Environmentalism of the ›Fuel-Poor‹?

Damiana Salm

No one involved in planning Hunslet Grange, a social housing estate in Leeds built in the 1960s, could have imagined that the space they created with the aim of improving the standard of living for future residents would be described as »hostile« just a few years later. And yet, it was precisely this word that the tenants' organisation Hunslet Grange Heating Action Group used in its 1976 report to describe the living conditions of one of its residents. Under the caption »SOME OF THE VICTIMS«,[1] the report tells of a young mother who could not afford to use the electric central heating and, therefore, was faced with the spread of mould in her apartment and draughts that rendered her living room a »hostile place«.[2]

The young mother was one of many residents whose life on the estate was becoming increasingly precarious in the 1970s, not least because of the cost of its electric central heating. She was also part of a growing number of British households that had insufficient financial resources to cover their energy bills, living in what would become known as ›fuel poverty‹.

Inadequate access to energy resources constituted a core experience in the daily life of low-income households for much of the 20th century, as it had in previous centuries.[3] However, it was in the 1970s, in the wake of several miners' strikes, an oil price shock and resulting changes in energy policy, that the phenomenon gained a new political and social momentum in Britain under the label ›fuel poverty‹. This emerging public awareness of the social costs of energy consumption was driven

1 Hunslet Grange Heating Action Group (henceforth HGHAG): Hunslet Grange. An Experiment and Its Victims, Leeds 1976, n. p. [emphasis in original].

2 Ibid.

3 See Adams, Sean Patrick: »Warming the Poor and Growing Consumers. Fuel Philanthropy in the Early Republic's Urban North«, in: The Journal of American History 95/1 (2008), p. 69–94; Kennedy, Liam: »›The People's Turf‹. Turf in Ireland in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries«, in: Richard W. Unger (ed.), Energy Transitions in History. Global Cases of Continuity and Change (= RCC Perspectives, volume 2), Munich: Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society 2013, p. 25–30; Oram, Richard D.: »Social Inequality in the Supply and Use of Fuel in Scottish Towns c. 1750–1850«, in: Geneviève Massard-Guilbaud/Richard Rodger (eds.), Environmental and Social Justice in the City. Historical Perspectives, Cambridge: The White Horse Press 2011, p. 211–231.

by the reports and campaigns of various voluntary and consumer organisations, as well as social science research and policy initiatives. From the very beginning, the term referred to inadequate energy access, as perceived and negotiated by contemporary voluntary and consumer organisations, social scientists, politicians and as manifested in the everyday life of affected people.[4]

In contrast to social science, which has been exploring the topic in more depth since at least the 1990s, historical research has only recently found its way to the study of ›fuel poverty‹.[5] As a newly emerging historical object of investigation, ›fuel poverty‹ seems, at first glance, to combine primarily social and energy historical perspectives by centring attention on the connection between poverty and energy consumption. However, as I argue here, the topic also provides significant insights for environmental history, most notably in the realm of environmental consciousness in the 1970s. The latter seems particularly promising in view of the material manifestations of ›fuel-poor‹ households like the young mother in Hunslet Grange. While not using the electric heating changed the indoor climate of her built environment and rendered it a »hostile place«, it was through these changes that she experienced and perceived the lack of energy consumption at home. The young mother, as reported by her fellow residents in the Heating Action Group, was thus displaying a kind of environmental awareness that was mediated and triggered by the absence of energy and the social hardship that had caused this absence in the first place.

This kind of implicit, everyday environmental consciousness is not easily reconciled with the explicitly politicised environmental movement for which the 1970s are often regarded as a landmark decade.[6] It may be worthwhile to broaden our understanding of ›environmentalism‹ by moving beyond ideas and movements and instead thinking about it more as what Frank Uekötter termed a »set of *practices*«,

4 See Boardman, Brenda: Fuel Poverty. From Cold Homes to Affordable Warmth, London/New York: Belhaven Press 1991, p. 1, p. 11–33; Cooper, Steven: Fuel Poverty in the United Kingdom, London: Policy Studies Institute 1981, p. 1–15.

5 See Chick, Martin: »The 3 Rs. Regulation, Risk and Responsibility in British Utilities since 1945«, in: Business History 53/5 (2011), p. 747–760; Mathis, Charles-François: La civilisation du charbon en Angleterre. Du règne de Victoria à la Seconde Guerre mondiale, Paris: Vendémiaire 2021, p. 169–216; Salm, Damiana: »Living in the ›All-Electric Alcatraz‹. Fuel Poverty in 1970s British Social Housing«, in: Journal of Energy History/Revue d'histoire de l'énergie 11 (2023), p. 1c-24.

6 See Kupper, Patrick: »Die ›1970er Diagnose‹. Grundsätzliche Überlegungen zu einem Wendepunkt der Umweltgeschichte«, in: Archiv für Sozialgeschichte 43 (2003), p. 325–348; Radkau, Joachim: The Age of Ecology. A Global History, Cambridge et al.: Policy Press 2014; Uekötter, Frank: »Consigning Environmentalism to History? Remarks on the Place of the Environmental Movement in Modern History«, in: RCC Perspectives 7 (2011), p. 1–36.

i.e. looking at what people were *doing* in relation to the environment.[7] In the case of the ›fuel-poor‹, what would a closer look at how people on low incomes dealt with the lack of energy at home reveal about their awareness of the environment?

Conceptual approaches to the relationship between social and environmental concerns can be found in Ramachandra Guha and Joan Martinez-Alier's concept of the »environmentalism of the poor«. It sheds light on conflicts over resource access and actions of poor communities in the Global South that are committed to preserving the environment as a source of livelihood.[8] The environmental justice movement, which emerged in the US in the 1980s, highlights the unequal distribution of and exposure to environmental pollution among different ethnic/racial and socioeconomic groups.[9]

This chapter draws on these approaches but broadens the perspective further by combining them with new concepts from a user-oriented energy history, which is increasingly focusing on the micro-level of households and the way people used and perceived energy at home.[10] Such an approach, which combines social, energy and environmental historical perspectives, shifts the focus to the environmentally important aspect of energy consumption, or rather the lack of thereof, and the impact it had on the everyday environment of the people affected. Thus, the domestic environment and the ways people perceived, negotiated and regulated it by means of energy consumption take the place of larger-scale environments as an object of study.[11] At the same time, this approach moves away from the environmentalists'

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7 F. Uekötter: Consigning, p. 11 [emphasis in original]. Similarly, Cooper, Timothy/Green, Anna: »The ›Torrey Canyon‹ Disaster, Everyday Life, and the ›Greening‹ of Britain«, in: Environmental History 22/1 (2017), p. 101–126.

8 See Guha, Ramachandra/Martinez-Alier, Joan: Varieties of Environmentalism. Essays North and South, London/New York: Earthscan Publications 1997, p. xxi–xxiii, p. 3–21; Martinez-Alier, Joan: »The Environmentalism of the Poor. Its Origins and Spread«, in: John R. McNeill/Erin Stewart Mauldin (eds.), A Companion to Global Environmental History (= Wiley Blackwell Companions to World History), Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell 2012, p. 513–529.

9 See Bullard, Robert D.: Dumping in Dixie. Race, Class, and Environmental Quality, Boulder/Oxford: Westview Press ^{3}2000; Massard-Guilbaud, Geneviève/Rodger, Richard: »Reconsidering Justice in Past Cities. When Environmental and Social Dimensions Meet«, in: G. Massard-Guilbaud/R. Rodger (eds.), Environmental and Social Justice, p. 1–40.

10 See Harrison Moore, Abigail/Sandwell, Ruth W. (eds.): In a New Light. Histories of Women and Energy, Montreal et al.: McGill-Queen's University Press 2021; Taylor, Vanessa/Chappells, Heather (eds.): Energizing the Spaces of Everyday Life. Learning from the Past for a Sustainable Future (= RCC Perspectives, volume 2), Munich: Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society 2019.

11 See Murphy, Michelle: Sick Building Syndrome and the Problem of Uncertainty. Environmental Politics, Technoscience, and Women Workers, Durham, NC: Duke University Press 2006; Ore, Janet: »Mobile Home Syndrome. Engineered Woods and the Making of a New Domestic Ecology in the Post-World War II Era«, in: Technology and Culture 52/2 (2011), p. 260–286.

struggles and sheds light on the ordinary people ›on the ground‹ whose environmental consciousness was firmly grounded in the everyday experience of scarcity and thus resulted less from conviction than from lack of choice. In this way, historicising ›fuel poverty‹ has the potential to further explore the complex web of social tensions out of which an environmental consciousness historically emerged.

The Everyday Practices of ›Fuel-Poor‹ Households: A Place for Environmentalism?

In the 1970s, the miners' strikes of 1972 and 1974 and the oil price shock of 1973 and 1974 seriously jeopardised Britain's energy supply, triggered significant increases in coal and oil prices, and led to a profound rethinking of the established energy policy.[12] Within the manifold debates that were held as a result of this energy crisis, ›energy conservation‹ – the idea that energy could be conserved by liberalising prices, thereby creating incentives for consumers to use energy more economically – gained a particular stronghold within British politics. While the idea of ›energy conservation‹ first reached prominence when it became a central political objective of the Conservative government under Edward Heath (1970–74), it remained influential throughout the subsequent Labour governments under Harold Wilson (1974–76) and James Callaghan (1976–79) – most notably with the policy of pricing energy at an economic level.[13] In November 1974, the Labour government announced the withdrawal of »subsidies to the nationalised industries« and a return to »an ›economic level of pricing‹«,[14] resulting in large price increases, particularly for electricity and gas in 1975 and 1976.[15]

This shift to charging the consumers the ›real costs‹ of energy hit the low-income households in Britain the hardest, as they had to spend a proportionately larger share of their already limited financial resources on energy costs than did

12 See Chick, Martin: Electricity and Energy Policy in Britain, France and the United States since 1945, Cheltenham/Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar Publishing 2007, p. 7–34, p. 57–83; Helm, Dieter: Energy, the State, and the Market. The British Energy Policy since 1979, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2004, p. 1–43; Wilson, John Campbell: A History of the UK Renewable Energy Programme, 1974–88. Some Social, Political, and Economic Aspects, PhD Thesis, University of Glasgow 2012, p. 72–97.

13 See Turnbull, Thomas: From Paradox to Policy. The Problem of Energy Resource Conservation in Britain and America, 1865–1981, PhD Thesis, University of Oxford 2017, p. 370–419; Turnbull, Thomas: »›No Solution to the Immediate Crisis‹. The Uncertain Political Economy of Energy Conservation in 1970s Britain«, in: Contemporary European History 31/4 (2022), p. 570–592.

14 National Consumer Council: Paying for Fuel. Report by the National Consumer Council to the Secretary of State for Prices and Consumer Protection, London: His Majesty's Stationery Office 1976, p. 4.

15 See ibid., p. 1–15; B. Boardman: Fuel Poverty, p. 18–20; S. Cooper: Fuel Poverty, p. 6–11.

high-income households.[16] As a result, an increasing number of households found themselves in a situation where they were faced with falling into arrears with the energy authorities, i.e. getting into debt, and possibly having their energy supply cut off – a circumstance that experts and representatives within the voluntary sector, consumer organisations, social science and politicians began describing as ›fuel poverty‹. Affected households were forced to actively reduce and/or replace their energy consumption through various practices to cope with the sudden price increases.

A particularly widespread everyday practice, especially among pensioners,[17] was the adoption of »low heating standards«,[18] whereby homes were heated minimally or not at all to keep costs down. While some households managed to reduce or limit their energy costs through this practice, in many cases, the low heating standards also led to excessive condensation, mould formation and hypothermia, which all posed considerable health risks (asthma, bronchitis etc.), particularly for older or disabled people or families with infants.[19] The example of Mr E, whose case was also included in the 1976 report of the Hunslet Grange Heating Action Group in Leeds, strikingly illustrates this point. As with the young mother, the energy bills at Hunslet Grange posed a »continual worry and strain« on Mr E, who lived with his family in a »ground floor maisonette«.[20] As a result, they tried to »cut back the heating« despite the instructions of the Leeds City Council's Housing Department »to turn up the heating and open the windows to try to get rid of the damp«.[21] The report con-

16 According to the report *Paying for Fuel*, published in 1976 by the National Consumer Council, households with a weekly income under £20 spent 13 % of their income on energy in 1975 and 1976 compared to the 4 % that households spent with a weekly income over £100 or more. See National Consumer Council: Paying for Fuel, p. 10.

17 See Fox, Ronald: Warmth and the Elderly, Mitcham: Age Concern 1975; Hunt, Audrey: The Elderly at Home. A Survey Carried Out on Behalf of the Department of Health and Social Security, London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office 1978; Wicks, Malcolm: Old and Cold. Hypothermia and Social Policy, London: Heinemann 1978.

18 Richardson, Paul: Fuel Poverty. A Study of Fuel Expenditure among Low Income Council Tenants, York: Department of Social Administration and Social Work, University of York 1978, p. 30.

19 See S. Cooper: Fuel Poverty, p. 23–34; The National Archives (TNA), AST 36/840, Meeting with National Fuel Poverty Forum, Hypothermia and Room Temperatures, 28th June 1978; TNA, EG 18/70, Heating and the Poor. Policy Recommendations, March 1978; TNA, EG 18/71, Condensation and Mould Growth in Dwellings. A Diagnostic Approach to Problem Solving, undated; TNA, EG 18/71, House of Commons, Fuel Bills, 23rd February 1979; TNA, POWE 14/2851, Supplementary Benefits Commission 1977 Report. Chapter 10 (Heating).

20 HGHAG: Hunslet Grange, n. p.

21 Ibid.

cluded that Mr E, who was disabled, had already been hospitalised twice, »the damp and cold being likely contributory factors«.[22]

Equally common among Britain's ›fuel-poor‹ population was the usage of alternative heating methods such as paraffin or liquified petroleum gas (LPG) heaters, as well as electric stoves and blankets. These alternative heating methods were used selectively, i.e. when urgently needed, and allowed for more direct control over the amount of energy consumed. However, the usage of alternative methods raised public concern during the 1970s because they were considered potentially dangerous – be it health-related or otherwise. This was particularly true of gas or paraffin stoves, viewed by multiple voluntary organisations as a »threat to safety«[23] because of air pollution, excessive humidity and the potential for fire.[24] The usage of alternative heating methods was also widespread among residents of Hunslet Grange in Leeds. In a newspaper article in the *Yorkshire Post* on March 28, 1977, entitled *It's a Poor Life in the All-Electric Alcatraz*, the Naylor family, who had lived in Hunslet Grange for five years, stated that their energy bills were high because »they had to use electric fires and electric blankets to keep the bedrooms dry«.[25] Even though this family was already under financial strain from the cost of energy consumption, limited though it was, the selective usage of these alternative heating methods was needed because, as Mrs Naylor explained, green mould was found in their beds, which made her children ill for »›they seemed to be breathing it in‹«.[26]

These everyday practices were employed to limit the energy consumption according to each household's financial resources and priorities, and/or to control it through the selective usage of alternative heating methods. Both practices demonstrate an increased awareness of energy and the costs it entailed for the households concerned. Nevertheless, by actively cutting down on energy-intensive activities, such as heating, low-income households were also reducing their environmental impact from an ecological point of view. While this resource-saving awareness and behaviour undoubtedly resulted not primarily from conviction but rather from a lack of choice, the observation is still worth considering as it points to Frank Uekötter's call for a broader understanding of environmentalism as a »set of practices«. Such a shift in the understanding of environmentalism allows unintended or implicit everyday practices of the kind adopted by ›fuel-poor‹ households to be ascribed

22 Ibid.

23 TNA, AST 36/840, Social Security Group Action, Supplementary Benefits and Fuel Costs, 17th July 1978.

24 See ibid.; TNA, AST 36/840, National Right to Fuel Campaign, Note of a Meeting, 4th July 1978; TNA, EG 18/70, Heating and the Poor; TNA, EG 18/71, Condensation and Mould Growth, undated; TNA, EG 18/71, House of Commons, Fuel Bills, 23rd February 1979.

25 West Yorkshire Archive Service Leeds (WYASL), LLD8/2/2/9/348, Annex. It's a Poor Life in the All-Electric Alcatraz, Yorkshire Post, 28th March 1977, Nr. 25.1-25.2.

26 Ibid.

environmental historical significance and, thus, significantly expand the range of topics that environmental history has so far engaged with.

However, the everyday practices were much more than ›just‹ the expression of a resource-saving awareness and behaviour. They also reshaped the indoor environment in which the affected households lived and the way they experienced or perceived this environment. The example of Hunslet Grange in Leeds showed that everyday practices influenced the environment at home in complex ways – on the one hand, by allowing mould and damp to spread in the living spaces, as in the case of the low heating standards; on the other, by preventing or containing these changes, albeit often unsuccessfully, as in the usage of alternative heating methods. In both scenarios, however, the residents of Hunslet Grange displayed an increased awareness of their immediate everyday environment and the changes taking place in connection with their constrained energy consumption behaviour as expressed in their everyday practices.

This increased awareness of the changes in their domestic environment by tenants in Hunslet Grange can be read as an expression of those »intimate connections between external nature and the inner nature of human beings« that Joachim Radkau suggests are of central importance for the development of an environmental consciousness.[27] Indeed, according to Radkau, »›[e]nvironmental awareness‹ is at its core largely a health consciousness«.[28] For those who reduced their energy consumption by means of low heating standards or alternative heating methods, the effect was not just a cold room, but also emissions of noxious by-products, high humidity or mould formation – all of which led to health problems and widespread dissatisfaction among affected households. The example of high energy costs and the associated risk of ›fuel poverty‹ shows how strongly the issues of energy consumption are historically linked to environmental as well as health concerns, which should be understood and investigated as more closely intertwined.[29]

It is important to note that the residents in Hunslet Grange were aware of the impact their everyday practices had on their immediate environment, but they also knew that they could not avoid them without making the necessary improvements to their built environment. This included other energy-related issues such as energy efficiency (e.g. insulation, heating systems). My research into the tenant activism in Hunslet Grange in the 1970s showed that tenants acquired knowledge about how various factors, such as the heating system and the building structure, interacted

27 Radkau, Joachim: Nature and Power. A Global History of the Environment, Cambridge et al.: Cambridge University Press 2008, p.6.

28 Ibid.

29 See, for example, Wright, Rebecca: »68 Degrees. New York City's Residential Heat and Hot Water Code as an Invisible Energy Policy«, in: Environmental History 28/4 (2023), p. 711–737.

and resulted in higher energy bills.[30] Finding the local city council unwilling to cooperate, they acquired this knowledge on their own initiative with support of and in dialogue with experts and social workers. At the same time, they incorporated it into their tenant activism, demanding the provision of an efficient heating system and rejecting the idea that they should pay for the ramifications of their structurally deficient council housing. Crucial to such demands was the fundamental belief that the tenants of Hunslet Grange had a right to an »adequate standard of heating at reasonable cost«[31] and »decent living conditions«[32] – a belief that was, in turn, closely linked to promises and expectations of post-war prosperity and the much-vaunted »democratisation of material comforts«.[33] Further research needs to ascertain the extent to which tenant action groups like the Heating Action Group in Hunslet Grange were a factor in the government's increased attention in the mid-1970s to the need for higher building standards and thermal insulation measures.

Finally, these observations also shed light on the fact that energy, environmental and health concerns disproportionally impacted poorer sections of society that – due to a lack of financial resources and alternatives – lived in environments that aggravated these concerns or even caused them to emerge in the first place. In the case of Hunslet Grange in Leeds, those sections of the population »in greatest housing need«[34] and least able to afford the financial burdens of the housing estate's structural deficiencies, including its poor energy efficiency, began to concentrate in the housing estate in the 1970s.[35] The Housing Department in Leeds attempted to reverse this trend by applying »greater selectivity«[36] in the choosing of potential tenants, starting in October 1976.[37] While those who could afford it moved out to new, hopefully better insulated and more energy-efficient places, households without viable alternatives and forced to remain in Hunslet Grange often felt trapped –

30 See D. Salm: Living, p. 1c-24.

31 HGHAG: Hunslet Grange, Appendix 2. Hunslet Grange Heating Action Group Objectives.

32 Ibid., p. 3.

33 Trentmann, Frank: »The Long History of Contemporary Consumer Society. Chronologies, Practices, and Politics in Modern Europe«, in: Archiv für Sozialgeschichte 49 (2009), p. 107–128, here p. 123.

34 HGHAG: Hunslet Grange, p. 2.

35 See ibid.

36 WYASL, LLD8/2/2/9/348, Annex. Department of Housing, Area Manager, Hunslet Grange, Allocation, 8th October 1976, Nr. 19.1.

37 See ibid.; WYASL, LLD8/2/2/9/348, Report of Director of Housing Department, re. Hunslet Grange Estate (Leek Street Flats), Leeds 1982, p. 12; Annex. Hunslet Grange. Criteria for the Selection of Tenants, undated, Nr. 18.1; Annex. Hunslet Grange, re. Future Letting Strategy, 11th December 1979, Nr. 32.1-32.2. Contrary to an earlier account by the author in D. Salm: Living, p. 17f., which incorrectly attributed this development to a change in the allocation policy in 1976.

not only in the housing estate, but also by its energy source, electricity.[38] The latter shows that living in ›fuel poverty‹ was an expression of social as well as energy and environmental inequalities, because any statement about a specific environment in which someone lived implied a statement about the social position and the choices available to the person.

Conclusion

The young mother in Leeds in 1976, who could not afford to use her own electric central heating and was therefore faced with changes in her everyday environment at home, had probably not primarily labelled or interpreted her actions, or her experiences and perceptions, as an expression of ›environmentalism‹. And yet, with their resource-saving behaviour and increased awareness of their immediate environment, the young mother and the other examples of ›fuel-poor‹ households did display an environmental consciousness. However, this kind of environmentalism of the ›fuel-poor‹ was implicit and commonplace. It resulted less from a desire to protect the environment than from a reaction to a broader social predicament.

Whether this environmentalism of the ›fuel-poor‹ constitutes a distinct form of environmental awareness or whether it makes sense to distinguish it from other forms of environmentalism, are questions that must remain open at this point. Rather, the present chapter has highlighted how fundamentally environmental consciousness, energy consumption and everyday life, with its social divisions, are intertwined. Even though historical research has so far focused primarily on shifts in political awareness of the environment in the 1970s, the example of the ›fuel-poor‹ shows that environmental consciousness is far more commonplace and ordinary than the focus on politicised forms of environmentalism suggests.

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38 See WYASL, LLD8/2/2/9/348, Report of Director of Housing Department 1982, p. 13; Annex. It's a Poor Life in the All-Electric Alcatraz, Nr. 25.1-25.2; Annex. Future Letting Strategy, 11th December 1979, Nr. 32.1-32.2; Annex. Press Cuttings.