

**Deified—Damned—Depleted:
Energy as Resource, Symbol and Consumer
Good**

Rachel
Carson
Center

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Sponsors: BMBF-Research Project “Objects of Energy Consumption,” Deutsches Museum and TU Munich in cooperation with the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society

Conveners:

Helmuth Trischler (Deutsches Museum/RCC), Karin Zachmann (TU Munich), Nina Möllers (Deutsches Museum/RCC), Sophie Gerber (TU Munich), Nina Lorkowski (TU Munich)

Participants: Silvana Bartoletto (University of Naples Parthenope), Thomas Berker (Norwegian University of Science and Technology), Florian Bieberbach (SWM Munich), Yves Bouvier (University of Savoie), Anja Christanell (Austrian Institute for Sustainable Development), Karl Ditt (LWL—Institute for Westphalian Regional History), Helena Ekerholm (Umeå University), Ole W. Fischer (University of Utah), Julia Herzberg (RCC), Hermine Hitzler (BAYERNenergie e.V.), Jordan P. Howell (Michigan State University), Elizabeth Jones (RCC), Michaela Kipp (Deutsches Museum), Mathias Mutz (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin), Timo Myllyntaus (University of Turku), Sophie Nyborg (Technical University of Denmark), Ursula Offenberger (University St. Gallen), Maj-Britt Quitzau (Technical University Denmark), Valentina Roxo (RCC), Tomas Moe Skjølvold (Norwegian University of Science and Technology), Frank Uekötter (RCC)

The history of affluent Western industrial societies is dependent on the use of different kinds of energies. Physical and intellectual concepts of energy became a formative topic in modernizing and industrializing societies at the turn of the twentieth century. Studies on private energy consumption from the perspective of the humanities are, however, still rare. The joint research project “Objects of Energy Consumption” by the Deutsches Museum and TU Munich, funded by the German Ministry of Education and Research, is dedicated to the study of household technology as material culture in the context of private energy consumption history. While the project’s first workshop focused on theories and methodologies of material culture studies, this second workshop, executed in cooperation with the Rachel Carson Center, took a closer look at energy technologies and their cultural images, interpretations, and values from an interdisciplinary perspective.

The first section, entitled “Energy as a Resource,” was introduced by **Silvana Bartoletto** with a presentation on the connection between economic growth and energy in Europe in the past two centuries. Building upon the concepts of energy productivity and intensity, Bartoletto called attention to the close connection between economic advancement and energy use, emphasizing the grave impact of transitions to new energy systems and dwindling raw materials on the economy. **Timo Myllyntaus** presented his Finnish case study: During the energy crisis following the Second World War, the Finnish national government established the so-called “billet campaign” in which city-dwellers were recruited for timber-related work. The campaign made forests—tied to the figure of the woodcutter—an important part of Finnish national identity. Another way of dealing with the energy crisis was addressed by **Mathias Mutz** in his analysis of the introduction of daylight savings time in East and West Germany. His comparative examination highlighted the relevance of political and economic ideologies to the treatment of energy. To what extent was the debate surrounding summer time a question of political symbolism? In her presentation, **Valentina Roxo** addressed the oil-rich region of West Siberia. Her presentation dealt with the changing and sometimes conflicting perceptions of oil in late and post Soviet politics. Though the resource was seen as a solution to economic problems, it was also increasingly perceived as the cause of the social and political problems that the region faced in spite of its wealth in oil.

The second section, which dealt with energy as a consumer good, was introduced by **Karl Ditt** in his comparative analysis of the spread of household technology in Germany and Great Britain from 1880 to 1940. He explained the difference in the speed and breadth of appliance distribution with the different marketing traditions in Germany and Great Britain. Germans, Ditt observed, were also more skeptical towards using consumer credit for household purchases. In his presentation, **Jordan P. Howell** dealt with the immateriality of electricity. In researching the sales boost in electricity in the United States since 1880, two opposing dynamics became visible: While private and state energy providers attempted to materialize the physically abstract concept of energy with films and cartoons, production plants were physically placed increasingly further away from the consumer, and through their “mythification” as places of modernization, were no longer seen as concrete or material. **Sophie Gerber** examined the influence of energy providers on consumption patterns based on the example of the Berlin electricity company Bewag. She explained how advertising and awareness campaigns of the 1950s were the basis of today’s “energy mentality.” **Yves Bouvier** concentrated on the role of commercials. His analysis of the French energy provider EDF since the 1940s showed that electricity is a socio-cultural construct, and that its medial depiction is heavily influenced by political and economic stakeholders.

In the second part of this section, **Nina Lorkowski** delved into the world of bathrooms. Her

analysis of Bewag's lease and hire-purchase campaign for hot water tanks showed how consumers had grown accustomed not only to novel appliances, but also to previously unknown comforts. The originally leased appliances turned out to be a "Trojan horse," since the suspension of the restriction on the night-time use of hot water tanks and a simultaneous change in hygiene standards paved the way for round-the-clock electricity use. **Thomas Becker** also saw the bathroom as a place where imagined and actual energy uses diverged. In order to sustainably change our treatment of energy, another form of "sensuous energy" would have to be created. In place of images that depict bathrooms as "wellness oases," which induce the desire for a hot shower, the media must associate bathrooms with energy-saving hygiene rituals. In her presentation, **Ursula Offenberger** dealt with the gender association of household appliances. Offenberger used the example of warming devices like tiled stoves and central heating devices to show how technologies are assigned gender-specific identities in their designs, and how home heating devices have thus become a "playground for masculinity." **Anja Christanell** broached the issue of class-specific use of household appliances and different associated energy-saving strategies with her research on low-income households in Vienna. While some households aim to increase efficiency, others reduce their energy use to a minimum. The attempt to save energy, however, must be limited to the adjustment of everyday activities, since energy-efficient appliances or better heating devices can rarely be justified financially.

In the third section, entitled "Energy as a Symbol," **Helena Ekerholm** addressed the cultural perception of wood gas as automobile fuel in Sweden in the interwar period. While politicians showed interest in wood gas as a potential alternative energy source—a stepping stone towards energy autarky—the public perceived it as a symbol of war, resource scarcity, and backwardness. **Tomas Moe Skjølsvold** examined the cultural and symbolic depiction and perception of bioenergy in Sweden and Norway. His analysis showed that the Norwegian public was more skeptical towards bioenergy than the Swedish public was. While, in principle, both countries perceived bioenergy to be positive, the Swedish media was more use-oriented and practical. **Nina Möllers** also concentrated on representation of energy in her presentation on World's Fairs between 1893 and 1958. She showed how future-oriented exhibitions embedded energy as a narrative of modernity, science, and progress, and demonstrated how corporate design-inspired innovations were made accessible to visitors. **Ole W. Fischer** provided insights into the close relationship between energy and urban architecture. He showed how the "love affair" between architecture and fossil fuel energy has continued until today, and that a new relationship between society and energy has been established in the new architectural forms and materials used in "green buildings."

The conference concluded with a podium discussion entitled "Power of Powerlessness of the Consumer?," which was moderated by **Karin Zachmann**. Discussants included project team member

Nina Lorkowski, **Florian Bieberbach**, the managing director of the Stadtwerke München (SWM), and **Hermine Hitzler**, a freelance energy consultant for BAYERNenergie e.V.

The diverse spectrum of participants proved to be a great success in discussions of energy as a resource, symbol, and consumer good. The numerous connections made between cultural perceptions of energy, the impact of economic and political interest in its use, as well as its place in historical and cultural discourses proved both promising and interesting. The conference also inspired heated discussions about energy research methods. Empirical methods such as interviews, statistics, and qualitative analyses of films, exhibitions, and advertisements offered the conference a wide range of methodological approaches. Last, but not least, the problem surrounding the relationship between research and praxis was emphasized. The podium discussion in particular consolidated the political framework of the concept of energy consumption and addressed uncomfortable questions about the background and success of energy-saving methods.

-- Nina Möllers / Simone Stirner