Series on the German Energy Transition (5 of 6)

Transatlantic Exchange:
Why California is to Blame for the Energiewende

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ABOUT THE SERIES

This paper is part five of a six-part series on the German Energy Transition (Energiewende). The authors are experts on different issues such as renewable energies, rural communities, social movements, and nuclear power. The series published 2012-2013.

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Why California is to Blame for the Energiewende

Energiewende is a German word en route to joining the English language, like “angst” and “sauerkraut” did long ago. Media from The Economist to the New York Times to The Times of India use it to refer to Germany’s historic plans to shift to a green economy based on renewable, non-nuclear energies.

The definitive translation of Energiewende however is a matter of dispute and interpretation, as is its source and proper owner. In the running for the best possible translations are the following terms that have appeared in English-language media: “energy transition,” “green energy revolution,” “energy sector overhaul,” “energy turnaround,” “energy u-turn,” “national energy transformation,” and “clean energy switch.”

The Energie part of the term is straightforward. It means “energy.” Wende is more complex: It can be translated as turn, rebound, reversal, tack, turnabout, turnaround, turning point, or even climacteric period (the last term, which I was not familiar with, is associated with female menopause). The word die Wende acquired a new meaning after the fall of the wall to refer to the collapse of communist East Germany and the chronology of events that led to unification. In Germany just about everybody now refers to this period in 1989-90 as die Wende.

Former Opponents Have Now Embraced the Energiewende

Whether fair or not, it is the case that Germany’s Chancellor Angela Merkel and her current center-right government have occupied the term Energiewende and made it their own as if they had coined it themselves -- which they did not. In fact, not only did they not create it, its origins go back deep into West Germany’s New Social Movements and ultimately find their source in the U.S., during the short-lived alternative energy boom of the mid-1970s.

But first Germany: Merkel had used the word very sporadically before 2011 to refer to Germany’s transition to clean energy, a project which she supported in general terms since she became chancellor in 2005. The 2009-elected administration of Christian Democrats and Free Democrats came to power with the intention of supporting clean energy policies and a long-term transition to renewables, while at the same time extending the lifespans of Germany’s nuclear reactors. (Germany’s opposition countered that these goals were mutually contradictory.) In 2010, the Merkel administration set ambitious targets for renewable energy supply, energy efficiency, carbon emissions reductions, and electric mobility. Although these 2010-set targets are basically those of today’s Energiewende, they didn’t carry the popular label “Energiewende” at the time.

The Merkel government’s prolongation of nuclear energy was a controversial over-
turning of the Social Democrat-Green, or “red-green,” government’s 2000 agreement with the nuclear industry to phase out nuclear power over two decades. The Merkel administration annulled this pact in 2010 by granting Germany’s reactors lifespan extensions from eight to 14 years.

It was only in the aftermath of the Fukushima disaster in the spring of 2011 that Merkel, shocked that a meltdown could happen in high-tech Japan, rethought the nuclear extension and reversed it, shutting down eight of Germany’s 19 reactors at once. Shortly thereafter, under the heading of Energiewende, the Merkel government announced several new targets and incentives to expedite Germany’s going renewable over three decades. The U.S. media first picked up the term on April 26 when the Christian Science Monitor noted ironically that “Chancellor Angela Merkel is using the term ‘Energiewende’ (energy turning point) as if it had been one of her election campaign issues.” On May 12 Spiegel International used Energiewende as Germany’s “national energy transformation,” which is basically what the term means today. Since then, in both the German and international media, the term has been linked to the Merkel government and Germany’s transition to clean energy by 2050. It has positive, proactive, environmentally conscious connotations. On its website the Munich-based daily Süddeutsche-Zeitung describes the Energiewende as “the Merkel government’s most important domestic project.” The Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung was not alone with articles earlier this year under the heading: “One Year of the Energiewende.” Even a new magazine called Greenfacts, which describes itself as “Das Magazin für die Energiewende!,” talks about the Energiewende as beginning in spring 2011. The implication is that the Merkel administration itself conceived and designed Germany’s clean energy transition policies and that they began in the aftermath of Fukushima.

A German Term with Deep American Roots

This, however, is not the case. Germany’s Energiewende has been long in the making and the term as well as the goals can be traced back to the early alternative energy movement in the U.S. and Germany in the 1970s. In 1976 the U.S. physicist and alternative energy guru Amory Lovins coined the term “soft energy path“ to describe a future where energy efficiency and renewable energy sources steadily replace a centralized energy system based on fossil and nuclear fuels. His 1977-penned book Soft Energy Paths: Toward a Durable Peace caught the eye of several German anti-nuclear energy activists who had spent significant time in California during the 60s and 70s.

Thus the idea of Florentin Krause, a Frankfurt-based activist, and two co-authors was to apply Lovins’s soft path theories to Germany. The product was the paperback Energie-Wende – Wachstum und Wohlstand ohne Erdöl und Uran (Energie-Wende – Growth and Prosperity without Oil and Uranium) published in 1980 by the Freiburg-based Öko-Institut, a newly founded green think tank. The three authors, Krause, Hartmut Bossel, and Karl-Friedrich Müller-Reissmann, sketched alterna-
tive scenarios for a non-nuclear future based on a limited-growth economy, energy conservation, and solar power. According to *Energie-Wende*, a structural transformation of the economy and advanced energy-saving technology would deliver Germans “more prosperity with less energy.”

Among those prominently thanked in the book’s foreword are the Friends of the Earth (San Francisco), Amory Lovins, and the California-based NGO International Project to Encourage Soft Energy Paths for their assistance “especially with information about new developments in alternative energy technologies abroad.” At the time, the Soft Energy Paths movement, Lovins’s brainchild, was gaining momentum across the U.S. Stunned by the 1973 energy crisis, the Carter administration was backing research in the field of renewable energy technology. Solar, above all, was being pushed, and key technological breakthroughs were happening in photovoltaics in the U.S., not in Europe.

This progress and these programs however were promptly quashed when the Reagan administration came to power in 1980. (Reagan even had Carter’s solar panels taken off the White House roof.) But the West Germans picked up on the innovations, particularly photovoltaics, and ran with them, while the U.S. waffled and ultimately squandered its lead.

**The Concept Began in Grassroots Campaigns**

“At the beginning of the 1980s,” writes the Öko-Institut about *Energie-Wende* on its web page, “this was a complete novelty. The de-linking of economic growth and energy use was clearly a red flag for the conventional energy branch. As it saw it, if one rose, the other did, too. With this publication, the Öko-Institut was the first to question this assumption, a matter of faith for Germany’s representatives in the business world, politics, and academia.”

The book had such an impact on the grassroots campaigns that the three authors bought rail passes and crisscrossed the country in the early 1980s speaking to interested citizen’s initiatives. In parts of the country, Energiewende citizen’s committees were formed to engage on behalf of energy conservation and renewables. The book sold beyond the Öko-Institut’s wildest expectations and tattered, Xeroxed copies floated around in activist circles for years to come.

Was the source of the term Energiewende then really the U.S.?

“‘In part, yes, of course,’” says *Energie-Wende* co-author Hartmut Bossel, today a retired professor of mechanical engineering living in Germany. “‘In particular California was out in front on new technical solutions like solar modules, windmills, and small water works.’” Bossel lived in the U.S. in the late 1960s and early 1970s where he taught mechanical engineering and worked on alternative energy projects. Florentin Krause was a graduate student at the University of California, Berkeley in the late 60s and early 1970s. (Now retired, he lives in the San Francisco Bay Area and works on climate changes issues.)
The Energiewende Was Quickly Adopted By Mainstream Politics

The term was adopted in the 1980s among Greens, in grassroots movements, and in the alternative press, like Die Tageszeitung (“taz”). It took ever more concrete shape as Greens and Social Democrats devised more detailed plans to replace nuclear and fossil fuels with renewable, zero-carbon alternatives.

“The word Energiewende stood for phasing out nuclear and switching to renewables,” explains Rainer Baake, a senior environmental official in the state of Hesse’s red-green government in the 1990s and afterwards in the national government. “We used the term regularly both in Hesse and then when red-green came to power [on the national level] in 1998, too. At the time it was the last thing that Christian Democrats or liberals would want to identify with. Even during the 2005-2009 period, most conservatives would never have described an Energiewende as a desirable goal. I really have to laugh when I see panels or articles referring to the Energiewende beginning in 2011.”

R. Andreas Kraemer, director of the Ecologic Institute, a think tank, traces Germany’s process of Energiewende back to 1986 when, in the aftermath of Chernobyl, the West German populace turned against nuclear power: “Since Chernobyl, majorities across the political and social spectrum wanted ‘anything but nuclear.’ Since 1990, when the first feed-in tariff legislation was introduced in the parliament by the conservative Christian Democrats, Germans as a whole wanted renewable energies and knew how they would do it, namely through a feed-in tariff rewarding entrepreneurs for the successful operation of renewable energy plants.”

Still today the Greens and their ecologically conscious allies speak about the Energiewende as their project, regardless of how the media uses the term. But they can’t deny that the Merkel administration pulled off a stupendous coup by linking its name to several decades of clean energy policies. Indeed, every major party in Germany today professes allegiance to the Energiewende, even if they endorse different strategies to implement it.

Within the Greens and the extraparliamentary campaigns today there are those who want to wrest the concept back from the conservatives. But there are also others who claim that it is now too tainted to be valuable. One of Germany’s foremost pioneers in photovoltaics, Wolf von Fabeck of the German Association for the Promotion of Solar Power, argues it is better strategy to refer to “100 Percent Renewable Energies” rather than Energiewende as the latter embraces brown coal and the massive transmission grid corridors the Merkel government is planning to link the North Sea wind parks and the country’s industrial hubs in the south.

Time to Bring a New Word into the English Language

Why, indeed, is the German term necessary in the English language in the first place?
Because what Germany is doing is entirely unique, at least for an industrial heavy-weight of its caliber. Germany isn’t just burnishing its image with a store-full of trendy renewables, as almost everybody’s doing these days. It’s going completely renewable without nuclear and simultaneously keeping to the EU’s carbon targets and maintaining its citizens’ very high standard of living. The likes of “energy transition” and “energy switchover” are just too small – and blasé.

A transformation of such a colossal scope is best described in English as Jeremy Rifkin does, labeling it as a “third industrial revolution.” It’s not like one energy source is simply being replaced by another and everything else will stay the same. As Rifkin argues, everything is going to change as our energy sources change: transportation, farming, industrial production, urban architecture, the business world, resource distribution, foreign relations, democracy, and more.

As for the Merkel administration, the Energiewende will only play to its advantage if it can keep a positive spin on the project. Yet it has been doing exactly the opposite. Its own faint praise and sniping, as well as its inability to overcome obstacles and drive the process forward, already has the project mired in negative press and bickering. In fact, it is a testimony to Germans’ commitment that citizens continue to support it in such high numbers despite the Merkel administration’s lukewarm attitude.

If this doesn’t change, the Energiewende might just prove an albatross around the government’s neck come national elections in September 2013. Who knows, maybe the conservatives will have to dig back into the archives of the anti-nuclear and environmental movements and point out the fact that it wasn’t their idea in the first place – California is to blame.