http://somatosphere.net/2016/03/making-cases-for-a-technological-fix-germanys-energy-transition-and-the-green-good-life.html

Making Cases for a Technological Fix: Germany’s Energy Transition and the Green Good Life

2016-03-17 05:00:16

By Jennifer Carlson

This is a story of women who invoke another woman’s psychosomatic distress to make a case for the green good life and its possibilities. Hailing from a northern German village transformed by sustainable development projects, the people in this story weigh the promises of the *Energiewende,* Germany’s “energy turn” from nuclear to renewable energy, through the experience of one woman and her everyday life. At a moment where ecological concern has become a site of capitalist speculation, these women posit investment in renewable energy as a means to better living and, by extension, a solution for their friend’s emotional upheaval.

Drawing upon research conducted over a decade of visits to northern Germany, I contend that situations such as this offer insight into the class politics of the unfolding energy transition. Here I interweave two different kinds of thinking in cases, for as the women in this story invoke their friend’s life to make a case for renewable energy, I take their very conversation as a case unto itself: a site where everyday sensibilities about ecocapitalist development are given form and freight.

One Friday morning in the spring of 2011, I sat around a table with four women eating breakfast rolls and mulling over the absence of a friend. Our monthly breakfast circle had evolved out of a preschool playgroup: when the children reached kindergarten age, their mothers wanted to stay in touch and continued to meet without them. I was a later addition to the group, invited by friends when I returned to northern Germany for fieldwork during the previous year. All of us were in our 30s and 40s and all of us lived in Dobbe, a community in Lower Saxony terraformed through wind, solar, and biofuel development. Each of us rotated hosting duties, which meant providing rolls, butter, preserves, cold cuts, coffee, and tea.

While the circle was a leisurely break from our workday tasks, it was also a highly charged space of what Kathleen Stewart calls “just-talk,”[i] a laboratory for working through politics and power in the idiom our own personal lives. Telling stories about ourselves and others, we asked

openly what kinds of broader knowledge could be gleaned from the pleasures and frustrations of ordinary life. Ours was a kind of thinking in cases, [ii] not in a (scholarly) disciplinary sense, but as a therapeutics of everyday living, aimed at determining what is valuable, just, and beneficial based on our own experience, and the lives of those around us.

This month Regina Janssen was conspicuously absent, having skipped our monthly meeting for the third time that year. Her teenage daughter Angelika had been legally blind since birth, but the doctors now warned that her condition had worsened to the point that the last of her partial sight could disappear at any moment. A series of surgeries would be necessary to preserve what was left of her vision, and in advance of the procedures, Regina and her husband Volker opted to keep Angelika home from school to prevent undue eyestrain. In the past, Regina had spoken openly to the breakfast circle of her struggles with anxiety, her fears for Angelika, and the stresses of caring for both her children, the younger of whom—Laura—was still in elementary school.

Now her stress was compounded by the fact that Angelika required near-daily trips to the eye doctor in a nearby town to ensure that her eye pressure remained stable while they awaited the green light for her operation in Hamburg. Working long hours at a port on the nearby North Sea, Volker was unavailable to watch Laura while Regina was away from the house, meaning that Regina had to schedule Angelika's trips to the doctor—and the 30 minutes of travel time each way—around Laura's school hours. As such, Regina's free time was severely curtailed, her days subject to the evolving situation with Angelika's eyes. When I mentioned the breakfast circle during our conversations that spring, Regina's tone suggested that all the uncertainty made joining us out of the question.

In Regina's absence, the rest of us shared what we knew about Angelika's condition, but the conversation soon turned to Regina herself. Maike, another member of the group, enumerated a host of concerns including Regina's prior complaints about spinal discomfort, weight trouble, and insomnia with her current stress with Angelika and, more broadly, her domestic life. Maike asserted that the underlying causes of Regina's problems lay not only in the everyday demands of caregiving, but in her relationship with her husband, suggesting that Volker had forsaken Regina for his work. "You know it's because he's always working in the glasshouses," Maike observed, her expression incredulous. "What kind of life is that? They never go anywhere, never do anything special."

The "glasshouses" to which Maike referred were part of a ramshackle plant nursery behind the Janssens' house. Volker and Regina had

originally bought the compound with the intention of converting its nine growing houses into a staging area for the reed-cutting business that he and his family had on the side. In the decade since the Janssens moved in, however, Volker's brother had abandoned their joint venture, leaving Volker and his aging father, Enno, with the task of refitting the nursery for other uses.

I found Maike's indictment of Volker as the source of Regina's hardships to be curious since I had never heard Regina herself suggest such a thing, although Volker's work in the old plant nursery was admittedly consuming. On weekdays the men often worked into the night after he came home from the port authority. Enno usually arrived early to have coffee and pastries with Regina and the children before getting a head start on the evening's tasks. During my many visits with the Janssens, I observed that food on hand for family and friends was a point of pride for Regina. When she hosted the breakfast circle, she detailed her trips to the supermarket to us, noting how she picked up our cold cuts and cheeses–of all the breakfast circle hosts, myself included, Regina's table was always the most generously set–before heading to the bakery to buy *Berliner* and doughnuts for Volker, Enno, and the children. Maike's statements, and our attendant nods, flattened the pleasures of Regina's life into a story of struggle that could be solved through our analysis.

Perhaps because I had once lived in the house next to the old plant nursery, I found that Dobbeners—and particularly my female acquaintances—were keen to discuss the state of the glasshouses with me when I returned to the area for fieldwork in 2010. I was repeatedly told that Volker was flush with cash, presumably because of his civil servant status at the port authority. Since he had money, some people mused aloud, why not use it to clean up the compound once and for all?

One recurrent suggestion was that the Janssens should convert the old nursery to a solar array by installing photovoltaics on top of the glasshouses. "How much money they'd make if they'd just put solar panels on the roof!" one person exclaimed to me. At the breakfast circle that spring morning, Maike also noted that Volker and Regina should install a solar array, suggesting that the technological fix of solar power might alleviate Regina's distress by "solving" the problem of the glasshouses.

Maike's suggestion pushes other Dobbeners' statements a step farther, conflating possible financial gains from solar panel installation with the resolution of other issues the Janssens faced, whether "real" (such as Angelika's blindness) or "perceived" (the perceived harms of Volker's work in the glasshouses). Here I'd like to consider what these assertions imply about Germans' understanding of renewable energy and its

promises at a moment when policymakers and popular media depict sustainable development as a key avenue of economic growth, both on the community level and at economies of scale.

By positing solar panel installation as a way out of Regina's troubles, Maike implies that ecocapitalist investment is a path to the good life. Her comments tap into a broader narrative—pervasive in news reports on both sides of the Atlantic—about how the energy underway since the 1990s is making Germany a world leader in environmental policy. Germany's energy transition consists of community-based wind, solar and biofuel initiatives that incorporate local energy governance, federal subsidies, and technologies manufactured at increasing economies of scale. The country's Renewable Energy Law, passed in 2000, offers incentives for renewable energy, including subsidies for power companies that buy wind and solar power, as well as tax breaks for individuals who invest in rooftop solar panels and other renewable technologies.

Renewable energy advocates in Germany and elsewhere in Europe have hailed these measures as a means of transforming energy consumers into "energy citizens," incentivizing people through small-scale development projects. In the words of the late Hermann Scheer, a chemist and Social Democratic Party member who spearheaded pro-renewable legislation in the 1990s, "Renewable resources will bring a new era of wealth-creating economic development, initiated not by bureaucratic fiat, but by the free choices of individuals."[iii] Statements like this reveal how Germany's energy turn is a social project as much as a policy initiative–a process of "fixing and co-substantiating phenomena, aggregating and assembling disparate elements of social life into a common purpose."[iv]

In rural areas of Lower Saxony as elsewhere in Germany, renewable energy development is rapidly replacing farming as the most visible (and in many cases, the most profitable) economic activity. When I first visited Dobbe in the spring of 2000, for example, a field of twenty wind turbines greeted me as I descended from the autobahn. Today that number has nearly doubled and other wind parks have spread across the horizon. Fifteen years ago, too, waste from local livestock was used primarily for fertilizer; today, there are three plants around the village where such waste is processed into biofuel. Biofuel development has also led to the "cornification" (*Vermaisung*) of the countryside, as former grazing pastures for dairy cattle are converted into a veritable monoculture of corn for biofuel production. And between my previous research trip to northern Germany in 2007 and my field stay from 2010 to 2011, solar energy incentives spurred many villagers to install solar panels on top of their homes.

By the time I returned to Dobbe for fieldwork in 2010, Dobbe was over

100% sustainable in the sense that its wind park and solar panels produced more electricity than the community consumed—selling the surplus to power companies for distribution beyond the village—although the majority of Dobbeners' cars and home heating systems continue to run on fossil fuels.

Dobbe's rapid development speaks to countless reports that renewable energy has transformed sleepy farming communities like Dobbe into hotbeds of economic activity. But despite the fact that renewable technologies dominate the village and its surroundings, comparably few Dobbeners are formally involved in the renewable energy industry. In the county where Dobbe is located, for example, shares of ownership in the "civic wind park" and biofuel processing plants are concentrated in the hands of several large landowners.

Landowning farmers—and more specifically, male landowners–had the most mobility with investments and returns. These farmers had more capital to pay into wind energy cooperatives or install industrial-sized solar arrays on top of their barns, and many held shares in the biofuel processing plants in the area. Home-owning villagers, on the other hand, invested in rooftop solar panels. While many non-landowning tenant farmers profited from the turn to biofuel crops, few had the resources necessary to invest in large-scale projects.

One could say that only some villagers are able to become "energy citizens," and that citizenship is as contingent on property ownership as it is on the will to preserve the environment, or even the desire to reap a profit. Yet even those who "have money"–that is, those able to marshal capital for investment in civic power generation schemes–may not necessarily wish to do so. As Regina noted on more than one occasion, she and Volker had obtained estimates for photovoltaic installation atop the old plant nursery, but the structures would require extensive work; in order to install the solar panels, she noted, they'd probably have to pay someone to haul the junk away. They remained ambivalent about the promise of solar energy, uncertain whether the benefits of installation would outweigh the hassle and the costs.

Large-scale energy development projects–including those that produce "clean" energy through wind and hydropower–unfold in ways that benefit some people more than they do others, particularly those who live where the projects are constructed. German energy policy was designed to mitigate this concern by scaling energy governance to the municipal level (recall Hermann Scheer's assertion that the energy transition would be made possible by the "free choices of individuals"). Yet citizen participation remains uneven at many sites of renewable energy development, and provisions for local energy governance is no guarantee

that all members of a given community will be included in the siting and planning of development projects that impact that community.

News reports on the transition's uneven outworkings tend to focus on urban areas at the receiving end of power generated elsewhere, with less focus on how people at sites of renewable energy development are affected by the power generation projects in their midst. Less known is the fact that many from the rural middle class are unable to take part in energy development projects, or unwilling to stake claims on such projects regardless of whether they can afford them. My long-term research engages ordinary affective exchanges to understand how this uneven participation takes form in everyday life. The breakfast circle offers perspective on this, allowing me to track how renewable energy—and environmental politics more broadly—was indexed in offhand but consequential ways. [v]

Few of Volker and Regina's neighbors have entered the nursery since it was shut down 15 years ago; most can only speculate as to what lies beyond the plastic children's pool that sits at the entrance to the structures. Walking through the space itself reveals that each of the glasshouses is its own microclimate of various flora and other materials. The glasshouse closest to the Janssens' house, for example, is alternately a carpenter's workshop, a trash depot, a garage and a playground. On one side, Volker's tools are arranged according to an apparent order; on the other sit bicycles and the children's pool. Behind this structure are eight more glasshouses, each collapsing into its own form of apparent ruin, with chunks of glass and fiberglass missing from the ceiling and walls, the old cement growing tables covered in dirt and weeds, with irrigation hoses dangling from above, snaking down and around the old growing trays on the tables and floor.

If you kept going all the way to the metal barn on the other end of the compound, you'd find a stockpile of tools and trash, piles of broken glass and old plastic growing trays awaiting new uses, coils of rope and industrial chains with hand-sized links. If you were to walk through these structures with Laura, she would warn you to beware of the glass and the rust. The glasshouses are a lived and lively space, useful to the Janssens, if not in ways that their neighbors could immediately recognize. By linking the apparent disorder of the glasshouses—evident in Volker's work at rehabilitating them—with the disorder in Regina's life, Maike and others create a space for considering how the energy transition offers a horizon of personal possibility to those in its midst.

By arguing that Regina and Volker would have an easier time if they invested in photovoltaics, Dobbeners depict the Janssens as an antimodel for the green good life, a cautionary tale of what happens to someone who

doesn't use their time or money in the way that they should. At the same time, these comments score over the complexities of the Janssens' situation, positing an abstract solution to the concrete and consequential problems posed by Angelika's encroaching blindness. Bypassing the question of how to help Regina at a difficult time, Dobbeners' speculations about the Janssens generated the terms for speaking about the transition as a social project.

Significantly, those who commented on Volker and Regina's situation belonged to middle class families that had yet to invest in renewable energy technology. Their comments work to suspend the question of whether they themselves might invest in renewables by laying the charge of renewable energy investment at the door of absent others who "have money." It's important to note that, in a region where men continue to dominate opportunities for formal participation in the renewable energy sector, the breakfast circle illuminates one way in which women impact the transition's unfolding, namely by shaping how renewable energy is understood in everyday life.

In my writing and thinking I return frequently to the case of the Janssens, who have yet to install solar panels on the roof of the old plant nursery. Although Angelika's sight remains vulnerable (if temporarily preserved through medical intervention), I do not wish to imply that the Janssens' life and circumstances are more exigent than are those of the others in Dobbe or the breakfast circle. Nor do I wish to dwell on the question of whether the people of the village were accurate in their assessment of Volker's wealth. Rather I find it remarkable that they presumed the Janssens to be wealthy in the first place, and framed Regina's life as a problem to be solved through ecocapitalist investment. Volker and Regina's life diverges from the expected norm in a region where prosperity is increasingly articulated in terms of ecocapitalism.

Susan Lepselter notes that "spaces of *departure* from the rooted signs of class position are often the most intricately imagined, as well as the most despised."[vi] Through the figure of Regina, her purchasing of the finest groceries, her husband's seemingly senseless work in the glasshouses, and her skipping gatherings because of her daughter's condition, Dobbeners sense out a "parallel shale of desire exposed amid the pervasive narrative culture of class mobility,"[vii] one that does not square with emergent—if implicit—understandings of social and economic citizenship.

Narratives of the green good life suggest that "only outlaws would refuse the gift of state fertility"[viii] offered by renewable energy. Yet the Janssens themselves do not speak of their hesitation to install solar panels as a refusal of the transition's fertile gifts. Rather, their actions illuminate

alternate ways of living out the transition, without recourse to narratives of ecocapitalist plenty. Even as their neighbors invoke the Janssens' struggles as a case for the green good life, Volker and Regina challenge us to consider what stories of the good life conceal as well as that which they reveal, what they make possible, and what (and whom) they deny—and the forms of life that flourish beyond their bounds.

[i] Kathleen Stewart, *A Space on the Side of the Road,* Princeton (Princeton University Press, 1996), 32; sociologist Beverley Skeggs offers an extended discussion of the term in "Imagining Personhood Differently: Person Value and Autonomist Working-Class Value Practices," *The Sociological Review* 59, no. 3 (2011): 496-513.

[ii] John Forrester, "If *p* then what? Thinking in Cases," *History of the Human Sciences* 9, no. 3 (1996): 1-25.

[iii]Herman Scheer, *The Solar Economy: Renewable Energy for a Sustainable Global Future,* New York (Routledge, 2013), 325.

[iv]Elizabeth A. Povinelli, "The Social Projects of Late Liberalism," *Dialogues in Human Geography* 3, no. 2 (2013): 238.

[v] I have elsewhere written about the breakfast circle in Jennifer Carlson and Kathleen Stewart, "The Legibilities of Mood Work," *New Formations* 82 (2014): 114-133.

[vi] Susan Lepselter, "The License: Poetics, Power, and the Uncanny," in *E.T. Culture: Anthropology and Other Spaces,* ed. Debbora Battaglia, Durham (Duke University Press, 2005), 145.

[vii] Ibid, 145.

[viii]Anna Tsing, "Unruly Edges: Mushrooms as Companion Species," *Environmental Humanities* 1 (2012): 146.

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AMA citation
Carlson J. Making Cases for a Technological Fix: Germany's Energy Transition and the Green Good Life. *Somatosphere*. 2016. Available at: http://somatosphere.net/2016/03/making-cases-for-a-technological-fix-germanys-energy-transition-and-the-green-good-life.html. Accessed March 17, 2016.

APA citation
Carlson, Jennifer. (2016). *Making Cases for a Technological Fix: Germany's Energy Transition and the Green Good Life*. Retrieved March 17, 2016, from Somatosphere Web site: http://somatosphere.net/2016/03/making-cases-for-a-technological-fix-germanys-energy-transition-and-the-green-good-life.html

Chicago citation
Carlson, Jennifer. 2016. Making Cases for a Technological Fix: Germany's Energy Transition and the Green Good Life. Somatosphere. http://somatosphere.net/2016/03/making-cases-for-a-technological-fix-germanys-energy-transition-and-the-green-good-life.html (accessed March 17, 2016).

Harvard citation
Carlson, J 2016, *Making Cases for a Technological Fix: Germany's Energy Transition and the Green Good Life*, Somatosphere. Retrieved March 17, 2016, from <http://somatosphere.net/2016/03/making-cases-for-a-technological-fix-germanys-energy-transition-and-the-green-good-life.html>

MLA citation
Carlson, Jennifer. "Making Cases for a Technological Fix: Germany's Energy Transition and the Green Good Life." 17 Mar. 2016. Somatosphere. Accessed 17 Mar. 2016.<http://somatosphere.net/2016/03/making-cases-for-a-technological-fix-germanys-energy-transition-and-the-green-good-life.html>