IRREGULAR CONNECTIONS: Everyday Energy Politics in Catalonia

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Abstract
While questions of energy and energy transition have become hotly contested, the abstract and fetishized conception of energy that dominates contemporary political debates occludes connections to everyday life. By tracing the activities of Catalan activist network Alianza contra la Pobreza Energética (Alliance against Energy Poverty or APE), this article seeks to excavate the political possibilities opened up by a more everyday energy politics. The article addresses the practice of illegal utilities connections among the urban poor of Catalonia, arguing that this constitutes a form of makeshift urbanism resonant of that conceptualized from within ‘Southern’ cities. These ‘irregular connections’ to urban infrastructure networks are then distinguished from the ‘irregular connections’ formed between people within the collectivized social infrastructure of APE. APE, I argue, translate ‘energy’ as social reproduction, framing their struggle for the right to energy around the right to sustain life with dignity. This, I suggest, is the starting point for a feminist praxis capable of creating new and unruly subjectivities, reconfiguring reproductive relations in more caring and collective directions, and ultimately challenging the violence of the commodity form.

Introduction
The ‘energy’ of physics textbooks is usually defined as the ability to do work. It is energy that sets matter in motion, which makes things happen. Energy also does much social, cultural, political work. This is the energy implicated in the injustices of rapidly warming global temperatures; whose absence can issue in poverty, respiratory illness, riots; whose fluctuating prices trigger turmoil on global markets.

Yet for Larry Lohmann and Nick Hildyard (2014) of research collective The Corner House, today’s hotly contested debates around energy leave a fundamental question unasked: the question of what ‘energy’ actually is. There is, they note, no ‘magical substance’ called ‘energy’, but rather several distinct socio-ecological processes that this term abstracts from, from the combustion of coal to produce electricity to the work done by human muscle power (ibid.: 6). The abstract concept of energy as the ability to do work, moreover, has a ‘bloody genealogy’ (ibid.: 25), emerging from the nineteenth-century project of thermodynamics, motivated by the development of the engines and motors sought by capitalists as a disciplining tool to deploy against labour (see also Mitchell, 2011; Malm, 2016). Energy’s ‘scientific’ (and thus supposedly apolitical) origins helped enable its fetishization, with the processes of struggle that shape the flow of energy rendered invisible. Hegemonic discourses of energy have become highly technocratic, dominated by ‘expert’ knowledge pertaining to dazzlingly complex policy frameworks, technological developments and financial products (Swyngedouw, 2010). Activism around energy sometimes becomes calculative, premised upon the counting of carbon molecules or monetary sums (Beuret, 2017).
One consequence is that the contested discussions around energy at the heart of today’s political conjuncture are often somewhat detached from everyday life. Energy, however, is integral to the everyday, at the heart of countless quotidian ‘social practices’, from cooking food to getting around (Walker and Shove, 2014). In the words of Matt Huber (2013: 7–8), ‘[e]nergy is life itself’, with all life depending upon solar energy for its very existence. The aim of this article, then, is to explore the prospects for a more ‘everyday’ approach to energy. In doing so, I take particular inspiration from Alex Loftus’ (2012) call for an ‘everyday environmentalism’, in which our daily interactions with urban natures become the basis for a radical political ecological praxis. On the one hand, I seek to expand upon recent contributions to energy geography that help de-fetishize energy as a social relation (Bridge et al., 2013; 2018; Huber, 2013; 2015; Calvert, 2016; Solomon and Calvert, 2017; Bridge, 2018; Castán Broto and Baker, 2018) by foregrounding the role of embodied everyday practices in constituting this relation. I also hope to deepen recent conversations between urban geography and energy geography (Rutherford and Coutard, 2014; Luque-Ayala and Silver, 2016) by focusing on the role of urban social movements in remaking energy–society relations. But, perhaps more importantly, I will ask what might open up politically through an approach to energy that takes everyday life as its starting point.

To do so, I will trace the activities of Catalan activist network Alianza contra la Pobreza Energética (Alliance against Energy Poverty), referred to by its members and in this article hereafter as APE (pronounced ‘ap-eh’). The article draws upon three months of ethnographic research conducted within APE between April and June 2017, during which time I participated in weekly meetings, events and protests, as well as conducting 21 semi-structured interviews with activists, politicians, civil servants and private sector representatives.¹

The network was founded in Barcelona in early 2014, in response to the increasing inability of many of the city’s residents to secure reliable access to what APE members term ‘basic supplies’, in which they include electricity, gas and water. While still maintaining its strongest presence in the metropolitan area of Barcelona, APE’s struggle has since spread across several Catalan towns and cities. The group collaborates closely with anti-eviction movement la Plataforma de Afectadas por la Hipoteca (Platform for People Affected by Mortgages or PAH). These groups both frame their struggle in terms of the right to a dignified life, advocating that all are entitled to basic supplies, regardless of ability to pay and, in 2015, securing a new Catalan law illegalizing evictions and utilities disconnections for ‘vulnerable’ households. In this article, I argue that APE prefigures an ‘everyday’ energy politics brimming with radical potential.

The article begins by drawing insights from the rich body of critical urban theory on the everyday. Next, after some brief contextual comments, I turn to everyday life within Catalonia. Here, I trace the ways in which the urban energy poor deploy irregular improvised practices to survive, arguing that the political prospects of these survival strategies are somewhat ambiguous. Hope, however, is found in the subsequent two sections, in which I reflect upon the collectivized praxis of APE, arguing that the group’s ‘everyday’ translation of energy opens up radical possibilities for a politics capable of challenging the commodity form.

**Theorizing the everyday**

The ‘everyday’ has long been conceived as a vital terrain of critical urban theory and praxis. For Henri Lefebvre (1968; 1991; 2014), emancipatory possibilities are always immanent within the stifling boredom and alienation of everyday life under capitalist
Urbanization: unruly subjectivities and covert struggles cannot ever be fully contained. Building on Lefebvre, Ruddick et al. (2018) have recently made the case for what they term ‘a social ontology of the urban’ that emphasizes the role of everyday life in producing urban space and its ‘constitutive outsides’. Ruddick et al. argue that struggles over the production of space begin with processes of subjectivation, emphasizing that it is in the fraught contestations of everyday life that subjects, and hence the openings and closures for radical politics, are made and remade.

Thus, everyday life constitutes a terrain of both alienation and resistance, a perspective that can be further enriched through materialist–feminist theorizing on social reproduction, understood broadly as the processes necessary for sustaining life (Katz, 2001; Mitchell et al., 2004; Federici, 2012b; Meehan and Strauss, 2015; Bhattacharya, 2017). The starting point here is the inadequacies of Marx’s focus on waged work as the exclusive site of value creation. It is the unwaged ‘women’s work’—and, as later theorists have stressed, racialized work (Mitchell et al., 2004; Federici, 2012b; Meehan and Strauss, 2015; Bhattacharya, 2017)—of social reproduction that produces labour power as a commodity. Thus, capitalism relies upon a gendered and racialized division of labour that artificially separates remunerated ‘productive’ labour from unremunerated ‘reproductive’ labour, blinding us to the ways in which production and reproduction are dialectically related (Mitchell et al., 2004; Meehan and Strauss, 2015). For Mitchell et al. (2015: 185), social reproduction has ‘political power and potential’ because ‘[i]ts practices are critical in the Lefebvrian sense—the chance for rupture, and with it the possibility that they could be done differently, that things, social conditions, and relationships could be otherwise immanent to them’.

Indeed, Loftus (2012) makes the case for what he terms an ‘everyday environmentalism’ grounded in the ‘conditions of possibility’ immanent within social reproduction. This perspective centres the insight from urban political ecology that all natures are produced through contested processes that are at once ‘social’ and ‘natural’, discursive and material, political and economic (Smith, 1990; Swyngedouw, 2004; Gandy, 2005; Heynen et al., 2006). Loftus argues that it is through our daily reproductive practices that these socio-ecological processes are constituted. Thus, it is through our everyday sensuous interactions with the urban environment that these processes can be understood and, ultimately, might begin to be transformed. At the heart of this argument is Gramsci’s contention that common sense understandings of the world are embedded in material practices. And within the contradictions of common sense lies a kernel of ‘good sense’: a basis for understanding the world in ways fitting for its transformation, emerging out of the quotidian practices of daily life (Gramsci, 1971). Arguing as such, Loftus suggests that through the reproductive practices necessary to access potable water for themselves and their families, women within the informal settlements of Durban, South Africa, are forced to confront directly the violence of the commoditization of the means of reproduction. Here, for Loftus, arise ‘the conditions of possibility’ that enable certain ‘situated knowledges’ to be achieved as an outcome of struggle (Hartsock, 1983; Harding, 1986; Haraway, 1988). These emerging forms of fragmented ‘cyborg consciousness’ (Haraway, 1991) can allow the processes that produce the objectified world of ‘things’ within the urban waterscape to be grasped, giving rise to new subjectivities and, in turn, forms of struggle.

Loftus’ account is one of many that locate political possibility within the everyday lives of the urban poor living in cities of the ‘global South’. Postcolonial urban theory tends to foreground the agency of subaltern groups as constitutive of city life, as opposed to the excess or result of overarching processes. Simone (2004a; 2004b; 2009) vividly describes the improvised and provisional survival strategies adopted in the fight for ‘bare life’ across a number of cities in Africa and Southeast Asia. For Simone, people themselves become infrastructure, with the reproduction of the city contingent upon informal social networks, which might prefigure more collective and
caring forms of urban life. Or, the inconspicuous practices undertaken to meet basic needs in the absence of organizational power might constitute what Bayat (2000) calls ‘quiet encroachment’, issuing in redistributive gains from elites. With particular regard to the specificities of energy, numerous accounts have located political power in daily struggles around electricity metering and disconnections (Baptista, 2015; Silver, 2015; Pilo, 2017). Particularly prominent here are experiences within South African townships, out of which militant movements such as the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee have emerged, politicizing already ubiquitous practices of illegal connections and non-payment (Naidoo and Veriava, 2009; Bond and Ngwane, 2010).

Recent calls to ‘provincialize’ urban theory encourage us to ask whether experiences within ‘Northern’ cities might benefit from being understood through theory developed out of ‘Southern’ urban contexts (Robinson, 2006; Roy, 2009; Lawhon et al., 2012; Parnell and Robinson, 2012). Rather than an imperative to simply apply theory developed in one rigidly demarcated context to another, these provocations are better read as inciting a form of ‘relational comparison’ that seeks to trace shared processes and differences of articulation across a fuller range of historical geographies (Coronil, 1996; Hart, 2018; Loftus, 2019).

Addressing the phenomenon of necessity-based squatting in Madrid, Gonick (2016) seeks to theorize in this vein. Gonick traces how a severe housing crisis has forced thousands of residents of the Spanish capital into a mode of ‘makeshift urbanism’ (Vasudevan, 2015) resonant of that described by Simone (2004a) and others with respect to Southern cities. As Madrid’s urban poor, organizing through PAH, become increasingly dependent upon illegal ‘recuperation’ of homes from finance capital, Gonick argues that the hegemony of property as an institution for organizing urban life is being eroded. The urban, then, is being remade through the everyday reproductive practices of subaltern actors. Given the strong connections between APE and PAH in Catalonia, might something similar be said of everyday struggles for energy access here? Before proceeding to think through these questions, some brief remarks on the Catalan context are necessary.

**Crisis and resistance**

APE’s struggle must be understood within a specific historical geography. It was in Catalonia that the Franco dictatorship encountered some of the fiercest resistance, including a brief period of anarchist social revolution in 1936 (Gorostiza et al., 2012). While the revolution was ultimately crushed by Franco, it left a radical legacy that continues to blossom through the existence of a burgeoning network of cooperatives and solidarity economy initiatives, highly active local neighbourhood associations and a tradition of militant urban social movements.

This radical urban context has been particularly animated during recent years, in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis. The crisis has been felt acutely in Spain, with subsequent austerity policies having drastic implications for the livelihoods of much of its population. Unemployment, for instance, rose from 7.9% in the second quarter of 2007 to 25.8% in the final quarter of 2012 (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, 2015; Tirado Herrero and Jiménez Meneses, 2016). This context of crisis and austerity—alongside years of disillusionment with the Spanish political classes on account of persistent allegations of corruption—has helped shape some of the most vociferous forms of protest and resistance witnessed in Europe during recent years, which have seen specifically urban spaces across Spain become focal points of resistance.

Perhaps the most dramatic example was the indignados uprising of 2011, which saw temporary protest camps established in urban centres across the country for a number of months under the banner of ‘real democracy now!’. These events were preceded by the formation of anti-eviction movement PAH in 2009, which has since become one of the most celebrated urban social movements to emerge anywhere in the
aftermath of the 2008 crisis. PAH was founded in Barcelona and has been extremely prominent in shaping the city’s current political conjuncture (as well as becoming active and highly influential across Spain). PAH’s former spokesperson Ada Colau is now the city’s first woman mayor, leading the Barcelona en Comú (Barcelona In Common) ‘citizens’ platform’ that in May 2015 (just a year after its formation) won minority control of the city council, as part of a wave of similar ‘municipalist’ projects that took electoral power in cities across Spain. Barcelona en Comú brings together activists from PAH, APE and a number of other movements in seeking to implement a ‘new municipalist’ agenda of defending ‘social rights’ in the face of austerity and introducing participatory democratic involvement into the council’s operations in an attempt to ‘occupy the institutions’ (Eizaguirre et al., 2017).

Catalonia also has a complex set of independence struggles, which came to a head with the referendum of October 2017—a referendum deemed unconstitutional by the Spanish state. This decision to violently repress the referendum resulted in mass protests and civil disobedience across the region and the arrest of a number of pro-independence Catalan politicians.

APE itself has no defined stance regarding independence, with activists within the network having diverging opinions and relationships in respect of the issue. Yet the broader context of crisis and resistance in Catalonia is important for this article. The histories of protest and collective action in Catalonia and its capital create a context that seems especially amenable to new forms of contestation. More particularly, while APE operates across the region of Catalonia, it was formed and continues to be strongest in the city of Barcelona. APE is able to benefit from the dense layers of neighbourhood association within the city, which provide a pre-existing infrastructure for its strong and ever-growing membership. It should also be stressed that APE has been very directly influenced by PAH. Most of those seeking support from PAH struggle with accessing utilities as well as with housing issues (Burlinson et al., 2018). Thus, when activists involved in movements fighting the privatization of water and energy proposed the formation of APE to activists in PAH, the latter were keen to collaborate. The model of collectivized casework adopted by APE (described later) originated in PAH and there are significant membership overlaps between the two networks.

Irregular connections I: pinchazo supplies

Crisis and austerity have also played an important role in heightening energy poverty—defined by Bouzarovski (2014: 276) as a ‘situation in which a household lacks a socially and materially necessitated level of energy services in the home’—with stagnating wages and rising unemployment curtailing many people’s ability to afford basic necessities such as energy (Tirado Herrero and Jiménez Meneses, 2016). Spanish Household Budget Survey data indicates that, in 2012, 17% of Spanish households spent over 10% of their income on domestic energy costs, almost triple the figure in 2007 (ibid.). And while, in 2008, Spanish electricity prices were roughly equivalent to the EU average, Eurostat data shows that, by 2016, pre-tax electricity prices had risen 65%, the steepest increase seen in any EU member state, resulting in the third-highest tariff increase among EU members for domestic consumers within this period (Asociación de Ciencias Ambientales, 2018).

This should be understood in the context of the specificity of the Spanish energy system. The liberalization of the sector in the late 1990s renders prices conditional upon the fluctuations of a competitive wholesale market on the one hand, and nationally regulated costs and subsidies on the other (Tirado Herrero and Jiménez Meneses, 2016). While this liberalized model is shared by other EU member states, APE argue that price hikes and energy poverty have been particularly stark in Spain because of the ways in which, post-liberalization, power has become highly centralized among a so-called
‘oligopoly’ of multinational firms who have used their monopoly position and lobbying power to create a starkly unjust market environment.

In Barcelona specifically, a recent report commissioned by the city council estimated that, in 2016, around 170,000 people ‘were unable to maintain their homes at an adequate temperature during the winter months or were late with the payment of bills including electricity, gas or running water’ (Tirado Herrero, 2018: 5). How, then, is ‘energy poverty’ embodied and lived in Barcelona and the surrounding region of Catalonia? How do the textures of this form of precarity relate to others? What kind of politics might emerge within these inadequately heated and cooled households?

To begin to answer these questions, I want to introduce Esther,2 a single mother from El Vendrell, a touristic town in the province of Tarragona (southwest down the coast from Barcelona). Esther described herself to me as ‘bolshie for as long as I can remember, in every way’. Unable to pay the rent, Esther was forced to leave her home in April 2012. Since then, she has navigated a difficult path between periods of street homelessness, short-term stays and, from 2013 onwards, illegally occupied housing. Spain (and Barcelona in particular) has for decades been home to a vibrant and sizeable squatting or okupa movement. Yet squatting has moved from a radical political movement into a widespread practice across the country in the aftermath of the financial crisis, which has left thousands without the means to cover rent or mortgage payments.

For those like Esther living in occupied homes, access to utilities is a complex struggle, with utility firms reluctant to reconnect without a legal housing contract. For Esther, upon moving in, the most pressing issue she faced was water access. At first, she would obtain water from a nearby public fountain. But the fountain soon broke and the city council refused to fix it. Esther was forced to walk 700 metres down a steep hill and back again to take water from another fountain, but this became impossible due to the severe back pain she developed. And when she found a nearer fountain the council found out and shut off access. While previously determined not to, in her own terminology, ‘steal’ water, Esther was left with no choice but to accept the decision of a new housemate to illegally connect the house to the water network. But her water company soon found out and cut off access.

Meanwhile, a similarly volatile situation was developing around the household’s electricity access. With firms refusing to connect occupied homes to the electricity network, Esther and other illegal occupants’ only option is illegal reconnection, referred to as the practice of pinchar (to illegally connect), estar pinchado (to be illegally connected) or luz/agua/gas pinchazo (illegally connected light/water/gas).3 Esther had maintained a pinchazo electricity connection without problems between 2013 and summer 2016, when a technician from her electricity supplier Endesa arrived to disconnect the household. Shocked and afraid, Esther managed to persuade the technician to secretly reconnect her. But since then, she has had a series of similar visits. In many instances, workers have again empathized, temporarily disconnecting the house, documenting the cut-off with a photo sent to management and then re-establishing the supply on the sly. Other times, Esther has been left in the dark, forced to pay various ‘colourful’ and ‘unscrupulous’ (in her words) characters, or else call upon the amateur electrical know-how of friends, to re-establish her pinchazo connection.

Hope, in Esther’s case, was found through APE, recommended to her by a friend of a friend. APE’s #AguaParaEsther (Water for Esther) campaign called upon the city council of El Vendrell, which had a 51% majority stake in Esther’s water supplier Aigües de Tomovi, to establish a legal water connection. Esther and other protesters camped for three months—from September to November 2015—outside the council offices before the council finally relented, making Esther the first person in Spain to receive a

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2 The names of some research participants have been changed to preserve anonymity.
3 Pinchar translates literally as to puncture or to burst.
legal water connection within an occupied household and setting a precedent for many other cases to follow suit. Unfortunately, there has been less progress on the question of electricity: energy firms still refuse to connect occupiers, leaving thousands without lighting and, where electricity is relied on for this, cooking facilities.

The goal of regularized electricity access for occupiers reliant upon pinchazo connections was APE’s primary campaigning focus in the months I spent in Barcelona. While a recent report commissioned for Barcelona city council suggests that pinchazo connections are a relatively fringe practice (Tirado Herrero, 2018), Esther’s situation is similar to that of many of the afectadas (affected people)4 I met through APE. Those who seek support through APE tend to be enduring the severest forms of energy poverty and thus pinchazo connections become a crucial last resort. For the protagonists of this practice, the result is a form of urban life evocative of the provisional and improvised survival strategies described by Simone (2004a; 2004b; 2009) with reference to Jakarta and Johannesburg. Building on Gonick’s (2016) arguments around squatting in Madrid, the cases of Esther and the afectadas of APE illustrate that this is not simply a question of housing. From illegal utilities connections through to Esther’s backbreaking trek to the water fountain and the widespread reliance on candlelight—the cause of a number of tragic house-fire fatalities in recent years (BBC News, 2016)—the precarious forms of ‘makeshift urbanism’ (Vasudevan, 2015) that we tend to think of as specific to the ‘Southern’ experience are constitutive of daily life within Catalonia—and increasingly so in the midst of financial crisis and austerity.

For Gonick (2016), having made this kind of comparison between Madrid and other urban contexts, we can proceed to identify shared processes of counter-hegemonic urbanism stretching across space. Silver (2014: 801) suggests that ‘incremental’ extensions to Accra’s electricity grid through illegal re-connections may have the potential to prefigure ‘future possibilities for affordable or even free energy for the poor’. Are pinchazo practices in the urban peripheries of Catalonia forms of quiet encroachment (Bayat, 2000) with emancipatory implications?

Certainly, in the first APE asesoramiento (collective advice session) I attended—the point at which I began to realize how widespread pinchazos were—my instinctive reaction was to celebrate this along such lines. Yet after the meeting, APE activist Mònica5 explained:

"We [APE] don’t advise or encourage it [pinchar], because it’s not what we want. People deserve a legal connection, a safe fully functioning secure supply—this is their right. So we choose other means. We don’t blame anyone who does it … But we say that people have the right to a legal secure service.

For APE, pinchar is recognized as a necessary step taken by those with no other option, albeit as a wholly inadequate resolution. The more I discussed the realities of pinchazo connections with people relying on them, the more this inadequacy became plain. In Esther’s words:

My fight for the meter isn’t so much to do with whether or not I can pay, it’s about the peace of mind that comes with knowing that I can go home and not worry about getting electrocuted.

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4 There is no direct translation of afectada into English. This is the term that movements across Spain use to refer to those directly affected by the financial crisis. It is a term that, in my experience, people readily self-identify as (in contrast to notions of poverty). Indeed, APE has no qualms about explicitly distinguishing between ‘afectadas’ and ‘activists’ within the group. I use the feminine afectada as opposed to the masculine afectado to stress, with APE, that women tend to be the principal protagonists in this struggle.

5 Mònica is not, by her own account, an afectada. Rather, she participates in the group due to pre-existing political commitments.
Another of APE’s *afectadas*, Valeria—a woman living in council-owned accommodation in Terrassa (a city in the centre of Catalonia, northwest and inland from Barcelona), unable to work long hours due to a disease that affects her mobility—had a pinchazo electricity connection for a year and a half before securing a legal supply. The risks of pinchazos for other people living in her block of flats weighed upon Valeria’s conscience:

If anything had happened, it’s not just me but everyone else that might be there. Elderly people who can’t get out because most of them are in wheelchairs. It was to do with that, so I could say that I don’t just think of myself, I think of the other people that live there too.

Alongside the material inadequacy of pinchazos, it is also important to consider the ways in which its protagonists themselves conceive of this practice. For Esther, *pinchar* was theft, a form of criminality she sought to avoid at all costs. Indeed, many of those coming to APE with pinchazo connections feel embarrassed and ashamed. Thus, while Loftus (2012) argues that, through daily reproductive struggles, we might gain the situated knowledges necessary for grasping the relations of domination that constitute urban socionatures, this does not seem to happen with pinchazo practices.

Scott (1990) has shown that, behind a veneer of docile compliance, subordinate groups often develop ‘hidden transcripts’ of resistance in their everyday practices. Thus, that pinchazos fail as a materially sufficient response to energy poverty and that this practice seems, on the surface, to lack any ostensible counter-hegemonic orientation, is perhaps insufficient to deny it has any political potential. Yet, while Gonick (2016) reads, in the practice of illegal housing occupation in Madrid, the seeds of alternative emancipatory urbanisms, it is difficult to build a comparable case pertaining to pinchazos. Gonick illustrates that the mainstreaming of illegal occupation is shifting common sense beliefs around homeownership as necessary for full inclusion in urban life. In contrast, for most of those reliant on pinchazos who I encountered in Catalonia, this was seen as a form of ‘theft’ to be ashamed of.

Returning, for a moment, to the post-apartheid South African context, comments made by scholar–activist Trevor Ngwane of the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee (SECC) shed further light on the situation in Catalonia:

I remember a time when in the SECC meetings people who were illegally connected would be asked to raise their hands, and almost everyone’s hands would go up. There’d be this sense of relief as almost everyone would be illegally connected. The only thing was that they were doing it as a criminal act individually. So, it was a question of turning what was a criminal act into a collective act of defiance (cited in Naidoo and Veriava, 2009: 321).

If the political prospects of pinchazos seem somewhat ambiguous, perhaps the notion of ‘collective defiance’ deployed by Ngwane might provide a clearer sense of possibility. Indeed, in Gonick’s case of squatting in Madrid, the common sense shifts she traces are associated with the ways in which this practice is collectivized through dedicated political organizing. In contrast, *pinchar*—rejected as a viable organizing tactic by APE—remains individualized and atomizing. I want to suggest, in the next section, that the ‘everyday’ energy politics enacted by APE charts a more hopeful collective path.

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6 The comparative approach adopted here might also be taken to evidence the argument that energy poverty is a ‘global’ condition which in some ways connects experiences across ‘Northern’ and ‘Southern’ contexts (see Bouzarovski and Petrova, 2015).
Irregular connections II: APE as social infrastructure

On a brilliant morning in early April, during my first week in Barcelona, I joined a crowd of 100 or so APE activists in strolling through the open doors of energy firm Endesa’s customer service office on Gran Via, a busy main road close to the famous Plaza de Cataluña.

I remember, upon arrival in the clinical corporate space, grey-haired men laughing as they started to race on office chairs. Loud whistles beginning to blow. Jackets and sweaters swiftly removed to reveal a sea of red APE T-shirts, displaying the slogan: ‘Ni set, ni fred, ni foscor!’ (no thirst, no cold, no darkness!). Younger people huddling round smartphones. Others bringing out books and magazines; the woman next to me starting a crossword puzzle. And then, soon, jubilant chants of ‘Sí Se Puede!’ (yes we can/it can be done!) as together we moved deeper into the office. ‘Tenemos derechos: agua, luz y gas!’ (we have rights: water, light and gas!) was the next chant as music erupted from a portable sound system and we danced and sang. Out of nowhere piles of Endesa bills appeared and we ripped them up with glee, throwing the shreds into the air. Office tables became kitchen surfaces as enormous bags of bread, cured meats, cheese, tomatoes and fizzy drinks arrived for lunch. As banners were hung on the office frontage, car after car passed by, horns beeping in support.

Meanwhile, back inside the office, around 20 afectadas living in occupied homes commandeered a booth to begin filling in the documentation required to make an application for regularized connections. This was the third time that Endesa offices had been occupied by APE in pursuit of electricity access for squatted homes. While Endesa bosses initially refused to engage in any dialogue, management relented after an exhausting 28-hour protest and agreed to a meeting the following day. Addressing the APE assembly that evening, group spokesperson Maria reflected: ‘Getting Endesa round the table with us to talk about connections for occupied homes is something we never thought could happen. It is a real step forward, but there’s a long fight ahead’. The woman I sat next to agreed: ‘A little victory is a big victory. All victories are very important’.

My experience of the occupation turned out to be a fitting introduction to the forms of praxis enacted by APE, to which I now turn.

Energy as social reproduction
‘Ni set, ni fred, ni foscor!’ (no thirst, no cold, no darkness!); ‘Tenemos derechos: agua, luz y gas!’ (we have rights: water, light and gas!). These slogans, repeated throughout APE’s activities, tell us something foundational regarding the group, which mark it out as unique within actors participating in energy debates. This is the inclusion of water alongside electricity and gas within campaigning around ‘energy poverty’. Campaigners working on both water and energy issues were involved in the formation of the network in 2014. Meanwhile, there was a realization that people struggling to access electricity and gas are likely to encounter difficulties accessing water too. Thus, the demand for ‘basic supplies’ across the board made sense. It is, moreover, impossible to understand APE in isolation from struggles around housing and, in particular, its relationship to PAH. Many APE afectadas are directed to the group from PAH; both networks actively support each other’s activities and often organize joint protests and events. ‘APE is PAH; PAH is APE’, as one activist put it to me.

As such, APE’s campaigning spans a range of materialities. Indeed, both APE and PAH frame their struggles as part of the overarching right to a dignified life. The

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7 Endesa is the largest electricity utility firm in Spain. Established as a state-owned company in 1944, the company has post-1988 been sold off to private investors. It is now majority-owned by Italian firm Enel (Endesa, 2017). With Endesa owning and operating the majority of Catalonia’s electricity distribution networks (including Barcelona’s), as well as being the region’s leading supply company, they are a key target for APE’s campaigning.

8 APE move fluidly between Castilian and Catalan. My linguistic choices seek to remain authentic to the original language in which communication takes place.
first principle of APE’s work is: ‘Universal access to basic supplies: all families, even if they cannot pay, should have the minimum services required to live with dignity’ (APE, 2017). We can, then, understand APE as translating the concept of energy as social reproduction more broadly. The struggle is not waged solely around access to electricity or gas; the aim is instead to secure all that is required to reproduce ourselves as healthy and flourishing subjects. Accordingly, debates around ‘energy’ within APE bypass the abstract technical discourses that often pervade. Instead of questions of electrons, carbon emissions or economics, APE recognize Matt Huber’s (2013: 7) provocation that ‘energy is life itself’. The result is a de-fetishized understanding of ‘energy’, exploding the idea of a singular ‘magical substance’ (Lohmann and Hildyard, 2014) and casting our attention instead on the multiple power-laden processes through which bodies are made thirsty or hungry, or homes made cold or dark (Doshi, 2017).

For APE activist Mònica, this ‘life-centred’ outlook helps constitute a feminist praxis:

We didn’t know that we would have so many women taking part [in APE], no, so it’s kind of a surprise, or it could seem random. But then you realize it’s not, because the people who are sustaining these precarious lives are normally women in the families ... Some feminist practices are present in APE, not only because we are many women there but because it’s life-centred, like, sustaining lives is what matters. That is what guides our discourse, that is what guides our priorities maybe.

Given the gendered division of labour integral to capitalism, the work of ‘sustaining precarious lives’ falls disproportionately upon women (Mitchell et al., 2004; Federici, 2012b; Meehan and Strauss, 2015; Bhattacharya, 2017). Thus, more often than not, it is women who come to APE for support. Yet the gender of those who participate in APE is of course no marker of feminist praxis. Rather, Mònica’s suggestion is that there is something particular about the group’s ‘life-centred’ outlook that generates an explicitly feminist politics: if APE can be understood as translating energy as social reproduction, their political project can be read as oriented around transforming the social relations that reproductive practices are constituted in and through. The next sections seek to excavate the detail of this feminist praxis further.

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Mutual support

Integral to APE’s struggle is a collectivized, politicized and antagonistic approach to ‘casework’. On this model, afectadas seeking support must come to a fortnightly asesoramiento meeting, in which others present—usually a mix of both ‘activists’, who joined the group out of pre-existing political commitments, and other afectadas, who first came to APE to find solutions to their own cases—will offer advice with the aim of empowering people to find their own solutions. Asesoramientos begin with a short ‘welcome’ statement, read aloud, which says much about APE’s outlook:

Welcome everyone, you are in the best place, you are no longer alone: this is a space of mutual support and trust. Be clear that this is not a crisis, it is a con ... We are not experts but with advice you can fight your own case ... We do not make miracles, but our collective struggle can win. What we want is for people to know their rights and learn to defend themselves. We give you all of the tools but you are your own lawyer.

APE, then, seek to organize on the basis of mutual solidarity rather than charity: afectadas are encouraged to remain active in the group after their own situations have improved, using the knowledge they have gained in the process to support others.
A key tactic is ‘accompaniment’, in which a group of APE activists go with an individual to the office of the relevant utility firm to negotiate in respect of her case. Accompaniment actions are complemented by larger-scale protests and direct actions articulating more general demands. The ways in which APE seek to render the lives of afectadas less precarious, then, tend to involve collective antagonistic confrontations with the institutions seen as responsible for this precarity (Butler, 2004).

The mutual support network of APE is qualitatively different in terms of ‘getting by’ from the makeshift urbanism of pinchazos. While those reliant on pinchazos tend to come to APE feeling alone, afraid and ashamed, APE functions as a social infrastructure (Simone, 2004b) through which new relations and affects of solidarity and collectivity are fostered (Brown and Pickerill, 2009a; 2009b). For Federici (2012a), endeavours to transform social reproduction must be attentive to the quality and character of reproductive relations internal to the struggle itself. Accordingly, just as APE seeks to remake reproductive relations through ensuring access to basic services, it seeks to foster relations of care and community within and between members of the group—here arises the feminist praxis alluded to by Mònica.

Indeed, the group is often referred to explicitly as a ‘family’. Within this family, moments of joy are frequent, from the office chair races and dancing during the Endesa occupation through to the emphasis on celebrating small victories in the assembly the following evening. All roles that contribute to these victories are valued: ‘The person who is in charge of bringing cookies, I think we owe this person everything’, Mònica told me. ‘It makes the movement more inclusive and it ... I think it also gives a lot of importance to all the work that is invisible, most times related to women’. Thus, APE prefigure reproductive relations in which patriarchal divisions of labour begin to be undone (Federici, 2012a). For those within this new family, the emotional and affective experience can be profound (Brown and Pickerill, 2009a; 2009b). ‘Talking about APE makes me cry. For me it’s a feeling, a really important thing’, Esther told me. ‘What’s special with APE is the spirit’, explained an afectado named Pablo, ‘it comes from the soul. You really feel it’.

As with any prefigurative political project, residual relations of power pose a real challenge. In APE’s case, class divisions between ‘activists’ and ‘afectadas’ should not be overlooked. Much knowledge and expertise within the group is concentrated among a small group of experienced activists. Yet, that said, it is precisely because of the solidarity-based model of casework adopted that many afectadas become key activists. This blurs the afectada–activist binary and constitutes a core group of organizers with far greater class diversity than is typical of most European energy activist projects I have encountered previously (see e.g. Schlembach, 2011).

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The ‘right to energy’

If, then, APE crafts family and joy out of loneliness, shame and fear, it likewise fosters confidence and antagonism. Integral to this is the insistence on energy as a right. Energy access is often discussed as a human right with, for instance, the UN special rapporteur on adequate housing including access to electricity as one aspect of the human right to housing, and several nation states including France and South Africa similarly purporting to treat electricity access as a human right (Tully, 2006). The concept of the right to energy has also made its way into scholarly discussions, with Bradbrook and Gardam (2006) arguing that energy services should be understood as such and Pilo (2017) undertaking an interesting exploration of how the regularization of electricity access in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro might relate to the broader question of the ‘right to the city’. Gordon Walker (2015), however, worries that the right to energy is a vague and ambiguous concept, easily co-opted by state and capital (see also Bakker, 2007). Indeed, for Angel and Loftus (2017), rights-based politics more generally risk reifying the state as an independent arbitrator of justice. Yet Walker (2015: 36)
stresses that ‘multiple, alternative ways of defining and realising the right to energy are available’, with Angel and Loftus arguing that rights claims can be integrated into broader strategies for transformative change. APE, I suggest, develops a discourse of the right to energy that portends this kind of transformative potential.

As discussed already, APE understands the right to energy as one component of the broader right to a dignified life. As such, the group’s concern is winning universal access to the energy services necessary in pursuit of this more general right. On the one hand, APE advocates for the right to energy as a legal right in an attempt to gain strategic concessions from the state. Thus, the Catalan law secured in 2015, prohibiting electricity, gas and water disconnections for households designated as ‘vulnerable’, is understood by APE as an important step towards the right to energy.

Yet while APE’s pursuit of the right to energy involves strategic engagement with state and legal processes, the group’s deployment of the notion of the right to energy far exceeds this. The right to energy, as enacted by APE, is a right demanded through collective struggle, as opposed to one granted to individuals from benevolent institutions (Harvey, 2008). Understood as such, the right to energy becomes an antagonistic discourse and set of political practices, and vitally a tool for shifting affect and consciousness. For the way that APE discusses and demands energy as a right fosters a sense of righteous entitlement: if energy is a right, then it is those who violate this right who are in the wrong. APE’s discourse of the right to energy encourages afectadas to feel deserving of all they need to live well; to understand their precarity as emergent from a deeply unjust political economy as opposed to their own personal inadequacies (Butler, 2004); to claim their entitlements collectively through contestatory action. This serves to combat the guilt and shame associated with poverty, debt and disconnection from formal urban infrastructures.

In this sense, while APE does advocate the right to energy as a legal right to be won from state processes, the group is equally concerned with the subjective effect that conceiving of and demanding energy as a right can have on those who make this demand. Thus, APE offers us a way of considering the right to energy as a powerful means towards making both new laws and new subjects, portending a rights-based politics that can avoid some of the worries around co-optation discussed by the commentators above.

— Shifting subjectivities

Accordingly, the right to energy becomes part of a broader process within APE pertaining to the formation of unruly political subjectivities (Ruddick et al., 2018). Explaining her feelings about utility firms prior to joining APE, Valeria told me: ‘I thought that they put up the prices too much, that they were thieves’. On the question of whether these feelings had changed since joining, she said: ‘I still think the same way, but now I realize that you can fight, you can support each other in order to change things’. Lucia, a middle-aged Colombian migrant, expanded on her own journey:

I’ve always been very rebellious, but I’ve never taken part in demonstrations, social activism, going to demonstrations, protesting against something, no … Before PAH I was afraid, since 2008 when the problem with the banks started and it was terrible ... In 2011 afraid didn’t come close. It was frightening, I was terrified ... But in 2013 I’m not afraid ... Because I’m able to fight with anybody: banks, politicians, injustice. I’m not alone. There are many people with my same problem. You know when, for example, we say in APE, when we do the welcome sessions, they say: ‘you feel better when you see the other people have the same problems’. Now this is my strength.

In these cases, pre-existing disillusionment, anger and rebellious tendencies, are the foundations from which—through collective support and struggle—more actively dissensual subjectivities arise (Rancière, 1999; Dikeç 2007; 2013). It is in thinking through
these processes that Loftus’ (2012) provocation towards an everyday environmentalist understanding becomes particularly generative. The ‘cyborg consciousness’ theorized by Loftus via Haraway (1991) is fraught and fragmented. In the terminology of Gramsci, layers of historically segmented ‘common sense’ coexist alongside a kernel of ‘good sense’. New situated knowledges that arise, then, do not come out of nowhere, nor does it take a vanguard of activists to lift the veil of false consciousness. Rather, pre-existing tendencies and understandings within ‘incomplete and differentiated subject[s] in a process of becoming’ (Loftus, 2012: 56) provide the ‘conditions of possibility’ for understandings of the socio-ecological environment that more directly threaten its transformation.

The antagonistic solidarities fostered through APE, in these instances, change how people understand themselves and the possibilities they have to act alongside others to change the world, reconfiguring the social ontologies of urban life (Ruddick et al., 2018). Certainly, this is not true for all APE afectadas, many of whom leave the group after finding a resolution to their own case, and many of whom continue to live highly precarious lives. But the point, following Loftus (2012) is to identify the conditions of possibility (never a guarantee) for pre-existing ‘good sense’ to be solidified and expanded upon—conditions that emerge through the praxis of APE.

Huber (2013) argues that the materiality of oil as an abundant and easily flowing liquid fuel has helped facilitate the atomized and privatized regime of social reproduction that characterizes neoliberal capitalism. This is premised upon the bounded family unit, charged with the ‘entrepreneurial’ tasks necessary to reproduce the individual household unit over time. Sultana (2011) highlights that the power relations underpinning the socio-ecological processes which sustain life are mediated through embodied emotions and affects. Thus, when we lack the financial means to buy the commodities required to reproduce ourselves, we are made to feel like we have failed as an entrepreneurial household (Huber, 2013), with women in particular shouldering this affective burden. We are made to feel it is our fault and our own responsibility to alleviate the problem. We find ourselves afraid and uncertain as to how to get by.

The power of APE’s social infrastructure, and what distinguishes it from individualized pinchazo practices, is that the affective basis for the ‘hostile privatism’ described by Huber begins to shift. Returning to Ngwane’s take on the situation in Soweto, the sense of ‘relief’ he describes through the overcoming of individualization and isolation is palpable within APE. Out of this relief comes the possibility for ‘collective defiance’. When we feel supported, that we are no longer alone and that we are entitled to the dignity which relations of gender, race and capital deny us, we can begin to understand ourselves, each other and the broader socio-ecological environment in very different ways. Thus, the affective and emotional become vital terrains of struggle for crafting alternative socio-ecological trajectories (Brown and Pickerill, 2009a; 2009b). This, I have argued, is what the everyday energy politics of APE can achieve. In the final section, I will argue that out of this achievement comes the potential for challenging the violence of the commodity form.

**In-against-and-beyond the commodity form**

The result of APE’s call for regularized connections for everyone is the somewhat paradoxical situation described previously, whereby those currently accessing supplies for free through pinchazos are turning to antagonistic protests in order to persuade utility firms to take them on as paying customers. Is there not a risk, here, of reproducing the reified commodity form?

Perhaps. Yet the demand for regularized connections must be contextualized. As alluded to previously, APE’s campaigning secured a new law introduced by the Catalan government in 2015, illegalizing water, electricity and gas disconnections for people designated as ‘vulnerable’ across the whole region. Ambiguities in the translation of vulnerability, alongside variations in the ways in which this law has been enforced...
(Barcelona being stricter than many other Catalan municipalities), have allowed utility firms to continue to disconnect some precarious households. And the functionality of the law continues to shift as national legislation changes, for instance with the introduction of a Spanish national law in October 2017 intended to prohibit disconnections for ‘severely vulnerable’ households. In any case, the impact of the law remains significant: the new norm is that those who own or rent their houses generally maintain formal connections when they cannot pay, with arrears accruing in the process. For illegal occupiers, however, utilities firms are using a legal loophole to refuse to abide by the law, with the Catalan government arguing that they have no power to stop this.

The demand for regularized connections for illegal occupiers, therefore, is the second stage of a broader strategy, which began with the law described above. If this second demand is met, the group intends to address the question of arrears accrued by non-paying households by calling for these debts to be written off. Taken together, this amounts to a plan to practically realize the broader understanding of the right to basic services alluded to in the previous section, in which access to water, gas and electricity is ensured, regardless of ability to pay.

This can be read as an approach that works in-against-and-beyond the commodity form. John Holloway (2002; 2016) advocates for a politics situated in-against-and-beyond capitalism itself: necessarily, we act within capitalist relations but can do so in ways that challenge these relations and ultimately prefigure forms of life beyond them. APE’s fluid relation to the commoditization of basic services can also be read through the lens of this trialectic. Thus, the inadequacy of pinchazo connections necessitates APE’s demand for regularized connections, which forces the group to work within the commodity form. Yet APE fully recognizes that the right to basic supplies stands in direct contradiction to their commodification. Hence, their struggle—for the legalization of vulnerable disconnections, the regularization of occupiers’ connections and, ultimately, the eradication of arrears—begins to work against the commoditization of these services and ultimately moves the prospect of a world beyond the commodity form onto our political horizons, even beginning to bring this world into being on an incremental basis (Silver, 2014).

Yet this approach should not be venerated without consideration of its limitations. Firstly, a situation in which those who cannot pay access supplies for free does not preclude those who can pay still purchasing these supplies as commodities. The point, then, is that APE’s demands push against the logic of the commodity, disturbing the idea that such supplies must be paid for, irrespective of financial means.

Moreover, the prospects for implementing APE’s strategy are unclear. The 2015 Catalan law was unanimously approved by the Catalan parliament, in part due to the right-wing pro-independence Partit Demòcrata Europeu Català’s strategy of fomenting conflict with the Spanish state. In this regard, they were successful, with the Spanish Constitutional Court challenging the law in 2016 and overturning articles related to evictions and household debt. Articles pertaining to disconnections, however, remain intact for now, despite fears that these would be overturned in the aftermath of the 2017 referendum and imposition of direct rule from Madrid. The struggle in defence of this law, then, is ongoing. Beyond this unresolved conflict, it is unclear whether the current demand for regularized connections for occupiers will soon be met, never mind the question of a debt jubilee.

Finally, APE’s exclusive focus on questions of energy and water access perhaps occludes the questions of ecological crisis, climate change and energy transition that this article began with. Here, Mònica’s comments are instructive:

APE arises from what we encounter in day-by-day struggle and it’s so urgent that maybe the first thing you think of is not ‘I want to save the planet’ because you think ‘I want to save my family’.
Urban political ecological accounts such as Loftus’ ‘everyday environmentalism’ perspective demonstrate that the question of access to water and energy is at once ‘social’ and ‘ecological’ (Swyngedouw, 2004; Gandy, 2005; Heynen et al., 2006; Loftus, 2012). Rather than reading APE’s focus as a provocation towards ‘social’ as opposed to ‘ecological’ activism, Mònica’s comments remind us of the problematics of an ecological praxis detached from the day-to-day struggles she alludes to (Loftus, 2012). This helps refocus our attention on the question this article started with: a technical and abstract conception of energy far removed from everyday life. If APE, as I have suggested, helps to point us towards a more everyday energy politics, an important question for future thought is how seemingly abstract processes such as climate change and energy transition might be reframed and politicized through their relevance to daily reproductive practices (ibid.).

Conclusion

This article has sought to respond to a specific problematic that advocates of emancipatory energy alternatives and transitions must take seriously: the ways in which an abstract and technical conceptualization of energy obscures connections to everyday life. Rather than devoting the article to a thoroughgoing critique of the failure of contemporary energy struggles to engage with the everyday, my strategy has been instead to think through what happens when this kind of engagement is present, and to illuminate the vitality and hope inherent in the forms of praxis that can emerge. I have argued that APE’s everyday translation of ‘energy’ as social reproduction is the departure point for a form of politics that can shift affect, consciousness and subjectivities, and in turn begin to challenge the generalization of the commodity form to energy and other commons necessary to sustain life.

Conversations with a range of theoretical interlocutors have helped inform this argument, yet the work of Alex Loftus (ibid.) in Everyday Environmentalism has been a particularly productive departure point in informing my analysis. Here, Loftus contends that daily reproductive struggles to access urban infrastructures in Durban open possibilities for new situated understandings of the socio-ecological processes through which these infrastructures are constituted, and in turn might provide the grounds for forms of struggle that threaten the transformation of these processes. Taking inspiration from this account, my argument has been that, in Catalonia, APE’s success in intervening in the processes through which urban infrastructure networks are produced is conditional upon the forms of affect and consciousness that differentiated engagements with these urban infrastructures might render possible.

More specifically, my argument has relied upon a distinction between two forms of ‘irregular connections’: the irregular connections to urban infrastructure networks that are established through pinchazos; and the irregular connections of collectivity and care between people that are crafted within APE. In making this distinction, I have sought to show that the political potentialities of an everyday approach to energy can in no sense be assumed as given. Rather, my argument has been that a more formalized and collectivized social infrastructure is, in this instance, transformative. This does not imply that the same follows for other materialities in other historical geographical contexts. Bayat (2000), for example, argues that individualized forms of quiet encroachment in Middle Eastern cities emerge out of the absence of conditions conducive towards collective organization.

While my wish, then, is not to make sweeping generalizations, my instinct is that there is something powerful about APE’s insistence on being-and-doing-together that holds relevance more broadly. Indeed, at various points in the article, I have also alluded to the ways in which the desire to shift atomized survival strategies into ‘collective defiance’ has animated a lively form of everyday energy politics in Soweto. Thus, if the struggle for the right to energy in Catalonia usurps fetishizing technical discourses to
reframe energy as a question of how we sustain life, the relations of care and conviviality fostered in the process might, perhaps, portend liberated answers.

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