Book review:

***Interpreting Energy at Museums and Historic Sites*. By Leah S. Glaser. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2023. xvii+205. Appendix, recommended reading, index.**[1]

In English, the word power could mean both "the ability to control people or things" and the "energy that can be collected and used to operate a machine or to make electricity". Science and environmental historians have stressed in recent years the close connections between these two definitions, between economic and political power and the generation and distribution of energy. As Leah S. Glaser's *Interpreting Energy at Museums and Historical Sites*, published within the American Association for State and Local History "Interpreting History" book series, states "those with access to plentiful, reliable, and safe electrical power are most often those with access to economic and political power" (p. 166). On the other end, those with less economic and political power not only do not have complete access to energy but are also those who suffer more intensely its several drawbacks. In addition, as many scholars have highlighted, the production of energy has been "historically and deliberately hidden" to most of its consumers, who "tend not to notice" (p.6) its infrastructures and impacts, which perpetuates those inequalities.

One of the main points of Glaser's book is that museums have the capacity, the power, to contribute to make energy visible, to invite the public to think critically about energy generation, distribution and use. Museums have recently begun to address climate change, but few have critically addressed energy and energy use as primary interpretative themes. Traditionally, North American museums and historical sites have interpreted energy following and reinforcing dominant narratives based on progress, innovation, technological determinism, technological history and nostalgia from past times. Narratives that maintain the disconnection between the energy consumer and its production and negative effects on people and environment. So, *Interpreting Energy* aims to provide tools and resources for museum professionals to stop sustaining those narratives and began to use new ones that highlight the "connections between sources of energy and their use" (p. xvi), and, not so explicitly stated, between energy and economic and political power.

To do so, Glaser analyses how museums and historical sites interpret energy and how could this interpretation be improved in the lines already stated. The book is organized in

seven chapters, plus introduction and conclusions, devoted to the different energy sources (wood, water, steam, fossil fuels, nuclear and renewable). Those chapters are divided into four sections. The first section briefly reviews scholarly works on the historical context of each energy, mostly in the United States, with the aim to "offer guidance to interpret energy use" to professionals (p. xv). The second section, "interpreting…" each energy, provides an overview of how each energy has been so far interpreted in museums and historical sites, recognizing its main problems. In the third section of each chapter, Glaser describes specific case studies to highlight both how those traditional narratives are perpetuated and how solutions for alternative interpretations have been developed. Finally, Glaser concludes each chapter with an "artifact spotlight" which suggests potential objects to provide critical interpretations of energy. After the conclusion, the book finishes with an annotated bibliography to come up with references to museum professionals on energy history and help them to identify themes and think critically about energy.

Interpreting Energy presents useful case studies that show how energy production and consumption inequalities could be analysed in museum settings and how heritage and material culture more generally could be used "to think critically about our attitudes toward energy technology and its relationship to the environment, in both the past and the present" (p. 68). Yet, there are also some points for improvement. These could be divided into three great groups.

First, despite Glaser identifies power connections, energy invisibilities and how traditional narratives have perpetuated them, its use of the scholarly works that have critically analysed them is limited. The book cites some good historiography on those topics but does not always develop its points enough, and it also lacks other interesting reflections that could improve museum energy interpretations. This can be partly attributed to the aims and scope of the book, but, in my view, approaches like Andreas Malm's capital-centred interpretation, very briefly described in the book; Jaume Franquesa's power struggles regarding renewable energy, or Marco Armiero's focus on waste, could greatly benefit the stated aim to give materials for critical thinking for museums and heritage sites. Two "shocks" could illustrate this better. On the one hand, historian of technology David Edgerton's already classic *The Shock of the Old* could be a powerful tool to critically address innovation narratives in museums, in addition to reinforce Glaser's stress on material culture as narrative focus. On the other hand,

Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz's *The Shock of the Anthropocene* could have been extremely useful to accomplish the book purposes regarding critical approaches to industrialism, and, more specifically, to the so-called energy transitions.

Second, the book focuses mostly on local or regional museums and heritage sites in the United States. This is not bad *per se*, it could be instead very useful precisely if professionals working on those sites, are the main aimed public. But, in terms of analysing historical interpretations of energy in museums, the book lacks a deeper understanding of how wood, coal or, especially, fossil fuels are interpreted in the context of big national museums, and in other geographical contexts like the United Kingdom or Europe. Mostly because to understand those contexts could provide mechanisms to improve museum energy interpretations, even in those local or regional museums and sites.

Third, despite when dealing with historical recreations of steam power, Gleaser discusses the problems of private for-profit historical experiences, I think the book could benefit of a deeper analysis of the similarities and differences between different types of museums, from fully public to fully private, including sponsored public museums or non-profit organizations. This analysis could help to understand how and why certain energy narratives have been highlighted and certain negative consequences, like climate change, waste o water contamination have been obscured. So, why a certain museum exhibit quotes like "although the search for oil and natural gas may have caused acid rain, oil spills and global warming, it is hard to imagine a completely petroleum-free future" (p. 92) deserves further examination of where the money comes from.

To sum up, despite those weak points, *Interpreting Energy at Museums and Historical Sites* is a useful book both for the aimed public of museum professionals and for historians who are interested in how energy has been and is portrayed and interpreted in exhibitions and heritage sites.

Miquel Carandell Baruzzi
Postdoctoral researcher at PCI2023-143370
"Museums and Industry: Long Stories of Collaboration"
Institut d'Història de la Ciència, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona