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Mass Observation and the Emotional Energy Consumer

by Rebecca K. Wright

Abstract: Understanding how people lived with energy in the past is becoming increasingly important as policy-makers are paying more attention to the social and cultural factors that condition energy consumption and fix energy demand. This is challenging historians to demonstrate the ways in which energy systems are more than just physical infrastructures set into the built environment but activated by users with complex emotional lives. This article goes some way toward developing this history, building up a profile of the emotional energy consumer. To do this it draws upon a collection of material from the Mass Observation Project (MOP), University of Sussex, which provides unique access to the emotions British users brought to their energy systems. Drawing upon a series of Directives written in the late 1980s and the early 1990s, the article considers how energy demand was shaped by the complex emotional cultures of Thatcherite Britain. The article proposes two different approaches to do this. The first approach considers how observers rooted emotions about energy in longer individual and social timeframes. This uncovers the importance of time in fostering emotions toward energy, from the lived experience of transitions, to the social memory of World War II and circulating rhetoric about the future. The second approach considers how emotions — such as sentimentality, nostalgia, love and fear — structured energy choices and led to particular configurations of energy use in the home. By demonstrating how emotion mediated between observers and their energy systems this article argues for the necessity of developing histories of energy focussed not upon energy systems but instead centre the complex subjectivities of users as well as their emotional cultures.

Keywords: Mass Observation, energy, energy history, energy systems, emotion, histories of

emotion, 1980s Britain, social memory, life writing, energy transitions, energy conservation, energy futures, domestic technologies, social practices, science and technology studies.

Public debate about energy provokes strong feelings.¹ Emotion was attached to the symbolism of coal miners during the 2016 US Presidential election and continues to animate arguments for and against the transition to renewable energy.² The active role of emotion is not unique to our current energy transition, however. Past energy transitions have provoked strong emotions in users. After all, the most recent energy transition in the British home — that from solid fuel to gas and electricity — had a strong emotional resonance.³ In 1946, the Fuel and Power Advisory Council in Great Britain recognized that an impediment to restricting the use of coal fire was the strong emotional attachment to this “national institution.”⁴ Even in 1946, policy-makers recognized that emotion had a role to play in this energy transition.

Emotion has been a growing subject of inquiry within the discipline of history over the past ten years. Despite its increasing prominence in historical studies, emotion still remains overlooked in histories of energy. One reason for this has been the dominant focus in energy histories on energy supply.⁵ As Frank Trentmann and Anna Carlsson-Hyslop have pointed out, although the importance of users in shaping technologies is well-acknowledged within Science and Technology Studies (STS) and anthropology, it is yet to be fully integrated

¹ With thanks to the Trustees of the Mass Observation Archive for permission to reproduce material from The Mass Observation Archive, University of Sussex.

² See Noel Cass and Gordon Walker, “Emotion and Rationality: The Characterization and Evaluation of Opposition to Renewable Energy Projects,” *Emotion, Space and Society* 2.1. (2009): 62-69; Kari Marie Norgaard, *Living in Denial: Climate Change, Emotions, and Everyday Life* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2011); For a recent media report see Lucia Graves, “Which Works Better: Climate Fear, or Climate Hope? Well, it’s Complicated,” *The Guardian*, 4 Jan 2018.

³ Lynda Nead has chronicled the emotional attachment to coal fire in Britain during this period. See Lynda Nead, “As Snug as a Bug in a Rug: Post-War Housing, Homes and Coal Fires,” *Science Museum Group Journal* 9 (2018). < <http://journal.sciencemuseum.ac.uk/browse/issue-09/as-snug-as-a-bug-in-a-rug/> > [accessed 10 September 2018].

⁴ Fuel and Power Advisory Council, *Domestic Fuel Policy* (London: H.M.R.C, 1946), 5.

⁵ For a typical supply focused history see Thomas Parke Hughes, *Networks of Power: Electrification in Western Society, 1880-1930* (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983).

into energy histories.⁶ Increasingly, however, the focus is shifting toward the role of consumers and social practices in shaping energy systems. Along with Trentmann and Carlsson-Hyslop, historians such as David Nye and Graeme Gooday have highlighted the social and cultural factors that drive consumption.⁷ Recent sociological work into the dynamics of energy demand, however, has gone even further to examine the subjectivities users bring to their energy systems.⁸ This has shown how energy systems are activated by users who bring with them complex emotional lives. Once energy systems are approached from this perspective, developing a fuller picture of the emotional energy consumer becomes essential. This is forcing us to look beyond physical infrastructures and social practices to understand how energy has been threaded into people's emotional lives over time. It pushes us to develop histories, not only of energy systems, or energy consumption, but of the emotional life of the energy consumer.

By developing a fuller portrait of the emotional energy consumer, this article will consider how emotions shape, and are materialized in, energy systems over time. It will explore how emotional cultures structured how energy was used in the home. To develop this emotional energy history, I will draw upon a collection that has been described by one historian as an "archive of feeling."⁹ This is the Mass Observation Archive (MOA) at the University of Sussex. Mass Observation was founded in 1937 by three left-leaning members of the British intelligentsia, the anthropologist Tom Harrisson, the poet and journalist Charles

⁶ Frank Trentmann and Anna Carlsson-Hyslop, "The Evolution of Energy Demand in Britain: Politics, Daily Life, and Public Housing, 1920-1970," *The Historical Journal* 61.3 (2017): 807-839.

⁷ See David Nye, *Consuming Power: A Social History of American Energies* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998); Graeme Gooday, *Domesticating Electricity: Technology, Uncertainty and Gender, 1880-1914* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2008); Frank Trentmann, "Getting to Grips with Energy: Fuel, Materiality and Daily Life", *Science Museum Group Journal* 9 (2018). The collaborative research project led by Frank Trentmann has drawn attention to the role of consumers in shaping energy systems. See "Material Cultures of Energy: Transitions, Disruption and Everyday Life in the Twentieth Century," AHRC Award 'Care for the Future: Thinking Forward through the Past,' Birkbeck College, 2014-2017. <www.bbk.ac.uk/mce/>, [accessed 18 July 2018].

⁸ See Fiona Shirani, Christopher Groves, Karen Parkhill, Catherine Butler, Karen Henwood, and Nicolas Pidgeon, "Critical Moments? Life Transitions and Energy Biographies," *Geoforum* 86 (2017): 86-92.

⁹ Claire Langhamer, "An Archive of Feeling? Mass Observation and the Mid-Century Moment," *Insights* 9 (2016): 2-10.

Madge and the film-maker Humphrey Jennings.¹⁰ Somewhere between social anthropology and surrealist experiment, its principal objective was to observe the everyday life of British people. The project ran until the 1950s, when it collapsed. Revived in 1981, the Mass Observation Project (MOP) extended Mass Observation's original mission, recruiting observers to document their everyday lives. Still ongoing today, the MOP holds the largest collection of first person accounts about everyday life in Britain. This makes the MOP a unique resource for tracing how emotions mediate between individuals and their energy systems at a distinct moment in time. By the 1980s the infrastructures used to heat the home, cook meals, wash the body, and run appliances were intrinsic to everyday life in Britain, and it is these energy systems that will be the focus of the article. Drawing upon a series of Directives collected as part of the MOP between 1987 and 1992, this article will consider how energy consumption was shaped by the complex emotional cultures of Britain in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In demonstrating the ways emotion interacted with energy systems, the article will argue for the necessity of developing histories of energy focussed not only upon energy systems, but on the complex subjectivities of users and the emotional cultures that surround them.

I.

Recent work in sociology has connected theories of practice to energy consumption. This has led to a reconceptualization of energy systems as existing not just in the physical hardware of cables, transmission lines and sockets, but emerging from a cultural and symbolic nexus involving ordinary people who fix the pattern of energy supply and demand in the home.¹¹ In

¹⁰ For the most comprehensive history of the early years of MO see James Hinton, *The Mass Observers: A History, 1937-1949* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

¹¹ Elizabeth Shove and Gordon Walker, "What is Energy For?: Social Practice and Energy Demand," *Theory, Culture and Society* 31.5 (2014): 41-58. See also Allison Hui, Theodore Schatzki and Elizabeth Shove, *The Nexus of Practices: Connections, Constellations, Practitioners* (London: Routledge, 2017); Elizabeth Shove, Matt Watson and Nicola Spurling, "Conceptualising Connections: Energy Demand, Infrastructures and Social

the words of Elizabeth Shove and Gordon Walker: “understanding energy-society relations depends on understanding the range of practices, material arrangements and social orders in which energy is immersed, and on showing how material arrangements and energy flows are implicated in the constitution and prefiguring of practices and hence of social order/society.”¹² To approach energy from this perspective is not just to understand the practices that surround energy, from home heating to cooking, housework and personal hygiene. It is also to consider how a wide range of cultural and symbolic factors influence energy systems, from memory to emotions, meanings and attachments. This draws attention to the people who consume energy, reinserting the individual and their emotional lives back into the energy system.

However, taking seriously the proposition that energy systems are activated by complex subjectivities requires a rethinking of the energy consumer that dominates energy policy. Yolande Strengers has identified a stereotype of the energy consumer that dominates energy policy thinking, which she calls “Resource Man.”¹³ According to Strengers, “Resource Man” is an autonomous (male) actor “making functional and rational” decisions about energy consumption in the home. He is: “the gendered, technologically minded, information-oriented and economically rational consumer.... He is the ideal and idealised individual consumer of energy, and his aim is total control and choice over his use of energy so that it is operating as efficiently as possible, in a way that suits his lifestyle.”¹⁴ “Resource Man” is not only gendered, but omits non-rational factors that determine and control choices within the home. This includes the range of non-human and non-rational energy consumers, from pets to babies, that place demand on energy systems.¹⁵ Also excluded from the model of

Practices,” *European Journal of Social Theory* 18.3 (2015): 274-487; Clark Miller, Alastair Iles and Christopher F. Jones, “The Social Dimensions of Energy Transitions,” *Science as Culture* 22.2 (2013): 135-148. See the “DEMAND” centre, Lancaster University. <www.demand.ac.uk>, [accessed 18 July 2018].

¹² Shove and Walker, “What is Energy For?” 51.

¹³ Yolande Strengers, *Smart Energy Technologies in Everyday Life: Smart Utopia?* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), 36.

¹⁴ Strengers, *Smart Energy Technologies in Everyday Life*, 36.

¹⁵ Yolande Strengers, Larissa Nicholls and Cecily Maller, “Curious Energy Consumers: Humans and Nonhumans in Assemblages of Household Practice,” *Journal of Consumer Culture* 16.3 (2016): 761-780.

“Resource Man” are cultural and symbolic factors, beyond economic cost or convenience, that structure energy consumption and people’s attachment to energy in the home. These factors are embedded in users as individuals, whose relationship to energy has an emotional dimension.

Although Strengers locates “Resource Man” in the data-driven world of the “Smart Utopia,” throughout the twentieth century one can see the dominant influence of the rational consumer in energy policy.¹⁶ One area where this has been particularly influential is energy forecasting. When domestic consumers became visible in forecasts, consumption was attached to the growth of physical infrastructures, modelled in terms of aggregate households, rather than as users with distinct practices and subjectivities.¹⁷ These representations filtered across energy policy as attention turned to the control of infrastructures rather than consumption.

The convention of “Resource Man” has also dominated macro-approaches to energy histories, which trace energy flows through environments. These depend upon an archetype of the energy consumer that is productive and rational.¹⁸ In these histories people, as well as whole populations, are often reduced to energy convertors, or in the words of Vaclav Smil “prime movers.”¹⁹ Reducing human behaviour to energy conversion flattens users to machines, leading to determinist assertions that promise that “human dependence on ever higher energy flows can be seen as an inevitable continuation of organismic evolution.”²⁰ Propositions such as these eliminate human agency and abstract from the diversity of lived experiences and cultural norms across space and time. Uncovering a more complex view of

¹⁶ Strengers, *Smart Energy Technologies in Everyday Life*.

¹⁷ Rebecca Wright and Frank Trentmann, “The Social Life of Energy Futures: Experts, Consumers and Demand in the Global Age of Modernism, c.1900-1970,” in *Futures Past: Experts, Development and Sustainability*, eds., Manuel Rivera, Anna Barbara Sum and Frank Trentmann (forthcoming, Munich: Oekom Press).

¹⁸ Examples of these macro-histories include Vaclav Smil, *Energy in World History* (Boulder, San Francisco, Oxford: Westview Press, 1994); Astrid Kander, Paolo Malanima, and Paul Warde, *Power to the People: Energy in Europe Over the Last Five Centuries* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

¹⁹ Smil, *Energy in World History*, 3-4.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 1.

the emotional energy consumer requires us to recognize that emotions are embedded in the material world and interact with energy systems.

II.

Just like “Resource Man,” the emotional energy consumer is constructed by wider societal forces. This is due to the way emotions are organized within society. In the last ten years, the field dedicated to the history of emotion has demonstrated how emotions have an active role within societies.²¹ Though intense debate over the precise nature of emotions continues, historians have unearthed how, in past cultures, emotions connect “the individual with the social in dynamic ways,” as Joanna Bourke argues.²² By focussing on what Peter N. Stearns and Carol Z. Stearns have described as “emotionology,” we can trace how emotions provide social scripts or patterning (a set of norms or standards) that direct emotion-work within societies.²³ Societies do not produce monolithic emotional cultures, but operate, as Benno Gammerl describes, as diverging “emotional styles,” which co-exist at any one time located in different spaces.²⁴ In Gammerl’s words, these “emotional styles” vary over space and time, enabling “the experience, fostering, and display of emotions, and oscillate between discursive patterns and embodied practices as well as between common scripts and specific appropriations.”²⁵ When emotions are understood as “emotional styles,” driving sets of action and practices within the world, we can better grasp the ways emotion mediates between users

²¹ The history of emotions is a growing field. See Joanna Bourke, “Fear and Anxiety: Writing About Emotion in Modern History,” *History Workshop Journal* 55.1 (2003): 111-133; Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004); William M. Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling: A Framework for the History of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Claire Langhamer, *The English in Love: The Intimate Story of an Emotional Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Peter N. Stearns and Carol Z. Stearns, “Emotionology: Clarifying the History of Emotions and Emotional Standards,” *American Historical Review* 90.4 (1985): 813-836; Benno Gammerl, “Emotional Styles — Concepts and Challenges,” *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice* 16.2 (2012): 161-175.

²² Bourke, “Fear and Anxiety,” 113.

²³ See Stearns and Stearns, “Emotionology.”

²⁴ Gammerl, “Emotional Styles.”

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 163.

and energy systems.

The importance of “emotional styles” in mediating between users and their energy systems was not lost on energy providers throughout the twentieth century. Energy suppliers recognized the value of fostering specific emotional responses in users toward particular fuels. Advertisements produced in Britain by organizations such as the Coal Utilisation Council in the 1950s used symbolism that reinforced the emotional attachment to coal fire, stressing its relationship to domesticity and family life (fig. 1).²⁶ As electricity and gas began to compete for dominance in the domestic sector, the UK Central Electricity Generating Board and the British Gas Council ran advertising campaigns to foster equally strong emotions toward these fuels. These drew on similar emotional associations as coal, promising “coziness” as well as developing new associations that stressed the modern-ness of these fuels.²⁷



Fig. 1. Coal Utilisation Council. Advertisement, 1952.
© Crown Copyright.

²⁶ Coal Utilisation Council. Advertisement. *The Times* [London, England] 28 Oct 1952.

²⁷ Nead, “As Snug as a Bug in a Rug”. See also Stephen Mosley, “The Home Fires: Heat, Health, and Atmospheric Pollution in Britain, 1900-1945,” in *Health and the Modern Home*, eds., Mark Jackson, 196-223 (London and New York: Routledge, 2007)

The emotions attached to energy were thus continually under construction — modelled by stakeholders that ranged from energy suppliers, to appliance manufacturers, political discourse, the media, social memory, and moral rhetoric about energy use. These emotional cultures provided scripts for how users should “feel” and “act” when consuming energy.

Not only were fuels connected to specific emotions, but energy was integral to constructing emotional environments. Ben Highmore’s concept of “mood” is helpful for thinking about how energy becomes essential to creating environments that foster distinct emotions. According to Highmore “mood” is culturally specific and requires particular material arrangements to produce it. Mood calls into order certain constellations of heat, light and audio-visual elements to transform a space into a distinct mood-scape. Sensations and emotions, Highmore points out, “are orchestrated for certain moods” and “those moods can be broken.”²⁸ “Mood,” therefore, is material and asserts pressure on energy structures to create and maintain it. The spectrum of mood can vary from the unique atmosphere of an air-conditioned Los Angeles mansion to a cozy British living-room heated by a coal fire, each placing unique demands on fuel economies and the shape of energy flows. Rather than being inert, therefore, emotions act upon the world calling into order specific constellations of energy use.

Despite the clear link between emotions and energy-use there are challenges to uncovering the emotional fabric users brought to their energy systems. Traditional resources, such as policy documents, technological ephemera, and industry records support system based approaches to energy systems. They do not capture the lived experience of energy as it is woven into people’s emotional lives. There are ways of reading these sources for the codes and regimes of emotions. One could look at the emotional cues within advertisements to

²⁸ Ben Highmore, “Feeling Our Way: Mood and Cultural Studies,” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 10.4 (2013): 427-38; See also Ben Highmore, “Formations of Feeling, Constellation of Things,” *Cultural Studies Review* 22.1 (2016): 144-167.

understand the production of “emotional styles.” These sources, however, do not provide evidence of how users absorbed these registers into their emotional lives and how embodied “feelings” drove energy use. In the words of Claire Langhamer, “we know a great deal more about how ‘ordinary’ people were instructed to feel than about the messiness of their actual emotional practice.”²⁹ Harder to capture is what Langhamer calls a “history of emotion ‘from below.’”³⁰ An archive is required that captures the “messiness” of the emotional lives of users who inhabited energy systems

III.

The MOP allows us to uncover the emotional life of energy users. Since its inception in 1937, Mass Observation has sought to turn the lens back on the lives of British people. It did this by establishing a team of observers to study the life of communities in Bolton and London, and by setting up a voluntary national panel of observers recruited to record their everyday lives through diaries, and by answering questionnaires known as Directives. MO continued these activities until the 1950s, when it stopped for a variety of reasons. When the MOP was revived in 1981 it took the same form as the earlier project, although the role of the national panel became increasingly central to MO’s mission.

This article focusses on a collection of Directives commissioned between 1987 and 1992. Directives operated as extended questionnaires, asking structured questions about elements of everyday life. Topics ranged from “Objects About the House” to “Waste, Thrift and Consumerism” and “Christmas Day.” Questions on the Directives could be open ended, such as one that asked for “a list of half a dozen objects of each sort, with your feelings about them.”³¹ Others were more specific, enquiring about their experience and biography: “explore

²⁹ Langhamer, “An Archive of Feeling,” 3.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Summer 1988 Directive “Objects About the House,” Mass Observation Project, University of Sussex (hereafter referred to as MOP).

yourself, your upbringing and the rules about wasting and saving in your childhood home.”³²

Observers responded in equally diverse ways, ranging from providing detailed lists, to lyric poems and at times, exhaustive narratives. The number of responses varied with each directive, but averaged around 500. Some observers only responded to the archive once, others wrote occasionally, when a specific subject piqued interest. A few were regular responders, allowing researchers to build up a composite picture of their lives over the years.³³

Mass Observation has often been criticized by historians due to the idiosyncrasy of the collection, which presents serious methodological challenges for the historian.³⁴ Prime among these is the lack of representativeness of the national panel. Observers were volunteers and, therefore, self-selective. As a result, the national panel was weighted toward women of an older demographic and its responders were drawn from an educated middle-economic group.³⁵ This weakness of representation, however, is a strength when the object of study is domestic energy use. The value of the archive for this research is that there are a large number of observers born early in the century and as a result had lived through an energy transition in the home. Moreover, with more women than men, the archive represents a group which carried out the majority of energy intensive activities in the home. As energy policy has largely depended upon the view of male experts, the MOP provides access to marginalized voices excluded from official sources on energy systems.

Not only does the MOP allow us to recover overlooked voices, but the value of the archive, to quote Jenny Shaw, lies “in getting data on subjective and emotional issues,

³² Spring 1987 Directive “Waste, Thrift and Consumerism,” MOP,

³³ Pronouns used for Observers in this article are based on the gender categories provided by the MOP.

³⁴ For a discussion of research methodologies as they apply to Mass Observation see Annabella Pollen, “Research Methodology in Mass Observation Past and Present: ‘Scientifically, About as Valuable as a Chimpanzee’s Tea Party at the Zoo,’” *History Workshop Journal* 75.1 (2013): 213-235.

³⁵ Pollen, “Research Methodology in Mass Observation Past and Present,” 219.

relatively cheaply, from a wide swathe of the population.”³⁶ Since its inception, as Claire Langhamer has argued, MO was committed to feelings-based research, inviting observers to think about their emotions. This meant, Langhamer stresses, that the act of writing for MO was a “process steeped in feeling.”³⁷ Indeed, the archive can be approached, in Langhamer’s words, as an “archive of feeling,” operating as a record of how British people felt toward subjects at a moment in time.³⁸ Rather than providing an objective (positivist) account of energy transitions, the archive allows us to capture the ways in which energy was woven into observers’ emotional lives.

In the following section, I will outline two approaches that characterize how emotion was materialized in the arrangement of energy flows within the home. In the first section I will complicate the one-dimensional account of the energy consumer by demonstrating how observers rooted emotions about energy in longer individual and social timeframes. This approach uncovers the importance of time in structuring the relationship to energy and the complex emotional frameworks that drove observers’ energy practices. The second approach will consider how emotions — such as sentimentality, nostalgia, love and fear — structured energy choices and led to particular configurations of energy usage in the home. By uncovering the attachments and emotional frameworks users brought to their energy systems both approaches will demonstrate how energy systems were connected to emotional cultures circulating at the time.

IV.

Observers, many of them born in the 1930s and 1940s, lived through an energy transition in

³⁶ Jenny Shaw, “Transference and Countertransference in the Mass Observation Archive: An Under-Exploited Research Resource,” *Human Relations* 47.11 (1994): 1391-1408. Quote from 1407.

³⁷ Langhamer, “An Archive of Feeling?,” 5.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

the British home. Before World War II, coal was the dominant fuel used for space and water heating and cooking. Domestic life and routines centred around the fire and stove, and the labour, dirt, and comfort that came from them. After the war, Britain was slow to abandon the coal fire and transition to gas and electricity as the main source of domestic fuel. Post-war austerity continued and Britain experienced severe fuel shortages that left the nation shivering, and at points, without electricity for periods of the day.³⁹ After the war, Britain's housing stock was in bad condition, with seven million homes without hot water, six million without indoor toilets, and almost no central heating.⁴⁰ By the 1980s, however, British domestic life had changed dramatically, as gas and electricity replaced solid fuel as a primary energy source, and appliances such as refrigerators, washing machines, and televisions transformed the domestic sphere. In 1950, only 5% of British homes had a washing machine, fridge or TV, while by 1986 83% of households owned a washing machine and almost all homes (97%) had at least one TV.⁴¹ A new wave of appliances, from microwaves to VCRs, were also becoming a feature of British households.

The effects of this change in the home can be seen in the transformation of Britain's energy mix. In 1970 Britain consumed 38,262 (ktoe) of solid fuel and 6,979 (ktoe) of gas in the domestic sector. By 1986, only 26,265 (ktoe) of coal was being consumed, and gas had risen to 29,088 (ktoe).⁴² This macro-shift defined the decade's politics, as struggles over the energy industry moved centre stage. From her election in 1979, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher fought a war against coal and the nationalized energy industries.⁴³ This would play

³⁹ David Kynaston, *Austerity Britain, 1945-1951* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), 194. See also Alex J. Robertson, *The Bleak Midwinter, 1947* (Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 1987).

⁴⁰ Kynaston, *Austerity Britain*, 20.

⁴¹ Sue Bowden and Avner Offer, "Household Appliances and the Use of Time: The United States and Britain Since the 1920s," *Economic History Review* 47.4 (1994): 725-748. Quote from 729; "Percentage of Households Owning Household Domestic Appliances," *Energy Consumption in the UK* (Department of Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, ECUK Data Tables, 2017).

⁴² "Final Energy Consumption by Fuel, by Sector, 1970-2016," *Energy Consumption in the UK* (Department of Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, ECUK Data Tables, 2017).

⁴³ Dieter Helm, *Energy, The State, and the Market: British Energy Policy Since 1979* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

out in the 1984-1985 miner strike, which continued a long line of industrial disputes in the coal industry. The steep rise in electricity, gas and oil prices from the mid-1970s until 1986 (due to the rise of OPEC) made people increasingly aware of (and alarmed by) their energy bills. Rising environmental consciousness attached to fears about the depletion of the ozone layer, air pollution and global warming also transformed observers' relationship to energy use. Inside the British home of the 1980s was a generation of users who approached their energy systems through individual (and shared) emotional frameworks developed over this period of rapid transition.

Within the MOP, accounts of energy encompassed these multiple temporal dimensions as observers compared present practices to past experiences.⁴⁴ Repeated accounts of homes without running water, outside bathrooms, tubs in front of the fire, chill-blains, and hot-bricks emerge from the MOP. Not only did this demonstrate how a generation of observers were still emotionally bound to these older energy environments. But the changing landscape of energy consumption became a way for observers to structure their life-narratives and personal autobiographies. This demonstrates the emotive potential of energy infrastructures that impacted the way observers envisaged change over time and development through their life. Throughout MOP, you see people using energy as a marker that divides important life-stages, including childhood, marriage, and retirement. One mother born in the 1930s, for example, returned to the same energy vignette from her childhood in a number of directives over several years, its repetition demonstrating its significance for the observer.⁴⁵ Centred on her childhood in a large boarding house owned by her parents in Scotland, the same vignette was

⁴⁴ For understanding the temporal nature of energy consumption I am indebted to Theodore Schatzki's theory of the timespace of human activity. Theodore Schatzki, *The Timespace of Human Activity: On Performance, Society, and History as Indeterminate Teleological Events* (Maryland: Lexington Books, 2010). See also Elizabeth Shove, Frank Trentmann, and Richard Wilk, *Time, Consumption and Everyday Life: Practice, Materiality and Culture* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2009).

⁴⁵ A1530, Response to Spring 1987 Directive "Waste, Thrift and Consumerism." Response to Spring 1992 Directive "The Pace of Life," The Mass Observation Archive, University of Sussex. From now on shortened to MOP.

transformed with each re-telling. In one Directive on “The Pace of Life,” the observer described a typical Sunday morning out of season. She recalled how old and damp the large house was, with only a boiler in an old stone flagged kitchen and a fire in one room downstairs, and how this dictated the family’s Sunday routine.⁴⁶ As her bedroom was over the “unheated” hall, she would stay in bed until Sunday lunch with her father bringing her a breakfast tray at 11am. After that, the family would settle in the warmed kitchen, with newspapers and homework, following which the radio would be turned on for a musical concert; then hot-water bottles and bed.

This vignette is revealing, not only for what it tells us about the domestic routine of a household, but how past energy environments remained central to rooting people’s sense of identity and the passage of time. In other directives written by the same observer, this energy vignette was juxtaposed with descriptions of her current living arrangements, providing a framework to rationalize energy choices and ways of living. Within the observer’s accounts, these two energy environments represented past and present, one relegated to childhood and the other to middle-aged motherhood. Although her current house had night-storage heating, it had no central heating and the hot water situation was hardly better than her parents’ house. This discomfort was transformed into nostalgia as her current house brought back the emotion-scape of the childhood home. There were continuities between these spaces and the observer inhabited both: one in her physical life and the other in her memories. This account demonstrates how energy environments signified more than just physical environments, but were used to represent and understand the passage of time and the shape of a life. From this perspective, energy systems became embedded within individual autobiographies and rooted observers’ sense of self.

Not only did observers embody past and present environments to make sense of their

⁴⁶ A1530, Response to Spring 1992 Directive “The Pace of Life,” MOP.

life, but their lived experience upset the smooth line of progress described in narratives of energy transitions. The variety of lived experience within MOP demonstrates how energy transitions were never experienced as a steady progression for those who experienced change. Even in the 1980s, there remained considerable diversity in the infrastructures users experienced and inhabited. Although energy systems were largely fixed, users moved around, building up their own experiences. Moreover, personal circumstances, economic fortune, and changing marital status meant that people's living standards underwent drastic changes throughout their lifetime. One woman who worked for the CO-OP supermarket moved between a number of houses over her life, shifted between family members in childhood and between two failed marriages.⁴⁷ Her standard of living did not get progressively better but fluctuated depending on her economic fortune at the time. Throughout her life she witnessed a range of domestic set-ups typical of the twentieth century: moving from a house in London (with warm running water, electricity and gas) to a miner's cottage in Yorkshire (with none of these luxuries), to an all-electric council house ("with brand new electric cooker and electric boiler"), and a number of subsequent properties that increased in amenities. After her divorce in 1967, her environment worsened, as she returned to a basic flat (with no electrification), a modern house, back to a rural cottage, and finally back to a basic house. It was not until 1976 that she caught up with the standard of living she had acquired in 1967, when she moved to a modernized house with a bathroom. She lived there until her second divorce in 1981, after which she moved back to an old inefficient house with high-energy bills. While narrating her autobiography, the responder connected each life-stage (marriage and economic well-being) with the particulars of the energy infrastructure in the house at the time — running water, all electric kitchen, immersion heaters — each infrastructure linked to her emotions about a particular period in life.

⁴⁷ F1634, Response to Spring 1987 Directive "Waste, Thrift and Consumerism," MOP.

Experiences built up over time thus informed the perspectives people brought to their energy systems. Most important within this framing was childhood, which many observers admitted had led to complicated emotions about energy use. One observer described how her father's arduous practice of lighting and cleaning the coal fire still haunted her sleep.⁴⁸ She described how her father was determined that "everything should be burned and nothing put in the dustbin that the fire could not consume, so that a nice fire by 9am was ruined by the cinders (yes, cinders, we too saved and re-used part-burned coke, but not stones and other ashy bits)."⁴⁹ Keeping the fire alight therefore meant that there was "a constant state of siege with the fire and the firefighting materials."⁵⁰ Some remained trapped by their parents' energy-using habits. One woman born in the 1940s confessed, "most of the habits taught in childhood have stayed with me and I often 'hear' my parents when telling my own children to look after things."⁵¹ Others rebelled against the energy practices formed during childhood. One woman born into a low-income family in Southend-on-Sea in the 1940s — where a "brown envelope landing on the doormat" would cause "inevitable dismay" — boasted of her "lovely warm centrally heated home with continuously running hot water."⁵² She was now a profligate user of energy, bragging that "we are all wasteful of electricity, every bedroom may be occupied during the evening and there may be as many as ten or eleven light bulbs on instead of the one only allowed during my childhood evenings, where we would all sit around the fire and listen to the radio."⁵³ For others this revolt was harder. One observer admitted: "I'm *trying* to rebel against the saving and carefulness of my upbringing," but confessed that despite his more than sufficient means, he still struggled to waste.⁵⁴ Emotions tied to

⁴⁸ C1711, Response to Spring 1987 Directive "Waste, Thrift and Consumerism," MOP.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ J958, Response to Spring 1987 Directive "Waste, Thrift and Consumerism," MOP.

⁵² P1282, Response to Spring 1987 Directive "Waste, Thrift and Consumerism," MOP.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ E174, Response to Spring 1987 Directive "Waste, Thrift and Consumerism," MOP.

childhood experiences, therefore, resulted in diverse and contradictory behaviours. One man, born in the 1920s, who lived through wartime rationing and scarcity, described how his relationship to energy continued to fluctuate between “extravagance and miserliness.”⁵⁵

Trauma inflicted by periods of energy scarcity also left an imprint on observers’ practices. Post-World War II austerity and more recent incidents, such as the 1972 miners’ strike, were often described as pivotal in informing observers’ practices. One observer divided her life in two halves: the freezing house she lived in during the period of the miners’ strike in 1972 and the modern home she moved to afterward. The observer described the physical strain of her earlier house; the numbness and illness caused by the cold during that winter, and the depression she had experienced because of it. She vividly recorded the effect of the shortage on her state of mind: the “phobia” of the night and the “hellish experience” of that time stuck with her. When she moved to her new house she remembered the overwhelming joy at how life had become, “positively harmonious compared with the old.”⁵⁶ The change in environment extended to her entire body, and she described how “relaxing is now my norm.”⁵⁷ This visceral response described by the observer was reflected by others who spoke of powerful bodily emotions informed by the experience of shortage. One woman born in the 1920s described how she still felt a “tingle of guilt when all our lights are on.”⁵⁸ Another woman born in the 1940s described how guilt about all forms of waste, from fuel to food, turned into a severe pathology that affected her entire life. She confessed to having struggled with anorexia nervosa and a long series of binges followed by starvation diets.⁵⁹ She still found waste upsetting: whether it was the waste of food, water, electricity, and worst of all, the waste of the environment.⁶⁰

⁵⁵ H909, Response to Spring 1987 Directive “Waste, Thrift and Consumerism,” MOP.

⁵⁶ G218, Response to Spring 1987 Directive “Waste, Thrift and Consumerism,” MOP.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ F1560, Response to Spring 1987 Directive “Waste, Thrift and Consumerism,” MOP.

⁵⁹ S513, Response to Spring 1987 Directive “Waste, Thrift and Consumerism,” MOP.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

Even though observers' accounts were presented as deeply personal, they also reflected a collective memory that had currency in 1980s Britain. Patriotic narratives about World War II continued into the 1980s as "blitz" spirit took on a new meaning in Thatcherite Britain and the qualities of thrift and self-sufficiency became core social values.⁶¹ As Geoff Eley has pointed out, you did not have to live through World War II to have a well-formed memory of it transmitted through popular culture, which re-fashioned the social memory of war for contemporary purposes.⁶² This social memory extended to rhetoric around energy. Energy saving tactics, such as filling the oven with multiple dishes, never boiling more water than needed, and turning off the lights, were frequently discussed within the MOP as habits picked up during wartime. "Habits during the war years have tended to stay with me ever since," noted one observer, echoing the sentiment of many who located the roots of their practices at this moment of national unity.⁶³ Others repeated the popular wartime maxim, "waste not, want not," and boasted about the continuation of their wartime "frugality."⁶⁴ The moral rhetoric that celebrated the fortitude of wartime saving thus fed into observers' energy practices. Although observers no longer believed that turning off a light might help win the war against fascism, energy saving carried a similar moral weight.

Emotion about the future also informed how observers approached energy practices. How these emotions were orchestrated could be mapped alongside shifting rhetoric about energy conservation that occurred between 1986 to 1991, as it moved from being connected to the national economy to the environment.⁶⁵ One can chart this shifting social rhetoric

⁶¹ James Hinton has pointed to the importance of public memory in the MOP, in particular the significance of World War II. See James Hinton, *Seven Lives from Mass Observation: Britain in the Late Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 5. For the importance of the wartime myth see Malcolm Smith, *Britain and 1940: History, Myth and Popular Memory* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000).

⁶² Geoff Eley, "Finding the People's War: Film, British Collective Memory, and World War II," *The American Historical Review* 106. 3 (2001): 818-838. There is a large body of literature on the British memory of World War II. See Lucy Noakes, Juliette Pattinson, *British Cultural Memory and the Second World War* (London: Bloomsbury Press, 2013).

⁶³ H828, Response to Spring 1987 Directive "Waste, Thrift and Consumerism," MOP.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ Spencer Weart, *The Discovery of Global Warming* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2008); See

through a series of campaigns produced by the Energy Efficiency Office (EEO) during this period. The Energy Efficiency Office was launched by the Department of Energy in 1983, with the objective of securing energy independence and reducing energy waste within industry, homes, schools and public buildings. 1986 was labelled as Energy Efficiency Year and the EEO established a large marketing campaign titled “Monergy,” promoting the value of economic savings of energy to the public purse. The campaign framed energy efficiency as an issue of national and personal expenditure, promoting savings to the national economy and to homeowners’ purses. In its advertisements, the EEO managed to stoke emotions about guilt and waste. One advert from 1984 depicted two identical boys, one standing alone and the other with a high-tech bike and full gear (fig.2). The caption read “my dad’s got more insulation than your dad,” a direct appeal to the shame of a parent failing to provide the trappings of affluence for their child due to energy waste.⁶⁶ In this case, the emotional struggle of “keeping up with the Joneses” was written into energy conservation campaigns.

also John McCormick, *British Politics and the Environment* (New York: Earthscan, 2013). The development of understandings of environmental futures have been catalogued by Libby Robin, Sverker Sörlin and Paul Warde in *The Future of Nature: Documents of Global Change* (Yale: Yale University Press, 2013).

⁶⁶ Energy Efficiency Office. Advertisement. *The Times* [London, England], 23 March 1984.



Fig. 2. Energy Efficiency Office. Advertisement, 1984. © Crown Copyright.

By 1988 Thatcher began to espouse a form of “Green politics” and energy conservation began to be connected to the environment.⁶⁷ This shift was reflected in the EEO, which began to tie energy conservation to environmental problems such as acid rain, the ozone layer, and by 1991 global warming. One advert, for example, linking together a fan and a tropical storm connected household practices directly to environmental destruction (fig.3).⁶⁸

⁶⁷ McCormick, *British Politics and the Environment*, 58.

⁶⁸ Energy Efficiency Office. Advertisement. *The Times* [London, England], 15 March 1990.



Fig. 3. Energy Efficiency Office, Advertisement, 1990. © Crown Copyright.

Observers expressed concern about the range of futures in public discourse. They directly made the link between their own household practices, such as the daily shower or turning off the lights, to the effect this was having on the ozone layer, or the limited stock of natural resources. Some observers absorbed this discourse literally, parroting government instructions to “‘Save it’ by switching off unnecessary lights, installing loft and cavity wall insulation, etc.”⁶⁹ Thanks to this campaign, the observer noted, “I am a stickler for switching off lights when not needed. This I do everywhere, at home, at other peoples houses and in the

⁶⁹ S1908, Response to Spring 1987 Directive “Waste, Thrift and Consumerism,” MOP.

office (when I was working).”⁷⁰ Other observers assigned particular motives to habits such as turning off the lights. Careful rationing of domestic heat, one observer noted, was down to her “ecological sensitivities” rather than economic need.⁷¹ While another woman admitted the contrary: “I like to think it is because of ecological reasons rather than meanness, as this seems more acceptable.”⁷²

Observers demonstrated their emotions toward the future in different ways. One observer got so worked up writing that she had to ditch her first attempt: “this is the second attempt at this — the first time I got so involved with World Wide Waste that I had to abandon it!”⁷³ One male environmentalist took a more pedagogic approach, reprimanding his wife and children for leaving lights on and taps running, and “forcefully put this view” to his friends who waste.⁷⁴ Other observers expressed emotions in a more confessional manner. “I share the collective guilt,” admitted one man as he tried to justify driving a car. “(But cars are so *convenient*, aren’t they?)... we will be much criticised by generations to come.”⁷⁵ Others took action. One observer made sure to drive his car smoothly, “changing gears correctly, breaking and accelerating” easily, to look after his vehicle and save petrol, which he noted, will “run out one day.”⁷⁶ One observer had become so concerned about the waste of natural resources that he had taken to switching off lights in empty train cabins, even though he was aware this would make little difference overall.⁷⁷

Even though observers frequently described feelings of guilt, anxiety, and fear about the future, it is more difficult to capture what impact this had on their energy using practices. Did the emotions described by observers manifest itself in behaviour? Unfortunately, there is

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ A1530, Response to Spring 1987 Directive “Waste, Thrift and Consumerism,” MOP.

⁷² L1691, Response to Spring 1987 Directive “Waste, Thrift and Consumerism,” MOP.

⁷³ C1546, Response to Spring 1987 Directive “Waste, Thrift and Consumerism,” MOP.

⁷⁴ H1848, Response to Spring 1987 Directive “Waste, Thrift and Consumerism,” MOP.

⁷⁵ E1510, Response to Spring 1987 Directive “Waste, Thrift and Consumerism,” MOP.

⁷⁶ B1551, Response to Spring 1987 Directive “Waste, Thrift and Consumerism,” MOP.

⁷⁷ F1928, Response to Spring 1987 Directive “Waste, Thrift and Consumerism,” MOP.

no way of knowing whether observers experienced the physiological responses they described (that “tingle of guilt”) or whether they were performing a moral position for the imagined archive and future reader. Although a number of observers detailed practical plans to shift demand, referring for example to the “Economy 7” rate, a cheap off-peak electricity tariff to spread load, we cannot determine whether this affected overall behavioural change.⁷⁸ Mention of the “Economy 7” tariff does suggest that observers valued this information significantly enough to record for posterity, pointing to a moral currency in circulation at the time. Comparing the rhetoric surfacing within the MO against the available statistical data for total UK domestic energy consumption for the period under question, suggests that there was an overall dip in total domestic energy demand after 1986.⁷⁹ This indicates that the Energy Efficiency Year did indeed help improve efficiency in British homes, although the largest dip was in space heating, suggesting that this was due to improvements in household insulation rather than convincing users to conserve by changing practices, such as turning their thermostats down. Whether or not emotions directly informed energy practices is a moot point; evidence of their presence is given by the performance of observers who enacted distinct emotional positions through their writing.

Past and future thus conditioned observers’ emotional responses to their energy systems. This occurred at an experiential level — as observers approached their energy systems through the experience of living within the changing energy environment of Britain. But it also was informed by constructed social memory and contemporary discourse about the future. Whether it was the wartime social memory of rationing or future guilt about climate change, observers came with overlapping emotional frameworks developed through

⁷⁸ P2223, B2066, Response to Spring 1992 Directive, “One Day Diary,” MOP.

⁷⁹ “Domestic Energy Consumption by End Use.” *Energy Consumption in the UK*. Department of Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (ECUK Data Tables, 2017). Total domestic energy consumption in UK households dropped from 43,700 (ktoe) in 1986 to 40,258 (ktoe) in 1989. Most of the reduction was in space heating which fell from 27,226 (ktoe) in 1986 to 24,006 (ktoe) in 1989.

circulating discourses about the past and future.

V.

Observers also expressed strong feelings toward their energy systems and energy practices. Feelings, ranging from sentimental attachment to love and fear, drove energy choices and shaped energy flows within the home. These emotions attached to different points of the energy system, from the fuel used to a particular technology or branded appliance, and the energy practices attached to them.⁸⁰ Each of these various levels affected how energy moved through the home and, as a result, played a role in materializing the emotional cultures users brought to their systems.

By the 1980s the sentimental attachment to the coal fire had not disappeared, even though few British homes continued to use it as a primary energy source. By 1986, 66% of British homes had central heating, and only a small number were primarily heated by a solid fuel fire.⁸¹ Despite this, the sentimental attachment to the coal fire remained strong and coal fires continued to be used as secondary heating devices, often lit at special occasions such as Christmas. The continued emotional attachment to the fire was reflected by observers, who still described their emotional attachment to the fire. One observer wondered whether it was some form of “primitive memory that makes a fire a focal point.”⁸² Maintaining that the fire held some deeper symbolic meaning, this observer and her family would sit around the

⁸⁰ Joy Parr has pointed toward the importance of value-systems, behaviours, and culture to the assimilation of household technologies and their use. See Joy Parr, *Domestic Goods: The Material, The Moral, and the Economic in the Postwar Years* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999). See especially “What Makes Washday Less Blue?”: 218-242.

⁸¹ Ian Cooper and Jason Palmer. *Great Britain's Housing Energy Fact File*. Prepared under Contract to DECC by Cambridge Architectural Research, Cambridge Econometrics and Eclipse, with data provided by BRE. 2012, Table 6A, “Households with Central Heating” and Table 6C “Main Form of Heating for Non-Centrally Heated Homes.”

⁸² A58, Response to Summer 1988 Directive “Objects About the House,” MOP.

electric cooker in the evening, using it as a new focal point.⁸³

The continued attachment to the coal fire demonstrates how practicality (and indeed cost) was not a key factor when observers made their energy choices. Of more importance was how their energy infrastructures made them feel. For example, one observer would light her Parkray fire (rather than turn on the electric heater) because it was cozy, even though it was ugly and her husband promised to build her an open fire.⁸⁴ One woman described her Aga, a heat storage stove and cooker, as her most prized possession, despite the arduous task of staking and loading it each morning. “It is certainly more than just a stove but a warm presence in the kitchen and I should certainly miss it,” she concluded.⁸⁵ The feeling evoked by specific fuels was so important that for some observers it over-rode major decisions, such as the purchase of a home. One home-seller believed that a recent homebuyer was deterred from purchasing his house because his wife “dreams of gas” for her dinner parties, and the house only had electricity.⁸⁶ Energy systems fulfilled diverse emotional needs beyond their function, that ranged from comfort to companionship. Anthropomorphism was also common. One observer even described her electric blanket as “a valued friend on a cold night.”⁸⁷

Others chose appliances because they fitted into the aesthetic fabric of the home. One woman relished the appearance of her Zanussi washing machine, not only because it worked well, but because it looked neat and efficient: “its look reflecting its function.”⁸⁸ Others rejected appliances because they looked out of place. One woman regretted buying her fridge-freezer because it stood out in her country kitchen.⁸⁹ The observer had tried moving it around the house, placing it in the garage, conservatory, pantry and dining room, but it still

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ W64, Response to Spring 1992 Directive, “One Day Diary,” MOP.

⁸⁵ C1582, Response to Summer 1988 Directive “Objects About the House,” MOP.

⁸⁶ S2591, Response to Spring 1992 Directive, “One Day Diary,” MOP.

⁸⁷ B1683, Response to Summer 1988 Directive “Objects About the House,” MOP.

⁸⁸ A1783, Response to Summer 1988 Directive “Objects About the House,” MOP.

⁸⁹ A1421, Response to Summer 1988 Directive “Objects About the House,” MOP.

looked awful.⁹⁰ Hoping to downgrade to a smaller appliance after it had broken, she was not relieved when an engineer fixed it easily. It now stood awkwardly in her hallway, although, it still hit you when you opened the front door.⁹¹ Other appliances disrupted the fabric of the home. One woman recalled her disappointment at her microwave, frustrated with how it took up too much room in her kitchen, and how its clock flashed “intermittently” and “irritatingly.”⁹² Things that upset the atmosphere of the home (vacuum cleaners, washing machines, and toasters) were rejected from observers’ homes for making too much noise, or in the latter case, setting off the fire alarm too frequently.⁹³

Not only were appliances expected to fit seamlessly into the fabric of the home but energy infrastructures were described with the same emotional attachment as other sentimental objects. One finds descriptions of coal burners, radiators and other domestic appliances attributed with personal meanings that elevated them from being functional infrastructures into sentimental objects. Observers recalled getting appliances as wedding presents, bestowing them with the symbolic importance that came with the occasion.⁹⁴ People detailed how long they had owned appliances, such as boilers, where they found them, and how these appliances had entered the home through chance encounters or strokes of good luck. One observer described how as she stood by the cooker: “I can remember aunt Rose teaching me to cook liver in that spot” when she was a young girl.⁹⁵ Another observer confessed to having owned her “Creda Stargazer” electric cooker for thirty years, pursuing ever more complicated repair jobs. She admitted that “friends and family laugh at me but I don’t care, I love my cooker and I dread to think about what my cooking would be like if I

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² A1783, Response to Summer 1988 Directive “Objects About the House,” MOP.

⁹³ A1473, Response to Summer 1988 Directive “Objects About the House,” MOP.

⁹⁴ B56, P1403, Response to Spring 1987 Directive “Waste, Thrift and Consumerism,” MOP.

⁹⁵ B1261, Response to Summer 1988 Directive “Objects About the House,” MOP.

had to get used to another one.”⁹⁶ Others found comfort and companionship in their infrastructures. One observer who had lived in her house for thirty-four years described the sound of the boiler as a night-time companion: “Boiler says Wmph, our son used to say. That noise is curiously welcome. Lark, I welcome the first train, sign of morning. Non-owl, usually alone in house, subject to the impulses of circadian rhythms, I welcome the boiler’s companionable Wmph as an indication of the beginning of the day.”⁹⁷ The capacity to narrate the lives of appliances was equalled by how people saw them in relation to other artefacts. This continuity was demonstrated by an observer who described her fireplace as an extension of her interior design, decorated with a mahogany mural that blended perfectly with her mahogany bookcase.⁹⁸ Moreover, once certain infrastructures became defunct, observers insisted on recreating them in forms that had little to do with functionality and all to do with their associated meanings. Many observers decried the loss of the mantelpiece with the substitution of the coal fire with an electric or gas fire. Not to lose this valuable structure, observers installed shelves for nick-knacks and other sentimental objects over their electric and gas heaters. Others created mini-mantle pieces above their radiators to house photographs of their children.⁹⁹

Not only did observers consider their energy infrastructures as a continuation of the emotional space of the home, but energy environments also set the emotional stage for family life. Here the connection between energy practices and “mood” comes to the fore, as observers used their energy infrastructures to support the complex emotions felt toward family members. At one family Christmas the coal fire was a palliative to turbulent emotions. The same observer who often wrote about her frigid Scottish boarding house was concerned to avert another disastrous Christmas, and so invested her anxieties about her fractious family

⁹⁶ B56, Response to Summer 1988 Directive “Objects About the House,” MOP.

⁹⁷ J1407, Response to Summer 1988 Directive “Objects About the House,” MOP.

⁹⁸ A60, Response to Summer 1988 Directive “Objects About the House,” MOP.

⁹⁹ A002, A35, Response to Summer 1988 Directive “Objects About the House,” MOP.

in the lighting of a coal fire.¹⁰⁰ This fire had a larger symbolic significance for the mother, installed in the hope that it would encourage her teenage son, a heavy drinker, to stay in during the evenings: “It has not been lit this year” so she was “secretly hoping someone lights it this morning.”¹⁰¹ The fire was eventually lit by her daughter, who as an adult living away from home, had developed this new skill from a house-share in Leeds. Once the fire had been lit, the responder had a strong emotional response, which made her feel, “really pleased and this makes me feel more positive towards gift giving.”¹⁰² For this responder the fire was tied up with anxieties about family life and the pressures of Christmas day, ranging from the unpredictable behaviour of her teenage son, to her daughter’s development and growing independence as an adult. At other points, mention of low lighting making the room “glow warmly” and “everything seem fine” demonstrated how this responder’s feelings of stability and control were tied up with the specificity of this energy environment and its associated “mood”.¹⁰³

Fear drove energy choices as much as emotional comfort. The narrative of social decline that animated much of Thatcher’s political programme also fed into the way observers used their energy system. This manifested itself both in the space of the home as the stair light became mimetic of childhood fear and concern over personal safety.¹⁰⁴ Fear of the dark would lead one observer to “turn on as many lights as I could lay my hands on” when going down the stairs.¹⁰⁵ Another weighed up the dangers between the cult of electrical safety, that had introduced the hazard of short circuiting plunging one in to darkness, and leaving one stranded with no light at all.¹⁰⁶ Police warnings to keep lights on to deter

¹⁰⁰ A1530, Response to Autumn 1986 Directive “Christmas Day Diary,” MOP.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ M645, Response to Spring 1987 Directive “Waste, Thrift and Consumerism,” MOP.

¹⁰⁵ H1456, W633, Response to Spring 1987 Directive “Waste, Thrift and Consumerism,” MOP.

¹⁰⁶ B1858, Response to Spring 1987 Directive “Waste, Thrift and Consumerism,” MOP.

burglars, also conflicted with ingrained habits of thrift. One woman, whose father would “rant and rave” when the lights were on, now struggled to follow this security protocol.¹⁰⁷ She did occasionally keep the stair light on, a remnant she believed of her childhood in a darkened tenement building, where the fear of stepping off into the abyss was a genuine nightmare.¹⁰⁸ The social dimension of fear extended beyond the house, connecting to a pervasive social rhetoric about a declining society rife with crime. Many observers justified their car-use because they were worried “streets were not the safest place to be anymore” and they felt obliged to ferry teenage daughters around at night.¹⁰⁹ Others were driven by racial prejudice and a growing unease about an increasingly multicultural Britain in the 1980s. One teacher recalled how her headmaster was so fanatical about turning off lights that during the winter she watched her students, “a high proportion of Afro-Caribbean children,” “receding into the gloom as the afternoon wore on.”¹¹⁰ In this case the observer forced the headmaster to leave the lights on by threatening to go on a course to learn braille.¹¹¹

While fear contributed to patterns of energy use, social bonds also impacted upon observers’ energy practices. Observers reflected upon tensions between partners and spouses, children and parents, caused by different approaches to energy in the home. Responders recalled terrible fights caused by differences of opinion about what accounted for appropriate energy use, as those brought up in difficult financial circumstances failed to align norms and expectations about energy use in the home. One wife described how her husband walked around the house turning on each light. She, a “light dictator,” followed behind turning off lights, reminding him that their house was not the “Blackpool illuminations,” a common colloquialism that referred to the legendary lighting display at this British seaside town.¹¹²

¹⁰⁷ M1857, Response to Spring 1987 Directive “Waste, Thrift and Consumerism,” MOP.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ H1766, Response to Spring 1987 Directive “Waste, Thrift and Consumerism,” MOP.

¹¹⁰ Q1835, Response to Spring 1987 Directive “Waste, Thrift and Consumerism,” MOP.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² C1225, Response to Spring 1987 Directive “Waste, Thrift and Consumerism,” MOP.

Another described her husband as a “programmed robot” turning off the lights, leaving her in the dark as she tried to read her book.¹¹³ One woman spoke about a friend’s father who would surreptitiously unplug the iron while his wife was ironing, believing that the iron would stay hot for at least a quarter of an hour longer. Needless to say the mother soon divorced him (with his fridge unplugged to save electricity). His stinginess she believed, was a broader reflection of his personality.¹¹⁴

Social pressures to “keep face” also influenced behaviour. Observers spoke of friends and relatives who would keep the heat low to save energy bills, “only turning it up when people came to visit.”¹¹⁵ Other emotional pressures, including love, duty, and guilt, also added to the electricity bill. One wife (who identified herself as an environmentalist) was pressured into an expensive and wasteful regime by her mother and her small acts of kindness.¹¹⁶ Her mother, who lived nearby, came to her house each morning to wash the family’s dishes. Every morning the immersion heater would be turned on and a large tank of water boiled to wash a few dishes that could have fitted in the dishwasher with the rest of the day’s washing. At other times, this process would be started by the grandmother just to wash two milk-bottle tops for charity. Despite this waste, the responder recounted how her mother liked to feel useful and part of the family, and to make her happy she “closed her eyes to the waste of water and electricity.”¹¹⁷

Observers approached energy systems with developed and sometimes stubborn views about material objects, social bonds, and security, assigning symbolic and personal meanings across their energy environments. Feelings mediated between observers and their energy systems determining the constellation of energy flows in the home.

¹¹³ E189, Response to Spring 1987 Directive “Waste, Thrift and Consumerism,” MOP.

¹¹⁴ C140, Response to Spring 1987 Directive “Waste, Thrift and Consumerism,” MOP.

¹¹⁵ B1385, Response to Spring 1987 Directive “Waste, Thrift and Consumerism,” MOP.

¹¹⁶ D1697, Response to Spring 1987 Directive “Waste, Thrift and Consumerism,” MOP.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

VI.

Using first-person accounts from the Mass Observation Project, this article has uncovered the emotional cultures that surrounded energy consumption in Britain in the late 1980s and early 1990s. This emotional landscape was distinct to the experience of living in Britain in the decades after World War II and the Thatcher years. Emotional cultures were tied to observers' lived experience and social memory, as well as to their imaginaries of the future. They also reflected the social fabric of Britain during the decade, as observers' relationship to material objects, personal relationships, and sense of security fed into their interactions with energy systems. By uncovering the emotional life of the energy consumer, the article has demonstrated the specificity of the emotional cultures that surround energy systems over time and space. These emotional cultures fed into how observers engaged with their energy systems, determining the flow of energy within the home. The MOP therefore allows us to see how emotional cultures are materialized within energy systems over time. In doing so, it demonstrates how we have to develop energy histories that centre users and their complex subjectivities in histories of energy.

Incorporating the emotional energy consumer into energy histories, however, is not only essential for a more complete understanding of energy transitions in the past. Developing a fuller understanding of how emotions have structured energy use in the past will also provide insights about how to modify energy systems in the future. On the one hand, it shows that to intervene in energy practices policy makers have to understand the emotional cultures in which they are set. But more importantly, it demonstrates that these emotional cultures are not universal. As this article has shown, emotional cultures change over time and are based within specific socio-cultural settings; in this case, the 1980s British home. Paying

attention to the specificity of emotional cultures will provide a fuller understanding of how to intervene in energy systems and lead the way toward developing individualized culturally bound solutions to adapting household demand in the future.

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