard to structural barriers and aspects of power, it shares a tendency to focus on macro-level structures and to pay less attention on micro-level dynamics. While guiding visions and broad normative orientations (e.g. related to sustainability) are considered to play an important role, the social dynamics involved in the development of such orientations into socially binding rules and of mechanisms for sanctioning them are rarely examined.

The importance of a micro-sociological foundation

Studies on the role of Leitbilder for governance and planning (e.g. in urban development, Kuder 2001) have exemplified how new Leitbilder, guiding visions of a certain quality (Dierkes et al 1992), rely on established norms and social capital of their proponents to build up legitimacy. New Leitbilder become effective in antagonising existing path dependencies when they tightly link up with well established basic norms & values of the relevant individuals and at the same time are concrete enough to allow for a classification of actions as congruent with the Leitbild or not. This of course limits the scope for a reflective support (leave alone design) of Leitbilder with regard to sustainability transitions. The reflective monitoring of such dynamics and occasional interventions are nevertheless key to any intentional action regarding socio-technical transitions.

Methods and empirical basis

I study Energy Regions in Austria, i.e. regional initiatives which aim at focusing regional development strategies on the exploitation of renewable energy and which build up respective actor networks. In these regions, the acceptance of a set of principles and relatively concrete targets with regard to the future development of the regional energy supply and consumption system (like a certain share of renewables in heat/ electricity by a certain year) has been of uttermost importance. I particularly analyse the development of the Leitbild of one such regional initiative in the district of Murau, Upper Styria, focusing on the participation of stakeholders as well as the intentional strategies and observed activities of network building. I document the actual effects of the Leitbild concerning its co-ordinating function in concrete decisions (by planners, local authorities, enterprises and households deciding on infrastructure projects, product portfolios, marketing strategies etc.) and develop hypotheses about why the Leitbild in this case developed into such a binding norm (the disobedience of which would cost any regional actor relevant social capital). A close empirical look on the discourse in a very small region is juxtaposed with the recent debate on ‘experimental regionalism’ (e.g. Heidenreich 2005).

The pitfalls of openness to participation and interpretative flexibility

In order to fulfil a co-ordinating function, broad orientations must develop into shared visions, these into even more concrete Leitbilder, and these into socially binding norms. This process can not be steered, but actors can try to establish the preconditions for such a process e.g. by mobilising certain kinds of social capital. Actors do reflect upon the locally specific basis for the legitimacy of new Leitbilder and act strategically. Necessary (though not sufficient) preconditions for their success are: The thematic focus of one recognisable initiative is kept at an optimal level of concreteness and scope, participation of the most relevant stakeholders is achieved, access is restricted to them and group dynamics develop, that bring about opinion leadership in niche domains, providing a surplus of esteem sprawling into the core areas of conflict with an incumbant regime. Only if there are concrete touchstones allowing for the assessment of actions (e.g. 'this architect's plan does not comply with the 'Energievision Murau', hence he is not one of us – hence the 'mobbing' in the title) there is a chance for a Leitbild to develop a co-ordinating effect which can be utilised in an intentional effort towards socio-technical transition. And only a Leitbild tightly linked to well established values and norms can function as the binding agent of regional single issue movements and policy networks on the national level.

Conclusions

The regional processes of Leitbild development and network building can serve as a testbed for governance strategies and breed hypotheses about the social dynamics (concerning participation, norms and legitimacy) involved in the intentional change of complex socio-technical constellations.

My analysis strongly indicates that the recommendation 'to develop scenarios and visions' must be qualified by recommendations about how the development of such elements into concrete, binding and sanctioned social norms can be supported. Some observations in Murau (as compared to three other Energy Regions in Austria) seem to be especially fruitful inspiration for the general conceptualisation of socio-technical transitions and its governance: The importance of narrow thematic focus and the role of a watch-dog to keep the discourse focused, the success of interventions as a function of their timing in relation to phases of identity building, the importance of 'exclusiveness' of niche networks and the strategies and behavioural patterns that bring about group dynamics necessary to let a new Leitbild develop into a binding norm.

A hypothetical conclusion concerning the governance of socio-technical transition is, that neither the local level nor the micro-sociological dynamics should be ignored when looking at the institutional co-evolution across governance levels required for socio-technical transitions. And as the local level is considered an important test-bed for institutional innovations (cf. the 'experimental regionalism' approach) it is also important for the development of Leitbilder as normative binding agents that can be crucial for the building of networks far beyond the local level.