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Climate and Capital in the Age of Petroleum: Locating Terminal Landscapes

Référence bibliographique

Jeff Diamanti, *Climate and Capital in the Age of Petroleum: Locating Terminal Landscapes* (NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021).

Résumé

Climate and Capital in the Age of Petroleum: Locating Terminal Landscapes presents the historical relationship between climate, capital, and oil energy from the second half of the 20th C to the present. For this process, Diamanti introduces different historical cases to trace oil exploitation's political, economic, and environmental consequences through the concept of "terminal landscapes." From the Shell oil company to the Fiat factory in Lingotto (Turin, Italy), from current digital forms of information to the case of Greenland, Diamanti shows how landscape, energy, and capital are related, engaging the readers with a cultural and theoretical line of analysis of our climate crisis, connecting with a broader secondary study about petroculture and energy history. With this study, Diamanti shows historical cases as representations of human actions after 1970, when the Western economy combined economic stability with energy through oil production, changing our conception of the future associated with unlimited energy from natural resources.

- 1 Jeff Diamanti's *Climate and Capital in the Age of Petroleum: Locating Terminal Landscapes* introduces us to the connection between climate, capital, and oil energy during the second half of the 20th C up until today. He chooses a series of case studies to investigate public policy, economic decisions, and environmental consequences. Nevertheless, these cases are mainly metaphors of human actions after 1970, when the Western economy combined economic stability with energy through oil production, changing our conception of the future associated with unlimited energy from natural resources. In tracing this historical process, Diamanti uses the concept of "terminal landscapes," retaking a theoretical line of Roland Barthes and other scholars.
 - 2 For him, "terminal landscape is an endpoint and a beginning. It is a circuit of infrastructure between land and economy, object and condition, or commodity and its historicity; between a particular location and global abstraction; between lived environment and political distribution; between energy history and energy future. The terminal landscape is a mobile concept that captures both dystopian industrial theory and utopian possibility."¹ One of the book's most important contributions is the connection with broader fields and actual research agendas in humanities and social sciences, such as energy history, anthropology, cultural analysis, media, and communication.
 - 3 The book has two parts with different narrative structures and distinctive methodological and theoretical approaches. For example, in part one, Diamanti follows a historiographic narrative to present three examples of capitalist development in the 20th C: the Shell oil company, the Fiat factory in Lingotto (Turin, Italy), and current digital forms of information. All these cases show how infrastructure, energy, and capital are related. In the second part, Diamanti focuses on Greenland as an ethnographic case study
- and critically analyzes different spaces, such as beaches and natural ice formations, as terminal landscapes, engaging the reader with a more cultural and theoretical analysis of our climate crisis.
- 4 In part one, "From coal to capital petroculture," Diamanti analyses how Shell connected oil energy with the global scale economy, having transnational, national, and local consequences, affecting how we conceive the world economy. Moreover, in 1973, Shell-related oil and its economic activities anticipated our current world perception of energy. For example, exploiting a natural resource such as oil, linked to energy production, would be the ultimate example of a commodity moving in the global marketplace. In this respect, and for scholars from different environmental humanities and social sciences, Diamanti proposes a methodology called "reconceptualization of oil,"² to understand today's energy crisis and simultaneously bring historical and political perspectives into oil exploitation and petrocultural issues. This is connected to the concept of "terminal landscapes," where petroculture can show how capital and energy move at the macroeconomic level, affecting our perception of climate today. As a beginning and an end, as an infrastructure and immaterial perception of energy, we see Shell's infrastructure, oil as a commodity, the physical and symbolic location where oil moves, and the environmental and political consequences of its uses.
 - 5 In his analysis of the Fiat factory in Lingotto, Diamanti traces the political, architectural, and energy connection in Italy. From a European agrarian economy to a paradigm of Fordism during the 20th C, the Fiat factory symbolized a new chapter in the analysis of petroculture. It represented, on the one hand, a material ensemble and production of labor and automobiles and, on the other hand, an immaterial aspect of the use of petroleum. Diamanti follows the theoretical approach of the Marxist architecture historian Manfredo Tafuri and the connection with labor history in Italy and Europe,

¹ Jeff Diamanti, *Climate and Capital in the Age of Petroleum: Locating Terminal Landscapes* (New York, Bloomsbury 2021), 10.

² *Ibid.*, 25.

social aspects in factories, and the concept of time and production surrounding specific landscapes. Moreover, the Fiat factory was present in the modernization and development process of post-Second World War state formation and the energy sector's development before 1970, deepening a historical narrative of an energy sector as relevant as automobiles. Finally, as Diamanti mentions, the Shell company and Fiat factory are representations of "terminal landscapes." This process is self-explanatory when, as readers, we realize that the Fiat factory is a museum today with a different cultural objective; rather than connecting with human labor and production, it is more a reminiscence of a period of modernization in the second half of the 20th C.

- 6 Diamanti's third chapter focuses on the existent discussion about digital information, energy, and politics. More specifically, he addresses how the necessity of digital stores creates a narrative surrounding digital information as a green immateriality. This discourse has two essential points. First, digital information uses much electric energy from "coal, diesel, and petroleum products."³ In this respect, the immateriality of energy through its digital version does not mean that electric energy is more environmentally friendly. As Diamanti proposes, it is the opposite, and this narrative reinforces the idea that electric energy does not have a natural resource origin. Second, the concept of immateriality has a political consequence for the current discussion about climate change. The concept of green and energy immateriality is hazardous because we can believe that energy production and distribution do not have a political agenda behind them and that energy is neutral. Finally, green immateriality reinforces the concept of "terminal landscapes." Digital tools, as Diamanti mentions, are also "terminal landscapes" where the political and the environmental collide. To argue this point, using cultural theory and philosophy, he proposes the concept of "energyscapes," according to which digital forms of information are spaces containing energy in an immaterial form but also symbolize the place where political and economic decisions

were made during the second half of the 20th C and that would end up having an impact in the future. These immaterial energyscapes also imply a specific conception of human labor, where the integration of non-human actors becomes the base of the economic pyramid.

- 7 In the second part of the book, "From the Industrial Environment to the Concerns of Climate," and through three chapters, Diamanti introduces an ethnographic methodology focused on Greenland and develops an environmental history analysis surrounding its beaches and ice formations. Compared with part one, part two is more of a cultural analysis surrounding climate change, economic policy, energy, and production, where Greenland, beaches, and ice become specific "terminal landscapes" to investigate and show our current climate crisis. Moreover, the second part presents hydrology spaces as terminals, an ensemble with the Shell company, Fiat factory, and digital forms of information to represent the connection between climate, energy, and capitalism. As such, it is possible to follow petroculture in its economic and immaterial dimensions in Greenland. Oil production is part of a continuum in how we think of our energy history post-1973. As the author mentions in the title of chapter one, "Our Future is Still the Future of 1973."⁴

- 8 Diamanti uses a variety of primary and secondary sources, such as surveys, photography, art installations, films, and spaces, placing human geography locations in conversation with natural landscapes. Regarding the scale of methodology, he uses a wide range of analyses at the transnational, national, and local levels, making *Climate and Capital in the Age of Petroleum* also a pedagogical and methodological tool for students and scholars who want to immerse in energy history, cultural analysis, and the construction of cultural landscapes.

- 9 One final contribution of the book is the theoretical proposition of "terminal landscapes." First, as a material and immaterial concept, he shows

3 *Ibid.*, 61.

4 *Ibid.*, 21.

how these spaces are subjected to a permanent move and permeability. Moreover, he argues that “terminal landscapes” generate new spaces in constant changes, where global energy, transnational companies, economic history, and our climate future are reunited. Second, “terminal landscapes” illustrate our petroculture world from 1973 until today, which, as the case of the Shell company suggests, combined politics, economics, and a particular conception of nature based upon the extraction of land and natural resources.

Finally, this last aspect joins a large body of previous secondary literature, such as the work of Sheena Wilson, studying from cultural history, environmental history, and communication how oil exploitation created an extractivist vision that has contributed to the current climate crisis.⁵ To conclude, Diamanti shows us how, through the historical energy evolution surrounding oil, we can also trace political, economic, and environmental perceptions of land, resources, and energy to problematize our present and future related to climate change. 10

⁵ Sheena Wilson, Adam Carlson, and Imre Szeman (ed.), *Petrocultures: oil, politics, culture*, McGill-Queen, 2017.