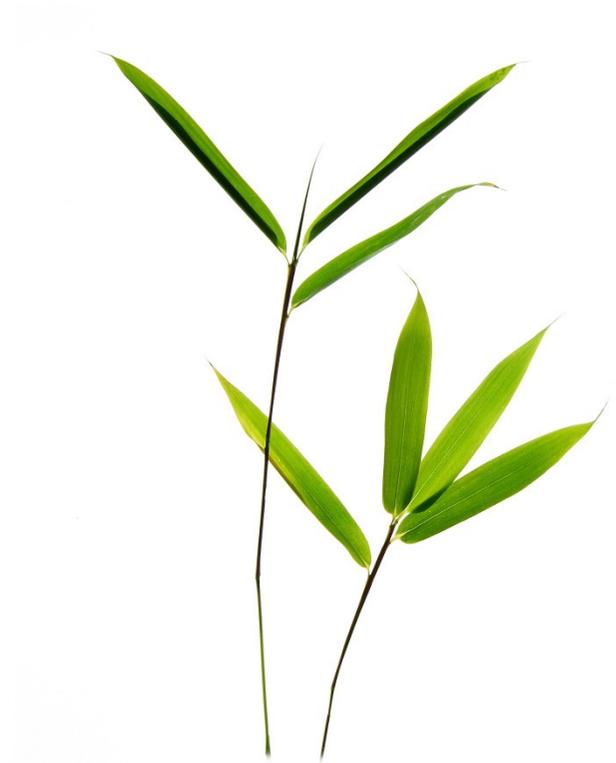


# The discursive construction of sustainable biofuels in Germany and the EU

**A struggle of different conceptions of sustainability and its meaning**



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# Biofuels Policy in Germany and the EU

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- **As of the beginning of the 2000s**
  - Wide political support for biofuels
    - E.g. EU Biofuels Directive 2001 or tax exemption for biofuels in Germany
  - Biofuels widely seen as a silver bullet for a lot of problems
  - Rise of biofuel production and use in the EU
    - Especially in Germany: from less than 1% to 7.2% in 2007
- **Increased criticism from 2005 on**
  - Because of many issues, but mainly because of impacts on food prices during the food crisis 2007/2008 → Food vs. Fuel conflict
- **New EU directive on biofuels 2009**
  - Binding target of 10% biofuels in 2020, bound to the compliance with sustainability criteria

# Aim of research: Making sense of these developments from an interpretive perspective

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- **Starting from Laclau’s discourse theory**
  - Food vs. fuel conflict as a dislocatory event that disrupts the partial fixation of the dominant discourse
  - Results in a proliferation of floating signifiers
  - Struggles over the integration of those floating signifiers into the dominant discourse
- **Analysis of these discursive struggles and their meaning**
  - Central role of ‘sustainable biofuels’ in these struggles in order to fix the discursive rupture
  - 2-step-approach
    - 1<sup>st</sup> step: Document analysis based on the methods of grounded theory
    - 2<sup>nd</sup> step: Going beyond the texts based on secondary literature and historical reconstructions



# Narratives of sustainable biofuels

Narrative	Critically supportive	Radically dismissive	Trade & efficiency	Domestic production
Problem structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Sustainability problems are profound and broad (not only CO<sub>2</sub>, not only ecological)</li> <li>- Still, there is social and ecological potential</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Biofuels are generally not a sustainable strategy → Biofuels are the problem</li> <li>- Problems are rooted in western fuel consumption patterns</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The wide range of sustainability problems, of which the poor CO<sub>2</sub> balance is the most important one, are due to inefficiencies</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Sustainability problems of biofuels are not grave and entirely a problem of biofuels from the global South</li> </ul>
Needs for action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Comprehensive regulation that covers social and ecological aspects, using instruments such as LCA or multi-stakeholder certification</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Abandon biofuels support policies</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Foster innovative technologies and R&amp;D for more efficient biofuels</li> <li>- Expand global trade in biofuels</li> <li>- Investments</li> <li>- Focus on specific crops and farming techniques</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Introduce sustainability standards that provide for a level playing field and protect the European market from unsustainable dumping biofuels</li> </ul>
Image of a sustainable biofuel	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Small-scale, peasant, ecologically and socially just production, preferably in regional economic circles, but also for export</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Does not exist</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- A (CO<sub>2</sub>-)efficient high-tech product that is produced on a large, industrialized scale and traded globally</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- State-protected domestic European production from domestic crops like rapeseed</li> </ul>

# Contextualizing the narratives of sustainable biofuels I



- **What meta-discourses are reinvoked through these narratives?**
- **Meta-discourses of environmental governance in scientific literature (Bäckstrand and Lövbrand 2006)**
  - Green governmentality
  - Ecological modernization
  - Reform-oriented civic environmentalism
  - Radical civic environmentalism
- **How do the narratives of sustainable biofuels relate to the these meta-discourses?**
  - Critically-supportive narrative → Reform-oriented civic env.
  - Radically-dismissive narrative → Radical civic env.
  - Trade & efficiency narrative → Ecological modernization
  - Domestic production narrative → ?

# Contextualizing the narratives of sustainable biofuels II

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- **The meta-discourse of green governmentality is largely absent in the narratives of sustainable biofuels**
    - What meta-discourse does the domestic production narrative reinvolve then?
  - **Broadening the view by integrating agricultural meta-discourses (Potter and Tilzey 2005)**
    - European agriculture is (i.a.) framed by a neo-mercantilist discourse
      - Emphasizes the productivist conception of the farmer's vocation and the state's responsibility to safeguard and underwrite the productive capacity and export potential of domestic farmers
- **The domestic production narrative is embedded in (and reinvokes) the agricultural meta-discourse of neo-mercantilism**

# Contextualizing the narratives of sustainable biofuels III



Meta-discourse	Civic environmentalism		Ecological modernization	Neo-mercantilism
	Reform-oriented	Radical		
Narrative of a sustainable biofuel	Critically supportive	Radically dismissive	Trade & efficiency	Domestic production

- The (state-emphasizing) meta-discourse of green governmentality is replaced by the (state-emphasizing) meta-discourse of neo-mercantilism
- Shows the deep historical embeddedness of biofuels policy in the practices and meta-discourses of European agriculture
- Raises some interesting questions for further research

# Relation to policy decisions: Discourse institutionalization I

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- **Discourse institutionalization: translation of a discourse into institutional arrangements (Hajer 1995)**
  - Discursive affinities between different narratives are central to this
- **What has been adopted?**
  - A binding target of a 10% share of biofuels in total transport fuel consumption that is bound to a couple of sustainability criteria
    - Reduction of greenhouse gas emissions
    - No raw material from land with high biodiversity value or high carbon stocks
  - No social, only (a few) environmental criteria are included
    - A moderate sustainability certification approach
- **So did the critically-supportive and the domestic production narrative prevail?**

# Relation to policy decisions: Discourse institutionalization II

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- **Rather, a discourse coalition (Hajer 1995) has prevailed**
  - It centers on discursive affinities between story lines of the critically-supportive, the domestic production and the trade & efficiency narrative
    - Sustainability standards, but no protectionism  $\leftrightarrow$  increased global trade
    - Increased jobs and income  $\leftrightarrow$  win-win rhetoric
    - Binding sustainability standards  $\leftrightarrow$  binding sustainability standards
- **What does this policy instrument represent?**
  - A reconciliatory approach
  - Legitimizing function of the reform-oriented civic environmentalism meta-discourse  $\rightarrow$  serves to the sustain the dominant biofuels discourse (that has hitherto been characterized by the meta-discourses of ecological modernization and neo-mercantilism)
  - A ‘passive revolution’

## Conclusions

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- **The food vs. fuel conflict (i.a.) disrupted the dominant biofuels discourse coalition in Europe**
- **‘Sustainable biofuels’ became the central floating signifier that has been integrated into the dominant discourse coalition**
- **It was integrated by incorporating the reform-oriented civic environmentalism meta-discourse that fulfills a legitimizing function, not a challenging one**
- **Is the notion of ‘sustainable biofuels’ the new empty signifier in the biofuels discourse?**

Thank you for your attention.

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## Literature

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- Bäckstrand, Karin, and Eva Lövbrand (2006): Planting Trees to Mitigate Climate Change: Contested Discourses of Ecological Modernization, Green Governmentality and Civic Environmentalism. *Global Environmental Politics* 6, no. 1: 50–75.
- Hajer, Maarten A. (1995): *The Politics of Environmental Discourse. Ecological Modernization and the Policy Process*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
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# Narratives of sustainable biofuels I: Problem structures

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- **Why are biofuels currently not sustainable?**
  - Because of the lack of a comprehensive regulation
  - Because biofuels are per se unsustainable
  - Because of inefficiencies
  - Because of the Global South

# Narratives of sustainable biofuels II: Needs for action

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- **What is needed to make biofuels sustainable?**
  - Comprehensive regulation that ensures sustainability via binding sustainability standards
  - Fostering research and investments in innovative refinery technologies, specific crops and farming techniques
  - Expand global trade in biofuels
  - Abandon biofuels and start reducing fuel consumption