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Bien au chaud: Histoire du chauffage au XXe siècle [Keeping warm: The history of heating in the twentieth century] by Renan Viguié (review)

Alain Beltran

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beyond laboratories and landscapes (Heine and Meiske, *Beyond the Lab and the Field*, 2022)—thus, *Die Geburt des Geoengineering*s represents a book-long application of this idea.

The book offers a variety of insights and inspirations, and although it sometimes loses focus over the many digressions and different topics and lacks overall balance over the chapters, Meiske has written a highly recommendable account on the history of geoengineering that indeed contributes to the current debate on the Anthropocene. Meiske's book makes a powerful argument for an Anthropocene periodization based on the history of geoengineering, showcasing the possibilities of nature-turned-infrastructures enriching the historiography of infrastructures and technology, as well as environmental history.

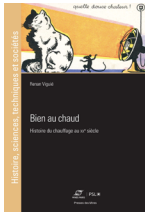
LEANDER DIENER

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Bien au chaud: Histoire du chauffage au XXe siècle [Keeping warm: The history of heating in the twentieth century]

By Renan Viguié. Paris: Presses des Mines, 2024. Pp. 324.



In the history of “commonplace things,” we have lacked an in-depth study of the issue of heating in very contemporary times. This has now been done with Renan Viguié’s thesis, under the slightly ironic title of *Bien au chaud* (Keeping warm). Heating is a marker of comfort, but also of precariousness and misery. The focus here is on France. Viguié’s work is part of a new historiography that looks at everyday life, comfort, and domestic space as a place of practices, innovations, and routines. In a nutshell, the last few decades have increased the number of choices available to consumers in terms of heating methods and fuels. This is not a linear story: the trajectory of solid fuels shows that obsolescence is not always definitive.

The book covers the twentieth century in three parts, the first of which takes us from 1900 to 1940, the second to the 1970s, and the third to the turn of the century. In the early period, fireplaces featured prominently in many rooms. They were used not only for heating but also for cooking, lighting, and ventilation. Wood and coal were the main fuels used. Later, it was the cooker

that took pride of place, providing warmth for meals and for the inhabitants. In the middle of the century, central heating appeared, requiring solid fuels. But the public authorities were already demanding one chimney flue per room as a means of renewing the air. Heating was also embodied: it was seen as a woman's business, and young girls, as part of their education, had to master the art of fire (and its dangers). Although coal dominated the scene, it had to compete with municipal gas, which was simpler, cleaner, and did not require individual storage. On the other hand, cities were discovering central coal-fired heating. Electricity was beginning to be talked about, although it was very nice but also very expensive. With electricity came a modern discourse that rejected the handling of coal, poisoning, and chimney fumes that polluted and blackened the air. Excessively high temperatures in the home were condemned, and for a long time, bedrooms were kept very cool.

The second part of the book opens with the period of the reactionary and bureaucratic Vichy government (1940–44). There was no shortage of Vichy committees, which did not hide the regime's powerlessness in the face of major problems. The confrontations between heating manufacturers and installers continued after the war. However, certain ideas emerged, such as the need to distribute heat rather than coal. During the postwar reconstruction period, heating became one of the key elements of modernization. It took some time after the deprivations of the war for comfort to be achieved through better heating. Despite this, images of fuels were changing: coal was obsolete, heating oil symbolized modernity, and municipal gas offered comfort. Electricity was gradually entering a fiercely competitive heating market, where it had to contend with gas. It was no longer manufacturers or installers who drove the market but energy suppliers. As a symbol of French people's access to comfort, housing temperatures gradually rose, sometimes reaching 22°C (71.6°F).

The last part of the book begins with the oil crises of the 1970s. Logically, fuel oil suffered from high prices, unlike its rivals, gas and electricity. Central heating had become the main source of energy, making it a major challenge for energy companies. The new discourse included advice on how to insulate buildings better, how to tame the thermostat, and how to combat greenhouse gases. Electricity had the advantage of simplicity and the fact that every building was supplied with it from the outset, but not necessarily with gas. Despite this, public authorities tried to curb the development of electric heating, which was regularly denounced as an economic and industrial aberration. Fuel oil and wood tried to survive, and coal was even relaunched, without success. In the end, gas held up well for central heating. However, precariousness and the cold have reappeared as ever-present scourges, and heating is a heavy burden on family budgets.

In this wide-ranging survey, the author raises questions such as the reality of consumer choice. This work should be read and added to the

understanding of our civilization, which needs to be warm, but not at any price.

ALAIN BELTRAN

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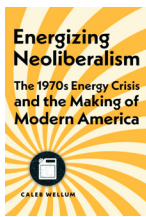
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VOL. 65

Energizing Neoliberalism: The 1970s Energy Crisis and the Making of Modern America

By Caleb Wellum. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2023. Pp. 251.



In *Energizing Neoliberalism*, Caleb Wellum demonstrates a penchant for pithy statements that demand a second reading and deeper thought. Consider the book's opening line, which posits that "the 1970s energy crisis never actually happened, but it mattered" (p. 1). What Wellum means, of course, is not that disrupted supplies, high prices, long lines, and heated tempers did not occur in 1973 and 1979. Instead, labeling these events as a "crisis" was less about their material reality and more the discursive product of competing, and sometimes complementary, narratives that framed these events for different purposes. Wellum's cultural history of the energy crisis thus reveals the rhetorical structure of this phenomenon and then shows how its interpretative flexibility allowed pro-market actors to co-opt the concept for the cause of neoliberalism. In the end, the lived experiences of millions of people were real, but the energy crisis itself was constructed and then manipulated to create the modern world order.

To make such grand assertions requires solid support, and Wellum is wise to rest his contributions on the back of proven scholarship. He begins by crediting Christopher Jones (*Routes of Power*, 2016) and Matthew Huber (*Lifeblood*, 2013) for uncovering the earlier roots of America's fossil-fuel dependence, and then he surveys existing work on the postwar rise of what David Nye calls America's "high-energy society" (*Consuming Power*, 1998). Certainly, the Cold War's shaping of the country's suburbanization, atomization, and mass-consuming habits is well known, as are the fears these trends caused among environmentalists, neo-Malthusians, and energy experts. But Wellum's synthesis is nevertheless helpful for understanding the foundations of the energy crisis, which "congealed when the ecological and anticipatory discourses of crisis collided with the material and affective experience of scarcity in the winter of 1973–74" (p. 47).

From there, the book gets down to business, delving deeply into the widely held explanations for this crisis and how to address it. Essentially, these fall into two conventional camps: the environmentalist narrative that blamed