

‘A leading role in a future technology market‘

**How the narrative of technological innovation and efficiency shaped
German and European biofuels policy**



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A coalition approach from an interpretive perspective



- **Starting point: focus on meaning**
 - Meaning is not fixed to social and physical realities
 - These realities are assigned meaning through interpretation
- **So, is everything constantly in flux?**
 - Empty signifiers provide for relatively stable discursive structures that organize social relations
 - ‘technological innovation’ in this case?
- **The concept of empty signifiers is very close to Maarten Hajer’s concepts of story lines and discursive affinities**
 - Story lines are ‘crisp statements’ summarizing a narrative
 - Discursive affinities describe the similarity of the discursive or cognitive structures of separate discursive elements



The discourse coalitions approach

- **Empty signifiers and story lines with their discursive affinities largely fulfill the same function**
 - Multi-interpretability
 - Establishing positive links between different discourses
 - Covering contradictions and sidelining alternative interpretations
- **Those story lines that develop discursive affinities are at the center of discourse coalitions, which are defined as the ensemble of**
 - a set of story lines
 - the actors who utter these story lines
 - the practices this discursive activity is embedded in
- **Central aspect of discourse coalitions: the way discursive elements are related**
 - Look for the ‘discursive cement’ that keeps together a discourse coalition

Applying the discourse coalitions approach to German and European biofuels policy



- **Discourse coalitions in German and European biofuels policy will be analyzed at three different points in time**
 - the introduction of tax exemptions for biofuels in Germany in 2002
 - the replacement of these tax exemptions by a mandatory quota in Germany in 2006, and
 - the introduction of a binding 10 per cent target and mandatory sustainability certification in the EU in 2009

The adoption of a tax exemption for biofuels in Germany I



- **Biofuels were long only implicitly promoted as a side-effect of agricultural policy**
 - Dominant discourse coined by a state-centric agricultural paradigm
- **In the 1990s, biofuels became more than an outlet of agricultural surpluses**
 - Diversification of meaning in the context of the general rise of renewable energies and of the issue of climate change
- **Adoption of a comprehensive tax exemption for all biofuels in 2002**

The adoption of a tax exemption for biofuels in Germany II



- **Dominant biofuels discourse coalition at the time**
 - Story lines
 - Agricultural surpluses; Rural jobs and income; Climate protection; Technical feasibility; Security of supply; Oil independence; Technological innovation
 - Actors
 - Automotive and mineral oil industries; Farmers associations; Environmental organizations; Ministry of Agriculture; Almost all political parties
 - Practices
 - Large-scale fuel production; Agricultural production; state aid schemes; technological support programmes
- **Very broad, but undifferentiated discourse coalition**
 - Win-win narrative
 - Positive relations between all pro-biofuel story lines
 - Materialized in the comprehensive tax exemption

The replacement of the tax exemption by a mandatory quota in Germany in 2006 I



- **Biofuels boom** in Germany after the tax exemption
- **Stronger perception outside of an agricultural niche**
- **The original win-win narrative is questioned**
 - Tax exemptions seem expensive, inefficient and ineffective in terms of
 - the state budget
 - climate protection
 - potential to mass-produce
- **Replacement of the tax exemption by a quota that obliges fuel sellers to sell a certain percentage of biofuel**

The replacement of the tax exemption by a mandatory quota in Germany in 2006 II



Pro-tax exemption

- **Story lines**
 - Agricultural surpluses; Rural jobs and income; Raising tax revenues; Climate protection
- **Actors**
 - Farmers associations; Renewable energy organizations; Ministry of Agriculture; Liberal democrats; Christian Social Union
- **Practices**
 - Agricultural production; state aid schemes
- **The pro-quota coalition prevailed**
 - It managed to gather a group of widely different actors around specific notions of technological innovation, cost-effectiveness, climate protection and budgetary discipline

Pro-quota

- **Story lines**
 - Climate protection; Technological innovation; International trade; Cost-effectiveness; Budgetary discipline
- **Actors**
 - Farmers associations; Automotive and mineral oil industries; Ministry of Finance and of Environment; Social Democrats; Christian democrats
- **Practices**
 - Large-scale fuel production and marketization; international trade; reducing state expenditure

The introduction of a binding 10% target in the EU in 2009



- **Increased criticism from 2006 on**
 - Because of many issues
- **A critical biofuels discourse becomes stronger ...**
 - ... that is split up, however, between radical opponents of biofuels and critical supporters
- **New EU directive on biofuels 2009**
 - Binding target of 10% biofuels for 2020, bound to the compliance with (a few) environmental sustainability criteria
- **A discourse coalition similar to the pro-quota coalition in Germany in 2006 prevailed ...**
 - ... by incorporating a specific notion of sustainable biofuels that a wide range of actors were able to relate to



Conclusions

- **Discourse coalition approach offers an alternative conception of coalitions**
 - Beyond the mere reference to interests or institutional positions of actors
 - By focusing on the story lines in the discursive field and the relations between them
- **The case of biofuels policy in Germany and the EU (to some extent) showed how specific story lines**
 - were related to one another,
 - appealed to widely different actors, and
 - materialized in specific policy decisions
- **The story line of technological innovation was one of these story lines and, arguably, played an important role in keeping together this set of story lines**

Thank you for your attention.

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Sales of biodiesel in Germany 1998 - 2006

