

Between Luxury and Necessity: Electricity in Britain, 1920s–1950s

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This paper explores the impact of wartime social policy on the development of electrification in Britain. Although conventional accounts of the social penetration of electricity focus almost exclusively on technical and commercial developments, the experience of wartime Britain shows that social policy played a significant role in shaping the pattern of electricity consumption and in moulding the social understanding of electricity. In the late 1930s, consumers largely regarded electricity as a luxury commodity, but when Britain came out of the Second World War, a large part of the population began looking at electricity as a basic necessity of life. What was crucial in the changing social status of electricity was the public discussion over the introduction of a comprehensive household fuel rationing, which was submitted to parliament by William Beveridge in 1942. The failure of its implementation resulted in consumers' move away from controlled fuel, house coal, as they shifted to uncontrolled electricity and gas. The greater dependency on electricity contributed to making it a basic household fuel. Social policy regarding the exclusion of electricity from basic commodity control resulted in making it a necessity. This also meant that a gap was created between how electricity was treated in social policy and how consumers saw it. The gap between social policy and consumer expectations was widened in the post-war period. In the late 1940s, electrical appliances were taxed as non-essential commodities despite appeals from electrification advocates who argued that electricity was no longer a luxury. The purchase tax was a refusal to acknowledge electricity as a necessity, effectively slowing down the penetration of electrical appliances. This paper demonstrates the profound impact of social policy on shaping the course of electrification in Britain in the broad context of the transformation of electricity from luxury to necessity.