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## **“In the morning I just need a long, hot shower”**

Outline of a sociology of the (re)distribution of energy sensibilities

### **Abstract:**

In this short paper Elizabeth Shove's (1997) discussion of two sociologies of energy is taken as inspiration for the proposal of a third 'sociology of energy': the study of how energy sensibilities (in the sense of esthesia: responsiveness and awareness) are distributed unevenly. Energy is approached as a polyphonic concept, i.e. as containing many meanings of which no one is logically privileged. Given this polyphony, the assumption of a boundary between visibility and non-visibility of energy, which divides Shove's two sociologies, loses importance. Instead unevenly distributed ways of sensing (and making sense of) energy become the object of study. Drawing on Jacques Rancière's (2004, 2006) writings, this approach is used to discuss contemporary distributions of energy's sensibilities in domestic settings and how they have been redistributed during the previous two decades.

### **Two sociologies of energy's in/visibility**

In her 1997 contribution for the Handbook of Environmental Sociology Elizabeth Shove discusses two different 'sociologies of energy'. These approaches deal differently with energy's intangibility and pervasiveness in modern everyday life.

First, sociologists have tried to make energy as visible as possible for consumers. This approach is based on the basic idea that as long as energy is hidden from these consumers' eyes they will make wrong decisions in their everyday life, leading to unnecessary waste of energy. Thus, this sociology caters for an energy policy measures which depends on well-informed and responsible consumers such as campaigns for switching of standby or reducing boiler temperatures.

The second sociology of energy discussed by Shove is more inspired by the pervasiveness of energy rather than by its intangibility. Because energy is everywhere, it is argued here, changes in levels of energy consumption are much more a matter of how basic infrastructures

and fundamental practices of modern societies are organized than a matter of the consumers' knowledge and awareness. This sociology acknowledges energy's invisibility explicitly as one of energy infrastructure's central features.

Shove concludes that these approaches each have their virtues and problems and do not exclude each other. For instance, while the first sociology is in the danger of becoming too narrow and consequently 'an esoteric form of market intelligence', the latter loses either its topic energy altogether or it turns into a sociology of the first kind, which seeks to make visible energy – but now within infrastructures.

In this contribution, I propose a third 'sociology of energy' which discusses the manifold ways of how energy is made sensible – be it in its consumption, with regard to specific technologies or in societal infrastructures and practices. First, this extends 'visibility' into the realm of all senses. Secondly and more importantly, this approach is not about *whether or not* energy is sensed, but about *how* it is sensed. Complete in/sensibility is rare and exists in addition to a broad range of possible ways of sensing energy – as heat, as speed, as abstract entity, as radioactivity etc. Further, we assume that different ways of (not) sensing energy exist and form regular patterns distributed among different people. An engineer is sensing energy differently compared to a housekeeper or a poet. In addition to this uneven distribution between (groups of) people, we assume that there are uneven distributions according to space and time. Different settings evoke different sensations of energy at different times.

## **Sensing energies**

The extension proposed here is only necessary when energy is approached as *polyphonic* concept. In both scientific and non-scientific discourse, energy, just as any other word, has a range of meanings. This is no problem whatsoever as long as the person feeling a 'lack of energy' in the morning does not confuse this use of the word with other uses such as in the sentence 'domestic energy use is responsible for roughly one third of Norway's *energy* consumption'. It gets, however, problematic (or rather: interesting) when the perceived 'lack of vital *energy*' leads many people to take daily, hot and extended showers, which then may produce a shortage of energy on the societal scale. In this instance two meanings of energy interfere with each other. People may not understand the first thing about the kind of energy which is administered on the societal scale, but nevertheless have 'folk theories' about energy (Kempton 1986), which are also informed by the sensation of hot water on a cold winter morning. How we reconstruct this relation between two meanings depends on whether we aim

at a homophonic or a polyphonic understanding of energy.

Borrowed from Bakhtin's reception of the musicological terminology, a state of polyphony denotes a situation where there is no single privileged voice, i.e. meaning of a word, in which therefore the otherwise valid hierarchy of one denotation and many connotation is challenged (see also: Barthes 1975). If we for instance privilege the meaning of energy as something managed on the societal level (= the technical-economic sensibility), we are likely to address the occurrence of the word energy as bodily experience in a hot shower as a distraction, a misunderstanding. Someone sensing energy as relaxing shower would not qualify for having 'seen' energy, energy remains invisible for him/her. This view would reduce a sociology of energy's sensibility to a science which sorts right from wrong sensibilities. Deviant forms of sensing energy are in the best case harmless, but they may also appear as problematic distractions from the 'actual issue' which is at stake. In this homophonic approach, we already have taken sides in favour of a certain (desired) distribution of energy's sensibilities before we even have tried to understand how these sensibilities are distributed in the first place.

A different approach was proposed by Jacques Rancière (2004; 2006) in his conception of how distributions of the sensible are changed within aesthetic practices. For him uneven distributions of the sensible are a political question: What people sense together, as well as what they cannot sense, is defined by their social position (as engineer, as housekeeper, as ...), but it also defines their political perspective in a fundamental way. Rancière describes the productive role of aesthetic practices in changes of distributions of the sensible. Art, as a communal way of sensing, according to him, never has been a simple representation of the existing. As such it is able to transcend – and therefore also to change – how citizens perceive themselves and the society they live in.

For a sociology of energy's in/sensibilities based on Rancière's approach the distribution of different perceptions of energy is important in its own right: how energy *is made* in/sensible *for and by* specific groups is not any longer a question of right versus wrong. Instead, these processes create a fundamental frame within which possible ways of dealing with energy are located. It is important that this is not meant to declare sensibility to be the basic factor from which everything else can be derived. Instead, Rancière locates the mere possibility of politics within gaps between perception and society. He evokes the powerful image of the pre-revolution French worker dreaming to possess the aristocrat's house in which he is refurbishing the floor. The workers sensibility, which in other aspects will be restricted by his

social position, in this rare case is transcending his status, making space for political actions which may or may not change society. *Which* politics is taking shape based on gaps between society and sensibility is not determined, neither are certain social orders meant to be the expression of certain sensibilities. In a society, however, in which sensibility is always identical with social position, Rancière would see no space for politics at all.

In the remainder of this paper we will demonstrate the significance of Rancière's approach for a 'sociology of energy's sensibilities' applied in an empirical study.

## **Energy sensibilities in the bathroom**

Domestic energy consumption in Norway has been stable since 1996. This is worse news than it may seem at first. Unfortunately, this stabilization has come at high levels of consumption. Additionally it means that considerable gains in energy efficiency of appliances have been compensated by more energy intensive daily lives. This problem is the point of departure for the empirical study of how energy's sensibilities are distributed in Norwegian homes, which is presented here. We focus on an aspect of domestic energy consumption, which has seen an unprecedented increase during the last decade: energy consumption in the bathroom.

These concerns related to the *aggregated* energy consumption of the Norwegian populace prefer a certain energy sensibility: energy as something which is to be managed on the societal level. In line with what was said above, however, the point in question addressed by this study is not only how *this* kind of sensibility is distributed in Norway. Using similar empirical material, Margrethe Aune (2010) has convincingly shown that this special sensibility is almost completely absent from large parts of public representations of domesticity. The question therefore is whether different collective ways of sensing energy are present and how they are distributed.

Liberal societies are characterized by the split between the public and the private, which means that domestic sensibilities are performed hidden away within the household, most often within the household. We have based our empirical exploration on two notable exceptions: A first exhibition of domesticity happens when homes are sold and bought. And secondly, domesticity is discussed publicly in lifestyle magazines. We have analysed the distribution of energy's sensibility in Norwegian homes based on both instances. To achieve this we have gone through all issues of the largest interior design magazine 'Bonytt' between 1990 and 2008 and collected every visual representation of a bathroom. The analysis was conducted

qualitatively according to the principles of grounded theory (Berker and Gansmo 2010)<sup>1</sup>.

Second, we analysed 1,200 real estate advertisements published between October 2007 and November 2008 at the website finn.no. This analysis was conducted by counting word frequencies and co-occurrences (Callon 1983).

Our results show that Norwegian bathrooms have become increasingly objects of collective sensibility after 2000. They become publicly exposed and sensibilities connected to these spaces are discussed explicitly: should the bathroom be beautiful, should it be practical, those are questions asked in an editorial of the 2005 bathroom special issue:

”I [the chief editor] have many ideas for the bathroom of my dreams [...] The bathroom can be everything from a room for tooth brushing to a room for relaxation. Or both. Definitely it is a room where many want to realise their interior dreams.”

The real estate advertisements contain in most cases presentations of the bathroom, whether the bathroom is shown in one of the visual representations of the object is, however, dependent on its condition. A second result is the dominance of visual representations of large amounts of hot water in the magazine. The images have changed during the decades studied here, moving slowly from whirlpools to large showerheads, but the underlying aestheticisation of (a lot of) hot water remains stable. Third, we see a large number of mentions of positively connoted warm floor tiles in the textual parts of the advertisements. And forth, both magazines and advertisements present large bathrooms as a positive asset.

Together these four observations produce a clear picture of an emerging collective energy sensibility connected to Norwegian bathrooms, which is particularly powerful because of its complementary character. The sensation of walking in a large room barefoot on warm tiles and splashing a lot of hot water on a naked body, is a strong competitor to frugal representations of energy as numbers (which are to be reduced). We do not have to conduct an empirical study to establish that the sensations made public in the material studied here will be completely absent in engineering or public policy documents about domestic energy consumption. Such an uneven distribution of energy sensibilities is doomed to produce contradictory results which may very well explain the paradoxical stability of domestic energy consumption in Norway.

More importantly, however, in terms of Ranciere's 'the political', are the gaps between sensibility and social reality. Advertisements and lifestyle magazines are both about the

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<sup>1</sup> This study was conducted together with Helen Jøsok Gansmo, KULT, NTNU.

recipients' reality *and* about their dreams. They are produced to sell bathrooms (or bathroom components) and seek to appear affordable while promising something which is better than the status quo. In this sense the images of large rooms, warm tiles and large amounts of hot water are a good example for a luxury which is – almost – affordable for most Norwegians. The politics residing in this gap is most likely one of increasing energy consumption and anybody interested in the opposite should accept that these sensibilities are to be taken seriously in their own right.

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