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Citizen or Consumer? Reconsidering Energy Citizenship

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Keywords

energy citizen, consumer, energy transition, citizenship, discourse, agency

Abstract

The transition to more sustainable energy systems has set about redefining the social roles and responsibilities of citizens. Implicit in this are expectations around participation, though the precise contours of what this might mean remain open. Debates around the energy transition have been skewed towards a normative construct of what it means to be a 'good citizen', the parameters for which are shaped by predetermined visions of statist and/or market-driven determinations of the energy systems of the future. This article argues that concepts such as 'energy citizen' are co-opted to reflect popular neoliberal discourses and ignore crucial questions of unequal agency and access to resources. Paradoxically, official discourses that push responsibility for the energy transition onto the 'citizen-as-consumer' effectively remove agency from citizens, leaving them largely disconnected and disempowered. Consequently, energy citizenship needs to be reconceptualised to incorporate more collective and inclusive contexts for action. Considering how much energy consumption occurs in (traditionally female) domestic spheres, do conventional notions of citizenship (especially with regards to its associated rights and duties) need to be recalibrated in order for the concept to be usefully applied to the energy transition?

1 Introduction

The transformation of the energy system from one based primarily on fossil fuels to one that is carbon neutral or indeed carbon negative involves more than simply substituting one energy source for another. It implies a transformation of the socio-technical systems that form the basis of our everyday lives; including *e.g.,* the electric grid, transport infrastructure, construction, waste disposal and food production. These systems are not just assemblies of technical infrastructure, but are also of social practices, regulations, institutions, information, cultural meanings and economic networks (Gram-Hanssen, 2011; Maréchal, 2010; Rohracher, 2018; Shove & Warde, 1998). Consequently, transitioning to a sustainable carbon neutral energy system will also see the emergence of new social roles and responsibilities that will require significant public support (Ryghaug, Skjølsvold, & Heidenreich, 2018). However, the exact contours of these remain unclear.

Apart from a tantalising glimpse in Devine-Wright (Devine-Wright, 2007b), what concepts like 'energy citizenship' might involve in practice remains largely open to interpretation. Therefore, energy transition debates in the EU have skewed towards normative constructs of what it is to be a 'good citizen', the parameters for which are shaped by statist and/or market-driven determinations of the energy systems of the future (Fri & Savitz, 2014; Nasirov, Agostini, Silva, & Caceres, 2018). These imaginings invariably involve minimal disruption to current centralised models of energy production and distribution, a continued (re)conceptualisation of energy as a commodity, and the maintenance of corporate ownership and control over individualised patterns of consumption, all of which inform the shift to renewable power and greater energy efficiency. Official narratives and policy cycles tend to place particular emphasis on individual behaviour change, with citizens urged to 'play our part' by using energy more efficiently and making more informed choices as consumers (Department of Communications Climate Action and

Environment, 2015). This attitude reflects a wider shift politically towards narrow, prescriptive definitions of citizenship and the elision of what it means to be a citizen and/or a consumer. Increasingly, it is primarily through their purchasing and investment decisions that citizens are conceived as participating in the public sphere and influencing public issues.

Consequently, discussions on the role of citizens in the energy transition tends to reflect neoliberal discourses, ignoring crucial questions of inequality and exclusion. Paradoxically, the result of an official discourse which lays much of the responsibility for transition on the citizen-as-consumer has been to leave both citizens and consumers largely disconnected and disempowered (Lennon, Dunphy, & Sanvicente, 2019). This article argues that current energy systems are structured in a way that provides little agency to the majority of citizens. As Bues and Gailing (2016) suggest, power and power relations are critical determinants of energy transitions. A complex mix of factors, including financial resources, access to technology, relationships to decision-making, knowledge and information, along with national and EU regulations merge to structure citizen engagement with the energy system in ways that create widely differing levels of enfranchisement and participation. However, in popular discourse behaviour-change narratives often ignore these issues of unequal agency and access to resources. Rather, they construct the citizen as an individual actor motivated primarily by financial considerations and invite them to exercise civic responsibility through changes in economic behaviour and purchasing decisions in the private sphere. The result is to reinforce a market-driven paradigm of the energy system, where the state occupies a centralised regulatory role that largely removes any real agency from its citizens through a system of 'knowing and not knowing' the contradictions of economic growth and low carbon transitions (Webb, 2012).

Clearly there is a need to move away from such individualist and economistic approaches, and

relocate citizenship within wider contexts of social engagement in the energy system (Defila, Di Giulio, & Ruesch Schweizer, 2018; Mullally, Dunphy, & O'Connor, 2018; Vihalemm & Keller, 2016). Alternative visions of the energy future are emerging, as the energy transition opens up new spaces for citizen participation and engagement. One example posits the need for a more decentralised electricity grid to incorporate dispersed renewable energy sources (RES), greater deployment of micro-generation technologies, more active management of energy consumption, and increased localised energy production. All of which have can potentially create new opportunities for households and communities to exercise greater control over energy production and its consumption. This in turn opens the possibility for a paradigm shift, away from energy as a commodity (to be distributed according to the dictates of the market) to energy as an ecological resource and as a social necessity and subject to collective decision-making. This would indeed be more reflective of the reality of a resource with very real human and environmental consequences (*e.g.,* see Table 1).

However, there are significant differences between how these spaces construct 'the citizen' and the level of empowerment that is afforded her. The next section develops a typology of citizen engagement, based on whether it is located within the private space of the household, the localised space of geographic community, or the public space of civil society. Within each sphere, engagement can be characterised by the degree to which individual or collective decisions are motivated by monetary or non-monetary values and operate within/outside the structural frameworks of corporations or the state. Alongside official narratives of energy citizenship and the energy transition, citizens are actively creating and exploiting new spaces for engagement and participation from the bottom up (*e.g.* David & Schönborn, 2018; Reinsberger, Brudermann, Hatzl, Fleiß, & Posch, 2015). Also emerging, are a variety of different social formations, from social

movements to grassroots civil society groups, that are staking claims to public participation in different ways (Chilvers and Longhurst 2016). Some of these movements may seek to appropriate the language of energy citizenship and revitalise its democratic potential; others may create new discourses to legitimate and rationalise the vision of an energy system radically (re)shaped by ordinary citizens. The success of these initiatives will to an important degree define whether the energy systems of the future will follow a 'hard' or a 'soft' energy path (Lovins, 1976).

2 Citizen or Consumer? Neoliberalism and the Energy Discourse

The concept of citizenship itself needs to be revisited, in particular its association with a gendered public sphere. Historically, both the person of the citizen and the sphere of citizenship were defined through a series of exclusions and binary divisions. From classical Athens to the present, the assignation of citizenship has always entailed exclusion. Likewise, the classical public sphere was defined through the exclusion of (amongst others) women, who were relegated to the private spaces and domestic work (Cohen, 1989; J. Davidson, 2011; Rotman, 2006). These divides remain entrenched in the concept of citizenship today. Given that considerable non-commercial energy use takes place in (traditionally female) domestic spaces, do conventional notions of citizenship (along with its rights and duties) need to be recalibrated in order for it to be usefully applied to the energy transition? The concept of citizenship therefore needs to be broadened, with energy reconceptualised as a necessity rather than a commodity and framed within a rights-based model of citizenship.

Currently, energy citizenship exists as a catchall phrase or marketing instrument that is largely removed from the more potentially transformative aspects of citizenship. Signals for what energy citizenship might mean in practice therefore must to be imputed from proximal ideas on ecological or environmental citizenship and cognate discussions on the debate on participation in sustainable

development. As Chilvers and Longhurst (2016) suggest, moving beyond the normative constructions of 'deliberative versus individualist' and 'citizen versus consumer' lie emergent empirical constructions of public engagement that might help to define more constructive understandings of energy citizenship that challenge the deep inequalities many current configurations promote.

2.1 Defining Citizenship: Neoliberal Discourse Matters

> Words matter. The language we use structures how we think about things
>
> (Samoff 2007; in Klees 2009, 78)

Inequality comprises a myriad of social, cultural, political and economic processes that operate along multiple levels, often at the same time, in a given place (Piketty, 2014). This complexity is also reflected in the structures and institutions that perpetuate inequality (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012). Therefore, only by unpacking the entrenched linguistic and semiotic deceptions that help to mask or deflect from existing structural inequalities can we begin to see how such processes are allowed to operate and indeed flourish in plain sight. The (mis)use of language has enabled neoliberal commentators to dominate political discourses by assimilating words – and the suggested meaning of those words – into their lexicon, rendering all original meaning as useless. For example, presenting multinational business organisations as potential 'corporate citizens' diffuses the potency of the term 'citizen' to empower individual agency in the political process. As Klees (2009, 107) puts it, 'language is not a mirror of society. It is an unstable social practice whose meaning shifts, depending upon the context in which it is used'.

In addition, liberal assumptions on individual autonomy, freedom and universalism have been co-opted into free-market discourses espousing the need for uninhibited freedom of movement (although invariably in rather qualified forms) of capital and people, while at the same time conveniently ignoring the unequal and differentiated levels of access social groups have to

resources and opportunities. Harvey (2005) outlines how this construction of consent has been orchestrated by proponents of the neoliberal turn towards a more consolidated free-market world view, with a dizzying range of actors co-opted into the process.

> Powerful ideological influences circulated through the corporations, the media, and the numerous institutions that constitute civil society—such as the universities, schools, churches, and professional associations
>
> (Harvey 2005, 40)

These concerted, overt (and indeed covert) overtures culminated in a gradual shift in political consent where 'common sense' narratives shifted to reflect the ideals of these emboldened neoliberal elites. Harvey uses Antonio Gramsci's understanding of *senso comune* – a knowledge or understanding that is believed to be true and therefore held in common by the majority in society – to demonstrate how it is constructed through long-term practices of cultural socialisation that are themselves validated in regional and national traditions (for a more detailed assessment of Gramsci's work, see Crehan 2016). Harvey goes on to develop Gramsci's distinction between it and 'good sense' which comes from critically engaging in the issues of the day. Therefore, taken in this context, common sense is essentially illusory, while good sense is more rationally sound and allows space for criticising commonly held beliefs. Common sense by comparison appears as reassuring, confirms biases and is self-validating. However, it is largely a sophistic tool for those adhering to a specific common-sense narrative since the narrative itself is ultimately built around a fiction. This approach also helps to mask the deep inequalities behind what Bloomfield (2019) describes as 'neoliberal piety'.

Also, free-market ideologies convince us that we have very little collective agency to change or resist these normative constructs. Framed like this, we are the passive consumers of energy, customers privileged with access to this resource, but ultimately having no real agency in terms of

how energy is produced or made available to us. Essentially, our identities are obscured and presented to us as being normal (Khan et al., 2015). Massey (2013) reinforces the position that language is fundamental to the shaping of identities and the framing of social relationships, acting as ideological scaffolding for whatever happens to be the prevailing common sense. Consequently, this vocabulary of customer, consumer, the markets, enlightened self-interest, choice and freedom shapes our very sense of ourselves and our relationship with the world. It also repeatedly boxes us in to false choice narratives, where we are only allowed to select between choice A and choice B when the more equitable and sustainable solutions may very well involve asking different questions entirely.

2.2 Citizen or Consumer, Operationalising the False Choice Narrative

This narrowing definition of citizenship and the elision of citizens and consumers in neoliberal discourses are consistent with a general tendency to shift responsibility from the state back on to the individual, *i.e.* the citizen consumer. Increasingly, it is primarily through their purchasing and investment decisions that people are perceived to be actively participating in the public sphere and influencing public issues. Famously, President George W. Bush (in response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York) encouraged Americans to do their civil duty by increasing personal spending, stating 'I encourage you all to go shopping more'. Little was obviously made of the towering individual and federal debt burden that would inevitably accrue from this action. The speech can be seen as a culmination of efforts throughout the 20th Century to recalibrate our collective understanding of citizenship towards consumer rights and participation in the marketplace. Consumption has now become a political act, with consumer choice increasingly being equated to voting and freedom (Tsai, 2010). Khan *et al.* (2015) chart this progression as it pertains to current energy system configurations, demonstrating how resources are captured and then monetised.

> A century-long strategic alliance between fossil fuel corporations and Western governments has fostered an energy system that has been structured by imperial, extractivist and then neoliberal power
>
> (Khan et al., 2015)

Khan *et al.* (2015) go on to present a stark picture of the current energy situation in the UK, where the 'Big Six' energy companies accumulate up to £1 billion per annum in surcharges between them by targeting economically disadvantaged users. This takes place against a backdrop of one of the highest levels of household fuel poverty in Western Europe, where 'one in five households was in fuel poverty in 2010; [and] 10,000 people died in winter 2013–4 from cold homes' (2015, p. 98). Clearly many of the UK's 'energy citizens' lack any real agency when it comes to engaging with the energy system. While some effort has been made towards promoting enhanced citizen participation in environmental policy making (Van Der Schoor & Scholtens, 2015), these have been met with concern from environmentalists who fear delegating decision-making authority to local people may in fact endanger decades of hard-won regulatory success (Irvin & Stansbury, 2004).

Such concerns are valid when efforts to broaden our collective understanding of energy beyond the energy as a commodity paradigm have been largely unsuccessful. Stern and Aronson acknowledged as much in 1984, demonstrating the commodity view received the strongest support in both the political arena and from policy analysts.

> In practice, energy programs are usually conceived and justified on technical and economic grounds and only after they are designed and proposed are the likely environmental effects examined… Socioeconomic impacts, which include equity effects, effects on communities, and the like, are considered as part of the environmental analysis, but usually a small part
>
> (Stern & Aronson, 1984, p. 23)

This remains largely the case today as it did back in 1984. While efforts have been made to broaden how energy is seen and represented (e.g. Sovacool, 2011), Stern and Aronson's four key views of

energy as a commodity, an environmental resource, a social necessity, and as strategic material, are still just as relevant. Devine-Wright (Devine-Wright, 2007a), for instance, supports their argument that each of these views is not given equal weight by policy makers and that the commodity paradigm remains the hegemonic social representation of energy. The emergence of sustainable development as an innovation in policy making during the 1990s has not changed this. Despite opening a space for energy as a social necessity in the policy making landscape – which he links to current understandings of energy citizenship with its emphasis on local empowerment *etc*. (Devine-Wright, 2004; 2007) – it has not resolved the inherent difficulty associated with balancing these perspectives simultaneously. Indeed, while there are other representations of energy than those featured in Table 1, the dominance of the commodity paradigm makes it difficult for even the ecological resource or strategic materials perspectives to receive adequate attention.

Table 1 The four key representations of energy (source: (Devine-Wright, 2007a)*; adopted from Stern & Aronson, 1984)*

Energy as:	**Important properties**	**Central values**	**Interest groups**
Commodity	Supply, demand, price	Choice, individualism, private sector provision of energy services	Energy producers, consumers with sufficient resources (fuel rich)
Ecological resource	Resource depletion, environmental impacts	Sustainability, frugality, choice for future generations, preference for renewables	Future generations, green movement
Social necessity	Availability to social groups, meeting essential needs	Equity, justice	The poor (fuel poverty) and other vulnerable groups
Strategic material	Geopolitics, availability of domestic substitutes	National military and economic security	Military, energy suppliers

However, the tensions that operate at the interface of the public and the private spheres requires greater exploration if we are to see energy as a social necessity, or indeed energy citizenship, develop into a coherent counterpoint to the commodity narrative. Also, greater space needs to be opened for the ecological resource context given the range of existential environmental crises

facing us (IPBES, 2019; IPCC, 2014). While Devine-Wright (Devine-Wright, 2007a) frames the private very much within an environmental psychology framework, the consensus has been to assume that when we talk about local empowerment, citizen engagement *etc.*, it is most often visualised within the public arena. Attempts to explore the private sphere are often cancelled out by actions or debates at the public level. For example, issues around the siting of wind turbines usually centre on the visual impact they have on the landscape rather than the potential effects such construction may have within the home. When the home is discussed it is in reference to the housing market and falling house prices, which are themselves a culmination of activities that requires the transformation of a private space into becoming a public one. The private becomes public, the home becomes 'a property'. Therefore, there is a clear need to develop a more nuanced approach to the energy as a social necessity perspective (and indeed ideas of energy citizenship) by developing a greater understanding of the role the private sphere has in impacting such discourses.

2.3 How individualist constructions of citizenship denies agency

This will not be easy, given energy policies tend to encode normative understandings of the role of citizens and reflect neo-liberal assumptions of individual freedom, autonomy, and (enlightened) self-interest. They also invariably lean towards complying with statist and market-driven visions of the energy systems of the future. The result of which has been to place the burden of responsibility for achieving a more sustainable energy system on individual citizens, while also ignoring issues of unequal access to resources and limited citizen/consumer agency. This is exemplified in mainstream behaviour-change campaigns targeting energy consumers. An historical example that remains an archetype of more recent behaviour change campaigns still

being rolled out, is the 'Power of One', launched by Sustainable Energy Ireland (SEI)[1] in 2006. This national campaign targeted energy consumers at home and in the workplace with an aim to change behaviours associated with everyday energy use by focusing on information provision and awareness raising. Despite €10 million invested in the campaign there is very little evidence any substantial behaviour change having occurred as a result (Diffney, Lyons, & Malaguzzi Valeri, 2013).

A key concern here, is with how the (energy) citizen addressed by the campaign is imagined. While the language of citizenship is not expressly used, implicit in the campaign literature is a certain blurring of the role of citizen and of consumer. In the first case, the readers are seen as individual energy users, motivated by enlightened self-interest. The campaign blurb states: 'If each of us becomes aware of our own power when it comes to energy efficiency, and use it properly, we can collectively make a big difference, to ourselves, to our pockets, and to the environment' (SEI, 2008b, p. 1). Social change is explicitly set out as the cumulative sum of individual actions.

The emphasis and constantly repeated is on saving money, increasing comfort, and preventing climate change, in this order. The financial savings from energy efficiency is particularly emphasised: 'when you cut carbon, you cut costs' (SEI, 2008b). People are urged to manage the energy usage of their households by adopting the model of a business. One of the main information booklets, "Householders: Be Your Own Energy Manager", presents individual householders as indistinguishable from professional energy managers, framing citizens primarily as economic actors obeying a normative economic logic.

The campaign also appeals to a sense of civic responsibility, urging people to start 'taking individual responsibility' and 'we can all play our part' in making Ireland more sustainable (SEI,

[1] Now the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI).

2008c). However, sustainability is presented in prudential terms, 'we don't waste resources…or needlessly damage the world around us' (SEI, 2008a). In this regard, even citizens' performance of their civic duty is conceptualised as being essentially self-interested. Moreover, its performance is confined to the private sphere of the household and manifests in individual behaviour change and purchasing decisions.

While the steps required to save energy are presented as 'common sense', 'practical', and 'easy' a consistent theme of the campaign is the requirement for consumers to develop a reflexive self-awareness around their energy use. People need to become 'energy conscious' (SEI, 2008c) and understand 'how, and where, we use energy at home' (SEI, 2008a). Householders are urged to find out what they spend yearly and admonished 'if you are well organised, you will have a record of all your energy bills' (SEI, 2008a). The energy saving tips imply a readiness to undertake additional housework (regularly defrosting freezers, cleaning light fittings and windows) and a high degree of organisation (cooking multiple meals in the oven at the same time *etc.*). Consequently, while drawing on a discourse of 'common sense', which on the surface appears non-ideological, this campaign actually imagines the citizen in a very specific way. The implied addressee is a home-owner, able to invest significant time and energy in maintaining their home, organise their daily and weekly routine, and have the capacity to maintain a condition of self-reflexive awareness of their energy use. Issues of unequal access to energy, limited financial resources, educational privilege and expertise, or differential levels of control over one's environment and practices, are studiously ignored.

The construction of the citizen implicit in 'The Power of One' is replicated in other behaviour change campaigns, *e.g.,* Smart Energy GB (UK), Familles à énergie Positive (FR), Carrega't d'Energia (ES). The parameters of behaviour change and the defining of which behaviours are

sustainable are set in advance by 'experts' and public bodies. For example, the technical standards of the smart-meter network tend to be developed on a top-down basis with little or no input from householders (*e.g.,* Jenkins, Sovacool, & Hielscher, 2018, p. 102). Citizens are repeatedly (re)imagined as economic actors whose participation in the energy transition is based on their role as consumers, making individual choices in the privacy of their own homes. They are also assumed as having the financial, property, educational, organisational and time resources to reflect on and exert meaningful control over their energy usage. Consequently, the normative model of the 'good citizen' implicit in this initiative is one which reinforces the market-driven paradigm of the current energy system, as well as the central regulatory role of the state.

This is deeply problematic, given household energy consumption is not driven solely by financial incentives or the rational pursuit of material self-interest (Frederiks, Stenner, & Hobman, 2015). Even where energy-efficiency measures are cost-effective and save consumers money, many people fail to implement them. Reaction to this has led to the dominant rational choice perspective on behaviour increasingly being supplemented with insights from the field of behaviour economics, which stress the ways in which people's decision-making is affected by various mental short-cuts and cognitive biases (Frederiks et al., 2015). However, this approach still accepts the rational, utility-maximising individual of classical economics as the ideal, even as it explores why actual consumers fall short of this ideal when making their decisions. Collective identities, and the way in which individual energy practices are shaped by the wider systems within which they are embedded, are ignored in this understanding. The consequence, as Maniates (2001, p. 43) suggests, is to shift 'blame from state elites and powerful producer groups to amorphous culprits like 'human nature' or 'all of us''.

2.4 The socio-technical system

The result of this transfer of responsibility onto individual citizens is, ironically, their

disempowerment, since energy systems are not structured to give agency to their users. Recent research also indicates there is significant widespread disconnect, along with a deep sense of disempowerment, from citizens in relation to energy policy and the energy transition (Lennon et al., 2019). Citizens felt limited connection to the institutions responsible for devising strategies around energy and it transition; experienced difficulty accessing resources which would allow them participate in the transition; met with financial barriers to purchasing energy efficient and renewable generation technologies; faced a lack of autonomy in making decisions about energy use in spatial contexts such as the workplace or rented accommodation; saw themselves as being excluded from decision-making, whether at the national level or in terms of local planning decisions; and in general felt disempowered and lacking in agency (Dunphy *et al*., 2017).

This research demonstrated citizens face disempowerment at multiple levels, including financial, institutional, infrastructural, and regulatory, which severely limit their capacity to influence the energy system or indeed change their own behaviour. In order to understand why, we need to move beyond rational choice or behaviourist perspectives, and approach the energy system as a socio-technical system, recognising technical infrastructure not only reflects but also 'locks in' certain values and practices. As Bridge (2018, p. 13) asserts "we are all socio-technical now" and subject to relatively fixed linkages between daily routines and technical apparatuses, with energy consumption depending on hardware and technological systems that tend to structure the patterns of daily life (Gram-Hanssen, 2011; Shove & Warde, 2002). Most importantly, 'the explanation here is not that people rationally decide to do what they did before, but that their routines get entwined with technical apparatus and material surroundings, so that just doing the same thing each day or each week results in the same patterns of consumption' (R. Galvin, 2013, p. 601). The result is that people are locked into routinised energy-inefficient behaviours and can fail to change

even when they want to.

Taking the electric grid as an obvious example of a socio-technical system we find its components include ‘hardware’ such as power stations, transmission lines, substations and pylons, as well as the household appliances and industrial equipment that use electricity. It includes the corporations which generate power and own the grid, as well as the wholesale and retail markets within which electricity is bought and sold – in addition to those businesses which make and sell electrical appliances. It includes the regulatory frameworks and institutions that govern the generation, transmission and sale of electricity. It includes the end-users of electricity, whether they are households, businesses or institutions, and the everyday practices which they engage in when using it – such as daily showering, turning up the thermostat in winter, or leaving the lights on in empty rooms. It includes the values and cultural narratives which social groups have around energy, such as different standards of comfort, cleanliness and convenience (Shove, 2003). It is clear, from grid infrastructure and regulatory frameworks to deep-seated cultural values and narratives, many are immune to change from the actions of individual consumers. They are confined to instigating individual changes in behaviour, whose impact on their total energy use may be relatively small, or investing in energy efficient appliances, home renovation and renewable energy generation, all of which will be constrained by their individual financial resources. Locked into a false-choice narrative that suggests by buying the slightly more energy efficient product they are doing their bit to instigate change.

It is here that the neo-liberal construction of the energy citizen combines with the socio-technical characteristics of the energy system to reinforce their disempowerment. Fundamental changes to the energy system, enabling citizens to contribute meaningfully in the shift towards a more

sustainable lifestyle, requires both massive infrastructural investment[2] led and funded by the state and large-scale collective action such as the mainstreaming of community power and group ownership of transport. Since these options are foreclosed by the dominant neo-liberal consensus, citizens – especially those whose financial resources are limited – are locked into a situation where responsibility for making the energy transition is laid at their door, yet they are denied the tools and opportunities to do so.

Consequently, there is a need to reconceptualise energy citizenship, moving away from individualist and economistic perspectives and locating it within (emergent or potential) collective contexts of engagement. The state, insofar as it is the vehicle for implementing democratically-achieved decisions has the potential to transform the energy system through state-led investment and legislative change. Other modes of collective participation include deliberative democracy, grassroots innovations and social movements (Chilvers & Longhurst, 2016; Hoffman & High-Pippert, 2010; Kunze & Becker, 2015). However, considering the intersecting lines of gender, class, ethnicity, age and education that combine to shape patterns of privilege and exclusion a critical question remains to be resolved pertaining to the levels of power and agency different modes of participation afford citizens.

2.5 Emerging participatory trends for energy citizens in the socio-technical processes

Masking this question still further, is the decoupled manner in which energy issues are viewed in the policy cycle. This separation of technical and social factors reinforces the misconception that they are not interdependent and routinely marginalises social factors in favour of technically-orientated solutions (Luque-Ayala & Silver, 2016; Whitehead, 2014). However, emerging social science research provides compelling arguments that demonstrate energy grids are not apolitical

[2] Including deep home retrofits, significant investment in subsidised public transport and the creation of distributed smart electricity micro-grids.

structures. Further, the social experience of energy is specifically shaped by material infrastructure (Luque-Ayala & Silver, 2016). It is also equally true that material infrastructures are themselves shaped by social processes. For example, Harrison (2016) traces the historical development of urban electricity networks in the Southern USA, demonstrating how the emerging energy landscape was (and still is) illustrative of racial divides and the segregation of minorities there. Situating energy citizenship at the intersection of social and technical processes is therefore a means toward understanding the layered and interdependent way in which the concept of citizenship is reproduced and enacted (Ryghaug *et al*., 2018). It also provides the means for critiquing emerging energy landscapes by highlighting the social and political contours.

As the imperatives of climate change and energy security push countries toward more sustainable RES systems, and away from carbon-based energy sources, it is important to consider how these developments are playing out not just in terms of technology but also socially. Current trends indicate public engagement in energy-related policy making is increasing. However, there is a tendency to circumscribe our understanding of public engagements by using falsely constructed notions of participation which channel people into specific positions such as consumers, clients, users or beneficiaries (Bakker, 2009; Fischer, 2006). When occupying these roles issues of injustice, inequality and marginalisation are usually hidden. In fact, the limited (and limiting) consumer-orientated role ascribed to people very often amplifies conflict between citizens, state agencies and other stakeholders, including energy producers or suppliers. For example, Garavan (2008) shows how protests against the Corrib Gas Project in the west of Ireland during the 2000s led to wider community struggles for recognition of local values and circumstances. Interestingly, from an energy citizenship point of view, Garavan shows how this struggle for recognition amongst opposing actors (including state institutions) led the local community to better understand

their own specific cultural norms and vulnerabilities in opposing the 'common sense', 'pragmatic' economic arguments that the majority of actors ascribed to. Ryan (2008) further contends that, in the case of the Corrib Gas conflict, this struggle evolved from a shallow to a much deeper level of engagement for opposing stakeholders and that it was this process of learning that helped the community to situate themselves along different positions within the Corrib gas struggle. The Corrib example is helpful in understanding that energy citizenship very often entails highly-localised political struggles around meaning and recognition. Indeed, this form of participation creates a space whereby communities and individuals develop and mature their identities (Garavan, 2008; Haraway, 1991; Milan, 2015; Moulaert, Swyngedouw, & Martinelli, 2010).

It can be argued that recent policy agendas have attempted to promote two highly distinct energy paths, one promoting technological development and the securitisation of resources to maintain the existing status quo, and another championing alternative energy configurations that place greater emphasis on sustainable energy production, consumption and conservation (Smith, 2012). Using Lovins' (1979) analysis, these can be conceived as hard and soft energy paths, respectively. The potential role of citizens in relation to these two very different visionings of energy futures in policy has placed individuals and groups into a range of diverse, and not always complimentary, positions. For example, in the advancement and promotion of 'hard' technological solutions such as the development of nuclear technology, the building of large dams, or the construction of large-scale on-shore wind farms, communities have either been assumed to be passive consumers (with passivity taken as endorsement) or as obstacles to overcome in terms of managing protesters and environmental activists lobbying against these developments (Smith, 2012). A greater role for communities, as envisaged by Chilvers and Longhurst (Chilvers & Longhurst, 2016), Ryghaug *et al.* (Ryghaug et al., 2018) and others, is needed to develop and implement the types of 'soft' energy

policies that are required if we are to have an truly equitable energy transition. An approach that also presupposes greater political restructuring in terms of planning and policy implementation, energy service provision, and fairer resource ownership (Havet, Bruce, & Legros, 2009; Smith, 2012).

Decentralisation of energy services is an emerging soft energy policy that looks to expand and strengthen sustainable energy systems by not only improving governance structures, but also shifting fiscal, administrative and resource ownership, and management, away from central government to more local levels of governance (Havet *et al*., 2009; Nolden, 2013). In this energy policy arena, the public usually plays a more central and active role in generating the long-term changes seen as necessary for tackling climate change, pollution and issues around long-term energy supply. Other strategies such as Demand Side Management (DSM) have focused considerable attention on changing patterns of consumer electricity use through a range of measures including consumer awareness and information campaigns, peak load management, smart metering techniques and subsidies (Dulleck & Kaufmann, 2004; Gillingham, Newell, & Palmer, 2006). Once again there is a focus on the public as consumers and while reviews on the merits of this form of intervention are varied there is a large degree of uncertainty regarding the long term outcome of these policies (Bergaentzlé, Clastres, and Khalfallah 2014).

Chilvers and Longhurst (2016) make use of literature pertaining to socio-technical transitions and social constructivism to illustrate the transformative impact of public engagement in energy transition (see also Chilvers, Pallett, & Hargreaves, 2018). It is worth noting that the co-produced dynamics between the different actors, while positively contributing to new more collective and inclusive collaborations, can also lead to new forms of exclusion (Berka & Creamer, 2018; Taylor Aiken & Aiken, 2018; Van Veelen, 2018). The authors identify and expand on four forms of

participation in current energy transitions in the UK, which include: deliberation forums, social activism, grassroots innovation and everyday interactions with new technologies. Using these four examples, the authors highlight the potential diversity of experience participation can give rise to. This research helps consolidate the idea that rather than mapping participation in current energy transition pathways, what is really needed is a careful (re)consideration of the political spaces that are emerging and how they can contribute to processes of exclusion or inclusion. Notably, the idea that as consumers we can actively exercise or benefit as engaged 'citizen consumers' in the energy transitions is to significantly overlook the unequal experiences and situatedness of citizens that this particular space produces, which is itself mediated by buying power and other economic factors.

3 Conclusions

When taken together, outcomes at the local level arising from citizen concerns around participation can significantly impact national and European energy policies. The energy policy landscape contains a number of different public participation modes which reflect, in a way, how ideas around energy itself have evolved in reaction to fixed or limiting conceptions of citizenship and participation, which undermine meaningful citizen engagement with the energy system. This is deeply problematic. The European Commission's 2018 'Clean energy for all Europeans package', offers another recent illustrative example. While admirably seeking to put Europe's citizens 'at the core of the Energy Union' (European Commission, 2019), the legal text supporting the package (Council Regulation (EU) No. 2018/1999 of 12 December 2018) conflates consumer and citizen to the point where traditional ideas of citizenship and 'the citizen' become essentially void of any real meaning (see Council of the European Union, 2018). The term citizen is only mentioned once throughout the document and only then for warranting 'consideration' from any potentially

adverse impacts of transitioning to a low-carbon economy. In comparison, there is a clear emphasis on encouraging consumers (rather than citizens) to participate in the energy system. The term appears fourteen times in the text. Again, and despite suggestions to the contrary, citizen engagement with the energy system remains reduced to the singular role of consumer, with all the rights and entitlements of citizenship defined in those terms.

There is significant potential for what Middlemiss (2008), and more recently Galvin *et al.* (2018), refer to as the diversity of outcomes community-based sustainability projects can engender, especially when group-based deliberations are utilised. This is important, given what Hyytinen and Toivonen (Hyytinen & Toivonen, 2015) and others acknowledge as the masking effect of technology in the energy system, which disguises the more critical human dimension.

Clearly, current corporatist representations of energy citizenship have not worked in driving the deep societal changes associated with the energy transition. Therefore, the residual meanings attached to 'citizenship' (collective action, democracy, rights, collective ownership, etc.) must be placed back at the centre of the energy citizen concept going forward. Empowering the energy citizen to meaningfully engage in the energy system is essential if we are to get the levels of public participation needed to tackle the myriad of societal crises facing us.

This article explores the concept of 'energy citizenship', looking at two under-conceptualised, but distinctly linked, aspects of citizenship – the person of the citizen and the sphere of citizenship. We argue that the lacunae inherent in the genealogy of both the citizen and the sphere of citizenship, how these aspects have expanded and contracted and how they have been imagined and theorised, have profound implications for the development of the concept of energy citizenship and its potential for driving the energy transition. In order to address the concept of energy citizenship, the interconnected issue of the status of energy has also been addressed, particularly

in terms of energy as commodity and energy as necessity.

An additional issue that has particular relevance for the development of energy citizenship, and must be resolved, is the tensions arising from the individualisation of energy consumption – thus individualising the problem of reducing consumption – rather than positioning consumption as an exemplar of socially-based practices, requiring socially-based change. Ironically, the same individualisation of the 'citizen consumer' entirely neglects the range of social positions that the citizen consumer actually occupies, and the ends for which that energy is ultimately consumed. As long as the complexities of the socially-situated, embodied realities of the intersectional human being are not being captured by the concept of 'the citizen', the concept of the 'energy citizen' will remain equally problematic. As Syssner (2011) suggests, in the absence of a contract between the polity and the citizen, citizenship is reduced to the simple monetary capacity of the individual. This is not sustainable. If we are to conceive of energy systems as properly functioning, sustainable socio-technical systems then what exactly is the space for citizenship?

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