

Lectio praecursoria

Power of Marketplace Myths in Energy Transition: Unveiling Timeless Mythologies in Finnish Energy Agora

Petra Berg

The energy transition to zero emissions, sustainable societies is a wicked challenge. It re-quires a shift of entire socio-technical marketing systems into new ways of thinking and doing. This includes all levels of actors, institutions and technologies. It is argued, that the traditional production and consumption systems in Western societies, are still tied to the fossil industry and growth-dominated worldview. As such, they are unsustainably path dependent and too slow to secure the 1.5-Celsius target put forth by the Paris agreement – COP21.

To further the sustainable energy transition, the EU has put the energy citizen at the forefront in making responsible choices. Marketing research also shows that people are increasingly aware of sustainability issues and interested in reducing their environmental impact. Still, the notion of the 'green gap' or value-action gap is (in) famous, indicating that consumers receive information and have favorable attitudes towards sustainable consumption, but their actions do not reflect these good intentions.

Consumption regarded as a socially constructed process considers that people are socialized into consumption systems and the dominant social paradigm since birth. This makes it hard to grasp a holistic understanding of sustainability or make coherent, consistent decisions from an external point of view. Thus, the notion of the rational consumer is challenged. More so, there is a call for changing focus from the consumer, to more importantly acknowledging the responsibility of the state and corporations in solving environmental and social problems. Here, the role of institutions and their workings, or how they are shaped, be-comes of interest.

The need for further knowledge upon socio-cultural-cognitive drivers in systems

transitions is recognized by both macromarketing and sustainability transitions scholars. Thus, the research interest of this dissertation is to gain a better understanding about these so called intangible drivers of transition dynamics.

To do so, I explore the discursive constructs of energy realities in the Finnish energy market and I develop and test the Energy Agora Framework. I examine how individual action is oriented towards the behavior of others through language, legitimizing certain mental models over competing ones. This is done by exploring the process of institutionalization as translation, where mythical plots circulating in the Finnish socio-technical energy marketing system are captured.

So, this thesis takes a multidisciplinary approach, drawing from the fields of Macromarketing, consumer culture theory, transformative consumer research and sustainability transitions. More precisely, the main contribution goes to the field of Macromarketing and the earlier work on marketing systems theory and dominant social paradigm(s). Macromarketing focuses on the study of marketing systems, the impact of those systems on society and the impact and consequences of society on marketing systems. These systems are seen as having direct impact on societal well-being (quality of life) and on environmental sustainability. While previous research has found that the dominant social paradigm of western societies affects sustainability outcomes and the quality of life, there has not been much research on uncovering "how" it works.

To answer the call, this thesis creates more understanding about the dynamics in the social matrix of marketing systems, by exploring how dominant beliefs and ideologies travel as mythical constructs, being translated by actors who themselves are carriers of the same institutions they aim to change. This thesis also participates in the search for solutions to bridge the green gap studied in sustainability marketing and transformative consumer research. There is a call for more approaches that highlight sociocultural and situational contexts that unveil hidden or little known social problems. In this thesis, I use 'markets as the central organizing principle' (the energy agora) to understand the big picture where micro-macro interactions take place.

Central to both consumer culture theory and macromarketing, are questions about "how consumption participates in the constitution of society" and "how the consumption – production dilemma should be approached". Researchers in these fields have criticized the responsabilization of consumers, arguing that the socialization into consumption cultures makes people answer to challenges by consuming more. This thesis has borrowed the cultural approach from consumer culture theory to help understand the forces 'structuring consumption'. Earlier research on marketplace myths and consumer mythologies open up the creative world of using marketing tools to explore how mental models shape institutions. Here I acknowledge the dialogical relationship between consumers and market structures and 'test them' in the energy agora framework, taking a systems perspective.

Finally, the field of sustainability transitions covers multiple perspectives on change. Out of these themes, understanding transitions includes the multi-level perspective, as well as the interest for institutional processes in shaping the regime, referring to the dominant socio-technical system and its rules. Researchers also raise the question about the practical impact of the research, “how to engage with real-world actors, systems and transitions” and “can and should researchers in the field be part of transition initiatives and apply ideas of transitions management in pilots, living labs and action research”. This thesis provides a perspective upon the dominant social paradigm and the way it maintains path dependence, hampering sustainability initiatives from a level that might be difficult to pinpoint, as it is embedded into the mental models of the actors.

So, the aim of this dissertation is to create more understanding about the sustainability transition dynamics of energy marketing systems, and the way transformations are shaped and/or the current regime maintained. The General research questions are “what happens in the transition process that ‘hijacks’ deep sustainability before it can transform the system and “how come we maintain unsustainable systems and choose innovations that cause more environmental harm in trying to solve the emission challenges”?

These are followed by the specific research questions:

- RQ1: How do people construct their energy realities in the context of the Finnish energy marketing system? This question is answered in the three essays by exploring discourses produced by actors at the consumer (micro), business (meso) and governance (macro) levels.
- RQ2: What kinds of energy myths circulate the Finnish energy agora? Here I reveal the dominant rational energy myths across the three (micro-, meso- and macro) levels in the agora framework. This is done by following the discourses as mythical constructs (plots) translated by individuals who are considered as carriers of institutions.
- RQ3: How to use the energy agora framework to uncover mental path dependencies and lock-ins? This third question relates to the wicked challenges inherent to transition processes and to the general research questions. To gain an eagle eye perspective upon socio-cognitive roots to mental path dependence, the energy agora is put to work.

Then, about the theoretical framework. This thesis takes a multi-level approach, bringing in simultaneously both micro, meso and macro levels of observations. As it is at the institutional level that social structures are given legitimacy, the understanding of consumption systems and how they can be maintained or transformed through market-place myths, requires knowledge about institutional theory. Building upon that, institutional work is an intentional effort or action by an actor that may shape an institution or social structure and manage a given

situation. Sustainability transitions and the multi-level perspective (MLP) offers an overarching view of the dynamics leading to a structural change of a socio-technological system. It stresses that socio-technical systems change through interplay between landscape, regime and niche level. The path dependence approach addresses the question “why change processes often do not take place although they seem to be urgently required”. Mental path dependence means that the individual always sees the same problems, finds the same solutions to them, and thus refers to the same institutions, knowledge or ideologies.

Thus, the “freedom of choice and responsibility for it” exists within the context of the dominant social paradigm (DSP) that consists of the institutions, values and beliefs that provide a lens through which members of a society view and interpret the world. Still, the possible new green paradigm (NEP) is overshadowed by the dominant social paradigm of Western societies, which is linked to continuous material growth. The institutions considered the most integral in Western society are the political, economic, and technological. Macromarketing recognizes the role of the broader institutional environment in the formation of marketing systems, meaning the “written and unwritten rules, norms and constraints that humans devise to reduce uncertainty and control their environment”. All marketing systems are path dependent and this affects the ways they form, grow and evolve. Marketing systems theory proposes that markets as systems, can describe the social evolution of a collective. Their origin lies in the trade imperative, where individual actors realize that gains are possible through specialization, and they enable a systems perspective upon the output of a certain network of exchange.

Myths exert a significant influence on the stories consumers tell and, hence, the meanings they ascribe to their experiences. Universal mythologies are timeless, collectively shared understandings that usually speak to the listener through symbolic means. Myths and mythologies provide a way of explaining dominant ideations as legitimized systems of mental models constructing the energy agora.

The Energy Agora Framework approaches transition dynamics from the perspective of the ancient agora as the local square – the place where different actors as carriers of institutions meet. Drawing from the idea of the public square, the Energy Agora Framework sees participants in a socio-technical marketing system as actors in three levels of energy transition or social roles: Macro - governmental, meso - business and micro – consumer or citizen. Thus, the Agora Framework sets the stage for the socio-cultural dynamics of (energy) transition to be captured. Rational energy myths, circulating the Finnish Energy Agora, draw from their national and mythological roots, and translate the individual energy ideations into accepted, legitimized constructs, collectively shaping the institutional structures of the socio-technical marketing systems. Exploring how ideations translate in the agora is an attempt to understand how mental path dependence is maintained in transition processes and how the DSP reinforces itself, making the sustainability goals of transition to the NEP challenging.

The research perspective of this thesis is in ‘the social constructionist paradigm’.

sees reality as socially constructed and emergent, adhering to the perspective that knowledge of the social world is produced and sustained through certain social processes, in certain cultural and historic contexts. It participates in the post-positivistic – interpretative marketing research and uses qualitative discourse analysis as main methodology. This thesis follows the inductive process as it has started from observations, data gathering and seeks to establish certain generalizations. The data used in the three essays has mostly been collected from various ‘real life events’, where renewable energy has been publicly discussed. The exception is the first essay where the data included transcripts of two filmed local events (accessible in Youtube), a web discussion forum, online newspapers and a blog. The reason for choosing recordings from live events has been the idea of using “raw data” where people express themselves freely through situational speech.

The first essay, Wrath in consumer oppositional activism, focuses on micro-level discourses. It explores wrath in the area of consumers’ collective opposition of wind power. The findings show how wrath underlies the ways in which activists try to influence their adversaries as well as to mobilize support among consumer allies. Wrath is expressed through three rhetorical strategies: morality, evidence, and victimization rhetoric’s – ethos, logos and pathos.

The second essay, Exploring New Business Opportunities in Energy Sector - Network Con-figurations for Sustainable Energy Marketing System, explores ideologies in municipal energy transition dynamics. Focus is upon how municipal stakeholders in five Finnish rural areas structure their ‘social schema’ regarding local (renewable) energy. The findings indicate that ideological structures have the power to shape socio-material outcomes by affecting who will be heard. We identify three types of ideological discourses; The Clan, Tech-believer and Downshifting and five subject positions constructed by the discourses; Working-Ant, Realist, Changemaker, Rationalizer and Treehugger.

The third essay, Market Shaping Energy Myths, explores how institutional actors use the Finnish national meaning systems to shape energy pathways. Here, the process of institutionalization as translation has been followed to capture energy myths. So-called rational myths bridge the individual discourses to collective discourses e.g. dominant energy myths, which also tell us about different energy realities and how they are structured. The dominant myths are the Energy Dragon Myth, Domesticated Energy Myth and Global Energy Myth. These dominant myths maintain several ideologically imbued rational energy myths, namely the Rock Solid, Big Brother, Smart & Flexible, Rural Resilience and Global Village.

Following the findings from the three essay, we now focus upon the energy agora dynamics at work. The first research question, how do people construct their energy realities in the context of the Finnish energy marketing system? was answered by corroborating the main themes from the three levels of discourses. Ideologies were used as the common nominator to track so called energy realities and the question asked from the data was ‘how things are and why’? Three

constructs emerged from the data: Traditional Way - keeping the Energy Dragon at bay, stems from a more traditional understanding of reality. The field of energy is considered hierarchical, driven by top-down decisions and rules. The second group, In Transition – Domesticated Energy feels stuck and restricted by the current heavy legislation and slow processes. The energy transition reality is seen as contemporary phenomena in the continuous development of the rational human. The third group, Climate Emergency – Global Energy expresses need for radical change and of putting ecological limits first. The traditional values are questioned, as they are not supportive of the change in ways that are needed.

The second research question, what kinds of energy myths circulate the Finnish energy agora? opened up the fascinating world of myths and mythologies and how they relate (and translate) into the everyday world of people. This was done by following the process of institutionalization as translation. I found that the mythical constructs circulating in the energy agora do translate throughout the micro, meso- and macro levels. They show existence of legitimized collective social rituals and roles and do play a role in knowledge and input. To find the energy myths circulating in the Finnish energy marketing system, I used the rational myths from the third essay as starting point. The idea was to find the mythical 'plots' or structures of story that related to the macro-findings in the meso- and micro-level. As a guiding set of plots, I used Stern's work on consumer myths: comedy, romance, tragedy and irony, also including satiric. The plot types embody structural links between consumption myths and those found in other cultural myths. This logic is similar to the idea of rational myths, dominant (national) myths and mythologies used in this thesis.

I found that the subject positions in essay two and the rhetorical strategies in essay one presented us with distinct ways of 'coping with reality', and that these constructed plot types throughout the three levels of the energy marketing system. I found five (rational) energy myths circulating the Finnish energy agora: The Rock solid – romance myth that lives in the nostalgia of preferring the past. Big brother – ironic myth accepts change but does not trust appearances. Smart & flexible – comic myth believes in the transformation and evolution of society and that we (technology) will solve the big challenges. Rural resilience – satiric myth makes fun of the nonsense of the ideals of change and the Global village – tragedy sees humankind doomed by their actions and a need for a collective effort to avoid disaster (or survive).

Finally the third question, How to use the energy agora framework to uncover mental path dependencies and lock-ins? This is where the energy agora framework was used to explore the interplay of evolving shared understandings, ideologies, and belief systems of social collectives between the macro-, meso- and micro-levels. It unites the different approaches in the three essays so that they create a systemic "Agora" field where the larger reflection against the theoretical underpinnings can take place. I suggest that understanding the roots to the cognitive landscape of actors in the social matrix of the Energy Agora, gives insight into the transition dynamics. This means that the intangible, paradigm imbued and

'opaque' inner landscape causes outer path dependence and lock-ins.

So, it seems that the energy agora is a place where mythical work happens suggesting that the rational myths have a shaping power in the energy agora. It is institutional work on the 'subconscious' level, carried along by each actor as their mental models, translated to others through language. In other words, institutions are a product of routinized activities and understandings, enacted by individuals and organizations, at the same time as they draw from the same institutions. Thus the mythical work seen as an 'individual to the collective', micro-macro mechanism, might be self-reinforcing, as it keeps repeating the dominant plots of the agora. It keeps each actor inside a paradigm loop, the landscape and its dominant mythological origins.

Finally, citing Campbell about the differences between "mythology that is alive or dead". One worldview that makes the person participating in the mystery and the other giving her the role of a worshipper. If the landscape of the agora carries the DSP of Western society, it is more than likely that the mythological realm is tied to a hierarchical (worship) worldview, giving interesting insights into the idea of division of responsibility in society.

We might want to ask, who gets to be included in the energy transition and who is creating our common future? The energy sector is not doing well in inclusiveness and overall diversity lacks. There are no one size fits all solutions here, each region, local ecosystem and culture demand different approaches. We are diverse by nature, and that is the beauty of this planet. The changes happening in this moment of time are too big and important to be treated as mere socio-technological shifts; culture needs to be acknowledged as well. It is a question of how we humans place ourselves regarding the rest of the natural systems on earth. It seems that navigating paradigm shifts require understanding our mythological roots.

Author information

The public examination of Petra Berg's doctoral dissertation "'Power of Myths in Energy Transition: Unveiling Timeless Mythologies in Finnish Energy Agora'" was held on Friday 23 April 2021 online at the University of Vaasa. The field of the dissertation is Marketing.

Email: petra.berg@uwasa.fi

<http://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-952-476-949-5>