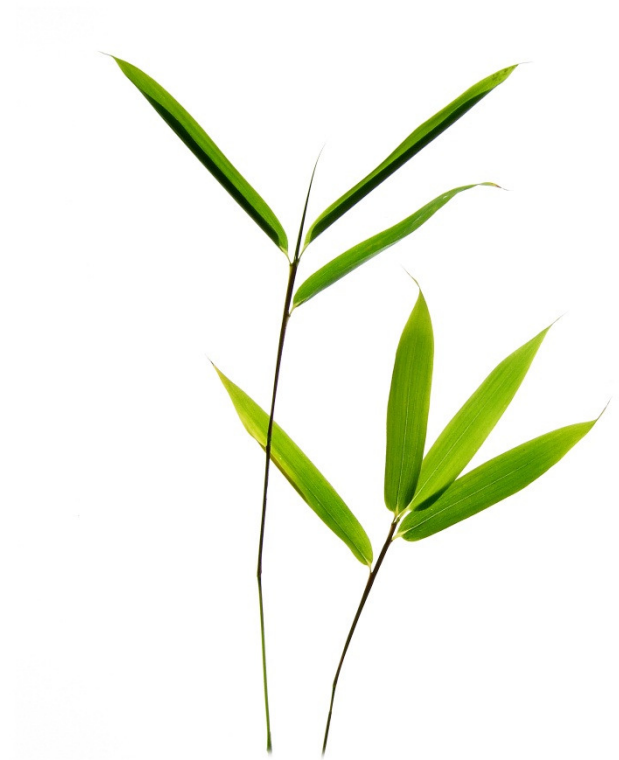


The discursive construction of sustainable biofuels in Germany and the EU

A struggle of different conceptions of sustainability and its meaning



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Biofuels Policy in Germany and the EU

- **As of the beginning of the 2000s**
 - Wide political support for biofuels
 - E.g. EU Biofuels Directive 2001 or tax exemption for biofuels in Germany
 - Biofuels widely seen as a silver bullet for a lot of problems
 - Rise of biofuel production and use in the EU
 - Especially in Germany: from less than 1% to 7.2% in 2007
- **Increased criticism from 2005 on**
 - Because of many issues, but mainly because of impacts on food prices during the food crisis 2007/2008 → Food vs. Fuel conflict
- **New EU directive on biofuels 2009**
 - Binding target of 10% biofuels in 2020, bound to the compliance with sustainability criteria

Aim of research: Making sense of these developments from an interpretive perspective



- **Starting from Laclau’s discourse theory**
 - Food vs. fuel conflict as a dislocatory event that disrupts the partial fixation of the dominant discourse
 - Results in a proliferation of floating signifiers
 - Struggles over the integration of those floating signifiers into the dominant discourse
- **Analysis of these discursive struggles and their meaning**
 - Central role of ‘sustainable biofuels’ in these struggles in order to fix the discursive rupture
 - 2-step-approach
 - 1st step: Document analysis based on the methods of grounded theory
 - 2nd step: Going beyond the texts based on secondary literature and historical reconstructions



Narratives of sustainable biofuels

Narrative	Critically supportive	Radically dismissive	Trade & efficiency	Domestic production
Problem structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Sustainability problems are profound and broad (not only CO₂, not only ecological) - Still, there is social and ecological potential 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Biofuels are generally not a sustainable strategy → Biofuels are the problem - Problems are rooted in western fuel consumption patterns 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The wide range of sustainability problems, of which the poor CO₂ balance is the most important one, are due to inefficiencies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Sustainability problems of biofuels are not grave and entirely a problem of biofuels from the global South
Needs for action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Comprehensive regulation that covers social and ecological aspects, using instruments such as LCA or multi-stakeholder certification 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Abandon biofuels support policies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Foster innovative technologies and R&D for more efficient biofuels - Expand global trade in biofuels - Investments - Focus on specific crops and farming techniques 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Introduce sustainability standards that provide for a level playing field and protect the European market from unsustainable dumping biofuels
Image of a sustainable biofuel	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Small-scale, peasant, ecologically and socially just production, preferably in regional economic circles, but also for export 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Does not exist 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - A (CO₂-)efficient high-tech product that is produced on a large, industrialized scale and traded globally 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - State-protected domestic European production from domestic crops like rapeseed

Contextualizing the narratives of sustainable biofuels I



- **What meta-discourses are reinvoked through these narratives?**
- **Meta-discourses of environmental governance in scientific literature (Bäckstrand and Lövbrand 2006)**
 - Green governmentality
 - Ecological modernization
 - Reform-oriented civic environmentalism
 - Radical civic environmentalism
- **How do the narratives of sustainable biofuels relate to the these meta-discourses?**
 - Critically-supportive narrative → Reform-oriented civic env.
 - Radically-dismissive narrative → Radical civic env.
 - Trade & efficiency narrative → Ecological modernization
 - Domestic production narrative → ?

Contextualizing the narratives of sustainable biofuels II



- **The meta-discourse of green governmentality is largely absent in the narratives of sustainable biofuels**
 - What meta-discourse does the domestic production narrative reinvolve then?
 - **Broadening the view by integrating agricultural meta-discourses (Potter and Tilzey 2005)**
 - European agriculture is (i.a.) framed by a neo-mercantilist discourse
 - Emphasizes the productivist conception of the farmer's vocation and the state's responsibility to safeguard and underwrite the productive capacity and export potential of domestic farmers
- **The domestic production narrative is embedded in (and reinvokes) the agricultural meta-discourse of neo-mercantilism**

Contextualizing the narratives of sustainable biofuels III



Meta-discourse	Civic environmentalism		Ecological modernization	Neo-mercantilism
	Reform-oriented	Radical		
Narrative of a sustainable biofuel	Critically supportive	Radically dismissive	Trade & efficiency	Domestic production

- The (state-emphasizing) meta-discourse of green governmentality is replaced by the (state-emphasizing) meta-discourse of neo-mercantilism
- Shows the deep historical embeddedness of biofuels policy in the practices and meta-discourses of European agriculture
- Raises some interesting questions for further research

Relation to policy decisions: Discourse institutionalization I



- **Discourse institutionalization: translation of a discourse into institutional arrangements (Hajer 1995)**
 - Discursive affinities between different narratives are central to this
- **What has been adopted?**
 - A binding target of a 10% share of biofuels in total transport fuel consumption that is bound to a couple of sustainability criteria
 - Reduction of greenhouse gas emissions
 - No raw material from land with high biodiversity value or high carbon stocks
 - No social, only (a few) environmental criteria are included
 - A moderate sustainability certification approach
- **So did the critically-supportive and the domestic production narrative prevail?**

Relation to policy decisions: Discourse institutionalization II



- **Rather, a discourse coalition (Hajer 1995) has prevailed**
 - It centers on discursive affinities between story lines of the critically-supportive, the domestic production and the trade & efficiency narrative
 - Sustainability standards, but no protectionism \leftrightarrow increased global trade
 - Increased jobs and income \leftrightarrow win-win rhetoric
 - Binding sustainability standards \leftrightarrow binding sustainability standards
- **What does this policy instrument represent?**
 - A reconciliatory approach
 - Legitimizing function of the reform-oriented civic environmentalism meta-discourse \rightarrow serves to the sustain the dominant biofuels discourse (that has hitherto been characterized by the meta-discourses of ecological modernization and neo-mercantilism)
 - A ‘passive revolution’

Conclusions



- **The food vs. fuel conflict (i.a.) disrupted the dominant biofuels discourse coalition in Europe**
- **‘Sustainable biofuels’ became the central floating signifier that has been integrated into the dominant discourse coalition**
- **It was integrated by incorporating the reform-oriented civic environmentalism meta-discourse that fulfills a legitimizing function, not a challenging one**
- **Is the notion of ‘sustainable biofuels’ the new empty signifier in the biofuels discourse?**

Thank you for your attention.

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Literature



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Narratives of sustainable biofuels I: Problem structures



- **Why are biofuels currently not sustainable?**
 - Because of the lack of a comprehensive regulation
 - Because biofuels are per se unsustainable
 - Because of inefficiencies
 - Because of the Global South

Narratives of sustainable biofuels II: Needs for action



- **What is needed to make biofuels sustainable?**
 - Comprehensive regulation that ensures sustainability via binding sustainability standards
 - Fostering research and investments in innovative refinery technologies, specific crops and farming techniques
 - Expand global trade in biofuels
 - Abandon biofuels and start reducing fuel consumption