



## Turn up the heat! Contesting energy poverty in Buffalo, NY



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### ABSTRACT

Energy poverty – or the condition of households that cannot adequately heat their homes – is produced at the confluence of multi-scalar processes, from regional labor market restructuring, to urban disinvestment, to geopolitical and geoeconomic struggles over extraction. Critical theorization of the concept is in its nascent phase and the notion itself has received relatively little attention in the United States. Our paper aims to address these lacunae by mobilizing an urban political ecology framework to consider a community-based campaign that targeted residential energy conservation funds in Buffalo, New York. We analyze how the community campaign drew upon the “network crisis” of the energy-poor home to frame critical justice demands that foregrounded energy poverty as the product of uneven socio-natural development. Through spatial claims and scalar strategies, the campaign highlighted the contribution of neoliberal conservation programs to deepening patterns of uneven development, and demanded redress of disinvestment in urban housing stock through funding of weatherization for low-income households. We argue that contests over urban energy metabolism offer a fruitful area to explore the possibilities of transforming uneven development from below.

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### 1. Introduction

Energy poverty refers to the inability of households to heat living spaces adequately, leading to social exclusion, material deprivation and poor health (see Buzar, 2007b). The concept became prominent in the 1980s in the UK, where it is called fuel poverty, and more recently in the European Union, particularly in the former Eastern bloc (Boardman, 1991, 2013; Buzar, 2007a, 2007b). In the US, the issue is recognized neither colloquially nor politically as energy (or fuel) poverty. Rather, policymakers and planners, while occasionally referring to energy insecurity, generally frame the problem as “unaffordable heat” and address the issue in a scattered, piecemeal way, in contrast to the more directed policy measures adopted in the UK and more recently in continental Europe (Power, 2006; Bouzarovski et al., 2012). Low-income households in the US pay on average 10% of income on all energy bills, compared to just 3% for high-income households, and the average is considerably greater in colder regions of the country (Eisenberg, 2010). Despite these figures, and the forms of hardship that they imply, both the limited conception of, and the policy approach to, energy poverty in the US belie the socio-natural relations of power that structure the problem.

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Energy poverty is generally attributed to demand side and supply side factors – low incomes and high energy prices, respectively – together with the inefficiency of housing stock. As these factors suggest, energy poverty is produced at the confluence of multi-scalar processes, from regional labor market restructuring linked to globalization, to geopolitical and geoeconomic struggles over energy extraction, to urban and regional disinvestment and decay. Despite its rich theoretical potential, theoretically-informed engagement with energy poverty is in its nascent stage, and the concept has received relatively little attention in the US. Our paper aims to address these lacunae by mobilizing an urban political ecology (UPE) framework to consider the spatial and scalar dynamics of a community-based campaign to redress regressive disbursement of residential energy conservation funds by a natural gas utility company.

UPE offers an entry point to better understand the social relations and socio-natural processes that produce energy poverty. Drawing on this literature, we consider how struggles over energy poverty in Buffalo relate to uneven development of urban environments, the politics of scale, and critical justice claims. Our study allows us to extend previous work that has sought to characterize energy poverty through the notion of assemblage, including the home conceived of as a networked space (Harrison and Popke, 2011). We show how the crisis of the networked space of the home, caused by repeated shut-offs of heat and struggles to pay energy bills, when combined with local organizing in neighborhoods that

concentrate these shut-offs, can articulate the home within a politics of scale that contests uneven socio-natural development in the city. In turn, our argument contributes to the UPE literature by offering a grounded account of the possibilities to reshape socio-natural processes, demonstrating the potential contingency of urban metabolism and possibilities for change.

As in many similar urban struggles, in the case of Buffalo the process of politicizing the energy-poor home and making redistributive demands was led at the grassroots by immigrant-descent and African-American women (Buckingham and Kulcur, 2009; Kurtz, 2007). The utility company and the state regulator initially dismissed these activists as representing but one neighborhood in a large service area targeted for energy conservation investment. In response, activists, with the support of engaged researchers and community allies, ‘scaled up’ their organizing to a regional campaign. Contesting the passive distribution of conservation funds across the region’s intense uneven geographies, activists and their allies effectively demonstrated the conservation program’s role in deepening these geographies. Framed in these terms, the group sought redress of disinvestment in urban housing stock through substantial, targeted funding allocations to weatherization for low-income neighborhoods. The Buffalo campaign had regional and statewide effects: the state regulator subsequently reviewed utility conservation programs across New York State and additional funding was added to the state’s low-income weatherization programs funded through on-bill surcharges.

This paper draws on key informant interviews and extensive primary document analysis, including public testimony, court documents, and conservation fund data, undertaken by Hilbert.<sup>1</sup> Based on this research and commensurate with a praxis approach, we draw upon the insights of campaign leaders in order to better understand the possibilities for community groups to shape the spatial form of the city’s energy metabolism in the face of neoliberal regulation of energy provision, including energy conservation. We proceed in four subsequent sections. In Section 2, we review the literature on energy poverty and discuss how a UPE framework can enhance our understanding of the concept. In the third section, we discuss the existing neoliberal policy framework to address the problem, narrowly defined as “unaffordable heat,” and the turn to on-bill surcharges in order to fund weatherization and appliance replacement managed by utility companies under the rubric of conservation. We introduce the Western New York version of this funding mechanism, the Conservation Incentive Program (CIP), managed by the area’s gas utility company, National Fuel Gas (henceforth, National Fuel). We turn in Section 4 to the campaign started in Buffalo’s West Side neighborhood by the community group People United for Sustainable Housing (PUSH). In our fifth section, we conclude by drawing out the contributions that the UPE perspective can make to our understanding of energy poverty, and how engagement with struggles over energy poverty can in turn enrich UPE.

## 2. Energy poverty and urban political ecology

In her classic work, Boardman initially defined energy poverty as a household that spent more than 10% of income on energy bills

(1991). Scholars subsequently moved away from a narrow income-based definition as research turned to understanding the multiple factors that contribute to energy poverty and its pernicious effects on health and well-being (Buzar, 2007b). Boardman and others have long identified poorly insulated or dilapidated housing stock as a principal cause of exorbitant household energy expenditure (Buzar, 2007b; Boardman, 2013; Healy and Clinch, 2004). An extensive literature in health has considered the effects of insufficient heating on infants, children and the elderly (Rudge and Gilchrist, 2005; Liddell and Morris, 2010), psychological health (Liddell and Morris, 2010), social wellness (Anderson et al., 2012), nutrition (Bhattacharya et al., 2003) and sedentariness and other micro-geographies of the home (Brunner et al., 2012; Petrova et al., 2013), as well as subjective experience (Waddams-Price et al., 2012). Over the past decade, energy inefficiencies linked to energy poverty have been considered as a source of emissions within the context of climate change (Ürge-Vorsatz and Herrero, 2012; Ürge-Vorsatz and Metz, 2009).

Research is now well developed beyond the UK especially in Eastern and Central Europe, in contrast to the US, where comparatively little work has been done (but see Harrison and Popke, 2011; Harrison, 2013). In Europe, the pioneering work of Buzar (2007a, 2007b) has been further developed by Bouzarovski et al. (2015) and Herrero and Ürge-Vorsatz (2012). Bouzarovski et al. (2012) have assessed EU-wide energy poverty regulation. There is also a growing literature that seeks to connect these debates across North-South and West-East divides (e.g., Groh, 2014; Sagar, 2005; Sovacool, 2012). This expanded scope has occasioned further efforts to redefine energy poverty. Day and Walker (2013) and Bouzarovski and Petrova (2015) have proposed the term ‘energy vulnerability’ to enable a more open definition that does not presume the energy service at issue in any particular context (e.g., heat, light, cooking, cooling, and mobility). We are sensitive to this proposal; in using ‘energy poverty’ here, we acknowledge the framing of the problem in terms of heat as context specific.

As part of redefining energy poverty, scholars have begun to engage critical social theory, in particular actor-network theory and post-structuralist, post-humanist notions of assemblage. Harrison and Popke, in a pioneering paper in this regard, primarily marshal science and technology studies and actor-network theory to propose energy poverty as “a geographical assemblage of networked relations” (2011: 950) constituted by networked infrastructures, including the home, energy flows, and social and economic networks, together with the lived experiences of the energy poor. The authors’ aim is to foreground an understanding of energy poverty as inseparably socio-natural, technical, and cultural. Key to this perspective, and our own understanding, is the notion that the discrete space of the home is in fact the product of networked social and natural inclusions and exclusions (Kaika, 2004). As we discuss below, when these processes enter into crisis, the power relations that produce the fetish of the home are exposed. Day and Walker (2013) building on the work of Harrison and Popke, posit an assemblage framework in order to assign agency to non-human nature and to foreground the dynamic and relational character of energy poverty, opening up possibilities to imagine change (see also Buzar, 2007a; Powells, 2009).

We aim to contribute to these debates by drawing upon UPE to shift the focus of inquiry from how energy poverty comes together (i.e., as an assemblage) to the social struggles that contest the scalar and spatial politics of energy poverty (cf. Holifield, 2009).<sup>2</sup> UPE seeks to tease apart the densely related elements of social

<sup>1</sup> Hilbert conducted interviews with both co-founders, member organizers, and the legal adviser of the key community group. Hilbert was unable to obtain an interview with the relevant actors at the utility. Extensive documentation of the utility’s position was available, however, via an online database maintained by the regulator, which stored all public documents related to the rate case that we discuss below (see NYSDPS-DMM Matter No. 07-00141). Hilbert coded and analyzed public statements of all actors in the campaign, transcripts of public meetings and hearings, and interview transcripts, in addition to conducting an independent analysis of conservation fund distribution. Our FOIA request for updated geographic data on fund distribution was denied by the utility.

<sup>2</sup> See also Harrison (2013), for the development of a cognate materialist approach to energy justice and uneven regional geographies in North Carolina.

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