Workshop 11
Short title: National Cultures of Energy Governance
Convenor: Jörn Richert, Bielefeld University

National Cultures of Energy Governance in a Global World – Exploring the Meaning and Significance of “Energy Transition”

Energy is an inherently global issue. Sites of production and consumption are often far apart; unintended side effects of fossil fuel combustion such as climate change don’t stop at national borders; and the discourse about sustainable energy transition is inherently global. Yet, governing energy still is a national task in many regards. If, therefore, the analysis of global energy – and particularly that of energy transition – is at stake, we also have to analyze national cultures of energy governance. These cultures can be understood as the complex of practices and institutions directed at governing (and at the same time constituting the meaning of) ‘energy’ in the national context.

The workshop aims to develop a landscape of global energy cultural differences by analyzing various national energy cultures, particularly those of big energy consumers – such as the United States, Europe, China, India and other emerging economies such as Brazil and Turkey – and of the major energy producers – such as Saudi-Arabia and Russia.

Four questions are of major interest for the workshop: How do national cultures of energy politics look like and how have they evolved? What is the state of ‘energy transition’ in these cultures? What does ‘energy transition’ mean? And how do respective meanings relate to Western understandings focused on advancing renewable energies, energy efficiency, etc.? Sub-questions might include: How is the challenge of governing energy conceived and why is seen as relevant? What kind of responses are discussed and ultimately taken to confront those challenges? Which actors are involved in governing energy and has the configuration of actors changed? How do the actual practices of governing energy relate to the institutional setup supposed to govern it?

Potential papers include individual country studies addressing all or several of the above questions. The Workshop also welcomes studies on, for example, the interaction of national energy cultures on the global, international, and transnational level as well as on tendencies and drivers of homogenizing or growing divergences of these cultures.

Relevance of the workshop: Energy is an important aspect of international politics. For long, political discussion has been restricted to fossil fuels and the security of their supply. Only in the recent two decades, ‘energy transition’ has gained more political attention in the national as well as, slowly, in the international context.

Scholars have been slow to account for this development. The respective discussion, furthermore, often misses to acknowledge the link between national contexts and the global state of energy systems. This is where the workshop will contribute to the debate. Studying energy politics from the perspective of cultures of energy governance thereby provides a helpful and necessary means overcoming orthodox, often materialist and overly rationalist approaches to the complex issue. This analytical focus opens up the IR discourse on energy theoretically as well as empirically to a broader universe of cases beyond geopolitics.

Moreover, the topic of the workshop and the analysis it will inspire are of immediate of policy relevance in the face of the 2015 UNFCCC negotiations aimed at creating a new global climate treaty. In the discussions approach that conference, energy transition will play a major role.