

## ENERGY FUTURES - EMERGING PATHWAYS IN AN UNCERTAIN WORLD?

International conference by the Leibniz Research Alliance on Energy Transitions

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WZB Berlin Social Science Center

### **Application requirements**

Please submit your 250-word abstracts to the session organizer(s) by December 15th, 2019. All abstracts must include a title, your name, institutional affiliation, and contact information.

### **Session title**

Implications of different 'Imaginary' concepts for energy futures: Interdisciplinary gains or quarrels?

### **Session chair(s)**

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### **Abstract**

'Imaginary' concepts have become central frameworks for different fields of research like sociology, sustainability research and science and technology studies, leading to various definitions of the word 'Imaginary'. In this session, we are looking for productive interplays of multifarious theoretical and disciplinary perspectives with regards to 'Imaginary' concepts for energy futures. Deploying imaginary concepts in research on energy futures can provide fruitful knowledge and an increased understanding of technological, societal and economic interactions when it comes to energy transition(s).

The concept of 'imaginaries' gained greater attention in social science in the 1950's when philosopher Castoriadis (1997) first described that society and how it is constructed is not a given but only exists and materializes itself because it is collectively imagined in certain ways. While Taylor (2007) sets out Castoriadis' idea of the social imaginary, he expands this idea further to analyze patterns and shifts of historical and political thought. The concept of sociotechnical imaginaries is explored in Sheila Jasanoff and Sang-Hyun Kim's (2013) work on nuclear power in the US and Korea over the past half century. The authors use this concept in order to explain the relationship between science and technology developments and political institutions, and in particular understand the relationship between the process of building a sense of national identity and national level science and technology projects. The role of competing imaginaries in shaping climate policy is explored by Levy and Spicer (2013). For these authors imaginaries provide a shared sense of meaning, coherence and orientation around highly complex and global issues. Grunwald (2011) investigates concepts and approaches for scrutinizing, comparing and assessing various energy futures from an epistemological point of view.

These are only some of the prevailing 'Imaginary' concepts of this growing theoretical field. Therefore this session wants to create an overview and an interdisciplinary meta-discourse about different 'Imaginary' concepts. Moreover, we want to impose a strong focus on the implications of these concepts for understanding energy futures:

- Which are the gains and blind spots of the above outlined concepts and other approaches towards imaginaries and energy futures?
- Do the focal points of imaginary concepts have commonalities; is there room for synergies and if so, what can they learn from each other/what can be learned from one another?
- We are also looking for incommensurable positions and ask for consequences in transdisciplinary contexts considering the discourse about expertise, counter-expertise and 'lay' expertise.
- Observing the increase of different 'imaginary' concepts we want to ask in a self-reflexive manner for the consequences of scientific work.

We want to encourage contributions shedding light on the rich theoretical approaches of imaginary concepts, aiming at providing incentives for various scientific fields to explore the analytical possibilities of the concept; as well as papers discussing capabilities and pitfalls of using imaginaries to grasp current developments. Instead of having a mere theoretical controversy, which imaginary account produces (more) 'truth', it is of interest how the plurality of 'Imaginary' approaches can have beneficial or detrimental consequences for the transitions of energy systems.

**Recommended literature:**

- Anderson, Benedict (2006): *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism.* London, New York: Verso.
- Castoriadis, Cornelius (1997): *The imaginary institution of society.* Cambridge, Malden: Polity Press.
- Grunwald, Armin (2011): Energy futures: Diversity and the need for assessment. In: *Futures* 43 (8), S. 820–830. DOI: 10.1016/j.futures.2011.05.024.
- Jasanoff, Sheila; Kim, Sang-Hyun (2013): Sociotechnical Imaginaries and National Energy Policies. In: *Science as Culture* 22 (2), S. 189–196. DOI: 10.1080/09505431.2013.786990.
- Levy, David L.; Spicer, André (2013): Contested imaginaries and the cultural political economy of climate change. In: *Organization* 20 (5), S. 659–678. DOI: 10.1177/1350508413489816.
- McNeil, Maureen et al. (2017): Conceptualizing imaginaries of science, technology and society. In: Felt, Ulrike; Fouche, Rayvon; Miller, Clark A.; Smith-Doerr, Laurel eds.: *The Handbook of Science and Technology Studies* 4<sup>th</sup> Edition, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, pp. 435-464.
- Taylor, Charles (2007): *Modern social imaginaries.* 4. print. Durham: Duke Univ. Press (Philosophy social theory).