

## Renewables and resonance\*

You rightly suspect me of being only one speaker – who is, by the way, immensely proud to be invited to this particular European Lieu de mémoire – but actually, I am here in a somewhat **twofold** way: partly as a journalist, book editor of the German weekly die ZEIT in Hamburg, and secondly, as a Permanent Fellow of the Research Group on Post-Growth Societies in Jena, a small university town in Thuringia, Germany. The research group is exploring ways to reign in or domesticate the dynamics of modernity. My own research focus is to ask how different actors in European democratic societies actually contribute to leaving behind the fossil and nuclear energy base of modernity's Ancien Energy Regime through the implementation of renewables in daily life, local, democratic decision making and regional economics.

Now, coming from **Hamburg** does not only mean sharing the Baltic Sea and the spirit of a free and independent city with Gdansk, it also implies as well sharing the historical experience of a complete **shift in the energy base** for the sake of the wealth of a European metropolis. Hamburg, as much as Gdansk, became rich because of the power of wind energy which drove the merchants' sailing boats across the oceans, until finally, at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, these sailing boats shifted to oil driven engines within less than a generation. Of course, this historical experience encourages the political imagination to move, within another generation, towards a future basis of 100% renewables, and thus to a new, so far unknown form of wealth.

Moreover, coming from **Jena** means thinking about the **alternatives of how to relate to the world within modernity**. Jena is the place where Goethe, Schiller and Humboldt worked on shaping and rethinking modernity and where Ernst Abbe reshaped capitalist production and property in order to open the ownership of the company's wealth to its workers. We should consider their work as a kind of renewable energy source as well.

But what is maybe more important: As a matter of fact, today, Jena is the place where the sociologist Hartmut Rosa and his theory of modernity attracts students from all walks of life, and the following is, most briefly, what his theory of resonance says: citizens in today's late modern acceleration societies lack the experience of being related to the world. What they long for is resonance. Living in the jumble of unravelling ties and losing the relation to their social and natural surroundings, they don't hear the world answer to their purpose and expectations. They feel threatened by an alienated world which isn't speaking to them. Thus, people lack the experience of acting self-efficiently, whether it is in the political sphere as citizens, on the job market or even privately. They feel freer than ever, but more powerless than ever, too, and driven by inescapable dynamics which they can't influence. Self-optimisation turns into self-destruction.

---

\* This is the revised manuscript of a presentation given at the 10th Conference on Solidarity at the European Solidarity Centre, Gdansk, Poland. The conference took place 4-6 November 2016 and was organized by the Institut für die Wissenschaft vom Menschen Wien, the European Solidarity Centre, Eurozine and Respublica.

## Now, how to “**Mobilize for the commons**” in the light of these two perspectives?

My own question is:

How can we think about the democratic shift towards renewable energies (“demokratische Energiewende”, as Hermann Scheer would put it, who was the intellectual and political inventor of the idea and its political practice) as a way to re-empower modern individuals to relate to the world in a meaningful way and thus feel political resonance with the world?

Here are five points I would like to offer for our discussion.

**1. Mobilizing for the commons means talking about modern democracies in crisis.** Not only leftist-liberal social movements and right-wing populism, but most individual citizens in European societies feel that traditional social ties are unraveling. They share the conviction that their individual purposes lack attention, visibility and recognition. Democratic institutions seem to have slipped out of the citizens’ reach.

These citizens feel disappointed for good reasons. Modernity promises individual rights, participation, self-determination and recognition to each and every one equally but it now appears to be a huge disappointment for it offers complexity and slow procedures instead of quick and easy solutions, even though each and every sphere of daily modernity is permanently accelerating. The gap between these accelerated citizens and the slowness of modern complex institutions creates all the more a need for immediate response and gives space to expectations which a democratic state can’t satisfy in immediate ways.

Strong feelings of disappointment and anger, of unrelatedness and powerlessness, are the consequences. Ironically, these feelings are specifically modern, too, and they are dangerous in a specifically modern way as well, since they lead to nationalist, social and ethnic exclusion. We now see that democracy can’t simply be healed by more democracy; all efforts to improve democratic participation have so far not prevented the strong xenophobic and exclusionary movements we witness today.

The only democratic way out, I believe, is to politicize the common good in a different way, and thus rely on the self-healing powers of modernity: Building a resonant democratic society in renewable European communities is, to my mind, the most promising idea to counter today’s populism.

**2. The strongest modern self-healing power is the experience of resonant self-efficacy,** both individually and in communities. Acting freely in accordance with one’s values and feeling the need for resonance as an acting subject are basic to modern people. Consequently, thinking about the re-empowerment of weakening democracies should mean thinking about experiences of self-efficacy and

political resonance, even of those globalisation losers who are left behind by the labour markets and by demographic developments, especially in rural areas.

Modernity's major promise to its citizens was the ability to shape the future. Modernity promised to its individuals as citizens that shaping their communities as well as their private lives and futures was possible and in reach. This is where the Rawlsian idea of "realistic utopias" comes in.

Now in this context, the recent attempts to democratize the provision of energy, which has become a most interesting experimental field of modern self-healing, merits our attention, because the growing importance of renewable energies is providing us with an idea of the future, in which self-interest, global common goods, the experience of a world that can be shaped by people's actions and of global solidarity can be linked and interwoven.

The European way towards a future based on 100 % renewable energies – despite the EU's political failures, e.g. the financial support for the dangerous development of bio fuels which the EU seems unable to correct – frames the possibility of efficient democratic experimentalism which is neither only local nor only national, but plays on different political levels.

**3. Renewables are a way of politicizing commons. Implementing the use of renewables basically means a change of direction in the use of the commons.** Sun and wind are obviously unlimited common goods beyond national borders (and also, in this respect, different from coal), and the air we pollute is obviously a common good, too. But moreover, the use of renewable energy contributes to creating resonant democratic spheres in regional and local communities where the universal value of ecological justice and solidarity is realised. Renewables mean that citizens of a village or town have to interact democratically in their common interest, deliberating over how to create and share energy property and how to add value by creating new types of jobs in the local interest – all within the framework of universal values like ecological justice.

But the implementation of renewable energies throughout Europe is one of today's very rare success stories, and is thus encouraging and hopeful, this is what I think is most attractive. Let me just highlight this point by telling the German part of the story:

\* From the sixties onwards, and at the latest since the nuclear disaster of Chernobyl in 1986, a growing social movement against nuclear energy was finally backed by a broad majority of the entire German society supporting renewable energy. The only question was how to challenge the fossil and nuclear monopolies politically in an efficient way.

\* What was needed was someone to bring the law and legislation back to the people, as Ugo Mattei would put it. The social democratic Member of Parliament Hermann Scheer, the pope of the renewables and a Right Livelihood Award laureate (the 'Alternative Nobel Prize'), from the early nineties onwards worked to organise a parliamentary majority for a renewable energy law (Erneuerbare-Energien-Gesetz

– EEG), which was passed under the red-green government in 2000. Its idea was simple: open the energy grids and thus the markets to providers of renewable energy which from then onwards could be fed into the power grids and which would not have been marketable otherwise. Scheer's political idea behind it was to decentralize and democratize energy and to empower regional parliaments to deliberate on how to create added value.

\* The effects were incredible: In less than 15 years the ratio of renewables rose from near zero to 31,6% of gross energy consumption and 12.5% of primary energy consumption in Germany.

\* What is more, the idea mobilized the actors and pluralized the modes of mixed property: From the year 2000 onwards, 850 energy cooperatives with 160,000 members were founded in Germany - more than twice as many people than members of the Green Party (and if one adds the numbers of credit and housing cooperatives, the number of people who commit themselves to shared property is far higher). Many towns and villages decided democratically to become independent from energy giants like Vattenfall, Eon and RWE and become 100% renewable as public owners of the municipal energy supplier. And finally, a large number of private households as private energy owners shifted to renewables by putting solar cells on the roofs – on nearly two million roofs.

\* One might object that in towns like Hamburg citizens are rich enough to compete with monopolies. For example, within a couple of weeks the citizens of Hamburg collected €50 million to demonstrate that they were ready to buy the grids, when finally the town itself - as a public owner - bought it. But the renewables are of huge importance in rural areas as well, where farmers who have lost their traditional jobs contribute to a village's welfare by providing renewable energy.

\* The invention of the EEG goes beyond national borders. As a political tool, it has become a universalizable model and been implemented by nearly 70 countries like, for example, Spain.

\* Astonishingly, monopolies like RWE, EON and Vattenfall are about to crash. They have simply lost the competition in their markets.

But since we are not here in Gdansk to tell tales, it is only fair to tell the dark side of this story, too:

\* Today in Germany, the number of energy cooperatives is declining because the law has been constricted since its introduction which has built up huge obstacles for small actors like cooperatives entering the market. The percentage of public energy owners is now stagnating at about 5%.

\* Renewables are more and more becoming a profitable field for regular private companies as well as for wealthy private owners.

\* Meanwhile, some forms of renewables like bio fuels have proven to be unsustainable but are still being supported financially by the state. On the state's level, as well, all depends on political majorities.

**4. The renewable energy movement, from its very beginnings in the anti-nuclear movement of the late 60s, is local, national, and cosmopolitan at the same time,** both individual and collective and always inclusive. This mixture explains its success. But the main attractiveness lies in the communality of all efforts to renew the energy base. Villages and towns across all cultural patterns deliberate about their own way to provide and save energy (whether it is Paris, Copenhagen, Gdansk or a small German village like Bechstedt in the Thuringian Forest), and together with their citizens they open ways to mix individual, social, and public energy properties to create new forms of social ties and responsibility beyond profit. To put it economically: Self-efficacy means access to property for anyone and thus to markets. It means regional independence.

But the recent decline of cooperatives proves the risks of this development as well, and here is what I think is most crucial after all I have said: in order to be a success story, the renewables actors need a state which is willing to learn as much and as quickly as society obviously does.

**5. It takes two to tango: Any modern social movement needs a modern state.** A modern state can never know for sure who exactly the people are and has to listen closely as soon as people show up claiming to be the people. On its way to at least partial success, a social movement needs the state in at least four different ways: *First*, it needs an open, liberal arena to articulate an agenda, whether we talk about the feminist movement, the anti-nuclear movement or the right-wing Pegida movement. *Second*, on the long road to building a majority, a social movement needs a state to guarantee minority rights. *Third*, when it comes to implementing the ideas of the political majority which are in accordance with the constitution, the state has to react by changing legislation or setting market incentives. *Fourth*, legislation has to be corrected and adjusted along the way, regularly and constantly, because new forms of property and/or new developments in technology can come into conflict with earlier ones, and the state has to make sure that new actors can enter the arena, too.

After all, to put it most succinctly, this is a story about the future, energized by Europe, and for once, it is not simply terrifying.