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Energy imperialism? Introduction to the special issue

Abstract

In this special issue, we reflect on the relations between energy systems and imperialism via multiple expressions: the role of oil in international relations, the global economy, and the post-colonial world; the problem of waste created by the oil industry; the relations between capitalism and imperialism, and the role of the energy industry in fuelling these structures and these relations since the second wave of European colonisation. Through the adoption of a multidisciplinary and comparative perspective across different periods and geographical areas, we deconstruct the mythology of oil imperialism to highlight the nodes in which energy systems have an actual influence on the course of history, and on the shaping of societies.

Plan of the article

→ Energy Imperialism?

ENERGY IMPERIALISM?

- 1 The connections between humankind and energy are a constant theme throughout history, and the relations between energy and power structures one of the most popular in social sciences. Energy resources have always been a fundamental part of our lives; but since the onset of the industrial revolution and the discovery of fossil fuels, energy production has been independent from animal and human labour, and available in quantities that have not only radically altered the ways in which humans live, but the very face of the Earth. The 19th C. was the age of coal; the 20th C. was the age of oil.¹ The 21st C., the age of the Anthropocene, has brought to the forefront the absolute necessity to implement new energy systems that are not based on fossil fuels, while our world economy is.
- 2 Unsurprisingly then, energy is also a fundamental factor in international relations and global governance. Oil in particular, consumed mostly in countries other than those where it is produced, has been at the forefront of geopolitics since the beginning of its modern usage. A vast historiography has explored the links between resources, commodities, and empires, highlighting that the quest for oil and coal shaped the expansion of the European empires, and promoted the emergence of both the Anglosphere and the Francosphere in the 19th C.² This has

1 Though we should be careful not to think of oil as “replacing” coal: hydrocarbons were added on top of rising consumption levels. For references about energy consumption in history: Vaclav Smil, *Energy in World History* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994); Astrid Kander, Paolo Malanima, Paul Warde, *Power to the People: Energy in Europe over the Last Five Centuries* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014); Kostas Bithas, Panos Kalimeris, “A Brief History of Energy Use in Human Societies”, in Kostas Bithas and Panos Kalimeris (eds.), *Revisiting the Energy-Development Link: Evidence from the 20th Century for Knowledge-Based and Developing Economies* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2016), 5-10; Joel Darmstadter *et al.*, *Energy in the World Economy: A Statistical Review of Trends in Output, Trade, and Consumption Since 1925* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971).

2 For the international economy of the second wave of imperialism: Giovanni Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power, and the Origins of Our Times* (London: Verso, 1994); Christopher Chase-Dunn, *Global Formation:*

been particularly the case after the Second World War, when oil gradually replaced coal as the main world energy source. The oil industry developed at a time of global-scale changes that overturned the world’s political and economic assets: the two World Wars, the fall of the empires, the Cold War, and finally the end of the bipolar world. The emergence of United States hegemony in the 20th C. cannot be understood without taking into account the development of the American oil industry and global oil politics – not only in the military and economic aspects of the oil industry, but in its social and cultural ones.

As early as the beginning of the 20th C., oil geopolitics became a genre of its own in political sciences, quickly intertwining oil with imperialism. Early works like *La Lutte mondiale pour le pétrole* by analyst Pierre L’Espagnol de La Tramerye (1922) and *Oil Imperialism: The International Struggle for Petroleum* by Louis Fischer (1927) are indicative of the importance that control over oil (defined as control over the crude fields and the capability of extracting it), already had in the immediate aftermath of World War I. “Qui aura le pétrole aura l’empire” wrote La Tramerye in his popular 1922 book, where he denounced that by allowing American companies to control the French supply market, France was giving up its independence as a nation, and threatened its position as a global power.³ Similarly, in commenting the post-war US and British interests in the oil-rich Baku area, Fischer asked “How much more diplomatic

Structures of the World-Economy (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1989); Peter A. Shulman, *Coal and Empire: The Birth of Energy Security in Industrial America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015); Shellen Wu, *Empires of Coal: Fueling China’s Entry into the Modern World Order, 1860-1920* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2015); E.A. Wrigley, *Energy and the English Industrial Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010)

3 Pierre Paul Ernest L’Espagnol de La Tramerye, *La lutte mondiale pour le pétrole* (Paris: Editions de la vie universitaire, 1922), 9. It is worth to note here that the expression “oil nationalism”, later applied to producer countries that sought to nationalise their resources, was actually first used in the 1920s for those European countries trying to establish State-led companies that could compete with the American firstcomers.

commotion, financial manoeuvring, political disturbance, military activities, and loss of life must the oil kings feel themselves justified in causing for the sake of the Russian oilfields".⁴ Both authors denounced the international oil industry, which particularly at the time mostly meant the American oil industry, as imperialistic. With the end of the formal empires after World War II, the fight against "oil imperialism" was taken over by newly-independent countries. In 1955, in "Philosophy of the Revolution", the Egyptian leader Gamal Abdel Nasser postulated the idea of oil as a weapon: "The most important weapon of the Arab world against the West is oil, the vital nerve of civilization, without which all its means cannot possibly exist"⁵ - a doctrine that was perceived as successfully applied in 1973, when oil prices quadrupled during the notorious "oil shock", celebrated as a second independence (the economic one) by countries such as Algeria and Iraq. In the same decades, the securitisation of oil supplies became a main feature of security policy in the US and the OECD area, particularly against the self-sufficiency of the Communist bloc - a trait of the Cold War that survived the end of the Soviet Union.⁶

4 Throughout the 20th C. then, Western military involvement has often been labelled in the public opinion, and by several scholars, as oil wars, from the Gulf wars to the more recent Libyan intervention.⁷ The mythology of oil imperialism

⁴ Louis Fischer, *Oil Imperialism: The International Struggle for Petroleum* (New York: George Allen, 1927), 11.

⁵ Gamal Abdel Nasser, *The philosophy of the revolution* (Cairo: S.O.P. Press, 1955).

⁶ See for example John Clark, *The Political Economy of World Energy: A Twentieth Century Perspective* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991); David Painter, *Oil and the American Century: The Political Economy of US Foreign Oil Policy, 1941-1954* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986); David Painter, "Oil and World Power", *Diplomatic History*, vol.1, n°17, 1993.

⁷ See for example: Michael Klare, *Blood and Oil* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2004); Lleif Wenar, *Blood Oil: Tyrants, Violence, and the Rules That Run the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Paul Roberts, *The End of Oil: The Decline of the Petroleum Economy and the Rise of a New Energy Order* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing PLC, 2005). A successful rebuttal of the concept of oil wars can be found in Emily Meierding, "Dismantling the Oil Wars Myth", *Security Studies*, n° 25, 2016.

is vast and pervasive: oil as a cause of war; oil as a cause of underdevelopment; oil as a cause of international corruption; oil as hindrance to democracy. Without an adequate context that takes into account the complexities and the many factors on which oil has an impact, these statements are not grounded in reality; and yet, they have often informed the policies and strategies of governments. This is the phenomenon that Robert Vitalis has recently defined in an upcoming book as "oilcraft",⁸ a modern form of magical thinking in which oil has much more agency on our economies and social order than it actually does, but that in a way becomes real because of the self-fulfilling prophecy of acting like it is real. Not to fall this trap, the necessary premise is that talking about "oil" means first and foremost to talk about energy sources. Starting from the title, this special issue wanted to focus on the materiality of oil as a primary resource which is at the heart of global energy policies. A second premise of this issue is the importance of a wide perspective, both historical and interdisciplinary. Few studies have tackled the problem of the relations between energy and imperialism in a long-term and comparative perspective. This special issue explores the relations between oil and energy dependencies and the socio-technical, economic, political, cultural structures around (and in part caused by) energy dependence from fossil fuels. It reflects on the sourcing of fossil fuels as an asymmetric power relation; on the connections between oil, the technology that distributes it, and the actors who consume it. The contributing authors are sociologists (Paul Ciccantell); jurists (Michael Hennessy Picard); anthropologists (Sarandha Jain); as well as historians of the environment (Armel Campagne), of international relations (Duccio Basosi and Francesco Petrini), and of economics (Simone Selva). We can divide the works in three parts: the first essays analyse the possible definitions of energy imperialism; the second part provides examples from colonialism; the third shifts towards the present to

⁸ Robert Vitalis, *Oilcraft: The Myths of Scarcity and Security That Haunt U.S. Energy Policy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020)

analyse the oil shocks and the global financial system that ensued. In the first contribution, Paul S. Ciccantell provides an overview of what is traditionally considered “energy imperialism”, and then moves to investigate alternative energy access strategies implemented at different times and places, whether market-based approaches (from “stealing peripheries” to pay a premium to ensure a good energy flow; from long-term contracts to the relocation of industries next to energy sources) or technological innovation (e.g., energy efficiency solutions, or material infrastructures for cheaper energy transports). In the second article, Francesco Petrini reminds us of the close relations between capitalism and imperialism, analysing what is surely one of the most interesting example, the American oil industry and its relations with the White House and the Department of State, in a complex public/private dichotomy that in the case of the United States has always remained in favour of the latter. In the third contribution, Michael Picard and Tina Beigi focus on the Persian Gulf and Iraq, perhaps the area that more contributed to the formation of a mythology of oil; however, the authors set aside the problem of oil wars to focus on the emerging concept of Molysmocene, the era of colonisation by waste, one of the most terrifying aspects of the Anthropocene, and how the development of the oil industry condemned the Gulf to be a wasteland of the oil industry, whether controlled by foreign oil companies or national ones.

- 5 The next three articles provide again a novel view on the problem of energy and colonialism. Firstly, Armel Campagne provides a reconstruction of an understudied aspect of French imperialism: the coal interests in Indochina over the Tonkin coal resources, the export-oriented economy that ensued, and the struggle of French authorities against the claims for resource sovereignty that the Vietnamese authorities put forward. This coal-centered research provides very interesting comparisons with the more studied aspects of oil interests in French overseas territories. In the fifth article, Sarandha Jain traces the evolution of the oil industry in India under British rule, in particular the technical aspects

and the government-company contention for rules on taxation. By focussing on the “everyday politics” of the oil industry in British-ruled India, Jain highlights the ways in which oil (and primary resources in general) become encoded in socio-political structures, and how they influence them from the inside.

The third part of the special issue looks at the finance of oil, and in a way overturns the perspective of imperialism by concentrating on the consequences of oil dependence on the West. There is general agreement on the fact that the oil shocks of the 1970s were first and foremost a financial crisis rather than an energy crisis, and a major factor in the renewal of the United States power in global finance after the end of the convertibility of US dollars to gold. Duccio Basosi taps into the debate on the rise of petrodollars by showing the importance of Saudi-United States relations, and the strong intervention of the American government in reclaiming a main role in the reshaping of global finance following the shocks. Simone Selva focusses on petrodollar recycling in Eurodollars from United States multinational banks to non-oil producer lower developed countries, thus promoting the shift from institutional borrowing to commercial borrowing, but under the supervision of American-based private institutions.

All in all, this special issue helps to overcome myths and “oilcraft”, and it allows to focus on the dynamics that make the energy industry, and in particular the oil industry, so relevant in global governance. While it does not expect to offer solutions to end our dependence from fossil fuels, this collection of essays facilitates the reflection on the role of energy systems in the colonial and post-colonial world and conversely, the way in which colonialism and imperialism (formal or informal) have impacted on the structures of the energy industry. Overall, it hopes to highlight the fundamental nodes of our global energy system, and how it developed. Intervening on these nodes in order to modify the energy flux that maintains our financial, economic, social and political structures is perhaps the biggest challenge of our times.

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