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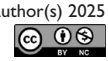

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A crisis of energy: War and heat in the professional kitchens of North East England

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Abstract

The invasion of Ukraine by Russia in February 2022 led to a dramatic increase in energy prices in the United Kingdom. Chefs interviewed in North East England were found already struggling with post-lockdown re-opening, now huge energy bills and food shortages as a result of war, and then the conditions of a record-breaking heatwave in the summer of that year. This article conceptualises these experiences as a crisis of energy: the re-routing of desire through a consumerist system that is open-ended with war and the production of heat – and that is now collapsing. It is argued that the professional kitchen is situated at the intersection of flows of energy – consumer desire, bellicosity, electricity, the logistical kinesis of commodities – that underpin the everyday practices of the chef but that are now organised in a system of unproductive capitalism that is marked by shocks that disrupt those same practices. In response to the strain of crises, this system has a tendency to perpetuate itself through a retrenchment in consumerist homogeneity and an abandonment of the care and attention required for a convivial and sustainable future – for the food service sector or more broadly.

Keywords

Chefs, consumerism, food service, fossil fuels, supply chains

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On 24 February 2022 Russia invaded Ukraine. The auditing service KPMG (2022) reported delays of, among other things, oil and gas, and wheat and corn, that transportation costs were spiking as ships were left stranded at docks, that the disruption was compounded by sanctions, and that all of this had an acute effect on the food service sector. Energy and food supplies were disrupted – and prices soared. This was a sector already rocked by the COVID-19 pandemic, the lockdowns and the social distancing measures that kept people in their homes, away from each other and out of eateries (Nerlich and Jaspal, 2021). *The Caterer* reports that 13,037 businesses in the hospitality sector (which encompasses the food service sector) permanently closed in the United Kingdom between 2020 and 2023; COVID-19 was a big factor in this, but the energy crisis of 2022 was even more so, with 18 hospitality businesses closing every day in the fourth quarter of that year (Witts, 2023).

This was a sector that, just a few months after the invasion of Ukraine, would be rocked again by the soaring temperatures of a heatwave. The Met Office recorded the hottest day ever in England on 19 July 2022, 40.3˚C in Lincolnshire on the east coast, an extreme datapoint amid what was the UK's hottest ever year (Met Office, 2022, 2023). Extreme heat threatens pollinators and crops and the interactions between the two, negatively impacting crop yields and threatening supply chains – and the resilience of the entire food system (Walters et al., 2022). Climate change threatens the collapse of the food service sector, as does the reliance on fossil fuels that accelerate global heating.

This is an article – informed by interviews with chefs – about working in professional kitchens during a crisis of energy. The purpose is to show how the everyday practices of the professional kitchen are disrupted by large-scale events that can seem distant to the lifeworld of the chef. The first section sets out literature on professional kitchens and on food preparation in order to establish the everyday experience of the chef. This is then violently juxtaposed with a conceptual account of systemic failure that weaves together critical theories that reflect the extremity of the crises communicated by the chefs who participated in this study. The apparent incongruence of the everyday and of the structures of and in crisis echoes the experiences of the participants, who felt their kitchens interrupted and imperilled by vast, alien and unassailable forces. After an account of method and a presentation of findings, the conceptual account is used to contextualise the chefs' experiences and to explain their interrelation with a wider crisis of energy.

The argument is that despite the appearance of distance, the professional kitchen is intimately bound to war and global heating by supply chains and pipelines and that the desire satisfied by the work of the chef situates the professional kitchen in a libidinal economy marked by a crisis of energy. The crisis of energy is shown to be more than the result of a volatile system of energy supply; it is really the ongoing collapse of a consumerist system that can no longer sustain the way that it satisfies energetic desire via supply chains and energy supplies that situate the professional kitchen squarely within a war economy that has no answers to global heating.

Literature

The classic account of the everyday practices of the professional chef is provided by Gary Fine (1996) in his ethnographic study *Kitchens*. Fine characterises the

professional kitchen as 'the apotheosis of free-market capitalism, production lines, a consumption economy and interorganizational linkages' (Fine, 1996: 1). The work of chefs is understood as nonetheless an aesthetic mode of production, where chefs take pride in the full sensorial qualities of what they produce, despite the often harsh economic realities they face, given this lineage. This aesthetic work is not only delimited by finances but also by consumer tastes and time constraints. The work of the chef is skilled, complex – involving juggling multiple tasks that are on their own fairly straightforward given the requisite skill but together 'nearly impossible' for all but the most experienced (Fine, 1996: 22) – and unpredictable, given that it is rarely certain how many diners will turn up or what they will order.

Chefs are socialised into accepting what many would consider extreme working environments (hot, dangerous, intense – with an air of violence), a socialisation that finds its purest expression in the brigade systems of fine dining establishments and which then trickles down through other eateries as those chefs move for work, replicating the hierarchy in whole or in part (Burrow et al., 2015). Those hierarchies are strict and yet highly collaborative and creative (Lortie et al., 2022). Those hierarchies are also enmeshed within the wider structures of the agri-food system, the growers and wholesalers and logistics companies (Böhm et al., 2020). These structures then capture food production in systems of value production and capital accumulation (Ernwein et al., 2021)

The relationship of the chef to the produce these structures provide changes with time, with certain ingredients elevated or diminished in status, as seen with the higher standing given to vegetables in haute cuisine, which then trickles down to other establishments along the same routes the chefs travel (Gomez and Bouty, 2011). Getting to grips with this produce requires a sort of relational positioning between chefs, to determine how something should look, how it should taste, and how it should be cut (Louisgrand and Islam, 2021). But it is also a mode of 'sense in action', an approach to the organisation of ingredients into a dish via sensorial practices (Bispo and Silva, 2022). This gastronomic creativity is then legitimated through a 'politics of meaning', which acts to say that these are legitimate organisations, legitimate sensations and legitimate processes (Slavich et al., 2020).

One way of legitimating what is created is by framing it around the already existing connection between health and sustainability in the face of climate change, joining what can seem individual to the collective to challenge food regimes and practices that are wasteful or unsustainable or actively deleterious to the environment (Dal Gobbo, 2024). Where food is grown, how it is transported, where and how it is cooked and served, and what happens to the waste, Susan Parham (2017: np) argues, are all integral to imagining 'a sustainable, resilient and convivial future'. While a focus on food and dining can seem distant to war and global heating, often characterised as an elite obsession (Parham, 2017: 8), perhaps an aesthetic matter or one limited to the satisfaction of desires, it is nonetheless paramount to understanding the global system – and the crises it faces.

Theory

Eating out is a response to desire. Jean-François Lyotard (2004) understood the energetic flows of desire as *intensities*: unbound excitations of force. These intensities are not held

captive by the body; they run within the body as a system, but a system that does not end at the skin and instead opens onto other systems through which intensities can flow. Energy moves freely from inside out and outside in. Intensities produce what is identified after the fact as relationships, as societies, as economies and so on, once the intensities cool. Desire is beautiful, but its intensity is terrifying because to desire is to suffer the compulsion of this force. Desire, as Lyotard (2004: 39) puts it, is 'having to cry near to areas struck by lightning'. The individual is forced, compelled by intensities that make vulnerable precisely because they are a force that is not willed.

Trade or politics or economics only appear to be systems that prevent the extension of desire beyond the body and into the organisation of the world. They are instead 'intensive regions' (Lyotard, 2004: 76). These systems or regions are not straightforwardly de-intensifying, as much as we perceive them as the triumph of rationality over affect. But these systems do attempt to channel intensities into more stable forms. Here, Lyotard (2004: 212) uses the figure of the centaur: with its hind legs, the centaur kicks up desire; with its front legs, it stands on the chest, squashing intensity into conformity and the same. All systems are like this. The danger is that those acting within the system act as if it was never animated in the first place by something as overexcited and volatile as desire. This would miss that the professional kitchen as apotheosis of a system of supply-side economics is connected to wider structures and crises by intensive flows.

The strongman politics of this time, exemplified by Putin's invasion of Ukraine, which threw the food service sector in the United Kingdom into such turmoil, does seem to acknowledge that politics and economics are not absent flows of desire. A bellicose intensity present in all bodies can be overexcited and then channelled into the mass production of death, a latent force turned to nationalism and to war by power. More lightning: Alliez and Lazzarato (2016: 11) suggest that the political economies of this time 'carry wars within them like clouds contain storms', given the reliance on a resource scarcity that feeds conflict, on supply routes that skirt geopolitical tensions, and on fossil fuels that by warming the planet precipitate a mass migration that provokes the militarisation of borders. It is by war that power amasses capital and by war that it then secures both capital and its own power, to the extent that, as Deleuze and Guattari (2004: 464) argue, war itself is not the primary object, which is instead the continued and extended capture of everything in the circuits of value and capital accumulation.

Those social institutions that Lyotard says are only after the fact of desire identifiable as institutions are run through with war; because the military complex and the social system are open-ended, the war abroad always returns home in the form of discipline and control. Lyotard says that the economy is always already a libidinal economy; Alliez and Lazzarato would add that the economy is also always already a war economy. This means that what appears cold – a war become everyday, in the form of disrupted supplies and rising energy prices – is more accurately the feedback of bellicose intensity returning as suppression, heat turned back on itself to cool intensities in the population. That is, a consumer society tethered to a war economy is at once a society of control ensuring that desire remains trapped within the channels of capital and does not move towards radical change, as bodies are subjected to inflationary discipline and the manipulation of interest rates.

Intensities are not willed, but they can be driven – towards conflict, away from care. But as Bernard Stiegler (2013) argues, even without wars, economic catastrophes show that humans are capable of mass self-destruction – and given the frequency of those catastrophes, the economy is really a war against humanity that masquerades as peace. This misdirects intensity. For Stiegler (2013: 18–19), everyone is connected to one another by circulations of desire. The desire for the other – which is care – can be short-circuited by dominant ideas that force adaptation to the doxic. This could be war and its commonsense of national identity and sacrifice, but it could equally be consumerism, which now drives the intensity of desire towards homogeneity in the form of the commodity.

The crisis of energy in the food service sector is a symptom of the coming to an end of productive capitalism as the system becomes primarily extractive. A productive capitalism would invest attention (in people, in institutions, in the environment) but, after decades of supply-side economics and financialisation, there is instead a structural precariousness and the opportunism of the elite. Without this investment, the energy in the system becomes peripatetic and capitalism becomes purely speculative. A system without investment will always find itself on the brink of collapse – and it throws the libidinal economy away in a vain effort to stay upright. Libidinal energy ought to bring people together in communities of attention and care, without which the mounting crises cannot be resisted. The problem is systemic. The tendency of the rate of profit to fall led to a logistical revolution that could accelerate consumerism in tandem with the financialisation of the economy; this has then accelerated the environmental catastrophe that capital has always posed to the planet – leading to unworkable heat, felt keenly in already hot environments like the professional kitchen – but because speculation moves away from care and attention, the energetic resources needed to fight against climate change are dwindling.

The crisis of energy as it relates to fossil fuels cannot be addressed without resisting the crisis of energy as it relates to intensity, since the energy price rises and the runaway heat are consequences of a system that drives desire towards consumption and that is premised on war. The problem is that the massifying power of consumerism syphons intensity and redirects it into enthusiasm for fossil capital. Andreas Malm (2016: 361) describes how this works: every time someone fills up the car or fires up the stove, they are interpellated as subjects of fossil capital. The fight against the multiple crises of energy falters because identities have now become bound up with fossil fuels, locking in the carbon infrastructures of a system that produces too much heat (Murphy, 2015). An excitation towards averting climate change is cut off by a system that redirects that energy into consumption, possible precisely because that system has no place for care (for the other, for the planet, which is the same thing). At its heart, as Malm sets out, fossil capital describes a system that is not invested in the planet, entirely extractive, taking oil and gas and coal from the earth, breaking free of the energy of the winds and the sea and the sun, and transporting those fossil fuels around the world so that production can be moved to where cheap labour can be exploited. The result is reliance on harmful sources of energy that are subject to immense market volatility – as any chef in the United Kingdom receiving an energy bill in 2022 could attest.

The transportation of commodities around the world aboard great polluting superliners is also fuelled by intensity turned against itself in a global consumerist system. Desire is directed through logistical routes that turn this intensity into an enthusiasm for the dominance of supply chains. With the desire to consume avocados or coffee or tropical fruits, an enthusiasm for the exotic is trapped in an unstable system for the global movement of things. Logistics is not without its ideology, its misrepresentation of the world as a smooth surface for the conveyance of goods and the satisfaction of drives (Hill, 2024b). But since those drives are satisfied, since at the end of the journey of the commodity, there is its consumption, and since the consumption of the right things is now normative if not doxic, this smooth fiction – absent slavery and violence and pollution – is itself satisfying, to the extent that the message delivered along with the goods is endorsed. Deborah Cowen (2014) argues that the routes of logistics map out a contemporary imperialism, an extension of the ruthless extraction of natural resources and the violent penetration of markets found in earlier colonial projects. And wherever there is imperialism, there is military power to protect it. The great powers then bump against each other uneasily along these shipping routes, constantly on the brink of conflict. The economy is always now a war economy, and the energies routed into consumerism can soon be found at war.

This is then a war economy that comes home in many forms, but most critically here, via pipelines and supply chains, as the near collapse of the food service sector in the United Kingdom in conditions heated by the same means.

Method

Interviews were conducted from the hot, dry August of 2022 through to February 2023, finishing as news was breaking via *The Caterer* of the dire state of the wider hospitality sector in the United Kingdom.

In total, there were ten interviews with twelve participants: eleven chefs (of whom ten were chef-owners) and one owner (interviewed alongside the chef and co-owner of their establishment). The research participants worked in small enterprises ranging from restaurants to bistros to cafes to pop-ups and (since this was post-lockdown) one cooking out of a home kitchen for collection, all in North East England. This is a region that has most starkly seen its industry replaced with service, in particular in the form of retail, hospitality and logistics (Maddock-James, 2023) – offering an acute localised example of the shift to unproductive capitalism. The main criteria for participation were that those interviewed had control over the sourcing of produce, menu design and the preparation of dishes. The research received ethical approval from the institutions of both authors. Participants were then approached via social media and email. Reflective of the dominance of men in ownership and cheffing positions, eight of the participants were men, three women and one non-binary.

The interviews ran just under an hour and a half on average, usually undertaken in dining rooms between lunch service and dinner service in the midweek. The interviews themselves began with a biographical narrative (Chamberlayne et al., 2000) section, where participants discussed their personal route to the kitchen. This was then followed by a more traditional semi-structured interview, where participants discussed how they

source and handle produce, how they design dishes and menus, the processes and challenges of cooking in professional kitchens and how they think about sustainability. All of the interviews were recorded with the express permission of the participants.

Following the interviews, the data were anonymised, and pseudonyms given to the participants. Data analysis was conducted following the precepts of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2021), readings of the transcripts leading to the development of the coding frame. Themes were then identified, based on the theoretical framing used for the interview schedule and as they emerged from the data.

Findings

The key findings identified were organised around the re-opening of professional kitchens after lockdown, energy price rises, supply chain disruption and extreme heat.

After lockdown

All the chefs interviewed had been affected by the COVID-19 lockdowns and the temporary end of indoor dining beyond the home. But Matt, with a background in fine dining in hotels, now chef-owner of a café, reported that, compared with re-opening, shutting down had been easy. 'The struggle really came when it was, like, getting it moving again', he said. 'All of a sudden, we're back stood up for eight hours a day. We had to get crash mats and put them on the floor, because our backs, you know'. They had grown unused to the excessive demands of kitchen work and had to lie down out back.

Many of the chefs were concerned that people now unused to eating out would be hesitant to come back to their dining rooms, and so changed their menus to draw them in. Jeff, who, after working in a family pub kitchen now ran a bistro with his wife, Sally, put on a tapas night despite his focus on modern British cooking; Jack, with a background in Michelin-starred kitchens but now running a taqueria, added burritos to the menu despite their geographical dislocation from his traditional Mexican fare – and his obvious distaste for their inclusion.

Re-opening was made easier for establishments that had loyal customers, but the challenging environment could also run against that pre-existing community. After working in hotel kitchens, Greg opened a vegan café before the pandemic; after lockdown, the going was tough, and he initially offered only coffee and cake – to cut down on food waste and thereby costs – before deciding to switch to a 'food for all' ethos. He said people would come in, look at the menu and then leave without ordering and he would think: 'They're a bacon sandwich walkout'. So, the previously plant-based kitchen started serving meat.

Some chefs, facing the financial instability of having closed, of re-opening to a hesitant public and then into a broader financial crisis, went in search of stability. Liz, who grew up in a family restaurant, said that their kitchen and community space had been taking on more corporate events, where they charge per head and know how many will come in advance: 'big money makers'. Kyle, a local butcher who also runs a pop-up and supper club, explains: 'Pre-orders are great, you know, you can organize everything you want, get just the right amount, buy a little bit more in case you mess something up kind of thing'.

Chefs were finding other ways to neutralise spontaneity and so minimise waste and cost, turning not to corporate events but to the theatre of dining. William, who in his restaurant wants to bring the fine-dining experience to a wider audience, offers only a set menu. This allows him to minimise waste – since he knows in advance how much produce to order since everyone is getting the same thing – but also, to generate the buzz and excitement of a unique experience, plate after plate brought out, dishes curated via the creativity and knowhow of the chef.

Supply disruption

By the time the interviews began, the difficulty of re-opening after lockdown had been compounded by the war in Ukraine and its impact on supply and on prices. All the chefs reported price rises – particularly for cooking oil and dairy products – as well as shortages. Whereas meat and dairy were largely sourced locally or at least within the United Kingdom – the chefs were often less certain of the provenance of fruits and vegetables bought from wholesalers – shortages of grain and dairy from Ukraine, and the impact of freighting being disrupted in this region, the cost being passed through the supply chain, was seen to push up prices of produce regardless of origin.

Sally, who does all the bookkeeping at the bistro she runs with Jeff, said that 'now is probably harder than COVID, just because of the prices'. Alan, with a background in fine dining restaurants, said that he had halved the amount of baked goods on the counter at his café because of the price of butter and was limiting himself to simpler bakes (that require less tempering or laminating). Liz was asked how they make vegetables really shine in meatless dishes, and the answer was 'put a lot of butter on them' – so as well as fewer fancy pastries, the cost of butter also risks the ability to elevate the status of vegetables. Alan's café sells a lot of brunches, but he decided to switch from smashed avocadoes to a pea alternative in response to cost, environmental concerns and the implication of the supply chain in cartel violence.

Rafid, who had taken redundancy before the pandemic, began cooking curries out of his home kitchen during lockdown, selling them for collection. He traded on his family's Kashmiri roots, marketing the curries as a traditional taste of the northern subcontinent. But when the price of cooking oil rose dramatically – 'doubled', Rafid said – he reduced the oil and instead emphasised the curries as healthy alternatives to traditional Kashmiri dishes. Back at Jeff's Bistro, more expensive cuts of meat were off the menu, replaced with cheaper cuts that were paired with fancier takes on vegetable sides. As Kyle explained, if you want to show the value across a dish, you can show the labour in the way you've scored a hasselback squash or the attention taken with a fondant potato.

Some of the chefs shared that they had begun to source produce from supermarkets. Many local suppliers had disappeared during lockdown and now the prices of those left were too high. Some of the chefs used a big, centralised supplier for vegetable produce, but Matt explained that the supermarkets 'were our best suppliers'. 'The quality's amazing because they get rid of the stuff that won't sell', he says. Asked if he could pick his own from independent local suppliers, he said that he would have to drive there and, since the price of petrol is going up, 'it's not worth it'. But as Jack points out, even if cheaper, the supermarket does not offer the full range of seasonal (or local) vegetables:

'Like, if you think, like, right now we're in the middle of summer, you should be able to walk in a supermarket and have a big array of amazing heirloom tomatoes. But, like, you're not going to, you're not going to find them anywhere'. Meanwhile, the set menu at William's restaurant does not just attract reticent customers back after lockdown and social distancing; because he serves numerous small dishes across a ten-course menu, it also means that he can offer customers locally sourced produce that would now be too expensive if provided in the quantity needed for a main course, balanced out with cheaper produce for the other courses.

Fuel costs

It is difficult to make creative savings when energy prices rise and practice is constrained by the appliances of the trade. The war in Ukraine precipitated what the chefs felt was an astronomical rise in the cost of gas and electricity. Part of the problem is that there are appliances that cannot be turned off: fridges, freezers, air extraction. The plancha or flat top in any kitchen is a big energy cost. 'The plancha gets used all day long [. . .] so that's just blazing away', says Alan. 'Yeah, it's hard to reduce that, but when you can't, you can't. The trouble with most of the kitchens is that they're just very not on-and-off-able, you know?' The choice is either to have the plancha on all day or not at all, since it takes a long time to warm up, which is no use when cooking to order. Matt made the choice to turn it off altogether – 'It just kicks out so much heat, and sucks in so much energy' – and replaced it with small plug-in, stand-alone induction hobs he can turn on and off when needed.

A change in appliances can mean a change in the food offer. Now that Matt was down to two small electric hobs, he had to change his approach to cooking. 'When we first started, we were doing full food. So, it would be like, fryers turned on, hobs turned on, all the time', he explains. 'Now I've made it into sandwiches because we can turn it off'. The cost of running appliances can also have an impact on the approach to food waste. Rafid cooks his curry in big batches; if he had any left over, he would freeze it. He had to buy a second freezer for that purpose, but when his energy bill went up, the appliance that would help keep his waste to zero became prohibitively expensive. And this cost of storing produce can change what is being stocked in the first place. Liz provided a tour of the kitchen after the interview, past the abundant shelves and into the empty cold store, explaining that they were stocking less fresh produce and relying more and more on canned or dried or preserved produce.

The most striking aspect of this was the sheer blind luck of energy bills. Jack's had jumped from £6000 one month to £10,000 the next, with £13,000 projected by the end of the year; Greg had locked his deal in before the conflict, so he was just about managing; Kate and Amy, who run a pop-up and catering business, saw bills quadruple; William had locked in a decent deal, but shared that friends had places where energy bills were 'trumping staff costs'; Alan's bill had doubled, as had Rafid's, cooking out of his home. The venue that hosted Kyle's food pop-up closed down, 'a huge, huge building' that had become too expensive to heat. The size of the dining room, the appliances needed in the kitchen for a particular kind of cooking, or just when a contract was signed, could be the difference between staying afloat and shutting up shop. Matt notes that in his group chat,

before the energy crisis and the invasion of Ukraine, maybe twice a year, there would be talk of someone going out of business, but 'now, it's like, every other week'. On his mounting bills – high already because of how he cooks – Jack, unsure of how he could cook any differently, captures a sense of helplessness: 'like yeah, it's a worry. I'm not sure what we're meant to do about it, but yeah, it's not good'.

Extreme heat

Asking about the hottest day in the United Kingdom in recorded history conjured some interesting adjectives: 'disgusting', said Matt; 'the day of hell', Greg called it; 'horrific', William said; 'ridiculous', adds Jeff. Chefs said that butter – already made expensive by supply disruption – was melting when they attempted to temper it; microherbs for garnish were wilting before they could be plated; ingredients were souring while being handled; cakes baked according to time-honoured recipes were collapsing; fresh produce was spoiling at a surprising speed, and even dry stocks were going bad inside their use-by dates.

Greg disclosed that despite following all the usual food hygiene protocol, on that hottest day, a cake went mouldy on the inside; 'luckily, we caught it before it went out to a table'. This was the same café that attempted to deal with one crisis – re-opening after lockdown – by offering only coffee and cake, to ensure that the hesitancy of customers to come out would not lead to food waste; and yet now the same failsafe – the cake – could spoil in advance of any reasonable prediction. While explaining why he has turned to supermarkets instead of local suppliers, Matt reasons that the supermarket has air-conditioning, but the greengrocer around the corner does not, so the supermarket produce is still fresh in a heatwave when the grocer's vegetables have wilted. In Alan's kitchen, the fridges started to overheat. 'So, I had to get two of those giant oscillating fans', he says, 'and just have the fans pointed at the filter of the fridge, just to try and keep some air circulating'. Struggling with the heat means appliances on top of appliances at a time when energy is at a premium, in kitchens reliant on electricity having been designed without recourse to more traditional methods of cooling (larders, basement stores, etc.).

At the same time, both customers and staff were struggling. Chefs reported stunted appetites and a lot of unfinished plates returned to the kitchen. Jeff and Sally closed the bistro on the hottest day, Sally explaining that there was no way Jeff could stand 'between the hot plate and the oven [. . .] for six hours without moving' like he would in a normal shift. Liz worked in the heatwave alongside less experienced chefs and could get a sense of the extremity of the temperature by how much extra effort they had to make to ensure that others took breaks, drank water – at least stood away from the oven. William, who had described the heat in his kitchen as 'horrific', where the temperature hit 48°C during service, said: 'you kind of came out of it like a raisin. You were just so dehydrated, slightly, like, delirious'. Nonetheless, he stayed open, explaining that as a small business, he really had no alternative.

Discussion

The crash mats at the end of lockdown stand as a reminder of how consumerist logic sweeps away the demand for care (for the self and for staff), as the socialisation of chefs

into extremity (Burrow et al., 2015) is accelerated by the extremity outside the kitchen. At the same time, chefs turning to simpler or crowd-pleasing dishes reinforces consumerist homogeneity, putting the process of legitimation (Slavich et al., 2020) – of locality, of origin, of community – at risk. Here is Lyotard's (2004) centaur taking effect. The catering of events, particularly corporate events, suggests that, with the move from a productive to a speculative political economy charted by Stiegler (2013), one that is both susceptible to shocks and itself driven by shock, chefs are seeking out more stable forms of doing business that are not reliant on the happenstance of desire (the walk-up), instead falling back on events that can be predicted in advance – and the risk neutralised. A consumerist system that kicks up desire for dining then stamps it down into this homogenised, corporate form.

Since the professional kitchen is connected to a wider agri-food system (Böhm et al., 2020), and, as Cowen (2014) observes, those logistical tendrils can communicate conflict as readily as they do commodities, the chef finds themselves on the front line of what Alliez and Lazzarato (2016) have conceptualised as the war economy. Shortages might push diners to simpler, healthier fare, but the necessity of war is a long way from a collective response to the health of the body and its connection to the health of the planet (Dal Gobbo, 2024). The status of vegetables can be elevated not only by the celebrity of chefs (Gomez and Bouty, 2011) but also by the impact of crisis; yet while it is tempting to hail this investment of attention in vegetables as a move towards more sustainable eating, it also further captures the vegetal in value production and capital accumulation (Ernwein et al., 2021) – and such capture, Deleuze and Guattari (2004) observe, is really the primary purpose of the war economy. It is a capture further tightened by the supermarkets, assisted by war in extending their grip on supply at the expense of locals, at the same time, extending the reproduction of the same through their limited range of produce despite the desire for variety and for heritage.

A system that cannot sustain itself with the energy it requires is a system in collapse. If it is no longer affordable to power the appliances that cook what people want, then desire cannot even be driven towards consumerism. The attempts to deal with this crisis of energy also threaten the collapse of the knowhow of the kitchen. Switching off the appliances, making sandwiches or opening cans shows how necessity leads to the production of bad food or the adoption of poor preparation (Fine, 1996). It represents a crisis of creativity and collaboration and relationality (Lortie et al., 2022; Louisgrand and Islam, 2021). This is an example of what Stiegler (2013) describes as the short-circuiting of the libidinal economy, such that a system that ought to circulate the desire for care and attention (to the other, to food, which is the same thing) collapses into something unproductive, as the cost of satisfying a desire for uncommon or sophisticated cooking forces chefs towards shortcuts and simplification. It is also a breakdown of the sensorial dimension of interacting with produce (Bispo and Silva, 2022), and all the joy and creativity that comes from touching and smelling and discovering fresh fruits and vegetables, if they are now replaced with canned or dried alternatives. A system that can no longer provide what is desired is no longer able even to drive that desire towards the flattened range of supermarket varieties. Lyotard's (2004) centaur is ultimately always a system that negates itself. This is the instability of an unproductive system that ultimately makes any attempt at the productive unviable.

A sensorial attention to produce (Bispo and Silva, 2022) is even more important in a heatwave, if the chef is to catch spoiled food before it gets to the customer. Dealing with climate change requires a re-investment of attention, but as extreme weather accelerates, the capacity to give (attention to produce and food produced with care) decreases. Part of what makes unproductive capitalism so helpless against climate change, so unable to direct resources of care and attention to the problem, is what Malm (2016) identifies as the interpellation of subjectivity into fossil capital. If the frequency of extreme heat increases, then so too does the production of crisis, such that any given solution to one will ultimately be made unviable by another – even a solution as simple as cake – given that climate change under the present political economy locks in behaviours that further climate change. There is no more acute image of this absurdity than powering a fan with energy reliant on the burning of fossil fuels to cool the fridge that is meant to cool the produce using energy reliant on the burning of fossil fuels – that heat the planet. The heat reroutes supply from the local (and sustainable) to supermarkets – corporate giants, logistical hydras that would appear to flatten the world (Hill, 2024b) – and as the system tends towards quasi-monopoly, it locks in all its worst practices. The produce nearby is left to wilt and spoil, as if the initial movement of fossil capital – away from the energy of the sun to the burning of carbon – was always at the same time a movement away from living nature.

Diners are left unsatiated as the heat closes off appetites they wanted to be filled, not driven to delirious consumption but instead a negation of desire – left crying near where lightning has struck, to paraphrase Lyotard (2004: 39). The chefs, though, are driven delirious by the forlorn attempt to satisfy the consumer demand that cannot be satisfied in the heat – delirious and desiccated. Even the act of care from one chef to another is done with full recognition that it is a socialisation into extremity (Burrow et al., 2015), that the small victory of surviving the shift is an acceptance of more to come on a planet that keeps heating. In the end, everything shuts down – and gone is the hope for a convivial and sustainable experience of food (Parham, 2017), since it relied on the desire and the care and the attention that wither in the heat.

The response to crisis often falls back on more conformity, more consumerist sameness, with a concomitant flattening of meaning and legitimation, as communities of diners are abandoned for corporate events and the security of the mass. In a political economy that is a continuation of war, the chef's work is vulnerable to the price shock born of conflict, and the now-straitened stocking further embeds natural produce in capital accumulation and reroutes supply from the small local to the corporate giant. The professional kitchen is materially bound to the appliances of carbon capital that are either always on or always off: if on, exorbitant cost and further degradation of the environment; if off, a further retreat into the simplification and conformity of consumerism, which is ultimately the negation of desire since desire desires the other and not the same. And being on, keeping going like this, means more heat, from the appliances and in the climate, that warms produce beyond the limit of attention, wilting, spoiling, the chefs too, now raisins, fading, as diners are unable to satisfy appetites lost to the heat – and then the whole enterprise inevitably just stops.

Conclusion

Half of the establishments included in this study have since gone out of business. Even before data collection began, a repeated feature of the recruitment process was chefs agreeing to participate only to drop out after they were forced to shut down. The interviews found participants at a time of extreme stress, as soaring energy costs added to the struggles of lockdown and as climate breakdown made itself uncomfortably felt. Catching the height of the crisis has allowed this article to make three core contributions: to record and report the voices of emergency (Clot-Garrell, 2024) emanating from the professional kitchens of North East England at a time of energy crisis; to develop a conceptualisation of the systemic factors that frame this crisis and to explain the experiences contained in those voices using this theory, at the same time demonstrating its viability.

Having conducted the data collection at the height of crisis, this article captures a certain hopelessness that may have diminished as costs and shortages slowly abated and as chefs found solutions through their own resourcefulness – although the longtail of Brexit complicates this recovery. Despite systems of energy and capital that appear overbearing, we cannot discount the subjectivity of those whose creative actions might lead to different everyday life ecologies (Dal Gobbo, 2020). Nevertheless, taking the most extreme slice of time is not without its use, if the pessimism it conjures forces a confrontation with systems that harbour such crises (Hill, 2022); if all appears lost, then at least the gravity of the situation is grasped – and the radical change needed to avoid the very worst evoked. Resistance would then come in proper measure, as environmentalism of the poor (Martínez-Alier, 2002) or as a *revellion* (a rebellion of revelry) that embraces the small pleasures against overconsumption (Boyer, 2021) or as a moral revolution in the relationship with sustainable sources of energy and with elements more broadly (Hill, 2024a). All three would combine to create a system that is more stable and more just in its organisation of energy.

In summary, human desire is an intense energy that extends through commerce and politics and economy. These intensive regions channel intensities into a stable but homogenising consumerism. Consumerism is connected to the war and heat that disrupts it by supply chains through which desire – flattened and driven towards the same – is channelled. This establishes a system of capital that is volatile and destructive of the care and attention needed to fight against crisis, if only intensity could be redirected away from its manipulation into systems that are collapsing under their own conflict and contradiction. The professional kitchen is at the heart of a system in crisis, the chef labouring within an unproductive system in the process of collapse, everyday practices never absent a libidinal economy that tethered it via supply chains and pipelines to war and to heat. All that remains is to disrupt the circulation of crisis with the care and attention that is needed for a convivial and sustainable future.

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Résumé

L'invasion de l'Ukraine par la Russie en février 2022 a entraîné une hausse considérable des prix de l'énergie au Royaume-Uni. Les chefs cuisiniers interrogés dans le nord-est de l'Angleterre, qui étaient déjà en difficulté lors de la réouverture qui a suivi le confinement lié au Covid, se trouvaient désormais aux prises avec des factures énergétiques colossales et des pénuries de produits alimentaires en raison de la guerre, ce à quoi s'est ajouté ensuite la conjoncture d'une vague de chaleur record au cours de l'été de la même année. Cet article conceptualise ces expériences comme une crise de l'énergie: le réacheminement du désir à travers un système de consumérisme illimité avec la guerre et la production de chaleur – un système qui s'effondre aujourd'hui. Le secteur de la cuisine professionnelle se situe à l'intersection de flux d'énergie – désir du consommateur, bellicisme, électricité, kinésie logistique des marchandises – qui sous-tendent les pratiques des chefs cuisiniers au quotidien, mais qui sont désormais

organisés dans un système de capitalisme improductif marqué par des chocs qui perturbent ces mêmes pratiques. En réaction aux pressions exercées par ces crises, le système a tendance à se perpétuer à travers un repli sur l'homogénéité consumériste et un abandon du soin et de l'attention nécessaires à un avenir convivial et durable – pour le secteur de la restauration et au-delà.

Mots-clés
chaînes d'approvisionnement, chefs cuisiniers, combustibles fossiles, consumérisme, restauration

Resumen
La invasión de Ucrania por parte de Rusia en febrero de 2022 provocó un aumento drástico de los precios de la energía en el Reino Unido. Los chefs entrevistados en el nordeste de Inglaterra que ya estaban lidiando con la reapertura tras el confinamiento, se encontraron con enormes facturas de la energía y escasez de alimentos como consecuencia de la guerra, y después con las condiciones de una ola de calor sin precedentes en el verano de ese año. Este artículo conceptualiza estas experiencias como una crisis energética: la canalización del deseo a través de un sistema consumista sin límites con la guerra y la producción de calor, un sistema que se está derrumbando en estos momentos. Se sostiene que el sector de la cocina profesional está situado en la intersección de flujos de energía (el deseo del consumidor, la belicosidad, la electricidad, la kinesis logística de las mercancías) que sustentan las prácticas cotidianas de los chefs, pero que ahora están organizadas en un sistema de capitalismo improductivo marcado por shocks que alteran esas mismas prácticas. En respuesta a las tensiones producidas por las crisis, este sistema tiene una tendencia a perpetuarse a través de un repliegue sobre la homogeneidad consumista y un abandono del cuidado y la atención requeridos para un futuro convivencial y sostenible, para el sector de servicios de comida o más allá.

Palabras clave
cadenas de suministro, chefs, combustibles fósiles, consumismo, restauración