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Vanessa Taylor

Gender and Agency in the Anthropocene: Energy, Women, and the Home in Twentieth-Century Britain

As a very new demonstrator in a very new Board, I felt strange and uncertain, because I had first to convince myself that the new ways were going to be better than the ones I ... had grown up with. Having done this, I had to pass on my conviction to other people. At times, it was not so easy, because tradition dies hard.¹

This was Edna Petrie in 1963, looking back on her early days as an electricity demonstrator for the North of Scotland Hydro-Electric Board. Founded in 1943, the Hydro Board had a mission to provide electricity for all in the Scottish Highlands and to break the dominance of coal- and peat-fired cooking, heating, and washing. This dramatic transition saw a rise from just under 2,000 farms and crofts electrified in 1948 to over 33,000 by 1963: amounting to around 85 percent of such properties in the region.² Edna Petrie was one of hundreds of demonstrators and Home Advisors employed by electricity and gas boards in mid-twentieth-century Britain. There were also thousands of women active in voluntary organisations sponsored by energy suppliers (at first private, then nationalised bodies from 1948): the Electrical Association for Women (established 1924), Women's Gas Federation (1935), and the Women's Advisory Council for Solid Fuel (1943). These women in Britain, and their counterparts in other industrialised countries, were crucial to new and expanding demands for electricity and gas in twentieth-century homes. This paper asks about the role of such women in the light of what we now know about fossil fuels. The North of Scotland Board was unusual for its water-powered generation, supplemented by steam and diesel; most electricity in Britain was generated using coal, with electricity and gas seen as clean alternatives to polluting domestic coal in the postwar years. Fossil fuel use is now recognised, of course, to be at the heart of a global climate crisis. The residential sector was estimated to contribute 14 percent of all UK greenhouse gas emissions in 2016.³

1 Edna S. Petrie, "A Demonstrator's Work in the North of Scotland," *The Electrical Age* (January 1963): 497, The Institution of Engineering and Technology Archives.

2 North of Scotland Hydro-Electric Board, *Annual Report and Accounts* (Edinburgh, 1963), 20.

3 Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy, *2016 UK Greenhouse Gas Emissions, Final Figures* (London, 6 February 2018), 24–5. This excludes electricity used in the home.

Edna Petrie with a resident of the North of Scotland and her dog. Image in E.S. Petrie, "A Demonstrator's Work in the North of Scotland," *The Electrical Age* (Jan. 1963): 496. © Reproduced here with kind permission from The Institution of Engineering and Technology Archives.



Since the year 2000 a growing literature has started to explore questions of agency, historical origins, and culpability in environmental crises in the light of the “Anthropocene,” the term for human-made environmental transformation and destruction on a global scale commensurate with a new geological epoch. What is striking is how absent women are from these discussions. From Andreas Malm and Alf Hornborg’s critique of the concept of the Anthropocene as obscuring the real historic culprits—the “clique of white British men” who invested in steam for capitalist gain—to Raewyn Connell’s recent discussion of institutionalised “power-oriented masculinity,” women’s role in our rising reliance on energy-hungry technologies is largely invisible. Discussions of agency and culpability in this epoch

tend to focus on the major power brokers and main beneficiaries of environmental exploitation. But if we take seriously the transitions that resulted from the multitude of incremental changes in everyday life—transitions in which women played a central role—what difference does this make to our understanding of women’s entanglement in the Anthropocene? Can we make women more visible in this “man-made” crisis?

We can make women more visible if we pay more attention to the home and women’s domestic roles when thinking about the wider environment. Four features of the home are important here. Firstly, a key tenet of feminism since the 1970s has been the importance of women’s unpaid role in biological and social reproduction in the home that makes possible the world of paid work and capital accumulation. As Nancy Fraser has argued, this is akin to the “hidden” role of cheap or value-less nature under capitalism. Second is the “semi-industrialised” nature of the home, which Ruth Schwarz Cowan and others have demonstrated. Everyday life in the home was transformed in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries through the introduction of new technologies marketed

as “labour-saving” (though with ambiguous results). This was part of a wider expansion of urban networks, as homes became increasingly linked to water, gas, and electricity systems during this period. Thirdly, recent scholarship has revealed many ways in which these technologies shaped domestic practices but were themselves also shaped by people in the home. Energy-using devices were appraised, adapted, and resisted, as well as adopted; this is clear from the work of historians such as Graeme Gooday, Joy Parr, and Ruth Sandwell. Despite the successes of the Scottish Hydro-Board—by 1963 they could boast a higher proportion of consumers with electric cookers than any other electricity region in Britain—a full 50 percent of their customers remained attached to coal- or gas-fired cooking, or other methods.⁴

Fourthly, women’s activities outside the home during this period were often an extension of their perceived domestic role: a result of their limited choices. Edna Petrie had herself been shoehorned into domestic science as a child, as had thousands of women like her. At the same time, women’s paid and voluntary work in energy promotion, home economics, and social welfare was crucial to the reform of domestic space, better housing, and rising standards of living for women, men, and families in twentieth-century Britain—as well as to new working opportunities for women. It was never just about the energy. Everyday practices outside the home, but often traced to women’s domestic roles, include the use of the car. Between 1975 and 2005, the proportion of women holding driving licences in Britain increased from 29 percent to 63 percent. This has had environmental consequences. A 2007 report indicated the extent to which car travel replaced walking during this same period and the role of local journeys in this, such as those linked to shopping and the school run. This shift was estimated to account for nearly 16 percent of increased CO₂ emissions from passenger cars in the UK.⁵ Such trends point to rising affluence and changing urban environments, as well as individual decision-making. Agency is not the property of individuals alone but is distributed across groups of actors and socio-technological systems, as Harold Wilhite and others have suggested. Women’s agency in relation to the environment is not confined, of course, to their movements across domestic and semi-domestic urban spaces; they just become more difficult to track when not carrying out such relatively well-explored domestic roles.

4 North of Scotland Hydro-Electric Board, *Annual Report and Accounts* (Edinburgh 1963), 19.

5 Adrian Davis, Carolina Valsecchi, and Malcom Fergusson, *Unfit for Purpose: How Car Use Fuels Climate Change and Obesity* (London: Institute for European Environmental Policy, 2007). Sections 3.1, 4.3, 6.2, 6.3, Table 10.

So, who were these women who need to be more fully incorporated into discussions of the Anthropocene? Two recurring tensions are important here. First, there is the problematic nature of the category “women” itself, cut through with differences of class and life chances, race, ethnicity, geographical location, women with children and those without, women at home and those in full-time work. Affluent women and poor women have had very different relationships to the causes and impacts of environmental degradation. Second is the question of sameness and difference: are women equivalent to men and only in need of being brought to full equality, or do they somehow embody different aspirations and values? Despite women’s large-scale entry into full-time work in recent decades, they remain a distinct category in discussions of the environment. This is partly because women are not (yet) in a position of equivalence with men, and partly because the category “women” is still loaded with symbolic meanings as well as historically traceable realities.

Discussions of gender and the environment in political and popular discourse in Britain and elsewhere are still often laced with assumptions about women’s greater environmental consciousness and primary familial role. Eco-feminism embraces women’s difference as a springboard of environmental agency, often tied to beliefs in women’s mothering nature. In this spirit, lesbian “back-to-the-land” communities in 1970s Oregon opted out of networks altogether, as Catherine Kleiner has shown, combining spiritual goals with “ecologically responsible lifestyles,” living off-grid with solar panels and kerosene lamps. The desire for a return to localised, off-grid, “circular economies” has been a feature of utopian alternatives to the iron cage of centralised energy networks since the 1960s.⁶ More recently, former Irish President Mary Robinson has suggested the roots for her environmental work: “[t]here’s a nurturing quality, a concern for children, that’s very deep in women. And women change behaviour...”⁷

What does this mean for women’s agency in the Anthropocene? If women are seen as having a predisposition to care for nature, or if the environmental impacts of domestic households are neglected, it is possible to ignore women’s contributions to the current crisis. But women clearly have acted as “geological agents,” though with significant

6 See also the experimental community of Auroville in Tamil Nadu, India, founded by “The Mother” in 1968, described by Strauss and Eggleston in “Energizing the Spaces of Everyday Life: Learning from the Past for a Sustainable Future,” edited by Heather Chappells and Vanessa Taylor, *RCC Perspectives: Transformations in Environment and Society 2019*, no. 2., 65–75.

7 Rory Carroll, “Mary Robinson on Climate Change,” *The Guardian*, 12 October 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2018/oct/12/mary-robinson-climate-change-former-president-ireland-ipcc-report>.

constraints, and they have made active energy choices. The work of women energy promoters was crucial to rising domestic fossil fuel use. Given the right conditions, women can promote any technology or relationship to nature but, chosen to act as intermediaries between energy suppliers and women in the home during this period, their work was expected to embody an ethic of welfare. As Edna Petrie put it, “the new ways” had to be “better” than the old ones. The path to affluence and environmental degradation was paved with good intentions as well as relationships of exploitation. While women in their domestic roles have—like men—exploited cheap nature, the idea of “women” nevertheless acts as a kind of cultural resource, similar to Nancy Fraser’s “reservoirs of ‘non-economic’ normativity.”⁸ This idea holds out the promise of doing things differently in the future. We need to keep trying to realise this potential, while not forgetting the many ways in which women have also always been part of the problem.

Further Reading

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⁸ Nancy Fraser, “Behind Marx’s Hidden Abode: For an Expanded Conception of Capitalism.” *New Left Review* 86, (2014): 69.