

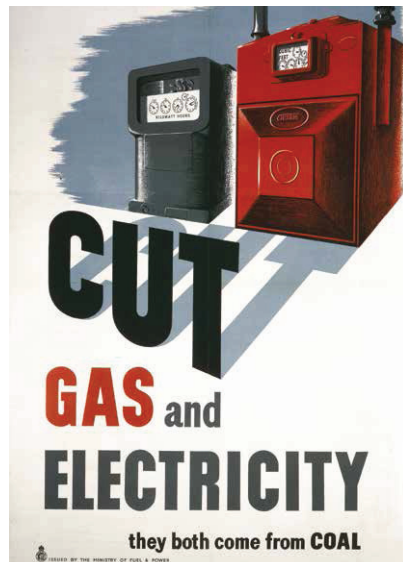
CASE STUDY

Material Cultures of Energy

Transitions, Disruption, and Everyday Life in the Twentieth Century

Professor Frank Trentmann BIRKBECK COLLEGE, UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

CARE FOR THE FUTURE: THINKING FORWARD THROUGH THE PAST



The project focuses on the lived, material and imagined world of energy, drawing on film, objects, fiction, time-use, consumer manuals and oral history as well as official and industrial archives. The research examines how culture and energy shaped each other and seeks to advance the debate about the role of consumers in energy transitions, past, present and future.



Arts & Humanities
Research Council



“ This comparative project follows changing energy cultures across the twentieth century to provide historical insight for energy transitions today and prospects for a more sustainable future.

Material Cultures of Energy investigates how the interaction between people and energy systems has transformed time and space. Rather than looking at supply, the project focuses on consumption and the interface between people and energy systems, with the help of case studies from Britain, Germany, Japan, Canada and India. It takes seriously that demand is made up of a number of energy-hungry daily practices.

Material Cultures of Energy asks a series of research questions in order to provide insight into energy transitions today. For example, the team look at how energy futures and energy “security” have been imagined and contested in the past amongst experts and wider publics. The team also addressed how people have coped with energy shortages, disruption and black-outs in the past, and how people and regions have responded to the uneven arrival of grids and networks and their effect on identity, norms, habits and the organisation of day and night. Finally, the project seeks to understand how energy transitions from one fuel to another were physically accomplished and socially managed and the uneven and diverse material cultures of energy in people’s lives, by nation, class, gender and neighbourhood.

The project speaks to current debates about energy transitions, access and fairness and how to achieve “behaviour change” and decarbonisation. The project has in place collaborative arrangements with several stakeholders, including Defra (UK Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs), the World Energy Council, the International Energy Agency, EDF, the Institute for Advanced Sustainability Studies (Potsdam) and a Japanese city (Saijo) to draw out



Cover left: “Cut gas and electricity”, London during World War II. Image: ©The National Archives / Science & Society Picture Library.
Right: “More electricity for building socialism”, East Germany 1952. Image: Landesarchiv Berlin

lessons from the past for experts confronting the challenge of transitions today.

In collaboration with the Science Museum, *Material Cultures of Energy* examines and presents the visual and material dimensions of energy use. The project will hold a joint public event at the British Library with support from the Raphael Samuel History Centre and the History & Policy think-tank. Further plans include a virtual exhibition, a public debate and articles in print and news media. The project’s central question is how energy has been communicated and represented. At the end of the project the team will engage young people, the energy users of tomorrow, in music events that explore emerging representations of energy. By connecting the humanities, material culture and energy, the project seeks to advance the debate about the role of consumers in energy transitions, past, present and future.

