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Framing of regimes and transition strategies: An application to housing construction in Denmark

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ABSTRACT

This article suggests that transition strategies are always formulated in the context of specific representations of the regime and the challenges it faces. It is argued that the framing of a regime affects the envisioning of transition strategies. An analysis of the current development agenda for the housing construction sector in Denmark reveals the relevance and impacts of different regime framings. It is proposed that the ability to cope with framing issues as situated and political processes is at the core of the governance of transitions.

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1. Introduction

Under pressure of sustainability challenges and other persistent problems of modern society, academics and policy makers have engaged in debates during the past decade about how to strategically support and govern societal transitions. The supposed need for such transitions is rooted in the conviction that the practices of individuals and organisations are shaped by regimes of interdependent technological, organisational, regulatory and cognitive structures, which are characterised by inertia (Rip and Kemp, 1998; Geels, 2002). This has enabled the sustainability challenge to be addressed as a feature of these regimes (Geels, 2006). The purpose of transition governance is thus to address core societal challenges such as sustainability by devising strategies to re-organise regimes (Schot and Geels, 2008).

Since transition strategies are concerned with the transformation of regimes, the ability to identify and represent regimes is a precondition for formulating such strategies. This raises questions about how regime representations are constructed, who controls their production, and what kind of experiences and resources go into the processes by which regimes are represented. Although these questions

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are central to any attempts to understand the challenge of governing transition processes, regime representations have not been systematically investigated as political constructs in the governance oriented transition literature.

The notion of the regime thus tends to be employed mainly as an academic concept in the governance oriented transition literature, i.e. as a concept that enables the scientist to identify and represent regimes. Much less attention has been dedicated to understanding how regimes are framed in the sphere of real-world politics, where situated interests and concerns are at stake. From a governance point of view, this is problematic, because transition strategies are much more likely to be informed by regime representations that succeed in becoming hegemonic in the sphere of real-world politics than regime representations that are articulated to meet the standards of academia.

The aim of the article is to investigate the processes in which situated actors craft regime representations, and to map the strategic development initiatives generated by different regime representations as they order and organise social reality conceptually. The notion of situatedness is employed to recognise that actors tend to perceive themselves as the centre of their context rather than as a component of a regime. To most actors the regime notion does accordingly not represent a perspective which appears natural to the way they understand themselves and the way they strategically express their interests. Central to the notion of situatedness hence is that actors navigate according to their own self-centred interpretation of their context. The role of situatedness has recently been explored in user-side oriented discussions of transitions, in which it is argued that practices that engage which the energy regime – such as cooking – are not likely to be experienced as an element of this regime by the end-user (Hargreaves et al., 2011:9). This does not, however, entail that situated actors may not engage in developing regime representations. They may do so in order to strategically influence the situated self-perception of other actors and thus facilitate new collective forms of coordinated agency. By emphasising the role of situated actors in representing regimes, the purpose of this article is to argue that regime representations may be perceived as political constructs influenced by a variety of different situated self-perceptions and interest articulations.

The paper is structured as follows: Section 2 is a conceptual discussion of how regime representations are crafted by situated actors. Section 3 offers an empirical analysis of such processes by considering a series of development initiatives within Danish housing construction as the effects of different regime representations. Finally, Section 4 concludes and offers suggestions for governance of transitions.

2. Regime framing as objectification processes

According to transition theory literature, a regime can be understood as a collection of highly institutionalised rules that configure a series of socio-technical elements into a socio-technical system that fulfils a societal function (Geels, 2005:450). The notion of rules conveys the view of a regime as a configuration of socio-technical elements that exhibit a high degree of structuration. A regime thus reflects the 'grammar' or 'deep structure' of a socio-technical system providing a societal function (Geels, 2004:906).

Against this background, it may be argued that the societal function provides an aggregate teleology for the regime as a whole, which ideally enables the regime to be represented and delineated, independent of situated interests, concerns and identities. Both the general transition theory literature and the governance oriented transition literature recognise, however, that contemporary real-world regimes may not be easy to describe and delineate, even for the social scientist. Within the transition theory literature it has been discussed how to empirically identify and demarcate regimes. An argument of this debate is that the regime notion should be seen more as an interpretative concept that invites an analysis of the patterns by which actors reproduce system elements and less as a concept that provides rigid guidelines for how to empirically identify and delineate regimes (Geels, 2011:319).

The governance oriented transition literature argues that regimes need to be understood in a reflexive manner (Voss and Kemp, 2006; Voss et al., 2010). Such reflexivity is coined as a strategy for coping with epistemic uncertainties. It is argued that uncertainties arise because regimes consist of 'heterogeneous interactions', which are not well understood by the cognitive models of established scientific disciplines, and because structural changes are believed to operate 'behind the backs' of the actors who

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