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I cannot fix what doesn’t exist:

Energy Poverty Discourse(s) in Germany

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Abstract

The war in Ukraine has made the issue of energy poverty salient again in Germany after a long period of political neglect and limited attention. In studying the issue, I bridged agency and structure by employing Hajer's Argumentative Discourse Analysis to examine both discourse coalitions and their storylines between 2017 and early 2022. I examined the discursive mechanisms behind the marginalization by turning Fraser's reflections on misrecognition into a framework for analyzing the apparent discursive repudiation and de-structuralization of energy poverty. I find that the debate is structured by a plethora of misconceptions about both the nature of the problem and those affected by it, leading it to focus on micro-level solutions. A dissonant left-wing coalition has so far failed to overcome these misconceptions and mainstream the issue, while a right-wing coalition seems to have succeeded in telling a story that marginalizes it. A far-right coalition remains discursively isolated. I conclude that misrecognition has been used as a non-policymaking tool and that narrative coherence is key for discourse coalitions seeking to put a new issue on the agenda. Finally, I argue that the intentional and unintentional misrecognition of energy poverty is a form of injustice and leads to bad governance.

Key words: energy poverty, misrecognition, discourse coalitions, storylines, non-policymaking
Words: 20,000

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1 Introduction[I]

War makes the unthinkable thinkable. Nowhere is this currently more true than in Germany. The Russian war of aggression against Ukraine caused Germany's post-World War II military skepticism (e.g., against arms exports to war zones) to evaporate. But it has also made it possible for the former German president to call on the German people to "freeze once for freedom"[II] (Schmidt, 2022) or for left-wing magazines to make a turned-down thermostat into a symbol of peace and solidarity with Ukraine (KATAPULT Magazin [@Katapultmagazin], 2022). This, obviously, has to do with Germany's continued heavy dependence on fossil fuels, which are primarily imported from Russia. Left out of such comments is the fact that for many, there is no longer any room for maneuver in their energy consumption. This is because the long-term stagnation of the lower income third (Grabka et al., 2019) has made energy poverty (EP) – understood here as "a situation where a household cannot meet its domestic energy needs [due to financial constraints]" (Bouzarovski et al., 2020, p. 7) – a widespread condition even before the war-related price shocks.

For example, in 2020 **at least** 7.5 million Germans were unable to maintain an adequate heating regime (presumably) due to a lack of financial resources – a near fourfold year-over-year increase (Eurostat, 2022; StBA, 2021). Exactly how many people are affected is unclear, in part due to high levels of unreported cases (hidden EP; Dubois & Meier, 2014; Eisfeld & Seebauer, 2022) and the lack of operational definition and regular monitoring. Yet, despite the Federal Constitutional Court declaring access to domestic energy a basic right (1 BvL 1/09, 2010; 1 BvL 10/12, 2014), the federal government has shied away from effectively addressing EP[III] or even recognizing it[1]. Curiously, non-governmental actors also paid little attention to the phenomenon. Even more puzzling is that EP policies and discussions in Germany seem to focus less on structural causes such as inequalities in the quality of available housing than on perceived inadequacies in individual behavior. When rising prices startled Germans even before the war and demands for full coverage of heating costs by social assistance resurfaced, they brought with them the claim that it must be the case that welfare recipients heat their apartments with open windows (Schmid, 2021).

On the scientific side, on the other hand, positivist perspectives on the measurement (e.g., Pachauri & Spreng, 2011), conceptualization (e.g., Day et al., 2016) or practical management (Dubois & Meier, 2016) of EP, as well as on its causes, consequences, and particularly affected groups (e.g., Drescher & Janzen, 2021), have dominated the research field so far. While all these foci have greatly contributed to our understanding of EP, they have also reified a narrow

[I] Chapters 1-3 are based in part on the research proposal prepared in the previous course.
[II] All translations of quotations are by Felix Jakob.
[III] Recent developments within the new government are not considered here.

technocratic approach to the issue that in practice sometimes negates the complexity of the lived experience of EP (Longhurst & Hargreaves, 2019, p. 1). Plus, there is little work on the political and discursive treatment of the problem, examining how policymakers have managed to sidestep an issue that has been longstanding and actively pursued by the European Union (EU), or the unlikely (discursive) coalitions that have formed against more socially conscious policies (for exceptions cf. Section 2.2-2.3).

In order to address the conspicuous features outlined above and to critically illuminate the political-discursive treatment of EP, this study examines how the problem is discursively constructed by different political actors in Germany, how its causes are framed, and how approaches to the problem are justified. To this end, I pursue the following research question(s):

> *How was the issue of energy poverty discursively constructed and how were approaches to tackling it justified in Germany between 2017 and 2021? What dominant and adversarial discourse coalitions have formed, around which discourses, favoring which approaches?*

I use a case study design to provide a thick description of Germany as an example of a country that is well advanced in a controversial energy transition and is grappling with this relatively new but timely issue. My two research questions are based on the assumption that EP – due to its low political salience[IV] (Imbert, 2017) – has been strategically used by different actors to promote their general ideology (Gawel et al., 2015). Hence, in order to understand not only what discourses and narratives are present, but also which actors espouse them, and to be able to analyze why they presumably do so, it is necessary to use an actor-based approach to discursive dynamics. Therefore, I use argumentative discourse analysis (Hajer, 2006), which focuses on discourse coalitions – a method not previously applied to EP – and complement it with Nancy Fraser's theoretical reflections on the injustice of nonrecognition, which I transpose to policy problems.

Nevertheless, as Hajer & Versteeg (2005) have pointed out, actors are never in full control of the discourses they (re)produce. Rather, the two are in a dialectical, co-constitutive relationship that Hajer's concept of storyline most vividly captures (cf. Section 3.2). Therefore, the first sub-question focuses on discourses as relatively autonomous structures of representation, while the second focuses on the active agents. Since narrative constructions shape how an issue is dealt with – an aspect especially crucial early in the issue life cycle – an argumentative approach is central to understanding the dynamics of EP.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows: The second chapter provides an overview of the research field of EP, while the third introduces my theoretical and methodological approach before the fourth reports the findings of my analysis. In Chapter 5, I put these findings into broader context, discussing their implications for research and policymaking. The final chapter summarizes the key findings and provides an outlook for further research.

[IV] i.e., that it is not a widely and constantly discussed political issue

2 Previous Research

The following sections present the state of the literature on EP in high-income countries. Assessing the discursive treatment of EP requires a basic understanding of the concept that is likely to elude many readers. Therefore, Section 2.1 provides a brief general overview of what EP is and why it is worth studying, before subsequent sections discuss the literature on the discursive treatment of EP that is of direct relevance to this study.

2.1 Background: What is Energy Poverty and why study it?

The concept of EP has evolved along two historical lines. In early work, EP was understood exclusively as a general lack of access to household energy in low-income countries (e.g. González-Eguino, 2015) – a perspective that remains prevalent today. However, in the 1980s, growing attention to "excess winter mortality" (Braubach, 2011; Wilkinson et al., 2001) in the United Kingdom (UK) led to a debate on "fuel poverty" (FP) (Bradshaw & Hutton, 1983; Osbaldeston, 1984), a concept later popularized by Boardman (1991) in her seminal work. FP refers to "a situation where individuals are not able to adequately heat their homes at affordable cost" (Pye et al., 2017, p. 261), a definition still used by some today. The term FP therefore historically focuses on heating fuels (Simcock & Walker, 2015), which is why FP became synonymous with EP after its diffusion in other high-income countries where various electricity affordability issues were at least as important[V], as the term EP is better suited to cover all energy sources. More recently, there have also been attempts to unify and transcend the two historical lines by conceptualizing EP as any form of "energy service deprivation" (Bouzarovski & Petrova, 2015), which leaves room for the inclusion of emerging sub-phenomena such as "cooling poverty[VI]" (Thomson et al., 2019).

With the influence of the UK debate came the analysis that EP was mainly the result of a combination of low incomes, high energy prices, and low energy efficiency of the homes occupied by the energy poor (Boardman, 2013; Hills, 2012; Tews, 2014). This delineation has been criticized for ignoring differing energy needs and socio-demographic factors at the household level (Bouzarovski et al., 2012, p. 79). Recent research agrees that a range of structural factors

[V] Throughout this document, I will use the term EP. However, I may adopt the term FP when used in sources.

[VI] Cooling poverty refers to the growing phenomenon of people not being able to afford adequate cooling during heat waves or on particularly hot summer days.

influence EP, such as illness, time spent at home, cultural norms, or country-specific regulations (Aigeltinger et al., 2015, pp. 11–15; Buzar, 2007; Kopatz, 2013), and that these factors reinforce each other (Grossmann & Kahlheber, 2017). Finally, critical perspectives have emphasized that the rise of economic inequality and energy market liberalization are often treated as given in the literature, even though both could be considered causes of EP (Chester & Morris, 2011; Galvin, 2019).

It has also been repeatedly pointed out that the energy poor are not passive victims but rather develop complex coping strategies to mitigate EP (Anderson et al., 2012; Gibbons & Singler, 2008; Spitzer et al., 2012). In Germany, "it is precisely those households that spend particularly little on energy that are especially likely to be energy poor." (Bleckmann et al., 2016, p. 149) This fact is mainly attributed to arbitrage (i.e., spending on other needs first) and/or rationing (i.e., consuming too little) behavior (Eisfeld & Seebauer, 2022), as reflected in the infamous "heat-or-eat" dilemma (Beatty et al., 2014; Bednar & Reames, 2020), which in turn can generate its own EP consequential problems (Frank et al., 2006).

Whatever its causes, EP has been shown to have significant negative impacts on those affected. These include, first and foremost, significant health consequences (Thomson et al., 2017) and thousands of annual excess winter deaths (Braubach, 2011), but also social exclusion (Maxim et al., 2016), poor nutrition (Bhattacharya et al., 2003), and impaired child development (Barnes et al., 2008). Recent works have highlighted the enormous psychological burden of EP, and some have even interpreted it as an affront to human dignity (Grossmann & Trubina, 2021), particularly because energy is such a pervasive element of modern life (Butler & Sherriff, 2017). Dubbed "energy citizenship" (Sanz-Hernández, 2019b) this normative turn has led to the realization that a lack of energy today results in the inability to "fully participate in the customs and activities that define membership in society." (Thomson et al., 2019, p. 22).

While many (but not all!) of these causes and effects are also associated with monetary poverty, EP has been considered distinct. Empirically, EP and monetary poverty overlap significantly, but this overlap is far from perfect (Healy, 2017; Palmer et al., 2018). This is because EP is closely related to energy efficiency (of appliances or housing), resulting in a significant proportion of non-income poor people living in EP (Bleckmann et al., 2016). In other words: As Kopatz (2013, p. 62) notes, education and monetary poverty are also significantly correlated, but because of the intersectionality of educational development (i.e., its non-exclusive causal relationship with monetary aspects), "educational poverty[VII]" is seen (at least in Germany) as a separate problem area that cannot be solved by increased transfers alone. Thus, while transfers have been shown to be part of the solution (Gawel et al., 2015; Primc & Slabe-Erker, 2020), **targeted** energy efficiency investments are generally favored as the primary, sustainable long-term solution (Green & Gilbertson, 2008; Kopatz, 2013; Ryan & Campbell, 2012), to mitigate EP and its impacts. Apart from these two, there is a plethora of "solutions" in the disparate landscape of EP policies that fall into four broad

[VII] German: Bildungsarmut

categories: Consumer Protection, Financial Interventions, Energy Savings Measures, and Information Provision (Kyprianou et al., 2019; Pye et al., 2017). While the latter is the least effective (Tews, 2013, p. 38), it is the only area where a "specific fuel poverty policy applied at a nation-wide level has been implemented [in Germany][VIII]." (Imbert, 2017, p. 54)

In summary, EP is a problem distinct from monetary poverty. It has significant impacts on health, well-being, and social participation, disproportionately affects those with the lowest incomes (Löschel, 2015), and is expected to become more important as energy prices rise in the wake of the energy transition (Bouzarovski & Tirado Herrero, 2017). With many in Germany still in denial about the relevance of EP (Imbert, 2017, pp. 66–73), an engaged political science is challenged to help society reflect critically on why an issue that is increasingly recognized as central to the "Just Transition" (Bouzarovski et al., 2020, p. 7) is largely being ignored by German policymakers.

2.2 Energy Poverty Discourse internationally

This section reviews the literature dealing with the discursive treatment of EP (in the broadest sense of the term) in other countries, before looking in more detail at the two studies that form the corpus of previous German research on this topic in the following section.

As noted earlier, the role of EP in discourse has received very little attention in the relevant literature, and political science perspectives are even rarer. If anything, the focus has been on framing (i.e., construction of the problem), which has been most vividly explored in the literature on the "lived experience" of EP. Such studies show that these narrative social constructions have an important influence on how the issue is approached on at least two levels:

First, there is preliminary evidence that how people describe their experience of EP influences what coping strategies they do or do not develop (Anderson et al., 2012; Butler & Sherriff, 2017; Longhurst & Hargreaves, 2019). More specifically, the energy poor place a high value on "maintaining self-respect and esteem" (Anderson et al., 2012, p. 51), often "reject a sense of vulnerability" (Butler & Sherriff, 2017, p. 38), and explain away or even normalize their own EP as evident in statements such as "It's normal to have damp" (Butler & Sherriff, 2017). All studies show that the energy poor pride themselves on coping with challenging circumstances using complex strategies, a widespread pragmatic optimism, and a tendency to reject the label for themselves, which creates a reservoir of hidden EP.

Second, this lived experience is often neglected in policymaking, depriving the condition of its complexity (Bouzarovski et al., 2020; Koďousková & Lehotský, 2021; Simcock et al., 2021), leading to "narrow, technical problem framings" (Longhurst & Hargreaves, 2019, p. 1) or a kind of "pseudo-

[VIII] The so-called "Stromspar-Check," which combines energy-saving advice with the provision of free, low-cost energy-saving appliances and a scrappage bonus for refrigerators.

recognition" (Bednar & Reames, 2020, p. 433) of the problem that purports to address the problem but does so at a symbolic or nominal level rather than substantively alleviating the condition. However, none of the cited work explores how these outcomes are related to discourses about EP, such as whether coping strategies are in any way directly influenced by how policies are publicly ideologized and institutionally implemented, including the values that institutional practices convey to those affected.

Nonetheless, framings **do** influence how EP is treated politically. For example, Primc & Slabe-Erker (2020) find that lower-income countries tend to frame EP as an energy policy issue and thus often opt for price controls and energy efficiency measures, while higher-income countries frame EP as a social policy issue and thus often opt for monetary transfers. Crucially, the authors fail to point out that integrated framing is completely absent. In the UK, an overemphasis on heating leads to a neglect of other energy services, even though they are technically part of the FP definition (Simcock & Walker, 2015). For Germany, there is evidence of neglect of energy services not based on electricity (Radtke & Pannowitsch, 2018). In this dynamic, the media can play a crucial role by raising awareness of all forms of EP (Sanz-Hernández, 2019a). For instance, Sanz-Hernández (2019b) notes that the Spanish media long individualized the problem of EP by blaming consumer behavior and debating whether energy-poor people were "unable or unwilling to pay" – a narrative that was later shaken by the onset of an "EP crisis."

Finally, Kerr et al. (2019, p. 6) note that while the constituent political issues of EP are ubiquitous, responses vary widely. This is at least partly due to the fact that "the discursive practice of using the term 'fuel poverty' [or EP…] to describe their intersection[, which] create[s] a new, distinct, policy problem" has not been universally successful (cf. Kopatz, 2013; Radtke & Pannowitsch, 2018). Consistent with other research, they find extreme instability in problem framings. For Ireland, for example (pp. 8-10), they show how there has been a shift from the restrictive FP frame to a broader EP frame that opens the door to energy services beyond heating. This shift has also influenced policy priorities (as in the other cases examined), albeit more in words than in deeds. Separately, Kod'ousková & Lehotský (2021) find that issue frames vary widely even within a single national context and, crucially, influence policy preferences.

Looking at the few more explicitly discursive perspectives, the picture becomes more complex. Middlemiss (2017, pp. 435–438) points out that the emphasis on energy efficiency, generally seen as beneficial for alleviating EP, can also be used to decouple it from monetary deprivation and obscure the role fiscal austerity and energy market design play. She shows how the change in the definition of FP in the UK[IX] draws on a neoliberal discourse of prioritizing limited resources to benefit the most needy, turning FP into a condition that can only ever be alleviated, not eliminated (p. 2). Chipango (2021, p.4) also found such defeatism in Zimbabwean EP discourse, where narratives about climate change,

[IX] Instead of considering households fuel poor if they have to spend more than 10% of their income on energy services, the new indicator focuses on a complex combination of low income and high necessary costs.

vandalism, and illicit connections serve to depoliticize and normalize the existence of EP. Like Middlemiss, she identifies a reductionist, technocratic narrative, in which, in her case, renewable energy is idealized as a panacea for EP. However, both authors are largely disinterested in the agents of these discourses and possible counter-discourses.

Finally, we know from the broader literature (e.g., Reppond & Bullock, 2018) that poverty discourses are often loaded with moralistic, paternalistic arguments that construct the poor as personally responsible for their condition and thus legitimize punitive or patronizing measures. While Middlemiss (2017) finds no parallel for this in UK EP discourse, others have documented such elements in other cases (Chipango, 2021; Koďousková & Lehotský, 2021; Sanz-Hernández, 2019b). Simcock et al. (2021, pp. 6–7) find a discourse of disrespect in the Polish policy community that legitimizes the low priority status of EP. This disrespect is institutionalized in policies aimed at correcting and lecturing the energy poor, while intentionally making access to support more difficult to "avoid cheating." Notably, Simcock et al. (2021, p. 1) also identify a narrative of nonrecognition that marginalizes the issue and renders the energy poor invisible by denying (the distinctiveness of) their plight altogether. This mechanism of discursively reproducing the marginality of EP as a policy issue has been found repeatedly (Bednar & Reames, 2020; Buzar, 2007; Walker & Day, 2012). But even in these studies, little emphasis is placed on who (re)produces these narratives in contrast to the counter-narratives of whom, almost naturalizing the presence of these narratives.

Before summarizing what the literature on the discursive treatment of EP has to say, the next section first briefly reviews the few studies that have so far taken an ideational approach to the study of EP in Germany.

2.3 German Discourse

EP is barely covered in the German literature, with a scant dozen peer-reviewed, dedicated papers, three monographs (Großmann et al., 2017; Hubert, 2015; Kopatz, 2013), a few academic dissertations, and a few non-academic reports. It is therefore not surprising that only two papers so far directly address the ideational dimension of EP policymaking.

Before looking at these in more detail, it is worth mentioning the findings of Radtke & Pannowitsch (2018), even though their focus was different. In examining the failure to put EP on the national agenda, they find that the framing and categorization of the issue is critical (p. 396). They argue that a lack of coordination among advocates and of a common, simple, and comprehensive conceptualization has hindered the spread of EP as a policy issue (p. 397). However, their analysis remains limited to policy diffusion between lower-level initiatives and the national agenda and does not examine, for example, discursive resistance to EU pressure (cf. Bouzarovski et al., 2020). Moreover, they hardly consider the (ideological) content of EP frames.

Closest to my concern, then, is the seminal analysis by Haas (2017). From a Gramscian-Marxist perspective, he examines the energy transition discourse in Germany between 1998 and the mid-2010s. He identifies three phases of the debate (98-09, 09-13, 2014-x) (p. 378), in which a "gray" and a "green" hegemonic project pushed for a slower and faster energy transition, respectively, and struggled for the "universalization of [their] particular interests" (p. 379). The "gray" project included neoliberal actors and those tied to fossil fuels, while the "green" project consisted of ecologists, leftists, and the "green" energy sector. Crucially, both projects included parts of trade unions, the Social Democrats (SPD), and the Christian Democrats (CDU), indicating the existence of cross-cutting (discursive) alliances (pp. 381–382; cf. Figure 1). Haas characterizes what might also be called discourse coalitions as primarily the product of capital interests, with ideology playing a subordinate role. For him, discourse, it seems, is produced exclusively strategically, privileging agency rather than allowing for a dialectical relationship between structure and agency (cf. Section 3.2).

	Green Hegemonic Project	Grey Hegemonic Project
Common interest	• 100% renewable energy as quickly as possible	• Slow transition to a renewable energy system
Actors	• BEE, BWE, BSW • Parts of public utilites • Parts of industry and trade unions • Alliance 90/The Greens, The Left, environmental wing of the SPD and the CDU/CSU, Federal Ministry of the Environment, Research institutes (DIW, Öko-Institut, etc.) • Environmental NGOs, Consumer protection associations	• BDEW, VKU, E.ON, RWE, Vattenfall, EnBW • Large parts of industry and trade unions • Economic wing of the CDU/CSU and the SPD • Federal Ministry of Economics • Research institutions (RWI, IW, etc.)
Goals/Strategic Practices	• Generalization of the vision of 100% renewable energy as public good-oriented Practices and thus sustainable, safe and competitive form of energy supply	• Generalization of the view that a rapid, decentralized energy transition is not in the public interest, i.e. does not lead to a competitive, secure and sustainable energy supply

Figure 1: Presentation of the two hegemony projects taken from Haas (2017, p. 384) [translated]

Overall, Haas argues, EP was a rather marginal issue in the hegemonic struggle, gaining importance only from 2009 with the emergence of distributional conflicts and especially from 2011, before being marginalized again since 2014. Haas shows how "gray" actors instrumentalized concerns about rising prices and thus EP to fight against the expansion of renewables and feed-in tariffs, while consumer protection and welfare associations tried, rather haphazardly, to steer the debate toward social policies for the energy poor. For Haas, this instrumentalization (cf. Gawel et al., 2015) is an effect of the capital interests of the fossil fuel industry. By gaining discursive hegemony through lobby

organizations such as the dubious “New Social Market Economy Initiative[x],” this “gray” project secured policies that served its interests, disguised as EP-related policies. (pp. 388–393) Again, the specific content of this EP discourse and its dynamics and/or dialectics are of secondary importance to Haas, as material interests and political influence dominate his analysis.

Imbert (2017), then, sought to bridge this gap between the material and ideational dimensions of policymaking by examining the two separately and then linking her findings. While her material analysis includes a strictly objectivist analysis of the extent of FP in Germany, her ideational analysis uses discourse network analysis to provide an ‘objective’ reading of the discursive field, focusing on the “peak in popularity” of FP she locates around 2012. However, for her, FP is only a case of non-policymaking (with only one specific national policy), her actual research object.

Most of her findings are consistent with those of Haas. She notes that the campaign by economic actors in the third quarter of 2012 was instrumental in raising awareness of FP, after which these actors retreated and social and political actors took the lead. However, she notes that FP was “strongly marginalized in the overall debate” (p. 84), with this tendency increasing over time. She also points to the lack of a real lobby for the issue, as well as the failure of issue advocates to engage with the general discursive environment, which she believes was more important to non-policymaking than strategic issue avoidance. Finally, like Haas, she notes that discursive alliances transcend traditional cleavages. (pp. 89–91) However, because she conceptualizes discourse exclusively in terms of actors’ shared reference to particular concepts, her analysis cannot say anything about the dynamics of EP discourse in and of itself.

More revealing in this regard are the expert interviews with which she supplements her analysis (pp. 66–73). I do not want to repeat all her findings, but it is striking how often her interviewees deny either the distinctiveness or the relevance of FP. Similarly, they repeatedly claim that the German welfare system is sufficient. In addition to various misconceptions reflected in the statements (e.g., the false belief that social assistance always covers all heating costs), the favored solutions (counseling schemes and slight transfer increases) also show a narrow, simplistic understanding of the issue. Overall, attitudes are consistent with previous findings (Koďousková & Lehotský, 2021; Simcock et al., 2021), although derogatory statements are less common. Unfortunately, Imbert takes these statements at face value and fails to examine their origins, their ideological tinge, their inherent misconceptions, in short, their discursive content. Speaking with Hajer, a lot of her subjects’ statements seem to be believed simply because they “sound right” (Hajer, 1995, p. 63), which warrants critical analysis.

Summarizing the last two sections, one can conclude that discursive constructions shape both the political treatment of EP and the lived experience of it. Moreover, there seem to be some commonalities between the cases: narrow, technical problem framings, tendencies to instrumentalize and misconceptualize EP and to mischaracterize those affected by it, and – especially in Germany – the marginalization of the issue. However, most studies to date have focused on

[x] German: Initiative Neue Soziale Marktwirtschaft

problem framings, while **critical** discourse perspectives being rare. Those that do take such a perspective tend to focus exclusively on the structural properties of EP-related discourses, neglecting the role of agency in their (re)production and treating their existence as a fact of nature. The few who focus on agency similarly pay little attention to the dialectical nature of discourse. This is the essential gap that the present study seeks to fill.

3 Theory and Methodology

In the following, I discuss my methodology and theoretical framework. First, I briefly justify my case selection before introducing Hajer's Argumentative Discourse Analysis (ADA) and explaining how I intend to apply it. Finally, Section 3.3 presents a modified version of Nancy Fraser's concept of misrecognition as a complement to ADA.

3.1 Why Germany?

As mentioned above, EP has traditionally been a topic of low- and middle-income countries. Case studies of developed Western democracies with sophisticated welfare states have long been rare, and critical perspectives even rarer. For the UK – the country with the liveliest EP debate – there are now many case studies (cf. Ambrose & Marchand, 2017 for an overview), but there is little critical scholarly work dealing with Germany. And although the debate has seen increased discursive activity and political action in comparable countries (e.g., Belgium, France, Spain), EP has remained a marginal topic in Germany (cf. Chapter 2). Positivist scholars who studied the issue found this difficult to comprehend, and those who pointed out Germany's heavy dependence on imported fossil fuels (BMWK, n.d.) simultaneously feared that EP would become even more pressing when prices soared. Unfortunately, this is exactly what happened. Although this study could not have foreseen these circumstances, Germany's strong economic position, its reliance on price levies to finance the energy transition, and its definition of access to household energy as a basic right made it an intriguing and illustrative example of EP debates even prior to these events. When all these factors are taken into account, the difference with countries like France becomes even clearer. And now Germany and its fear of EP – a condition that the country has long collectively neglected – have become a geopolitical issue as German politicians are wary of exacerbating the crisis by joining energy embargoes. This makes this study all the more relevant, as it aims to provide analytical insights into the discursive dynamics of the EP debate in this important country.

As for case studies in general, I see political science as a form of social self-reflection, i.e., it participates in a public debate that is of direct relevance to those who live within the boundaries of this public sphere. Since issues such as EP and its associated discourse(s) are still very much dealt with at the national level, it is worthwhile to explore them there. Moreover, recognizing the discursive patterns, variations, and subtleties that are so central to discourse analysis requires an

intimate knowledge of the political context that is best achieved by scholars who are deeply immersed in the debate in a particular country.

In terms of time frame, the most recent (federal) legislative period (2017-2021) seemed to be a viable and particularly relevant period, during which the most extensive climate change-related energy policies were introduced and triggered a new debate on price-driven climate action. Moreover, this period was not covered by the other analyses presented above.

3.2 Hajer: Argumentative Discourse Analysis

Discourse analysis assumes that social action is mediated by language, whether spoken, written, or thought. The way one sees, interprets, and chooses to act in the world is strongly influenced by the meaning one ascribes to various phenomena. These patterns of interpretation rest on practiced speech (in whatever form), in which various such patterns are (re)produced and which, in turn, can become so influential that they structure the way a large number of people perceive the world (cf. Wagenaar, 2014, pp. 107–111). For example, the belief that in Western societies anyone who works hard enough can achieve anything they want influences, among other things, the perception of poverty. And this notion is not an individual perception, but a pattern of interpretation embedded in the general culture.

Consequently, perhaps one of the greatest achievements of critical social science is the establishment of the term "discourse" in the public vocabulary. Unfortunately, due to a-theoretical and unreflective uses, the term has become a vague concept, used at different levels of abstraction and in reference to different phenomena. Alas, Hajer's distinction between discourse, storylines, and other discursive elements is also not always clear. He uses both a colloquial understanding that equates it with public discussion and an theoretical definition as "a specific ensemble of ideas, concepts, and categorizations" (Hajer, 1995, p. 44). However, he also conflates levels of abstraction by referring to both the "natural sciences" and "sustainable development" as discourses. Following his theoretical definition, I understand discourse here as *a broad interpretative pattern of social or physical phenomena, located at an intermediate level of abstraction* between all-encompassing ideologies and what Hajer calls storylines, which I discuss below.

ADA focuses on discursive interaction (i.e., actual argumentative exchange) and the formation of *discourse coalitions*. Discourse coalitions are "ensemble[s] of a set of story lines, the actors that utter these story lines, and the practices that conform to these story lines, all organized around a discourse." (Hajer, 2002, p. 47) Such *storylines* are generative narratives that circumvent actors' individual gaps in knowledge by using elements from different discourses with which they are familiar to make sense of a phenomenon that they do not necessarily fully understand (1995, pp. 56–62). They also serve as a unifying arc that reduces complexity by "imply[ing] arbitrary confinements" (1995, p. 66). This

mobilization of bias is central to the persuasiveness of storylines, emphasizing some aspects of social reality while ignoring or obscuring others. In essence, they represent “cognitive commitments” whose power rests “on the idea that it sounds right.” (1995, pp. 56, 63). Thus, discourse coalitions use storylines as a medium to “impose their view of reality on others, suggest certain social positions and practices, and criticize alternative social arrangements” (2002, p. 47). Moreover, Hajer (1995, pp. 59–61) uses *practices* as a broad concept to describe the form and setting of discursive exchange (e.g., writing a report), but also the “sedimented meanings” (Wagenaar, 2014, p. 52) embedded in institutional and other social routines. As will become apparent, the practices in the EP debate are fairly uniform, so I will focus on them only where they are particularly salient.

Specifically, the German debate on EP is part of the broader discussion on how best to make (or not make) the transition to climate neutrality. Discourse coalitions here cluster around three discourses: climate change denialism, a weak variant of ecological modernization, and a strong variant that could also be called socio-ecological transformation (cf. Stevis, 2011, pp. 153–156). All of these discourses form the basis of different storylines, i.e., comprehensive narratives that give meaning to phenomena from the perspective of the respective discourse. However, as Hajer (2002, p. 46) notes, “political arguments […] typically rest on more than one discourse,” so storylines combine *discursive elements*, i.e., more granular patterns of interpretation, of different origins – often in the form of *frames*. These can either be simple-sounding arguments or trope-like slogans such as the famous “Hartz IV[XI] is poverty by law” (cf. Holtmann et al., 2006). Within the green transition debate, then, EP is a storyline of which there are multiple versions, each based on the discourse (e.g., climate change denialism) to which a particular coalition adheres more broadly, and incorporating elements from other discourses (e.g., personal responsibility) on which it regularly draws. Preempting the analysis somewhat, one can cite as an example that the far-right coalition generally understands the green transition by means of a climate change denialist discourse. On this basis, it tells a variant of the storyline about EP, but also one about rising solar activity or the benefits of CO_2 for plant life. Corresponding to its discursive basis, its story about EP is completely different from that of, for example, the left-wing coalition, even if it uses the same buzzword.

Hajer’s approach is particularly valuable for this study because, unlike other versions of discourse analysis, it incorporates discursive agency. He sees political power as “the establishment of a particular set of storylines (and their related discourse) as dominant” (Leipold & Winkel, 2017, pp. 5–6). He calls this dominance *discourse structuration*, because once it is achieved, all actors depend on reference to a particular discourse for their credibility. I would add that such structuration can also be achieved for **individual** storylines such as EP. Discursive hegemony further requires *discourse institutionalization*, i.e., that a discourse is reflected in institutional structures and practices. The discourse of climate change mitigation, for example, is institutionalized in the Paris Agreement. Politics is thus a “struggle for discursive hegemony” (Hajer, 1995, p. 60) in which actors play a key role by communicating strategically (Hajer & Versteeg, 2005, pp. 177, 181).

[XI] Germany’s last big welfare reform

This does not mean that ADA takes a voluntarist approach. Rather, its understanding of discursive constitution is based on Giddens' (cf. 1984) idea of the "duality of structure," which states that actors both constitute structures (discourses) and are constituted by them. In line with this, Hajer adopts Foucault's notion of subject positions, renames it *positioning*, and emphasizes its dialectical quality. That means that actors "are actively 'positioning' themselves and others drawing on discursive categories" (Hajer & Versteeg, 2005, p. 177). In an EP context, this may include, among other things, the discursive construction of the energy-poor subject, but also the classification of EP advocates as alarmists.

In applying ADA, then, I deny that actors can realize their interests solely by virtue of their position of power through knowledgeable, rational, strategic behavior that is unaffected by discourse(s) itself (an assumption that Haas and Imbert could be accused of making). Nor do I view actors as pawns of immaterial discourses that float around determining what they do, think, or desire, thus depriving them of any agency. The power of a storyline about EP is that it offers actors a shortcut to rationalize a phenomenon they do not fully comprehend. And even if it was introduced with the strategic intent of making sense of a condition and bringing about its alleviation, as will be shown later, this has not resulted in a unified understanding controlled by its originator. Rather, EP has become (or is on its way to becoming) a vessel for different stories about similar alleged conditions. Such multi-interpretability is characteristic of storylines and contributes to the power of the discourses in which they are embedded. In order to commit common understanding to a particular version of the EP storyline, and thus to a particular discourse, it must be continuously reproduced discursively. Therein lies the agency, but also the risk that the concept will morph into something else. (Hajer, 1995, pp. 61–63)

Here, my study can also make a unique contribution by examining how the meaning of EP is constructed, which actors tell which version of the story, and (potentially) analyze why they do so. From a policy perspective, it also offers insights into why EP debates have remained so limited in this particular case, both from the perspective of the actors and from a structural perspective.

3.3 Fraser: Rendered invisible, misrecognized, disrespected

ADA provides valuable analytical insights into the EP debate. However, it is an understanding framework rather than a critical one, which means that it does not provide tools for critical reflection on its own findings. It does not answer the question of why it matters how EP is discussed – or is not. Moreover, one can deepen Hajer's framework analytically by supplementing his categories with theory appropriate to the topic at hand. To this end, I use a concept from Nancy Fraser's theoretical reflections on the political-philosophical-strategic conflict between recognition and redistribution.

I take as my starting point Fraser's insight that welfare programs, through their assessment and judgment of people's needs and their worthiness to be met by the (welfare) state, constitute "institutionalized patterns of interpretation" (Fraser, 1987, p. 90). These patterns not only determine the distribution of resources. They are also themselves a discursive practice that reifies behavioral expectations and establishes **reasonable** needs, transforming their definition from a contested to a settled or taken-for-granted matter. In Hajer's terminology, it is a form of positioning.

The simplest German EP example of this is the reimbursement of heating costs under social assistance. According to law, all "reasonable" costs are reimbursed. However, this requires an interpretation of the term "reasonable" that is left to the local authorities. Many of them opt for a flat-rate reimbursement based on living space, disregarding the fact that specific heating needs within a building can vary by up to 50%. Recipients who exceed these limits must reduce their costs, resulting in a significant number of households foregoing full reimbursement. (BT-Drs. 19/23454, 2020; Kopatz, 2013, p. 209) Discursively, however, this fact is hardly noticed, so that the claim that all heating costs of welfare recipients are covered by the state is a recurring misconception. In analytical terms, this both positions individuals who exceed the reasonableness threshold as behaving inappropriately and thus not worthy of assistance, and shifts the burden of proof for higher "reasonable costs" (caused by structural or individual factors) to recipients. Such discursive consequences can be said to contribute to the (re-)production of EP.

With Fraser, then, these procedures can be described as a form of misrecognition. She sees misrecognition primarily as a form of cultural injustice that denies the distinctive identity of a collective, but also acknowledges that "maldistribution is [always] entwined with misrecognition" (Fraser & Honneth, 2003, p. 3) and argues for viewing each practice as both economic and cultural (Fraser, 2003, pp. 61–64).

I argue here that institutionalized procedures and discourses surrounding them, as in the example above, represent a somewhat different form of misrecognition, namely the misrecognition of needs. Thus, I adapt Fraser's forms of misrecognition slightly: *Cultural domination* is not relevant here, but *nonrecognition* – "being rendered invisible via […] authoritative representational, communicative, and interpretative practices" – and *disrespect* – "being routinely maligned or disparaged in stereotypic public cultural representations and/or in everyday life interactions" (both Fraser, 1995, p. 71) – are. I argue that both form the discursive basis for refusing to meet the needs of the energy poor, either by denying the relevance or existence of EP as a condition in its own right (nonrecognition) or by denying their worthiness of support (disrespect). In addition, I would like to add a third form that falls somewhere between economic and cultural injustice. I refer to this third form simply as *misconception*, which I define as *having one's struggle and/or living conditions distorted or oversimplified*. It is easy to see how misconceptions can get in the way of meeting real needs. For example, if one assumes that EP is not usually the result of

wasteful energy consumption (cf. Chapter 2), targeted interventions to promote resource-efficient consumption may be both ineffective and perceived as unjust.

Certainly, the economic forms of injustice Fraser (1995, pp. 70–71) identifies in her work (exploitation, economic marginalization, deprivation) play as large, if not larger, a role in EP than these forms of misrecognition. EP among high-income people is largely considered a statistical artifact. Yet, especially for such a specific issue, economic inequities are at least exacerbated by misrecognition. Or, as Fraser (1995, p. 76) puts it, the "ideologies of class inferiority proliferate to justify exploitation." This is not to say that EP could be mitigated by proper recognition alone, without accompanying distributional measures. However, I argue that the opposite is true (i.e., that EP cannot be adequately addressed without proper recognition). In other words: I contend that the way policymakers discursively construct EP and the people who experience it – both through strategic action and through the unconscious reproduction of internalized elements – directly influences which approaches are perceived as legitimate or even possible.

This assertion is based on the constructivist insight that "we experience the world, not as a collection of facts and observations, but a collection of values and meanings." (Thorn, 2021, sec. 7:44-7:52) Nevertheless, the relevance of the former does not disappear when discussing the influence of the latter. Put differently, "dead trees as such are not a social construct; the point is how one makes sense of dead trees." (Hajer, 2002, p. 44). It is therefore crucial to hold on to the idea of an independent standard for judging political claims lest critical perspectives become self-referential and easily dismissed. It is the task of critical scholarship, even when examining discourse, to illuminate and critique powerful perspectives that bend observable reality to their advantage by disputing the existence of dead trees rather than their meaningfulness. Because Fraser's framework contains normative connotations, its application (i.e., judging something as a misconception) must refer to an independent observational standard. I take the more positivist studies cited above (cf. Section 2.1) – insofar as an observation is widely shared – as such a standard. This is because, thanks to such work, we have a fairly good idea of who is affected by EP and how, and what solutions are (in)effective. Whenever I claim that something is a form of misrecognition, I will cite the relevant sources on which this claim is based.

The combination made here ties Hajer's ADA into a critical framework that allows me to analytically assess how the discursive treatment of EP matters (i.e., how it affects its [non]treatment). Just as Hajer's study of acid rain tacitly presupposed the existence of dead trees and acknowledged the prevailing scientific explanation for their occurrence, I will tacitly presuppose the existence of the condition EP describes and acknowledge widely shared scientific observations.

3.4 Practical Application

Putting all this into practice has been more difficult for EP than for other issues. As we have seen, the German debate on this issue is fleeting, erratic and highly volatile. While some try to keep the issue off the table, others occasionally push it onto the agenda. For this reason, the issue is often present for only one or a few days, with occasional flare-ups of concern about rising energy prices providing small windows of opportunity.

However, this allowed me to collect quite a large amount of material, since the volume did not increase exponentially. My set of material consisted of three components: (1) All parliamentary documents (e.g., plenary minutes, motions) submitted to federal and state parliaments between 2017 and February 2022 that referenced EP. (2) All articles published online[XII] by national media on the topic or in which an actor referred to the topic. Audiovisual media were not included, mostly because they did not play a major role. (3) All press releases from relevant organizations in which EP is referred to. Only statements directly related to EP were analyzed (e.g., a parliamentary debate on EP; statements related to EP and reactions to it). This selection provides an almost complete picture of the German political EP debate. Since my focus was on the public portrayal of the issue, interviews – which, for practical reasons, were not possible – would have been interesting only as secondary sources. And since discourse coalitions are inherently a public phenomenon, this material also allowed for a good analysis of them.

In the analysis, I worked inductively according to the principles of grounded theory (Wagenaar, 2014, pp. 260–274). After collecting all relevant excerpts, I used open coding to identify recurring themes within the speech acts while also coding the actor speaking. This in turn resulted in smaller excerpts that were examined for deeper argumentative structure. In parallel with these and other readings, I wrote memos recording analytical findings that were later condensed into one or more explanatory theories about the discursive environment of EP. Based on a spreadsheet of coded excerpts, I created actor profiles that formed the basis for subsequent discourse coalition profiles. The memos, in turn, were later reorganized thematically and eventually processed into profiles of storylines and other discursive features. Grounded theory was chosen to facilitate an ongoing dialogue between my understanding of the field and the material.

[XII] For my time-frame, this is virtually every article published.

4 Analysis

In this chapter, I present the results of my analysis, which is divided into two parts. First, I will provide a thorough description and analysis of the various discursive elements of the EP debate. In doing so, I start from the assumption that discourses, storylines, and other narrative elements, although introduced by actors, have a life of their own, as they may be reappropriated or have unintended ideational consequences. And as they change in the process of argumentative exchange, they affect those who introduced them and may also change their use of the concept(s), among others.

Second, I will present easily digestible profiles of the three to four discourse coalitions I have identified. In this second section, I will trace how the actors actively – strategically or unintentionally – shape the debate on EP. In doing so, they naturally make use of the elements I presented in the previous section, so it is crucial to follow this sequence. In reading it, the reader should keep in mind that I have criticized the preceding literature for its segmented focus on either structure or agency. As a result, neither section is free of references to the other, as the two can never be completely separated. However, the synthesis of the two is made in Section 5.

Moreover, it is in the nature of discourse analysis that it is impossible to provide step-by-step evidence for every analytical statement in the form of quotations. As is common in grounded theory analysis, much of what emerges here as my analysis was built up incrementally through multiple readings, interspersed with rounds of reflection and dialogue with my prior knowledge. As a result, the insights are also intertextual, meaning that they cannot be derived from a single text, paragraph, or line. Where particularly illustrative, I provide direct quotations; where characteristic terms appear, I provide at least one exemplary reference to their use; and where possible, I will do the same for specific identified narratives or discursive elements. Primary material is distinguished from regular literature by the use of a numbered reference system.[XIII]

4.1 Unwilling or unable to understand? Structural Features of the Energy Poverty Debate

The following sections present the structural features and discursive elements of the EP debate in Germany between 2017 and early 2022. Before going into more detail, I would like to provide a brief overview:

[XIII] Complete list of materials available upon request; primary sources cited appear in a separate reference list.

One of the main features of the debate is the dazzling discrepancy between what scholars describe as EP and what is referred to as EP in the public debate. Recalling Sanz-Hernández (2019b) observation that Spanish media repeatedly asked whether the energy poor where "unable or unwilling to pay" (a phrase that occasionally appears in Germany as well), one might ask here whether policy actors are unable or unwilling to understand the complexity of EP as described by scholars. I will discuss this question in Chapter 5; for now, it should suffice to know that EP in Germany is mainly treated as an electricity and grid disconnection problem. This point will be discussed in more detail in Section 4.1.1.

Second, I found that **the** classic form of disrespect that we are familiar with from poverty debates, namely the assertion that the poor themselves are to blame for their poverty, is largely absent from the EP debate. Instead, the energy-poor subject is constructed as a pitiable fool incapable of coping in the market economy. In essence, many forms of EP would be avoidable or more easily remedied if the energy poor just knew better. Section 4.1.2 discusses this storyline.

Third, other narrative conflicts in the debate have much to do with framing, but also with its consequences. Whether or not access to energy is a basic social right, whether it is a social or an energy policy issue, and whether renewable energy or the way it was introduced contributed to EP are crucial points of contention that will be addressed in Section 4.1.3. Finally, a key point of this study is that while disrespect is not a key feature of the EP debate, nonrecognition of the distinctiveness of EP is. Section 4.1.4 discusses how nonrecognition works and why it can be problematic.

4.1.1 Analyzing with Blinders on: Limited Conceptualizations

A starting insight for all policy analysis is that "A conclusive way of checking the rise of conflict is simply to provide no arena for it […]" (Schattschneider, 1975, p. 71). This is a voluntarist conceptualization of preventing the mobilization of bias. Although a precise determination of intent is beyond my reach, the German EP debate shows signs of such strategic demobilization of bias, but also of genuine lack of understanding and, consequently, of misconceptions. Whether intentional or not, both (presumably) have the same effect: limiting the space for solutions and distorting the situation of the energy poor.

The EP debate is thus shaped by misconceptions that structure it discursively. Foremost among these is the notion that EP is essentially another word for people who are forcibly disconnected from the power grid due to lack of payment[XIV]. Strikingly, this notion itself is never the subject of debate. Rather, it is a misconception (cf. Bouzarovski & Petrova, 2015; Simcock & Walker, 2015) that is unconsciously reproduced by virtually all actors. Thus, when someone claims that EP is on the rise, the response "Electricity disconnections have declined." is

[XIV] The terms "Energiesperre" and "Stromsperre" do not translate well, so I will refer to this phenomenon as energy/electricity disconnections below.

not rejected because it narrows the focus to one aspect and one metric, but is rebuked because the absolute numbers are perceived as still too high[2(p. 15221)]. This has led to the aspect of heating poverty being largely omitted, with proposals focusing exclusively on reducing the number of electricity disconnections. Consistent with this, the only EP interventions undertaken by several states and the federal government are energy conservation counseling and energy debt counseling for welfare recipients. This perpetuates the misconception, as heating is not routinely addressed in these programs. This practice of narrowing the scope is particularly striking when, in response to questions about measures to address EP, governments refer exclusively to debt counseling and the tellingly named federal “Stromspar-Check”[3] (cf. Stromspar-Check, n.d.).

This also embeds EP in a discourse of emergency. Since electricity disconnections rarely last long and affect only a small fraction of households, structural measures are construed as unnecessary. This occurs in two ways: either the energy-poor subject is constructed as extraordinarily incapable of coping in the market economy, or their life circumstances are framed as exceptional and temporary, both of which are forms of positioning. Consequently, their situation is to be managed rather than structurally alleviated. This is a discourse familiar from homeless policy: Emergency shelters, blankets, and buses to keep warm may meet immediate needs, but they do not alter the underlying condition. And because “the homeless” are positioned as exceptional (think alcohol, drugs, mental health), the provision of permanent housing is refused on the grounds that “they” are supposedly unable to keep it. The situation is similar with the energy poor: While energy disconnections are addressed through emergency assistance (e.g., emergency loans), anything other than counseling is often rejected on the grounds that the energy poor are not individually market-competent (i.e., their needs are invalid).[4] Thus, a discourse of emergency is always a discourse of individual cases.

So, when EP is framed in terms of electricity (and) disconnections in virtually every discussion, it becomes not only a narrow, technical issue (cf. Middlemiss, 2017), but also particularized. This renders both heating poverty and all unquantifiable or unquantified forms of EP invisible. Both phenomena (i.e., disconnection and quantification focus) reinforce each other: for example, it is often not possible and therefore rare to turn off gas individually for structural reasons. However, since heating costs are part of the rent, non-payment can lead to eviction, but since there are no statistics on the reasons for evictions, heating poverty is rendered invisible.

Similarly, the heating cost misconception described in Section 3.3 is ubiquitous. Even eco-progressive research institutes repeat it (Cludius et al., 2018), making it the second element that approaches discourse structuration. And while it is not reproduced by all, it is almost never actively challenged. This assumption, now taken for granted, has a classic duality of structure-effect: it “might have been introduced for […] strategic purposes, [but] together [with other discursive elements it] create[s] a new discursive space within which problems [can] be discussed.” (Hajer, 1995, p. 50) That is, whatever was once behind it, it has become a stable element of debate that structures how actors think about EP.

And although some interject the qualification “if reasonable,” there is virtually never any discussion of what exactly that means. Instead, EP advocates even turn this misconception into an argument for why electricity costs should be integrated into the same framework[5]. Following Fraser (1995, p. 85), the call for full coverage of heating costs under social assistance in this discursive environment thus runs the risk of marking recipients as “inherently deficient and insatiable, as always needing more and more.”

These structuring misconceptions of the debate also lead to an almost total disregard for the energy efficiency of buildings. In addition, there is a plethora of other minor misconceptions that have not (yet) achieved the same level of discourse structuration. If we continue to use the literature’s repeated empirical observations as a benchmark, most actors either have not fully grasped EP or are strategically misrepresenting it (or both). There are also some clear ideological divides: The center-right tends to see high prices and behaviors, while the (center-)left sees high prices, low incomes, and sometimes socio-structural disadvantages as the main causes, with energy efficiency playing a marginal role for both. Consequently, the center-right tends to perceive EP as a problem of welfare recipients, while the (center-)left has a somewhat broader focus on low-income recipients. To be clear, (mis)conceptions like these (cf. Palmer et al., 2018) may either be the result of ideologically colored perceptions or intentional (or both). However, their effect remains the same: the image of EP becomes a cut-out rather than a landscape portrait.

4.1.2 Poor Fools: The Storyline of Blameless Incompetence

That the poor are often (unjustly) blamed for being poor is now a commonplace (Cozzarelli et al., 2001; Somers & Block, 2005), and such anti-poor discourse was institutionalized in the German welfare reforms of the early 2000s (Fohrbeck et al., 2014). However, Middlemiss (2017, p. 439) found for the UK that the “fuel poor subject is intriguingly blameless,” which I also found in the German EP debate. The energy poor are positioned as incompetent in their energy use, but rarely blamed. So while the scientific findings that the energy poor often under-consume energy (Spitzer et al., 2012) are not universally shared, their alleged over-consumption tends to be framed as innocent foolishness. Put bluntly, how can one blame them when they simply do not know any better? Instead of scolding them for their wickedness, actors often complain in the manner of frustrated parents about the alleged behavior of the energy poor. For example, public utilities often complain that all of their “support programs” rely on personal initiative, which the energy poor supposedly lack.[4(pp. 8, 17)]

The various discourses underlying this narrative differ slightly depending on the speaker. To stick with the cliché: Liberal-conservatives (and some social democrats) act as the demanding parent(s), urging personal responsibility and initiative. In this mental framework, arbitrage or actively seeking help becomes the equivalent of “pulling oneself up by the bootstraps,” receiving transfer payments is acceptable, but should always be accompanied by a nagging sense of

being a burden on the community, and energy disconnections are the nudges needed to escape lethargy. There is always an element of mistrust based on the discourse of rational self-interest that makes these actors wary of making it too easy for the energy poor.[2(pp. 15214–15215)] Conversely, the Greens opt for a discourse of benevolent empowerment that invokes "social participation," while the Left implicitly invokes the structural barriers of poverty discourse, as discussed below.

But – and this is crucial – although these differences exist, almost all actors (unconsciously) adopt the paternalistic storyline outlined here, changing only the tone. They may speak in terms of empowerment rather than discipline, they may acknowledge that all forms of poverty involve structural barriers to escaping it, but they still presuppose that the energy poor lack something – be it competence, be it initiative, be it knowledge (and thereby position them that way). Herein lies an answer to the question "Why send energy consultants to the homes of the frugal and not to the rich spendthrift households?" (Kopatz, 2013, pp. 60–61) Quite incidentally, this grants the right to live wastefully, but limits it to high-income classes. Such assumptions are what make energy conservation counseling so popular across ideological lines and make even progressives receptive to the idea of installing prepaid meters[XV] (cf. Berger, 2017). The ideological difference lies in who is constructed as responsible for taking the initiative. In the caring imaginary of those to the left of third-wave social democracy, the state is supposed to step in and help, while on the other side it is demanded that the (energy) poor take some responsibility for themselves.

None of this, however, means that the question of whether **non-structural** over-consumption is an important determinant of EP is uncontroversial. While some believe that the energy poor foolishly over-consume, others dispute this. But, as ADA assumes, "Coherence is not an essential feature of discourse." (Hajer, 1995, p. 44) and that holds true here. Even some of those who acknowledge under-consumption sometimes reproduce the storyline outlined. Some economic actors even use under-consumption to argue **against** certain EP measures, arguing that energy efficiency measures are futile[6,7]. Nevertheless, while there are some instances of subtle disrespect and mild caricatures of over-consumption, they are marginal features in a marginal debate (which is why I do not reproduce them here). Overall, the entire discursive repertoire is far less aggressive than in the general poverty debate.

4.1.3 Basic… Right? Other fundamental narrative Conflicts

Aside from these essentialist disputes, there are also a number of smaller storylines that keep popping up, the three most important of which I discuss here.

First, everyone rallies behind the mantra "Energy [access] is part of *Daseinsvorsorge*."*[8]* The term does not translate well, but it basically refers to services of general interest, the provision of which the state is supposed to ensure

[XV] These devices regulate electricity access through on-site payments and display various options. They have been criticized, among other things, for making energy disconnections invisible (because they happen automatically with these devices, without being counted).

in some form. However, whether access to energy is also a basic right and what that means is disputed. While the Federal Constitutional Court has affirmed this, actors to the right of the Greens are wary of using this framing. When it comes up, they are quick to add that it should not be synonymous with an "entitlement to unlimited provision"[4(p. 5)]. In effect, they position anyone who uses rights framing as an irrational idealist who demands that energy use be free and unlimited[9(p. 5961)].

Yet what exactly it means to call energy a basic right is far from clear. The Left, in particular, uses this phrase to argue that, for example, electricity disconnections should be banned, but others who use this phrase seem to have no specific intention and rather adopt it because it "sounds right." Occasionally, some link this to another court decision declaring a home uninhabitable without electricity, spinning a narrative in which electricity disconnections become legally illogical and ridicule those who insist they are justified. In the process, proponents position themselves as defenders of justice and the energy poor as victims of a grave injustice. However, neither this potentially powerful legal-moral narrative nor the basic rights framing is consistently reproduced. Nonetheless, its narrative power makes center-right actors alert to always counter it with phrases such as "services must be paid for"[10(p. 8)] or "who pays for those who do not,"[11(p. 21)] relying on a discourse of common sense.

Another point of contention is whether EP should be positioned exclusively as a social policy issue or whether it can be extended to energy policy[12(p. 5132)]. We know that social policy framing is correlated with the choice of transfers over market controls (Primc & Slabe-Erker, 2020). To some extent, this is also true here, but it seems to be another issue that is rarely reflected upon. Classifying EP as a social policy issue limits the debate and makes it difficult to argue for energy efficiency policies, regulatory market interventions, or pricing policies by simply assigning it to another area. Yet many EP advocates follow this framing, possibly because they associate "Sozialpolitik" with generous welfare, which – once again – makes it just "sound right." This makes it a successful counter-frame that suppresses the issue without having to be explicit about it. It fits the story that EP is an issue of a very specific, well-known minority, since explicit mentions of "Sozialpolitik" in the German context evoke images of welfare recipients.

Finally, a very subtle conflict revolves around renewables. The basic story that the "EEG" – Germany's renewable energy law – and in particular a provision that finances feed-in tariffs through an electricity price levy, has exacerbated EP is widely shared. It is remarkable that today no one outside the far-right disputes that the law had a noble intent (something unthinkable just a few years ago). On a more subtle level, however, the conflict continues to simmer. On one side, an amorphous group follows the simple narrative that "renewables raise prices, which leads to EP" and consequently argues that one should be wary of expanding renewables too quickly, although at the same time it advocates for the abolition of the EEG[13]. Another group specifically points to the EEG, arguing either that its mechanism caused the price explosion in the first place and/or that it was once helpful and is now harmful[14(p. 69),15(p. 10318)]. Academic actors (e..g, Heindl et al., 2014) dispute both versions of the story to some extent, but these narratives fit

well with the fundamental tension between rapid and slow expansion (cf. Haas, 2017)[XVI].

4.1.4 Nothing to see here: Nonrecognition in Action

As I described above, it is notable that instances of disrespect, as defined in Section 3.3, are almost completely absent in the observed period. While hurtful caricatures or derogatory remarks about those who struggle are common in debates about monetary poverty, disrespect in the EP debate today takes more indirect forms. Certainly, some welfare recipients living in EP might find it disrespectful when CDU politicians claim that the €1.89 (sozialleistungen.info, n.d.) they receive each month to save for a new refrigerator is sufficient[16(p. 12)]. However, it does not reach the analytical standards of disrespect described above. Rather, consistent with Simcock et al.'s (2021) findings, nonrecognition plays a much more significant role here, exercised almost exclusively by right-wing actors, governments, and the SPD. This nonrecognition takes the form of four discursive strategies: Arguing for a "holistic approach," asserting the futility or perversity of additional measures, emphasizing the purported shrinking size of the problem, and claiming that all necessary countermeasures already exist. The first and last techniques are discussed in detail in Section 4.2.3. Here I will focus on the alleged shrinkage and the futility/perversity rhetoric occasionally also used by non-conservatives.

Nonrecognition storytelling of the shrinkage type follows several simplification steps (only one example variant): First, EP is limited to disconnections (cf. Section 4.1.1). Then, the fact that several hundred thousand disconnections face several million threatened disconnections is disregarded (Bundesnetzagentur & Bundeskartellamt, 2022, p. 30). Third, it is tacitly assumed that the number of disconnections is always comparable to previous years (cf. Bundesnetzagentur & Bundeskartellamt, 2022, p. 274). Finally, a value judgment is made that implicitly declares a small proportion of disconnections to be a low priority issue in order to turn to supposedly more pressing issues. A comprehensive example of this is the statement by CDU politician Joachim Pfeiffer: "With 46 million tariff customers for electricity, the figures are put into perspective and there has also been a decline."[17] This discursive practice of nonrecognition through questionable quantification, exhibited primarily by conservative and government actors, would not be possible without the structuring misconceptions outlined above. It deprioritizes EP and renders invisible all forms of EP beyond disconnections. While scholars repeatedly emphasize that EP cannot be adequately characterized by a single measure (Bouzarovski et al., 2021), this narrative picks an arbitrary metric (disconnections are just one example) and declares "Energy poverty in Germany is declining."[18].

The fact that many of the four strategies mentioned are found primarily among conservatives is not surprising, since they all rely in some way on what

XVI This may be made obsolete by the current shifts in the debate.

Hirschman called the “rhetoric of reaction.” He cites, for example, the “perversity thesis,” which asserts that the proposed “action will produce, via a chain of unintended consequences, the *exact contrary* of the objective” (1991, p. 11; emphasis in original). Similarly, utilities argue that adjusting the preconditions for disconnection “would result in customers actually being left alone with their problem.”[4(p. 20)] This is simplistic reasoning that paternalistically strips the energy poor of their agency and positions the companies as benevolently punitive. “Then why impose preconditions at all?” one might ask. The important point here is not that any particular change is rejected, but that **any** adjustment to preconditions is rejected. Or take Hirschman’s (1991, p. 81) “futility thesis,” which states that the proposed measure would not change anything substantial (for the better). This is a line of reasoning used by energy corporations, who reject energy efficiency measures in the form of energy company obligations because the energy poor under-consume anyway, so there is no potential for savings[6(p. 13)]. This implies that there is no benefit to enabling the energy poor to consume adequately in their strained budgets by reducing necessary costs. Again, the argument is not that the particular course of action is inadvisable, but that energy efficiency measures are pointless anyway.

4.2 A disintegrating Subject: Discourse Coalitions?

As mentioned above, EP has remained a marginal topic in Germany to this day, struggling to find its place in the public’s “narrative imagination” (Morozov, 2013, p. 260). This raises two questions: Why is this so? and Who is actually fighting (back)? The answer to the former depends in large part on the answer to the latter. As Hajer (2002, p. 46) has duly pointed out, “social constructs do not ‘float’ in the world; they can be tied to specific institutions and actors.” Only when actors actively and successfully reproduce a discourse – or a storyline – can it ever become institutionalized, for example, as an idea to which practices are oriented or as a customary way of thinking.

The following four sections provide brief profiles of the discourse coalitions waging this battle. However, they are marked with a significant asterisk: Identifying discourse coalitions that grapple with EP is somewhat analytically daring due to its marginal nature. Many actors in these coalitions, especially on the right, do not use the term very often. This is an indication that the debate is still largely confined to expert circles. However, I argue that this analysis is nevertheless worthwhile because EP is marginal precisely because of the way it has been discursively treated by different actors[XVII]. Moreover, the analysis of negative cases of discourse structuration/institutionalization is – for obvious reasons – rather sparsely tilled land. Not to mention that we have every reason to believe that EP might become a positive case sooner rather than later due to the current energy price crisis and its context.

[XVII] Austria, where the concept seems to have gained momentum recently, would be an interesting comparison that was not feasible here.

Finally, although some phrasing in the following profiles might suggest intentional coordination, I do not wish to pass judgment on this. First, the ADA explicitly aims to illuminate the discursive processes that help “reproduce or fight a given bias” without actors explicitly coordinating or “sharing deep values” (Hajer, 2002, p. 48). Often, common impulses are sufficient. For example, actors share certain discursive repertoires that lead to certain perspectives on an issue. Second, as will be shown, actors advancing the concept of EP would do a poor job if coordination were the case. One conclusion can therefore be anticipated: No single storyline about EP has yet emerged to guide how a variety of actors interpret the world.

4.2.1 The far-right Coalition: It’s all Ecosocialism’s Fault

The far-right discourse coalition is the most consistent and seemingly coordinated in this field, and perhaps the only group worthy of the designation ‘strategic.’ It consists primarily of the “Alternative für Deutschland” (AfD), the only parliamentarily relevant far-right party in Germany. It also includes a number of fringe media that also spread conspiracy ideology, such as “Achse des Guten,” “COMPACT,” and “Tichys Einblick,” as well as some anti-wind power or climate change denying organizations like “Vernunftkraft” and “EIKE.” This coalition clusters around a climate change denialist discourse.

Coalition actors constantly and aggressively reproduce a very simple and consistent EP storyline: Its **one and only** cause is the “Energiewende,” a label under which they subsume more or less all German climate policy. In their narrative, this energy transition has led to skyrocketing prices (they focus on electricity) and is completely unnecessary, because climate change is not man-made, or at least Germany has no significant influence on it. However, the “left-green ideologues” of the “legacy parties,” to which more or less all relevant parties belong, are driven either by irrational convictions or by corruption to accelerate the transition ever further. These “ecosocialists” strive to redistribute resources from “the little guy” to the profiteers of renewable energy (the wind and solar “barons”). Fighting EP the way the “legacy parties” do is fighting symptoms rather than causes and targets the wrong people and is therefore futile, with most measures resembling a socialist planned economy.[12(pp. 5134–5136),19,20(pp. 1764–1765)] Besides, it is like “the arsonist scream[ing] for the fire department.”[21(p. 51)]

The AfD is also one of the few actors to frame EP beyond energy disconnections (though rarely electricity), since disconnections mainly affect the weak, who are anathema to them anyway. This is because, interestingly, the AfD combines apparent empathy for “the little guy” with disrespect and contempt for welfare recipients.[9(p. 5963)] The coalition’s EP storyline does not necessarily embrace the plight of the unemployed or low-income earners, but constructs “the little guy” as a self-reliant subject constantly hampered by government failures that make their life increasingly difficult. The energy companies are not the bad guys either, but are in a dilemma in which they rationally insist on their profits while lamenting the damage they cause[10(pp. 10–11)]. The culprit, then, is always “the

state" and the "ideologues" at its helm. In the resulting emphasis, there is a remarkable geographical split between the AfD's ultra-libertarian wing in the West (less state) and the more national-socialist wing in the East ("unideological" state).

Beyond the core climate change denialist discourse, the far-right relies primarily on three discursive elements: the populist "pure people against the corrupt elite," a simplistic anti-socialist economism (e.g., the indiscriminate designation of policies as "socialist," cf. "wind barons"), and a proto-Prussian ideal of Germanness based on strength, discipline and self-reliance. The latter – derived from the fascist discourse of decadent modernity – explains their disdain for the poor and their rejection of any targeted measures, which allows them to construct welfare recipients (with the exception of pensioners) as lazy people with an entitlement mentality who are not the "true" subject of EP. Their problem is an educational and behavioral one, which should be addressed by realigning the values taught in school and (perhaps) by forced counseling of the fools (cf. Section 4.1.2), i.e., by eliminating behavioral inadequacies.[9(p. 5963)] Together with the other two elements, this results in a strong anti-state discourse that can be summarized in the statement: "Market failure is always state failure."[22(p. 7715)] This is reinforced by the narrative that corporations benevolently dole out punishments like disconnections to discipline the contemptible fools, for whom "the little guy" has to foot the bill. As a result, the few solutions this coalition advocates focus on reversing the energy transition, returning to coal and nuclear power, slashing energy taxes, and limiting transfers to the elderly and infirm[2(pp. 15216–15217)].

Slight deviations occur at the margins (e.g., in the far-right media), where conspiracy ideology and (strategic) empathy for the poor are more pronounced, with the EP storyline also used as a vehicle for reproducing other ideological tropes (e.g., that "the Merkel regime" has "destroyed" Germany[23]). In doing so, the coalition reproduces extremely effectively catchphrases such as "taxing the air to breathe"[12(p. 5138)] or "climate hysteria"[16(p. 13)]. In this way, by discussing EP, they constantly reproduce their broader anti-climate change mitigation discourse, thus fulfilling the purpose of a (good) storyline.

4.2.2 The left-wing Coalition? I scream, you scream, we all scream[XVIII]

The left-wing coalition is far less coherent, but by far the most active group. It is composed of the Left and the Greens, left-wing media, welfare associations and consumer protection centers. They cluster around a discourse of socio-ecological transformation[XIX] and frame EP as a growing problem, advocating similar policies (with varying degrees of radicalism). Moreover, they all reject the portrayal of behavioral inadequacies as a (major) cause of EP. Instead, they characterize it as a complex problem with structural causes, such as unequal

[XVIII] Because many descriptions here are based on very broad intertextual analysis and individual elements are not necessarily apparent from individual documents, fewer examples from primary sources are given here.
[XIX] German: sozial-ökologische Transformation

access to energy-efficient appliances. Crucially, however, this differentiation is rarely spelled out fully. Although each actor follows some such conceptualization of EP, there is no comprehensive **set** of storylines underlying it, and the storylines introduced are rarely followed consistently. In Hajer's (2002, p. 45) words, the coalition "share[s] a social construct," i.e., its actors see (roughly) the same thing when looking at reality, but lack a comprehensive narrative around it. This lack of narrative coherence makes this discourse coalition less forceful and may explain why its efforts at discourse structuration (i.e., establishing the concept of EP) have largely failed so far.

Looking at the parties involved, the Greens tend to frame EP in pragmatic, narrow and technical terms. When they do address the issue, it is almost exclusively in the context of electricity disconnections, and they tend to advocate piecemeal, technocratic solutions[24]. For example, they mostly endorse electricity-related energy efficiency solutions such as household appliance scrappage schemes[25]. At its core is a narrative of benevolent empowerment, according to which the energy poor need not only tools but also specific resources to access them in order to participate fully and fairly in the market. Past policies (market liberalization) may have led to dysfunctionality, but the market approach to energy is rarely questioned. This is why, for example, the Greens are the driving force behind energy conservation counseling programs. Thus, elements of social participation[XX] and a strong(er) version of environmental modernization discourse structure their arguments.

As for the Left, they are the driving force pushing the concept of EP everywhere. More often than other actors, they frame it broadly, beyond electricity, disconnections, and welfare recipients[26]. Yet they still tend to talk only about electricity disconnections. They draw on elements from discourses of social justice and economic populism to tell a story in which neoliberal policies such as energy market liberalization and carbon pricing, as well as corporate greed, have made energy unaffordable for a growing number of low-income earners. They combine this with solution storylines of a stronger, more caring welfare state, and a version of "public infrastructure belongs in public hands."[22(p. 7714)] Crucially, many discursive elements (e.g., baseline access to energy as a basic or human right[27]) are introduced but never consistently woven into the main EP storyline. Thus, when drawing on many familiar leftist discourses, the result is more a cacophony than a song, i.e., not a comprehensive and consistent linking of narrative elements into a comprehensive EP storyline.

Welfare associations, then, are the only group that regularly avoids the simplistic portrayal of EP as synonymous with energy/electricity disconnections, even producing some catchy slogans and images in the process[XXI]. Crucially, however, they do not even have a unified voice among themselves, lacking a common **set** of storylines with replicable elements. And they do not have the public influence to be heard individually. They reproduce some discursive elements of the Left, but are apparently stuck in an argumentative conception of

[XX] German: soziale Teilhabe

[XXI] An example: For a short while the VdK repeatedly warned about people "freezing under the Christmas tree."[28]

public discourse based on fair deliberation. This leads them to embed their discussion of EP in a discursive practice of rational persuasion. Specifically, they frame EP as a problem and present reasonable solutions to it, expecting that others can be persuaded by the ‘force of facts’ alone. But they fail to weave such facts into a comprehensive, reproducible storyline. Moreover, their narratives of severe deprivation and the structural obstacles faced by welfare recipients tend to inadvertently reduce EP to a condition of the poorest of the poor, again collapsing the concept into one with monetary poverty.

The description applies all the more to the consumer protection centers, which appear almost apolitical and technocratic[29]. They soberly state the facts and figures and paint a picture that is as differentiated as the people who come to them (they primarily provide counseling). But where the welfare associations become explicitly political, they argue rather technocratically for helpful but small-scale adjustments that move them in the direction of the Greens and show a split within the coalition.

In summary, while the left-wing coalition has been instrumental in drawing attention to EP, they have failed to find a common set of storylines beyond a very basic formulation that presents EP as a growing, complex, and multifaceted problem. Although they largely agree on the problem and its urgency, they have not sufficiently infused the concept with meaning and have often fallen back into narrow frames that limit their argumentative reach and allow their opponents to deflect the issue. Like the far-right, they take EP as a container for discursive elements that they routinely draw on elsewhere. But unlike them, they do not unify these elements under a single, shared narrative. This has likely contributed to their failure to help the concept of EP achieve discourse structuration. I have nevertheless classified them as a discourse coalition because they share a common narrative framework of EP and engage in similar discursive practices (e.g., drawing attention to ‘shocking’ statistics, proposing piecemeal and technocratic improvements).

4.2.3 The right-wing Coalition: See nothing, hear nothing, say nothing

This group might best be described as a coalition of nonrecognition. Much like the British government in Hajer’s (2002, pp. 43–45) original example of acid rain resisted “labeling dead trees as victim of pollution,” the right-wing coalition essentially resists labeling people freezing in their homes (to cite just one example) as energy-poor. Their speech is embedded in the discursive practice of dealing with the term only ever reactively and evading a clear and multi-layered definition. In this way, the issue is suppressed and deflected as much as possible. However, in conjunction with the given institutionalization of its central discourse of a market-driven, weak version of environmental modernization[XXII], it is remarkably successful in producing discursive elements that ensure the

[XXII] Since there is no space here to discuss this institutionalization, anyone interested in the broad outlines of this discourse will refer to Stevis (2011) and Dias et al. (2020).

reproduction of its position in the EP debate. Its main actors include the CDU, the federal and state governments it leads, business associations, and right-leaning media (e.g., WELT, FAZ), which rally around a storyline that portrays EP as a small, shrinking problem irrationally exploited by others for political gain.

The right-wing storyline is therefore one of nonrecognition. Under pressure from the EU and others, the CDU-led federal government keeps insisting, verbatim, that there is no common definition (which it blocked in Brussels[1]) and that it "pursues a holistic approach to poverty assessment and, accordingly, to fighting poverty, which does not focus on individual elements of need."[30(p. 5)], which is regularly reiterated by business associations that oppose new obligations (e.g., targeted retrofits). All coalition actors thus fight back using defeatist slogans that they portray as realistic. For example, the line "services must be paid for"[10(p. 8)] serves as a supposedly self-evident mantra against limiting disconnections. This positions them as level-headed and rational, while EP advocates are positioned as irrational alarmists. This storyline defends the status quo, with business associations going even further and calling for cutting red tape.

Even if they do not directly deny the existence of EP, these actors keep questioning the seriousness of the problem. They repeatedly refer to the declining number of disconnections without questioning whether this is an appropriate measure (cf. Meyer et al., 2018), emphasize the alleged abundance of measures already taken but ignore their residual and one-sided (counseling) nature (cf. Tews, 2014), and label additional measures as futile because, among other things, they would harm businesses or create an entitlement mentality[2(pp. 15214–15215)]. Moreover, by calling for a holistic approach, they avoid explaining why the energy share in the social assistance basket of goods is unrealistically low (Aigeltinger et al., 2015). While they acknowledge that recipients under-spend on energy, they argue that arbitrage is part of personal responsibility and therefore acceptable. By presenting under-spending as normal, responsible arbitrage behavior[2(pp. 15220–15221)], inadequate transfers for energy become appropriate in a "holistic" sense.

The discourse of personal responsibility they invoke there does not follow the classic logic of contempt for the poor. Instead, it follows a neoliberal, paternalistic logic of empowerment that claims to "help people help themselves." This follows the "poor fools" storyline and allows for patronizing undertones that bemoan the lethargy of the energy poor, who need only take advantage of all the opportunities already available to them. For example, the CDU praises the supposedly strong competition in the energy market concluding, "This competition should be used positively for oneself."[31(p. 6454)] Structural barriers outside the individual are not acknowledged in this discourse. Consequently, energy conservation counseling is the only sensible measure and such programs already exist, so nothing needs to be done.

Finally, business associations in particular emphasize that EP is a social policy issue, not an energy policy issue. Energy corporations explicitly use this framing to assign responsibility for the issue exclusively to the welfare state. The fact that the structures of society are such that the energy poor do not have access to

energy efficient appliances and housing is tacitly acknowledged but categorically rejected as a way to remedy the situation. An example:

> *"Protecting and supporting vulnerable persons and those in need of assistance is a social welfare task of the state and must be financed through tax revenue. Regulatory provisions that impede competition and free market design are not a solution to social problems and are counterproductive."*[32(p. 5)]

Perhaps this is a consequence of the fact that these actors see EP almost exclusively in terms of electricity and disconnections. They keep repeating the heating cost misconception, and broader heating poverty does not feature in their statements. As a result, EP is only about electricity affordability – a welcome hook for elements of small-government and anti-tax discourse that shift the focus from helping the energy poor to a classic "less government, more competition" solution storyline that demonizes the state and idealizes entrepreneurship.

In sum, through a discursive practice and a concurrent storyline of nonrecognition, these actors seek to minimize EP and make it oblivious. Where this is not possible, they undermine the nature of the problem as a **political** problem and seek to individualize and naturalize it.

4.2.4 The In-Betweeners: Energy Poverty as a Vehicle for Ideology

So far, I have analytically distinguished three coalitions. Two of them actively discursively reproduce (very different) versions of an EP storyline, while the other tells a story that denies the relevance, distinctiveness, or seriousness of the issue. This has two consequences: 1) The concept of EP is introduced into the energy/green transition discourse. 2) Actors who do not voluntarily participate in its reproduction are sometimes forced to engage with it. To be sure, the latter is also true to some extent for the right-wing coalition. However, because actors of this coalition held various positions of power (e.g., representation in government), they were forced to develop a narrative to stave off storyline challenges to the status quo. For the emergence of a compelling new narrative might "re-order understandings" and thereby destabilize existing arrangements (Hajer, 1995, pp. 55–56).

The group of actors that I refer to as the "in-betweeners" either take up the issue reactively or refer to the term to make a point they were going to make anyway – a sign of the partial succes of EP in discourse structuration. The latter relies on what Hajer (1995, pp. 66–67) calls *discursive affinities* of narrative elements that "have a similar cognitive or discursive structure which suggests that they belong together." In some cases, talking about EP simply "sounds right." The in-betweeners include the SPD, the neoliberal FDP, trade unions, tenants' associations, and environmental NGOs. They participate in parliamentary debates initiated by the Left, speak as experts at parliamentary hearings, or use EP as shorthand for people who cannot afford their energy bills in policy documents on

related issues. They all have some vague notion of EP, but they rarely pursue it actively and decisively as an issue in its own right. Instead, it functions exclusively as an empty vessel and signifier in their general discourse, with no conceptualization of its own. Finally, they rarely use the term either. Many of them appear only once in my material spanning more than four years. Given their overall opportunistic or sparse engagement, I thought it wrong to include them among the other coalitions, although they may share some discursive affinities.

A somewhat different role is played by public-facing research institutes or think tanks (e.g., *Deutsches Institut für Wirtschaftsforschung*) and those media (e.g., *Süddeutsche Zeitung*) that take a less overtly political stance[XXIII]. Very sporadically, they take up the concept and paint a picture that corresponds to the scientific narrative about EP, i.e., a differentiated, multi-layered, and nuanced account of what academia considers it to be (cf. Chapter 2). With these contributions, they play the most important role in bringing both EP in general and a less simplistic story about it in particular into the energy/green transition debate. Because of their perceived moderateness and 'objectivity,' they are in a much better position to disseminate the concept. Think tanks, then, seek to craft ready-to-use storylines about EP for their respective ideological affiliates. Crucially, however, the frequency of such dedicated contributions is low during the period studied.

[XXIII] Since the term "mainstream media" is used pejoratively nowadays, I avoid it here.

5 Discussion

Reflecting on the results, much of what my analysis found matches previous research. EP remains a marginal issue in Germany, and some discursive mechanisms operating in this direction are similar to those found elsewhere (e.g., Chipango, 2021; Middlemiss, 2017; Simcock et al., 2021). However, the thick description I have provided here led to a number of interesting findings that are relevant beyond the present case. Below, I explore these findings in relation to the literature and the field of (political science-based) EP research more generally.

My three main conclusions structure this chapter. Thus, Section 5.1 discusses the consequences and implications of the widespread misrecognition of EP in Germany. Section 5.2 takes up my central argument that the marginalization of EP is at least as much due to the narrative weakness of those who care about EP as to the deflections of those who do not. And the third section provides an argument for why the misrecognition of EP matters from a social justice perspective, before the final section looks at the limitations of this study.

5.1 Misrecognition as a Tool of Non-Policymaking?

As stated earlier, ‘proving’ intent is beyond the scope of this paper. Yet, the analysis revealed clear indications that misrecognition was used as a tool of strategic issue avoidance or “non-policymaking” (Imbert, 2017). This is most evident in the form of nonrecognition: I mentioned that the German government reportedly fought hard to keep EP out of EU regulation[1]. It hardly makes sense to do so much covert lobbying out of a sense of propriety. Rather, nonrecognition – going so far as to reject the term even when obliged to talk about it[33(pp. 59–62)] – appears to be a strategic and, in some cases, institutional mechanism “through which vulnerability and marginality is produced and sustained.” (Simcock et al., 2021, p. 2) To use Hajer’s example: There may be a forest full of dead trees. But if official actors continually deny that it is a problem with a controllable cause, if they deny that the dead trees have social and political meaning (and make that narrative hegemonic), there is no basis on which to argue for action to ‘save’ the trees.

Misrecognition is not only an issue of injustice (cf. Section 5.3), but also of institutionalized bad governance. Again taking scholarship as a benchmark, misrecognition of EP leads to policies that a) exacerbate the problem (e.g., drive low-income people into the most energy-inefficient housing), b) are ineffective because they fail to take into account the nature of EP (e.g., the ‘real’ monetary value of welfare payments varies with exposure to EP risks), or, most strikingly

today, c) fail to prepare for external shocks. Politically, it does not matter much whether such bad governance is the result of honest value judgments or incomprehension, or whether it is strategically motivated (or all at once) – the consequences are the same. The condition is "organized out" of politics (Schattschneider, 1975, p. 71), privatizing the problem and making it incomprehensible to the general public. The cold apartment, for instance, no longer has a specific meaning – it is again an incident, not a structural problem (Hajer, 2002, p. 44).

Nonrecognition, nonetheless, is rarely a black-and-white affair. It easily devolves into what Bednar & Reames (2020, p. 433) call "pseudo-recognition," in which a problem is not blanketly denied, but is framed as a "temporary misfortune" and addressed through rather symbolic measures that do not produce substantive change. This is obviously related to misconceptions. The idea that EP is exclusively a disconnection problem has led to policies that deal with individual emergencies rather than structures. And as good as it may be to help people deal with their debt, it is often (for EP) only a short-term solution. Moreover, it is primarily aimed at the poorest of the poor. In an exemplary act of dialectics, this in turn leads to EP debates centering around those same misconceptions[10]. Similarly, because the energy-poor subject is constructed as a pitiable fool, energy conservation counseling is seen as a benevolent act of support, even though the pure impact of such advice is negligible (Tews, 2013, p. 38). All of this is to say that through the discursive (re)production of misconceptions, the vulnerability of the energy poor is stabilized and (re)produced. This means that EP is in part an effect of the discourse(s) and/or storylines that surround it. In other words, especially in the world of EP policymaking, discourse has a critical impact on substantive outcomes.

Such misconceptions are not (always) produced unconsciously. As shown, business associations deliberately frame EP as a **purely** social policy issue in order to reject targeted energy efficiency obligation programs (cf. Fawcett et al., 2019), and center-right politicians do the same to favor, say, counseling over targeted retrofits. Such rhetoric always presupposes the mutual exclusivity of the two categories. The market liberal discourse of the right-wing coalition is based on the notion that the economic sphere should be separated from the social sphere. Since the least constrained economic activities supposedly produce the most desirable outcomes, (social) policy is positioned as a residual, concerned with the effects of private/economic activities rather than the activities themselves. Particularly glaring is the claim that "innovation" and carbon pricing alone are sufficient to mitigate climate change, with social policy intervening only after the fact[20(p. 1770)]. This in turn determines which approaches to EP are perceived as possible. Wittingly or not, this misconception thus promotes certain approaches and demotes others in the actual discourse. Exclusivity framing is a valuable tool because it quickly becomes self-sustaining: The proposition to do something "social" is always attractive to the left, and the discussion of EP in the corresponding committees, by the corresponding specialist politicians, provides it with a small arena, but also limits its reach.

This is easily combined with the poor fools storyline. As seen, it is a gentle narrative that is attractive to progressives. The logic is tempting: how much will it really help to change anything about the structures if ‘these people’ cannot get their budget under control? Will they not exhaust their new room for maneuver just as they exhausted the old one? Public funds are scarce, so why waste them? Counseling is cheap and addresses the ‘real’ problem. – Combine this with limiting the view to electricity, and there is little need for nonrecognition any longer. The connections here are endless (think quantification bias), but it all distorts the problem enough to make it amenable to market-liberal solutions that alternatively include non-intervention or tax cuts. Of course, once the limits of these misconceptions are crossed, the arguments quickly break down: Recall the nearly fourfold increase in the number of people unable to keep their homes adequately warm in 2020 (Eurostat, 2022) – the argument that this is a non-structural problem is hard to sustain.

This yields a number of lessons for (discourse-based) EP research: first, it can be equally informative to study negative cases of discourse structuration or institutionalization. Second, the misrecognition not of people’s identities but of specific conditions (which have not yet become political problems) – and thus of the lived experience of those affected – can be a tool of politics, both of the strategic and the semi-conscious, ideological kind. Third, the most effective way to keep an issue out of politics seems to be to tell a story about why it is not actually a (relevant) problem at all, rather than simply ignoring it. Finally, for discourse analyses that are aware of the duality of discursive structures, determining intentions is not really important, since discursive action has consequences anyway. Nevertheless, the critical study of actions and actors remains an important task to uncover the taken-for-granted assumptions behind (ideological) discursive practice.

Before proceeding, it is important to recall that misrecognition in the EP debate did not become a valuable non-policymaking tool on a whim of those in government. Rather, it flourished because those outside government allowed it to, i.e., because they failed to provide a coherent narrative about EP and were complicit in (re)producing many of the misconceptions that made it so easy to largely dismiss the issue. The next section addresses this other side of the argumentative struggle.

5.2 The Importance of Narrative Coherence for Discourse Coalitions

Chanting is very simple: when a group of people shout the same words at the same time, the message gains power. However, if everyone chants a variation of a common theme or phrase, the message gets lost in the noise. This is a good way to understand why EP as a concept has not (yet) taken root in Germany and has remained marginal in the period studied. This may be a controversial proposition,

as Hajer (1995, p. 61) could be read as claiming the opposite: "the political power of a text is not derived from its consistency […] but comes from its multi-interpretability." Hajer's is, however, a retrospectively constructed analysis, i.e., after an issue is established, it can benefit from becoming an amorphous metaphor that can be loaded with slightly different meanings. In my case, in line with the literature (Imbert, 2017, p. 84; Kerr et al., 2019, p. 6; Radtke & Pannowitsch, 2018, p. 397), I see the inconsistency and incoherence of the left-wing coalition as key to the marginalization of EP.

Why then was the overwhelming unity of the far-right coalition not enough to establish the issue? First, this coalition clusters around a discourse (climate change denialism) that is largely isolated in the German green transition debate. While it provides a coherent narrative, both its starting point and its conclusions are so far removed from the content of the structuring discursive elements that they can be easily dismissed. Since the overwhelming majority of Germans agrees with the basic direction of change, its radical opposition fails to connect with public opinion beyond its base. The attentive reader will have noticed, however, that some discursive elements are still consistent with conservative EP narratives. Personal responsibility is a formative discourse in both camps, to take just one example. However, this has more to do with conservatives' general discursive affinities with the far-right and cannot bridge the general gap between the two camps[XXIV].

Returning to the broader left (including civil society), it has become apparent that the failure to produce a common conceptualization of EP that spells out notions such as *complexity* or *structural causes* and provides a comprehensive EP storyline has contributed to the non-achievement of discourse structuration. Moreover, the political parties involved do not appear to care enough about EP to be consistent in their narrative approach. The Left Party, for example, comprises state factions that rarely (or never) use the term, factions that simply drop the term without spelling it out, and a variety of different narrative elements used individually by different MPs and factions. Individual MPs (of the Left and others) are also extremely important in tending the flame of EP. Overall, there is no consistent, regularly reproduced EP storyline here. In addition, two other factors are important:

First, one can conclude from the analysis that many actors on the left act with little *discursive consciousness* or *strategy*. Presumably, the dominance of Habermasian deliberative thinking in progressive circles has led to a focus on discursive practices of persuasion. In particular, civil society EP advocacy groups (e.g., consumer protection centers) repeatedly emphasize that EP is a problem and that there are many possible solutions, but they offer little in the way of making it stick with people. In theoretical terms, mobilizing bias, i.e., privileging a particular issue or aspect in discourse, depends on telling a comprehensible story whose power rests on "sounding right." The capacity of public debate is severely limited and overstretched, "Yet somehow we distil

[XXIV] 'Cordon sanitaire' thinking is historically dominant in Germany. This means that any cooperation with the far-right, no matter how small, is strictly sanctioned politically and morally. (e.g., Deutsche Welle, 2020; cf. Downs, 2012)

seemingly coherent problems out of this jamboree of claims and concerns." (Hajer, 1995, pp. 1–2) Conversely, this means that if only disparate claims and concerns are voiced, the chances of being drowned out are high. Interestingly, some actors in the left-wing coalition seem to have recognized this and have begun to use more evocative narrative elements, such as "Starve or freeze?"[34] – similar to the "Heat or eat?" (Beatty et al., 2014) slogan popular in the UK – or "studying by candlelight"[26], but these remain limited to individual actors, are not used consistently, and are ultimately a building block without a building, i.e., a comprehensive EP storyline.

Second, the lack of direction and coherence has also led to unfavorable discursive dynamics. As shown in Section 4.1.1, far from being immune to the misconceptions that structure the EP debate, EP advocates actively reproduce them. By focusing on statistics and disconnections to kick-start the debate, they have simultaneously narrowed it and opened the door to arguments along the lines of "Well, the numbers are down." This also meant that they failed to make the difference between EP and monetary poverty understandable. As a result, the reproduction of misconceptions has led to discursive gridlock: The misconception that heating costs were covered, combined with the failure to consider EP beyond welfare recipients, made it nearly impossible to talk about heating poverty. And the misconception that disconnection was the central problem and the simultaneous discourse of emergency, de-structuralized the issue and shifted the perspective to the individual level. So what is left for the left to argue the EP case? – None of this is to say that actors were necessarily aware of this. Aspects of heating poverty have long been difficult to quantify and thus left out of the debate. And even when the only available indicator skyrocketed and the Federal Statistical Office refused to issue a press release, hardly anyone took notice.

As has been noted elsewhere (Bouzarovski et al., 2020; Koďousková & Lehotský, 2021; Simcock et al., 2021), the EP debate often neglects and in many cases oversimplifies lived experience. But, and herein lies the takeaway, when those attempting to bring the issue into the mainstream embrace these distortions, they run the risk of supporting the marginalization of the issue. Highly complex narratives such as those produced by academia are also unlikely to gain traction, but limiting the scope of EP so broadly can lead to it being easily dismissed or aspects of the problem not considered (Simcock & Walker, 2015). For example, while Middlemiss (2017, pp. 435–438) has pointed out the dangers of emphasizing energy efficiency as **the** cause of EP, it provides much of the argument for why EP is a policy issue in its own right. And, as she has shown, it is also a rich source for making the issue narratively attractive (think dual benefits). When it is almost completely neglected, it is more difficult to convince others of the issue's distinctiveness. Finally, the lack of narrative coherence even between actors in the same organization seems to be the other main reason why EP has not achieved discourse structuration. If there is no coherent narrative about a new concept – however limited and constrained – it becomes virtually impossible to establish it in the public's narrative imagination. Crucially, however, this does not cause the lived experience that the concept is meant to

describe to disappear. The next section addresses why this is important from a normative perspective.

5.3 The Injustice of Misrecognition

Taking a step back, one may ask why the marginalization of EP, or the sharp divergence of political understanding from the scientific origins of the concept, matters[XXV]. To answer this, recall that "interpretation of people's needs is itself a political stake" and that such interpretations become institutionalized in government programs (Fraser, 1987, p. 89). One might think that with the decision of the Federal Constitutional Court to declare access to energy a basic right (1 BvL 1/09, 2010; 1 BvL 10/12, 2014), this dispute had been settled. However, as we have seen, what this means exactly, how these needs are to be defined and satisfied in concrete terms, remains controversial. The discursive practice of rendering invisible the access and affordability problem that EP poses entails a threefold injustice: It excludes some from full participation in society, keeps them (potentially) trapped "in a false, distorted, reduced mode of being" (Taylor, 1992, p. 25), and erects new structural barriers to escaping EP. I will now take up and explain each of these in turn.

In the age of school-mandated videoconferencing, it is easy to understand why EP is socially exclusionary. Following Fraser (2000, p. 113), lack of unfettered energy access can be seen as degrading a person's social status, leading some to not invite anyone into their home because they cannot afford to heat it adequately and fear social judgment (Spitzer et al., 2012). This is the materialistically conditioned side. On the ideational side, misrecognition pushes such conditions out of the public's narrative imagination. How can a cold apartment be declared innocent in a world where no (socially acceptable) path to such unmet need is narratively accessible? How is an energy-poor welfare recipient supposed to explain their struggles to someone who is repeatedly told that 'these people' are reimbursed for all 'reasonable costs,' without losing face? Both not conveying an image and conveying a distorted image of EP force people to put their social status on the line in interactions. When they ask for help, they must expect that helpers will have the same distorted image of their experience in mind. And with policies that do not reflect their lived experience, they may not be able to access appropriate help at all – which brings us back full circle to the material side. And what they can avail themselves of – energy conservation counseling – requires that they accept the unflattering and distorted image of the poor fool, with even the scrappage scheme being made conditional on it. This is one way in which misrecognition is "institutionalized informally – in associational patterns, long-standing customs or sedimented social practices of civil society," so that redressing misrecognition is tantamount to changing social institutions (Fraser, 2000, pp. 114–115).

[XXV] More comprehensive discussions of this subject can be found, for example, in Grossmann & Trubina (2021) and Walker & Day (2012).

This is related to the under-researched question of how the public's misconceptions about EP affect the self-perception of the energy poor. In their watershed study, Butler & Sheriff (2017) provide the first disturbing indications that the energy poor portray their unhealthy living conditions as "normal." Cynically, similar fatalism has also been shown to be a discursive tool used by policymakers (Chipango, 2021; Middlemiss, 2017). When policymakers assert that EP can only ever be mitigated and never completely eliminated (cf. Middlemiss, 2017), they convey to those affected that someone must always bear that lot. Such a logic, which naturalizes inequalities, is not much different from that inherent in nonrecognition or the ideational restrictiveness of misconceptions. If there is no structural problem, one must be doing something wrong oneself. When arbitrage is nothing more than an exercise in personal responsibility, it is almost natural to struggle. Where people's lived experience is rendered invisible, their voice is rendered mute. Thus, German EP policies and debate tend "to substitute monological, administrative processes of need definition for dialogical, participatory processes of need interpretation." (Fraser, 1987, p. 100) In other words, misrecognition is a form of ideological justification of inequality (cf. Piketty, 2020), which as such can penetrate the minds of the energy poor themselves and those around them, normalizing their limited opportunities for social participation and the diminished social status to go with it. Whether this process has actually affected the consciousness of large segments of the energy poor should be the subject of further research. But if we take – following Fraser (2003) – the equal participation of all in society, unhampered by discriminatory structures, as the yardstick for justice, it is easy to see these effects of misrecognition as injustices to be criticized.

Finally, how does misrecognition lead to new structural obstacles to escaping EP? Take the example of heating poverty: Since the notion of "reasonable heating costs" is taken for granted, the burden of proof is shifted to energy-poor welfare recipients. They have to justify why their deviations from the standardized amounts are reasonable because they are not imagined to be in heating poverty. Or consider the scrappage scheme: monetary support for the replacement of energy-inefficient appliances is urgently needed, but can only be obtained through a social interaction that presupposes a need for advice on consumption behavior. This could be a socio-psychological barrier for those who feel they are already doing all they can to cope. For many, seeking help involves social shame anyway, and even more so if that help is conditional. So even the few resources available[XXVI] are subject to conditions based on a misunderstanding of the addressees. These two examples show that misconceptions, when they enter into policy, not only lead to bad governance, but also impose a similar socio-psychological burden on the energy poor (or any other group) as the famous "hidden injuries of class" (Sennett & Cobb, 1973). In most cases, these are much more subtle than the two outlined here. The mere fact that one's life situation is not a recognized structural hardship can lead to feelings of powerlessness and inadequacy.

[XXVI] The standard amount for the scrappage bonus is €100.

All of these forms of injustice, as measured by the standard of basic participatory equality, are political-sociological phenomena that exist *in potentia*. In addition to further examining the discursive treatment of EP throughout the developed world and the practices and policies that develop around it, it is these political-sociological phenomena that deserve further investigation. For, in addition to a critical political perspective, the perspective of lived experience is also lacking in Germany.

5.4 Limitations & Further Research

As I mentioned earlier, one could argue that my analysis takes a fringe issue and magnifies it disproportionately to reach supposedly impressive results. EP is not a broad national discussion in Germany, not even close to the level that the FP debate has reached in the UK. The fact that I was able to do a full analysis of all the written material from the last four years speaks to this. Certainly the reader should keep this in mind, yet I am convinced that the effort was worthwhile. Marginality as such should interest any constructivist, lest he end up writing the history of public debate only from the point of view of the victors. Moreover, it may well be – see current developments – that this study picked up the issue before it gained momentum. Finally, the role of critical studies should also be to highlight issues that can reasonably be said to have been unfairly marginalized. In other words: I argue that EP is interesting to study precisely because it has all the hallmarks of an important political issue and yet has been marginalized.

The reader should also bear in mind that this study makes no formal claim to prove causality. It provides an analytical explanation of the events of the past four years through a particular lens – it is up to the reader to decide how convincing they find it. Imbert (2017), from a different angle, came to a different conclusion about the significance of what I called nonrecognition; Haas (2017) emphasized more the material side of the debate. However, a cross-reading of all three studies should yield a relatively coherent understanding of the German EP debate. The same is true of other qualitative studies of EP from a political perspective. As always, more cases (countries) or broader comparative projects would be desirable, because even in those countries where EP studies exist, critical and political-sociological perspectives are often lacking.

Still, the limited resources of this study have left two real gaps that urgently need to be addressed in further research. First, Imbert and Simcock et al. (2021) have shown how insightful (and revealing) interviewing policymakers, bureaucrats, and other actors in the EP field can be. Unfortunately, only Simcock et al. took a **critical** look at what respondents said, and none of them made the connection to the broader discursive treatment of the issue. If my findings were taken as a starting point and policy makers, NGO advocates, and practitioners were interviewed about EP, fascinating insights could be gained. This would also shed light on the extent to which actors are aware of the discursive effects they generate, in other words, how intentional their actions are.

Second, and more crucially, the voice of those affected by EP is sorely missing from most EP studies. There are a number of issues for which this is relevant. But specifically in my case, how the energy poor are affected by the way they are talked about publicly and treated practically, how institutionalized discourses affect them, is a glaring research gap that this study has not been able to fill. Butler & Sheriff (2017) have made an initial contribution from a psychological angle, but political-sociological perspectives are urgently needed across a broader range of contexts. Crucial to this project would be not reproducing the misconceptions that are common in the debate. For example, not just talking to welfare recipients and those affected by energy disconnections. We still know far too little to assess the sociological consequences of the relationships I have pointed out.

Finally, this work, like all others, had to limit its scope in some way. It would be worthwhile to apply the ADA perspective to the entire last 15 years of the EP debate in Germany, to include audiovisual material, and to broaden the view to cases where the EP condition is discussed without explicitly mentioning the term energy poverty. It might also be interesting to include interactions between Germany and the European level.

6 Conclusion

This paper began with the observation that political debates about EP tend to de-structuralize the problem. In academia, especially in Germany, a contrary view prevails, but the growing phenomenon is viewed almost exclusively from a technical and positivist perspective. The few studies that have looked at the political-discursive treatment of EP have focused on either structure or agency within discourse. To combine both perspectives, I applied Hajer's ADA – supplemented by an adapted version of Fraser's concept(s) of misrecognition – in examining the German EP debate between 2017 and 2021. Situated in the critical tradition, it is not surprising that the main result of this study is a critique of the dominant narratives in the EP debate. This is based on the finding that EP has – discursively – remained a marginal issue in Germany and is characterized by two dominant discursive features: nonrecognition and misconceptions.

On the structural side, the debate is dominated by misconceptions about the nature of EP and the people affected by it. EP is seen almost exclusively as a problem of energy disconnections and electricity affordability, while the energy poor are often portrayed as pitiable fools who lack the requisite competencies to escape their predicament. These and other misconceptions, whether conscious or unconscious, de-structuralize the issue and push it back into the realm of private affairs and emergency assistance. Similarly, a strong discursive current of nonrecognition is characterized by various simplification techniques that marginalize the issue and keep it off the political agenda. Conspicuous here was the absence of overt forms of disrespect that have become commonplace in the general discourse on poverty. I have argued that both phenomena – nonrecognition and misconceptions – together are key to reproducing the marginality of EP and the vulnerability of energy-poor populations, as both have been institutionalized in directly and indirectly EP-related policies.

Looking at the actors, three discourse coalitions could be identified. A far-right coalition used an EP storyline that attributed the situation exclusively to climate change mitigation measures, and used it very effectively to reproduce ideological tropes that structure their general climate change denial discourse. A cacophonous coalition of left-wing actors agreed on the structural causes and complex nature of EP, but rejected the general blaming of climate change mitigation measures. They largely advocated welfare-state solutions and small-scale, technocratic interventions, and rallied around a discourse of social-ecological transformation. Nevertheless, the left-wing coalition failed to develop a comprehensive narrative on EP. Finally, the right-wing coalition, rallying behind a discourse of market-driven ecological modernization, used a narrative of nonrecognition to portray EP as a shrinking, marginal problem that had essentially

already been solved. In combination, this constellation prevented EP from becoming a structuring concept in the broader green transition discourse.

I have taken this analysis to indicate that misrecognition has indeed been used as an instrument of non-policymaking or issue avoidance. It should have become clear that this, in all its forms, is not only unjust but also leads to poor policy output. Failure to recognize a condition that affects at least 10% of the population (Heindl, 2015), probably more, and that touches the core of basic social rights, is unjustifiable and appears to be ideologically motivated. As for the misconceptions, the reasons for their dominance probably lie more in the inherent urge of modern politics to cling to statistics and their inherent limitation to partial aspects of an issue than in their strategic use. Any aspect for which there are no meaningful statistics is removed from the discussion – to the detriment of those who suffer from EP. I concluded that if society is to overcome such inappropriate simplifications and their negative consequences, it must fight its tendency to quantify and integrate complexity into policymaking. Complexity may be **the** main feature of modern society, and appreciating the benefits and challenges it brings is a central task of contemporary policymaking. This goes hand in hand with the task for EP advocates to find a coherent, shared narrative that can serve as a vehicle to bring EP into the public's narrative imagination. For it is precisely this incoherence that has contributed significantly to EP never achieving discourse structuration.

That said, it is not only a societal or political task that arises from my findings. The research community is equally challenged to resist the temptation of technocracy and of providing policymakers only with what they can digest and want to hear. Many a publication – of which there are far too few – has contributed to the narrow framing, technocratization, and simplification of EP. As long as the field of political-sociological EP research is left to those with a service mentality (e.g., think tanks) and focused on providing tools to political actors, the fundamentals of what has derailed the EP debate to date will not change. In particular, incorporating the voices of the energy poor and addressing misconceptions should be the task of future research efforts. We now know a lot about the basic features of EP – who it affects, how it works, what solutions are effective, etc. – but we know too little about the actual lived experience of EP and the political treatment it receives. EP research should no longer see itself exclusively as a service provider to policymakers, but as a critical observer that seeks not only to understand how the political and sociological processes surrounding EP play out, but also to critically analyze these developments. This starts with engaging with the topic in a meaningful way. The German and, frankly, the European research community on EP is still too small and too narrowly focused to meaningfully serve its function as a producer of critical counter-narratives (Chipango, 2021, p. 7) to the prevailing, oversimplified and distorted narratives.

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