How to Know About Oil

Imre Szeman

How to know about oil:is this the right question to pose?[1] Don't we already know everything we need to know about it – that this substance on which we depend for much of our energy generates geopolitical misadventures, environmental destruction and (for some) massive profits? Don't we already know that because it is of necessity a limited resource, our dependence on it constitutes something like a civilisational category mistake – one that we are unlikely to rectify, not because we can't identify the error, but because we are people who live in societies so saturated with the substance that we cannot imagine doing without it?

And yet, 'how to know' *is* the right question to ask about oil. We need to understand our multiple forms of being in relation to it. Oil is a physical substance – a thing identified by a concrete noun rather than an idea named by an abstract one (such as freedom or identity). Even so, oil only has the significance as it does for us as a result of the social and cultural narratives that shape our understanding of it. Oil has almost always been seen as an external input into our socio-cultural systems and histories – a material resource squeezed into a social form that pre-exists it, rather than the other way around: as giving shape to the social life that it fuels. But what if we begin to see – *really* see – oil as fundamental to the societies we have now, from the scale of our populations to the nature of our built infrastructure, from the objects we have ready to hand due to our agricultural and food systems, from the possibility of movement and travel to *expectations* of the capacity to move and interact? How, for instance, might oil make us rethink the shape of our histories and the way we understand the relationship between aesthetics and politics?

Alternative Histories

It is no exaggeration to suggest that the twentieth century would not have been the same without oil. Histories of the century that are alert to the significance of energy inevitably provide a vision of the recent past in which the presence of oil is amongst the central forces shaping human life. J.R. McNeill's environmental history of the twentieth century quickly identifies the capacities, technologies and infrastructures enabled by oil to be the single most significant factor in the massive expansion of population over the century, which in turn generates staggering increases in water consumption, CO_2 production, industrial output and more.[2]

Timothy Mitchell's *Carbon Democracy* also offers a powerful re-narration of the petrocarbon era that is alert to the material significance of oil in shaping capacity and possibility. There are two key points in Mitchell's book that speak to the 'how' of oil. The first is his account of the social consequences of the use of coal as a source of energy on a broad scale. One of the transformations produced by coal was that in industrialised countries the vast majority of people became dependent on energy produced by others. The production of coal at specific sites across northern Europe that then had to be channeled to other sites along narrow railway corridors generated the material conditions for a form of political agency that could be asserted through the disruption of energy flow. The ability of workers to effectively and immediately disrupt energy flow through mass strikes or sabotage gave their political demands especial force, and led to major gains for workers between the 1880s and the interwar decades, while also supporting the development of worker's consciousness of their social circumstances. For Mitchell, the switch to oil from coal as the primary energy source for the global north from the 1920s onward was a major factor in impeding the demands of labour and constituted the basis for a form of government that has managed the struggle for democracy. The production of oil requires fewer workers than coal in relation to the amount of energy produced; labourers remain above ground in the sight of managers; and from the 1920s '60 to 80 percent of world oil production was exported',[3] which made it difficult to impact supply via strikes. Mitchell is blunt in his claim: the mass politics that emerged alongside coal was defeated by the rise of fossil-fuel networks that made mass action more difficult, and changed the conditions within which class struggle took place.

The discourse of economics has played an essential role in the system of democratic government that Mitchell explores. And here, too, oil plays an essential, if hitherto unrecognised role. Mitchell argues

that 'the economy' as an object didn't exist in its current form prior to World War II. Nineteenth-century political economy concentrates on the 'prudent management of resources applied especially to the resource that had made industrial civilization possible' – that is, coal.[4] This an economy understood in terms of limits and scarcity. The shift from coal to oil produces a change in how the economy is conceptualised and governed. In place of natural resources and energy flows, economics becomes the measurement of money, and 'the economy' transforms into a measurement of 'the sum of all the moments at which money changed hands'.[5] Mitchell argues that 'the conceptualisation of the economy as a process of monetary circulation defined the main feature of the new object: it could expand without getting physically bigger'.[6]

As the dominant energy source of the century, oil fuels the idea of the economy as an object able to grow without limit in two ways. First, because of its continuous decline in price (adjusted for inflation) over much of the century, the cost of energy was thought to have little bearing on economic activity; energy appeared virtually free within overall calculations of the economy. Second, the apparent abundance of oil and the ability to move it wherever needed made it possible to treat it as inexhaustible. Mitchell concludes: 'Democratic politics developed, thanks to oil, with a particular orientation towards the future: the future was a limitless horizon of growth. This horizon was not some natural reflection of a time of plenty; it was the result of a particular way of organising expert knowledge and its objects, in terms of a novel world called "the economy".'[7]

Leftist politics on the one hand, the economy on the other – the first impeded by the appearance of oil, the second fuelled by it. This is already a shift in how we know oil that should produce new possibilities for how we might act in relation to it.

Aesthetics and Politics

Near the end of *The Long Emergency*, James Howard Kuntsler makes the claim that: 'the collective imagination of the public cannot process the notion of a nongrowth economy, even though the limits to growth are visible all around us in everything … We are not capable of conceiving another economic way. We are hostages to our own system.'[8] Such doubts about the public's capacity for radical change represents a genuine challenge for artists, writers and critics hoping to create new collective imaginings through their work. One such project is Edward Burtynsky's *Oil* (2009), which is made up of both new and old images addressing the topic of oil from every possible angle.

Burtynsky describes *Oil* as the outcome of an 'oil epiphany'. 'It occurred to me that the vast, human-altered landscapes that I pursued and photographed for over twenty years', he writes, 'were only made possible by the discovery of oil and the mechanical advantage of the internal combustion engine … These images can be seen as notations by one artist contemplating the world as it is made possible through this vital energy resource and the cumulative effects of industrial evolution.'[9] The exhibition is divided into three sections intended to document the life-cycle of oil. 'Extraction and Refinement' includes images of older oil fields in the California desert jam-packed with drill rigs and pumpjacks, of the expansive oil-sands extraction sites and tailing ponds in Northern Alberta, and the visually dynamic twists and turns of refinery structures around the world. 'Transportation and Motor Culture' begins with a series of Escher-like images of enormous highway interchanges, before taking us to massive car import lots in the US and China, as well as sites at which people accumulate around the fantasy of driving, as in the biker jamboree held in Sturgis, South Dakota.

If the photos in the first two sections draw our attention to the hidden infrastructures that produce and are produced by oil, 'The End of Oil' probes the consequences of oil society, especially through the detritus it leaves behind. The multiple images of the ancient oilfields of Baku, as well as of gigantic graveyards of cars, planes, tyres and oil drums, are concluded with a sequence of photos about the shipbreaking yards of Chittagong, Bangladesh, where nineteenth-century labour meets twentieth-century garbage through the mechanism of twenty-first century off-shoring of multinational capitalism's expenses

and responsibilities.

The impulse of documentary photography with political aims is to introduce to vision otherwise hidden practices or spaces that we should know about, but don't, either because we don't want to or because we aren't meant to. While Burtynsky's images have this impulse, there is more going on. His attention to the spectacle of scale and the elevated vantage point from which his images are taken simultaneously exemplify and critique the enduring fantasy of Enlightenment knowledge. The god's-eye perspective produces the enormity everywhere on display – a form of knowledge that makes it possible to see the outcome of petro-societies, but which is also able to create systems that leave signs of human activity on a planetary scale.

An epiphany means to understand the familiar 'how' in some new way. In another register, it can mean that one finally comes to understand that one *doesn't* understand, or can't possibly understand, what humanity has wrought as a result of oil. The feeling one gets in moving through Burtynsky's photo-narrative of oil is more the latter than the former – the dissipation of knowledge as opposed to its expansion. And this is to his credit: the painful and beautiful images on display in *Oil* never stoop to render oil manageable or fully graspable, except as a dimension of contemporary social life from whose blunt reality we can no longer hide away. Burtynsky offers no solution to the problem on display, but shows that the language of (easy) solutions is part of the system that generated the problem to begin with. Mitchell points out that since there is no way to distinguish between beneficial and harmful growth, 'the increased expenditure required to deal with the damage caused by fossil fuels appeared as an addition rather than an impediment of growth'.[10] *All* these images are images of growth. *Oil* confirms James Howard Kunstler's worries, though in a way that might yet generate the capacity for new social imaginaries.

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Putting oil at the centre of our investigations of social limits and possibilities opens new vantage points about politics, the environment and aesthetics. The insights offered by Mitchell about the significance of oil in contemporary democratic government gives us new insight into the forces shaping and enabling contemporary capitalism. The civilisation possibilities introduced by oil are seductive and far easier to defend with representational fictions of petro-plentitude (which accord with the specialised narratives of economics as well as with quotidian common sense) than with still abstract ideas and ideals of environmental devastation on the horizon. And work such as Burtysnsky's *Oil* produces representational openings into our imaginaries, even if it has to struggle with its capacity to intervene meaningfully at the level necessary to generate social and political change. The introduction of oil and energy into our thinking would make us alert to the necessity of mass energy for the enormous social and infrastructural systems we inhabit *and* those we prophesise. It would also alert us to the dead end of any environmental discourse that continues to ally itself with economics (as in some variants of theories of sustainability) – a discourse that depends on oil being virtually 'free' – and the need to create aesthetic *and* political interventions that oppose the narrative of endless growth with something more direct and more powerful than the ecological ethics on which we continue to depend.

1 This is an abbreviated version of a longer essay in a *Journal of Canadian Studies* forthcoming 2014 edition.

2 J.R. McNeill, *Something New Under the Sun: An Environmental History of the Twentieth-Century World*, Norton, New York, 2000, p.362.

3 Timonthy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil*, Verso Books, London and New York, 2011, p.37.

4 Ibid., p.127.

5 Ibid., p.136.

6 Ibid., p.139.

7 Ibid., p.143.

8 James Howard Kunstler, 'The Long Emergency: Surviving the Converging Catastrophes of the Twenty-First Century', *Atlantic Monthly*, New York, 2005, p.193.

9 Edward Burtynsky, *Oil*, Steidl, Göttingen, 2011, p.3.

10 Mitchell, op. cit., p.140.

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