

Problematizing the Politics of Low Carbon Transition

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Summary

- What does socio-technical transitions literature have to tell us about low carbon transition:
 - Focus on multi-level perspective (transitions management)
 - Economic historians
- Gaps and reified politics
- Policy paradigms and Models of Capitalism:
 - Ideas as context and detail (and complexity): critique of LMEs and climate policy
 - Explains existing politics (before change)
- Paradigm shifts, narratives and prospects for change to UK as one LME

Multi-Level Perspective

- Normative research project: not just interested in understand transition per se but of a certain type: low carbon
- Socio-technical regimes:
 - Complex systems made up of inter-related areas across industry, technology, politics, and society – areas co-evolve
 - Three levels: landscape (external structures), regime (mainstream ways of realising social functions), niche (innovation)
- Transitions
 - Take place over extended period of time (generations)
 - New knowledge at landscape level can destabilise regimes and allow space for niche innovations to break through
 - Niches exogenous sites of revolutionary change: need support
 - Transitions Management: learning, co-ordination, building networks, reflexive

Economic Historians: Unprecedented Transition

- Low Carbon Transition differs from previous large scale energy transitions (managed/organic):
- Timing ('innovation chains' and diffusion): previous transitions 100-150 years – cannot afford this time
- Different drivers for change: economic variables like price, cost, and value drove previous large-scale energy transitions – less so this time (social goal)
- Low carbon transition highly political: governments need to support and develop niche innovations and act as sites for knowledge and consensus building

Under-theorised Politics

- Recognise cultures, norms, etc... but politics of transition reified and unproblematic thereby tend to proscribe without asking about institutional likelihood of such recommendations being adopted OR successful
- TM, for example, fails to understand current political configurations that need to give way or adapt to their visions of the role of governance in transition
- Relates to frustration often expressed at why governance has not yet changed to better enable low carbon transition (or to reflect given recommendations)
- Different units of analysis: industry practices; technologies and innovation – but seldom political institutions

Policy Paradigms as Context

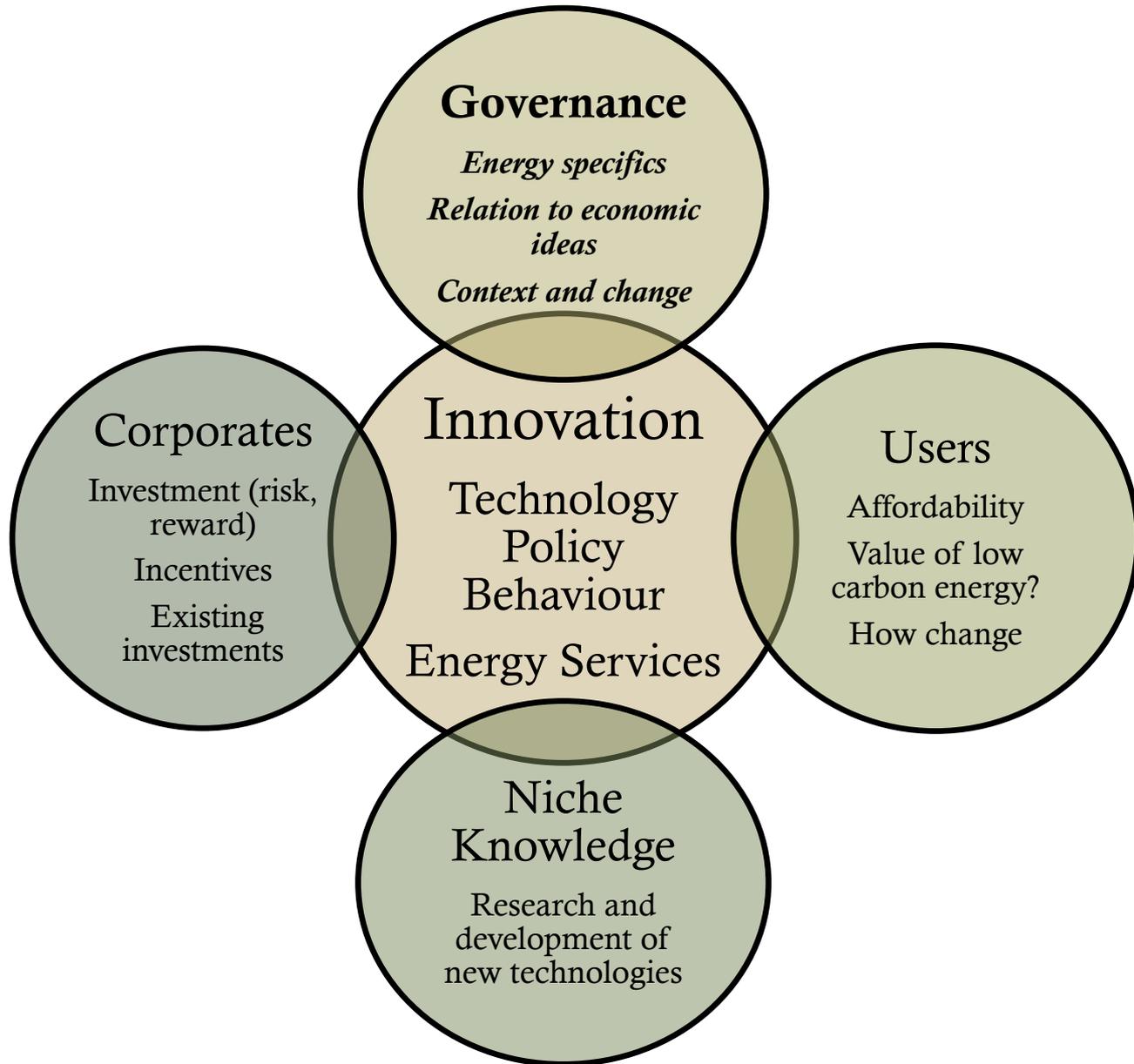
- Kern; Meadowcroft: ideas and institutions and context
- Interpretive frameworks (policy paradigms) influence how low carbon energy transition is understood and what policy choices are made: objectives, instruments, institutions
- Paradigms become embedded in specific ways and these produce specific path dependencies: making change difficult
- Neoliberal economic ideas:
 - Energy becomes more of a commodity
 - Markets to provide energy services – in a competitive environment
 - Framework of policies to enable markets
- Compromise of liberal environmentalism: climate targets but market instruments preferred (less disruptive) – narrows choice

Political Variety as Context

- Models of capitalism – embedded in institutions:
 - LMEs: reliance on markets; emphasis on individual action
 - CMEs: greater role for state in shaping the economy; maximise collective over individual goods
- Vivien Schmidt: other institutional sub-varieties related to discourse: coordinate and consensus build (Germany) and communication from centre (UK)
- Different approaches to governing energy for low carbon transition:
 - CMEs more successful i.e. in developing niche innovations
 - Building consensus groups re: low carbon transition

Energy Specific Contexts

- There's something about energy:
 - Energy as never successfully brought under universal trading norms (not in GATT)
 - Energy as national public good (US and military)
 - Even within LMEs historical role of state in financing and managing diffusion stages (electricity – see also Perez)
 - China: energy as fundamental to growth
 - Russia: energy fundamental to GDP (greater state control even while other sectors left in private sector)



Prospects of Change

- Focused on one LME, the UK: certain ideas when embedded imply certain path dependencies: i.e. depoliticisation and lack of political capacity
- Ideas can also enable change
- Punctuated evolution: as with socio-technical often coincide with crisis (shock, uncertainty, disruption = opportunity for change)
- Narratives (ideas): convince that crisis exists; explain problem; prove policy failure; provide solutions

The Debate

- Previous paradigm shift (Keynesian to neoliberal economic governance): narrative of state overload leading to a solution of reducing state's role
- Multiple crises now: finance, economic, climate, energy: different crisis scenario
- Range of alternative paradigms still battling it out (ecological, geopolitical, CME): confusion and inter-paradigm borrowing

Conclusions

- Can an LME, like the UK, adopt a more supportive, consensus building, reflexive approach to governing?
- Crisis debate still exists - reframe the debate
 - Whilst cogniscent of specific energy and ideational contexts
 - Continue to question existing policy in a consistent and detailed manner
 - Extend the debate beyond current circles and beyond coalition in-fighting – a national conversation
 - Social transformation as modernising, allowing for greater public participation, related to new technologies, to new industries and centres for growth
 - Corporate welfare focused on niche technologies R&D

Questions

- Speaking to NPE audiences about sociotechnical transitions – have I got that balance right?
- Do the second sections relate well enough to the first?