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# Crude, Crisis and Capitalism in Upton Sinclair's *Oil!*

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**ABSTRACT**

*Torrents of ink have been spilled trying to explain the significance of fossil fuels and, particularly, oil in human history. In fact, we seem to have reached a point in history where the dependence on or, as George W. Bush more accurately put it, the addiction to oil are posing an existential threat not only to human civilization, but also to large parts of the biosphere. Naturally, the first and foremost question which needs to be asked is what does our current predicament tell us about ourselves as a culture and, perhaps, as a species. While it is not my goal to provide an answer to such existential questions within the limited scope of this paper, I would nevertheless like to outline the intractable problems that oil presents: rapid global warming and climate change that threatens lives and ecosystems; an expanding number of serious, world-altering globalized environmental crises all related to fossil-fuel-fuelled population and economic growth; increasing geopolitical instability, conflict, and terrorism related to control of oil supplies or affecting the extraction/refinement/distribution of oil; and a possibly imminent failure of supply–peak oil–that would wreck the world's economic and social systems. All of these crises have led to new, widespread awareness of just how completely oil has become essential to all aspects of humans' way of life, from agriculture to medical facilities, transportation to consumer goods. Oil has become an obsessive point of reference in and clear determinant over the daily lives of many, either victimizing them directly and cruelly as with Shell in Nigeria, or Texaco in Ecuador, or making them increasingly feel vulnerable in the garb of development. In fact, it has become impossible not to feel that oil at least partially determines the production and reproduction of culture on multiple levels. Nowadays, energy is more than a constraint; it remains an essential commodity in the symbolic, material and emblematic aspects of human lives. The reason why the problem seems so intractable is not because there are no solutions but, rather, that our current neoliberal market economy is structured in such a way as to prevent the forceful implementation of the recommendations of the economic, scientific and political community. For this reason, and as this paper will try to demonstrate, the only credible path to effectively and rapidly mitigate catastrophic climate change is to rethink our economic priorities and, perhaps suggest a global economic system that is ecologically just and sustainable.*

The most pressing questions that need to be asked are: is such a change even possible? Are we as a species able to decide and implement such a radical rearrangement of our economic priorities? If the answer is yes, as we are told it must be, what are the obstacles that stand in the way? Are these primarily economic, social or cultural? These are, once again, big questions which would be presumptuous to answer exhaustively in such a small setting. Still, if the history can be of any aid, it is to show that sometimes the simplest answers are the most difficult to unveil; and while we, as a species, have a tendency to come up with the most convoluted narratives to explain our mysteries, nature's logic seems instead rather simple and straightforward.

In this vein, I would argue that fossil fuels, especially oil rather than being the culprit of our predicament are simply its most visible and recent embodiment. These natural resources did not simply gush out of the ground out of their volition and begin to alter the ecosystems upon which we depend. Rather, they were exploited at a particular historical-cultural conjuncture for specific purposes by what was initially a voluntary act and which later became a duress. In fact, the existence of oil, for one, was known long before the Industrial Revolution. The same can be said of technologies, the embodiment of specific cultural disposition.

This paper attempts to answer the question "Why is oil so bad?" in the light of the methods and techniques used in the pursuit of oil, particularly the manner in which this pursuit drastically reshapes landscape— that is, the physical outlines of a given area, but also the institutions, customs, operational divisions, aesthetic codes, and so forth that define it. I will attempt to answer that why in the world that oil remains so beloved, rather than the more obvious problem of why it is difficult to model an entirely new energy infrastructure. One of the most truly revolutionary, tumultuous aspects of late twentieth-century environmentalism was its primary focus on the oil spill, which jump-started the US movement in California in 1969 and which offered a reinterpretation of oil extraction as life threatening, rather than a realization of modern life. Yet most human survivors of the twentieth century, including a good number of self-proclaimed environmentalists, are driving oil-driven automobiles, using petroleum-based plastics and polymers, walking on asphalt, and otherwise living and breathing in oil. Probably keeping this view in mind, thinkers started investigating a set of recurring problems which include: the complex relationships that have fostered between oil and the future, the cultural imbroglio of petroleum and cataclysm, highlighting the drastic extermination of the human population.

Daniel Yergin voices much the same sentiment in his exhaustive history of the geopolitics of oil, *The Prize*:

> In the twentieth century, oil . . . became the basis of the great postwar suburbanization movement that transformed both the contemporary landscape and our modern way of life. Today, we are so dependent on oil, and oil is so embedded in our daily doings, that we hardly stop to comprehend its pervasive significance. It is oil that makes possible where we live, how we live, how we commute to work, how we travel—even where we conduct our courtships. It is the lifeblood of suburban communities. Oil (and natural gas) are the essential components in the fertilizer on which world agriculture depends; oil makes it possible to transport food to the totally non-self-sufficient megacities of the world. Oil also provides the plastics and chemicals that are the bricks and mortar of contemporary civilization, a civilization that would collapse if the world's oil wells suddenly went dry. (14)

It requires little to no effort to produce an alternative history of the twentieth century that emphasises the role of oil as the central figure in shaping and organising human life. The heroic (or foolish) decisions made by generals and politicians to attack this or that enemy position in accordance with the dictates of military strategy continue to dominate accounts of the World Wars. Since armies became mechanised, air forces took to the skies, and navies began to rely on oil (instead of coal) for ship propulsion, much of what passes for strategy can be summed up by the simple directive to gain and maintain access to oil at any cost. Japan and Germany began World War II in a position of energy deficiency due to a lack of domestic oil reserves. As a result, the German push into Russia and North Africa and the Japanese push into Southeast Asia were driven as much by the need for energy to keep their militaries on the move as they were by misguided national narratives. Of Pearl Harbour, oil historian Daniel Yergin has written that "the primary target of this huge campaign remained the oil fields of the East Indies;" the attack on the U.S. was carried out in order to protect the Japanese flank and to safeguard tanker routes to the home island from Borneo and Sumatra. Without a doubt, a history of the modern world centred on oil would be reductive, omitting numerous significant human social, cultural, and political developments: energy security was not the cause of World War II. Likewise, histories that exclude oil fail to account for the ways in which our dominant energy source influences our material and social lives.

Oil is a substance that has influenced all aspects of society. The 20th century would not have been the same without a source of energy that was easy to store and transport, produced a large amount of energy per unit of fuel, and formed the basis of numerous other substances, from plastics to lubricants, without which it is difficult to imagine life on Earth today. The fact that oil plays a significant role in our lives in ways we may not have believed — or wished to believe — appears to have finally become a conscious part of our imagination. There is no other commodity that captivates the public's attention as much as oil, from news about oil spills to growing concern about the environmental impact of our CO2 economies. The physical necessity of oil for the operation of social and economic systems continues to weigh on the liberties and new forms of community generated by wireless devices and instant global communication systems. Global and domestic politics are increasingly organised around energy security, whether in the form of military adventurism during the Gulf War, battles over pipeline expansions, or strategic investments in extraction sites by nations and sovereign wealth funds. At a time when the exemplar of the capitalist corporation is the technology company, oil companies continue to hold the position they have held for the majority of the last century among the world's largest, most profitable, and most powerful corporations. In the twenty-first century, we are no longer as blind as we once may have been to the simple fact that oil matters, and matters a great deal.

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In his prophetic 1992 essay "Petrofictions," author Amitav Ghosh laments the lack of fictions addressing oil and what he calls the "Oil Encounter"—the historic intertwining of the destinies of Americans and Middle Easterners over this resource. Ghosh offers multiple explanations for why the sixteenth-century spice trade—his point of comparison—produced more and more fictions than oil, including the professionalisation of contemporary fiction, which he argues must come to focus on "a stock of themes and subjects, each of which is accompanied by a well-tested pedagogical technology." But if there is a single, dominant reason for the dearth of fictions addressing petroleum, it is that:

> To a great many Americans, oil smells bad. It reeks of unavoidable overseas entanglements, a worrisome foreign dependency, economic uncertainty, risky and expensive military enterprises; of thousands of dead civilians and children and all the troublesome questions that lie buried in their graves…. And to make things still worse, it begins to smell of pollution and environmental hazards. It reeks, it stinks, it becomes a Problem that can be written about only in the language of Solutions.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, writers, artists, and filmmakers have undertaken the challenge of creating petrofictions that cast oil as the protagonist of our society. Consequently, they have avoided presenting oil in terms of problems and solutions. The very best petrofictions currently being produced do not view oil as a social problem to be solved, but rather as a fundamental aspect of our societies. Ghosh is astute in identifying the (still) surprising dearth of oil-related fiction, but his comparison to the spice trade is inappropriate. We need petrofictions not only to narrate the points of encounter between societies and individuals produced by the trade of desirable commodities, but also because oil (unlike spices) is an ur-commodity: the substance on which the world relies to heat its homes, transport bodies and goods, build and maintain infrastructure—the substance that, for better or worse, makes the world go round.

Since the beginning of human civilization, petroleum derivatives have been utilised, particularly in ancient Mesopotamia and other parts of the Middle East, where an ancient but significant oil industry "supplied asphalt for building roads, mastic for waterproofing ships, architecture, and hydraulics, as well as essential components for many medicines and treatments." Bitumen was utilised in warfare and numerous other industries. Paradoxically, despite its widespread use in prehistoric times, its subsequent applications throughout the centuries were marginal and primarily limited to locations where oil was readily available through surface seepage. After a long decline into obscurity, oil partially reemerged in the mid-1850s, when amateur and professional chemists in Europe and the United States conducted parallel experiments to extract and refine oil to create an illuminating fuel. Among those claiming to be the modern inventor of oil distillation, a Canadian scientist deserves special recognition: Abraham Gesner, who patented a new oil product, Kerosene, for "illuminating or other purposes" in the United States in 1854. (Maugeri 4). In Pennsylvania, the great revolution began in 1859, when Edwin Drake successfully extracted oil from its rocky underground penitentiary using a drilling machine. Thousands of amateur petroleum prospectors, dubbed "wildcatters," along with transporters, refiners, traders, dealers, bankers, speculators, geologists, and the ever-present con artists flooded the fields of Western Pennsylvania. In 1861, the first oil refinery went into operation, and the first barrels of oil exported from the United States sailed from Philadelphia to London. The first successful pipeline, with a capacity of 800 barrels per day and a length of five miles, was completed in 1865. Thus, what could be termed the "Black Gold Rush" began (5). Beginning in the 1920s, as oil came to exert an irrefutable social influence on the industrialised nations that were well on their way to becoming dependent on its consumption and on those locations around the globe where it was being extracted, refined, and distributed, a body of literature examining the functional dynamics of the companies that dominated the oil industry after Standard Oil's demobilisation emerged. Among these works is Upton Sinclair's novel Oil! (1927), which depicts American existence through oil so precisely that it appears to be the apogee of Americanness. It was also the inspiration for the Academy Award-winning film There Will Be Blood (2007). Oil! is set in the first two decades of the twentieth century, during the early Southern California oil boom. At the time, Southern California supplied 22 percent of the world's oil, more than any country outside of the United States (Juhasz 64).

A muckraking spectacle in the tradition of Sinclair's own The Jungle, it tells the rags-to-riches tale of a successful independent oil baron, J. Arnold Ross, referred to in the text as "Dad," as seen through the eyes of his loving but increasingly cynical son, Bunny. The two acquire a couple of ranches in the fictional town of Paradise, where they strike it rich by discovering a "black gold gusher" and meet Mr. Watkins, the owner of one of the ranches, a religious fanatic with two sons, Paul and Eli, who represent divergent approaches to social reform and existential vocation. Paul, the older child, rejects his father's religious extremism in favour of social activism. He eventually becomes a carpenter, working for his father, and he becomes Bunny's friend, philosopher, and mentor, instilling in him a healthy scepticism. During Paul's adolescence, he is introduced to radical thought by a freethinking attorney who takes him on as an apprentice and invigorates his tendencies by forcing him to fight against Soviet proletariat forces in Siberia as part of the American expeditionary force at the conclusion of World War I. He devotes his entire life to communism and the struggle of labour against big business. Eli, on the other hand, is a dishonest evangelical who exploits others' faith for his own gain. He is an epileptic who claims to have the ability to heal and religious visions. Modeled after the renowned evangelical revivalist Aimee Semple McPherson, he becomes wealthy as a result of his "hellfire and damnation" ministry broadcast on the radio and from the pulpit of his multimillion-dollar Los Angeles sanctuary. In the meantime, following a brief military stint, Bunny enrols at Southern Pacific University, a school modelled after the University of Southern California during its Methodist Church connection days, and

 

begins a relationship with Hollywood starlet Vee Tracy. In the meantime, Dad joins forces with Vernon Roscoe, "whose life provided the template" for the real-life oil magnate Edward Doheny (Juhasz 65), and they conspire to buy Senator Warren Harding's election to the White House in 1920 in exchange for the rights to drill on the forbidden government oil reserves.[1] Sinclair based this incident very closely on the Teapot Dome scandal, which had helped to inspire his writing of the novel in the first place (Bloodworth). This illustrates the self-perpetuating, *quid pro quo* nature of the relationship between private sector and state, redefining America's political system as a capitalist oligarchy, not a democracy. When Roscoe and Dad's manoeuvre is revealed, a ruckus erupts; Dad leaves for Europe, where, broken and melancholy as he grows older, he becomes intrigued with spiritualism and dies soon after. Due to the intrigues of Roscoe, who does not want the money to pass into Bunny's hands, the family fortune vanishes with Dad. Bunny has grown to accept an increasingly radical socialist attitude as a result of Paul's influence, which he confirms when he marries Rachel, a woman from his university socialist club. One of the important characters in the novel is Paul, a fiercely idealist youth who introduces young Bunny to socialism. Bunny idolizes Paul from the time of their first meeting outside Paul's aunt's house, where Dad is attempting to secure a community oil lease. Paul is drafted during World War I and serves in Vladivostok during the Allied Intervention in Russia at the end of the war. He returns to the US radicalized. Having seen atrocities and injustices committed by the Allied and American troops against Russian workers, he has become convinced of the rightness and viability of government of, by and for the workers. The novel's take on the Bolshevik Revolution reflects the central debates and concerns that coincided with the American Left at the time. The novel concludes with the death of Paul, who was beaten by an anti-communist mob for disrupting a labour conference, and his loyal sister, Ruth, who grieves by throwing herself down an oil well.

Oil! is a protest against the erosion of democracy that occurs when big business buys its way into power, a reflection on the corrupting face of avarice, and a witness to the persecution of far-left social reformers. It encourages the reader to consider their own culpability in the mendacious capitalist system by perpetuating the herd behaviour that is often defined by passive neutrality. Diffident participation in the capitalist structure is shown to be as integral in maintaining the capitalist status quo as devious politicians, debauching police forces and mobs, and the self-enriching businessmen whom Sinclair portrays as the perpetrators of this oppressive system. Its position on oil itself is ambivalent, or rather, multifaceted. One might expect the capitalist side of the novel to be presented by a one-dimensional and demonic depiction, but this is not the case. Dad, for example is not shown as a man of excess, but rather as a hard-working pragmatist. After his first wife is convinced to leave him for a man of more profitable financial means, Dad decides that if he is to provide a life free from such loss for his children, he must provide them with the means to prevent that loss: money. Most on the left would find Doheny sympathetic because he is the novel's central oilman. He's a tough individualist who's made his own way, rising to prosperity and social status not out of any intrinsic yearning for power or luxury, but rather as a stoic submission to modern life's needs. He appears to pay his workers decently, to be concerned about many injustices that his idealistic son Bunny exposes him to, and to be eventually taken in by the powerful oil tycoons when he uses strike breakers only when compelled to by the oil owners' group to which he belongs. Furthermore, the novel, particularly in its opening chapter and portions portraying Bunny's high school days, revels in the freedom of mobility and speed given by the oil-powered automobile. However, this freedom of circulation, Bunny comes to conclude, is part of an ultimately fruitless, quixotic search for something better: "you looked at the world, and saw enormous crowds of people driving to places where they were no better off than at home" (284). Paul, who is favourably characterized as a selfless and enlightened figure, comes to see in the mad scramble of individuals and companies for control of resources endemic to the oil industry a metaphor for international relations within a capitalist system as mentioned in the *Oil!*:

> As I go about Europe I say to myself that is world diplomacy. A wrangle over an oil lease! Every nation hating every other one, making combinations and promising to stick together—but they've sold each other out before night. . . . Each one racing to get the oil, and spending more than he makes—isn't that a picture of capitalism? And then the war! You remember how we heard the racket [of a group of neighbours fighting over the terms of an oil lease in their neighbourhood of Prospect Hill]. . . . Son, that was a little oil war! And a year or two later the big one [World War I] broke out . . . and remember, they were fighting for a chance to exploit oil workers, to divide the wealth the oil workers were going to produce; in their crazy greed they killed or injured seventy-three per cent of all the men they put to work on Prospect Hill— that's government statistics also! And don't you see how that's the world war exactly? The workers doing the fighting, and the bankers getting the bonds! (468–69)

Therefore, according to Sinclair, the conflicts and exploitation of the oil industry are ultimately the result of human acquisitiveness and a lack of resources. This is emphasised by the novel's final line, which states that if oil is properly harnessed under a different social and economic system, it will not cause the havoc and destruction depicted in Oil!

> "There will be other girls with bare brown legs running over those hills, and they may grow up to be happier women, if men can find some way to chain the black and cruel demon which killed Ruth Watkins and her brother— yes, and Dad also: an evil Power which roams the

[1]Heidi Zogbaum argues that like Sinclair's Vernon Roscoe, Collins is based in part on Edward Dohney, one of the chief American oilmen active in Mexico (32).

> earth, crippling the bodies of men and women, and luring nations to destruction by visions of unearned wealth, and the opportunity to enslave and exploit labour" (527).

In the world of the novel this "witch's brew" transforms the spatial contours by stirring the rapacious drive to dominate oil reserves and thus optimize profits, which in turn leads men to bring about great modifications and alterations to physical spaces and environments. The city of Paradise is transformed by Dad's oil drilling, from a small pastoral— though more desiccated and rundown than its name implies— community to the site of a sprawling industrialized camp, with derricks, massive reservoirs, workers' barracks, and a state-of the-art refinery. Dad distributes the necessary graft to local officials to have paved access roads built at taxpayers' expense. In general, the novel marvels at, while simultaneously cautioning against, this power of enterprise and capital to effect monumental change to the landscape, as in the case of a road constructed through the mountains:

> Men of money had said the word, and surveyors and engineers had come, and diggers by the thousand, swarming Mexicans and Indians, bronze of skin, armed with picks and shovels; and great steam shovels with long hanging lobster-claws of steel; derricks with wide swinging arms, scrapers and grading machines, steel drills and blasting men with dynamite, rock-crushers, and concrete mixers that ate sacks of cement by the thousand, and drank water from a flour-stained hose, and had round steel bellies that turned all day with a grinding noise. All these had come, and for a year or two they had toiled, and yard by yard they had unrolled the magic ribbon. (5)

The novel acknowledges the need for spatial regulations, such as zoning laws and restrictions on land exchange and exploitation, despite the passage's palpable emphasis on industrial might. Real estate promoters were responsible for Southern California's transition from relative obscurity in the late nineteenth century to its current status as a lagging urban and suburban population centre. Before the oil, entertainment, and defence industries, this was the first significant boom in Southern California. Oil! portrays these real estate agents, one of whom, Mr. Hardcastle, helps Dad acquire the Paradise properties he later drills on at rock-bottom prices, as ruthless roadside vendors with no aesthetic sense. Oil! argues that when there is no legal stewardship governing the use of land or when it is laxly applied, the types of capitalist economic exploitation carried out by the real estate men, Dad, and Roscoe to an even greater extent than Dad can occur unimpeded.

In this novel, no aspect of the early twentieth-century Southern California oil boom is omitted, be it the deception used to secure land leases, the bribes paid to maintain sympathetic policies in Washington, or the American oil industry's ability to extend American power through exploration and extraction abroad. Sinclair's descriptive abilities are just as visceral here as they were in his work on the meat industry, The Jungle, and, if anything, he demonstrates a more nuanced grasp of the political battles at stake in an oil economy. The opening chapter of the novel, for instance, is an extended ode to the automobile and the desire for speed, but the novel's critique of capitalism far surpasses Munif's reading, which frequently clings too closely to economic numbers insufficiently elaborated within a cultural logic. And if Munif's sensitivity to class discourse is impressive, it is Sinclair who allows a creative ambiguity in class tension that cannot be resolved by oil encounters alone. Amitav Ghosh is proven wrong on this point: the Great American Oil Novel is contemporaneous with the emergence of oil in American history. Sinclair's oil encounter may be more concerned with the impact of globe(oil)ization on American families and communities than with oil economics as a logic of American imperial need, but it nonetheless confronts the transformation any discovery of oil produced in the modern era, this time within the infrastructure of the American state. The formal challenge of the oil encounter persists, and if Oil! resonates today, it seems to be more due to the foresight of its content than to its lessons about degrees of inexpressibility in constructing its narrative from the raw facts of oil giant Unocal's rise to prominence during the California oil boom. Oil! is written in the style of investigative journalism, so perhaps Sinclair places more faith in his satirical eye than in his novelistic zeal. Sinclair's writing follows the plot from paragraph to paragraph and minimises opportunities for reflection on the underlying themes of economic justice and moral clarity. Sinclair, like Munif, has an intense interest in the oil extraction process. Sinclair will frequently explain the process of oil while obfuscating its significance, a division with tragic repercussions for Dad, if not for his love-blind son. Chapter Three of Oil! provides extensive information on the oil extraction process:

> "Far down in the ground, underneath the Ross-Bankside No.1, a great block of steel was turning round and round. The under surface of it had blunt steel teeth, like a nutmeg-grater; on top of it rested a couple of thousand feet of steel tubing, the 'drill-stem,' a weight of twenty tons pressing it down; so, as it turned, it ate into the solid rock, grinding it to powder" (65).

This phallic force simultaneously consumes and reforms nature. Mud is pumped through tubes and then returned to the surface along with debris from the bore. Oil can flow naturally to the surface; in the novel, Ross's interest in the Watkins ranch stems from this observation when the seepage begins

 

after an earthquake. However, nothing collapses inside/outside like the apparent ecstasy of a successful well:

> "Then they would go down for another fifty; and presently they would find they didn't have to go so far, the pressure was shoving the column of water up in the hole. Then you knew you were getting near to the end; one or two more trips of the bailer, and the water would be shot out of the hole, and mud and water and oil would spout up over the top of the derrick, staining it a lovely dripping black … There she came! There was a cheer from all hands, and the spectators went flying to avoid the oily spray blown by the wind" (77-78).

"It stinks of unavoidable overseas entanglements, a worrisome foreign dependency, economic uncertainty, risky and expensive military enterprises; of thousands of dead civilians and children and all the troubling questions that haunt their graves," says Moby Dick, which supports Ghosh's contention that for Americans, oil "smells bad" (30). In the eyes of puritans, Sinclair's orgiastic celebration of oil extraction sanctioned a dubious desire and, when coupled with the corruption he discovers at nearly every turn, presented an American dream tainted by the rapacity of exploitation and objectification. In his novel Cities of Salt, Munif responds to American objectification by depersonalising oil businessmen; most of them are simply nameless 'Americans'. Sinclair, on the other hand, would like to make oil more American. In the just-quoted passage, he shifts from the third to the second person, so that the reader is no longer a neutral observer of the oil extraction process but is instead stained by it. This is similar to Bakhtin's concept of double-voiced discourse: the interpellation of the reader into the event challenges the objectivity of the primary description. The internal debate concerns the nature of the celebration. If Sinclair never refines his prose, these shared experiences come close to evoking a community of oil, hierarchical but bound by a common destiny in the capacity to create something from nothing. Sinclair has always adored the unique American necromancy, but he lamented that it only appeared to flow through the most obnoxious and avaricious forms of capital accumulation. This is not only the moral and ethical conundrum of Sinclair's novel, but also a significant tension in how we assess the emergence of the American century.

Sinclair comprehends how the American experience of space as freedom conflicts with the necessity of confinement in its exploration (Hitchcock 92-93). The automobile in which Mr. Ross and his son are riding facilitates the joy of movement described by Sinclair in the opening chapter of Oil!, but also represents a production logic and the privatisation of space in its realisation. It is noteworthy that Sinclair wrote a novel about oil because his wife owned property near the Los Angeles border where oil had been discovered. Sinclair began to comprehend the relationship between the promise of mobility and the ruthlessness of the business model it embraces when he attended meetings of landowners attempting to fashion sales to bring oil companies for drilling (Dell 179). Oil revolutionises space in California, just as it did in Pennsylvania and Texas, but stifles the ability to imagine beyond its logic. It is hardly a coincidence that some of the wealthiest individuals in modern world history (John D. Rockefeller [Standard Oil], Andrew W. Mellon [Gulf], and J. Paul Getty [Getty Oil]) embody this freedom/enclosure nexus. J. Arnold Ross, the oil baron, is a composite figure Sinclair creates from this stratum of American business. Ross is not malicious, but he believes that accumulation through oil justifies his ruthlessness. In some instances, such as when he acquires the Watkins Ranch, Ross is more motivated by cunning than by greed, and Sinclair makes good use of Bunny and, to a lesser extent, Paul Watkins as ethical foils. In general, however, the pursued strategies are interpreted as American industrialism, with oil as its most generous and potent ally. There are numerous ways in which Oil! inscribes itself into the ancestry depicted above, and on this occasion, we can only begin to describe this fateful prescription.

American power, for example, is founded not only on the discovery of oil as a domestic resource used to "cover" its vast spaces, but also on the articulation of geopolitical and geocultural influence. While Sinclair may appear to confine this narrative within the confines of a social-realist Bildungsroman based on Bunny's coming of age, from the title onwards, another form of elaboration is at stake, one in which Paradise becomes a veritable sea of oil derricks and resource extraction affects every level of socialisation, whatever the crisis. Paradise is the counterpart to Sinclair's missed opportunity, his socialist experiment named Helicon Hall in New Jersey (Dell 186). In 1914, when "the majority of the civilised world had gone to war" (Sinclair 114), the United States maintained neutrality, which according to Ross meant that "they would make money out of both sides; they would sell to the Allies directly, and they would sell to the Central powers via agents in Holland and Scandinavia, and they would raise a howl when the British tried to stop this by the blockade" (115). Ross has a principle: when representatives of warring parties ask him to sign contracts for oil delivery, he is willing to do so "but only if they convert their European bonds into good US dollars." The demand for oil during the First World War marks the beginning of the golden age of the U.S. dollar, a safe haven whose demise is directly correlated with control over and access to oil (Hitchcock 94). The 'Great War' is not typically regarded as an oil war, but it greatly enhanced America's global standing, especially because its economic infrastructure remained intact and its oil production capacity was maximised. F. William Engdahl suggests that oil played an additional role: beginning in the late nineteenth century, the Germans exploited the deteriorating economic conditions of the Ottoman Empire to directly satisfy Germany's rapidly expanding demand for energy reserves. In 1912, Winston Churchill, then First Lord of the Admiralty, stated succinctly the need for imperial command: "We must become the owners or at least the controllers at the source of at least a portion of the oil we require" (Sluglett 103-4). During the war, the sharp rise in oil prices made American oil magnates both wealthy and more politically influential. Again, Sinclair tries to depict a society dominated by oil logic. Ross, for example, sees no reason why local officials should not be bribed so that public funds can be used to construct a road leading to his oil wells. In addition, the business, along

 

with other oil company owners, demands lax taxes and questionable lease contracts from the government. Sinclair bases this critique on the infamous Teapot Dome scandal, in which members of Harding's administration were bribed to lease oil-rich land in Wyoming and California without competitive bidding to oil barons such as Edward L. Doheny (a model for Ross) and Harry F. Sinclair (no relation to Upton). Harding was heavily funded by Big Oil in order to unseat the less cooperative Wilson as president. Ross and his business partner, Vernon Roscoe, viewed bribery as patriotic because it persuaded government officials to act in the national interest. Albert B. Fall, Harding's Interior Secretary, was eventually convicted of accepting bribes for oil land leases and sentenced to one year in prison. While Roscoe is a fugitive from an investigation resembling the Teapot Dome scandal in the novel, he continues to serve the United States abroad by attempting to secure oil exploration concessions from foreign governments (Yergin 195-200).

As previously stated, Sinclair and Munif share an interest in the political opposition of workers to the substance of oil economics. Much of Oil! describes a growing resistance to the labour practises of oil companies, whether through oilfield strikes or the promotion of alternative modes of economic justice, largely inspired by the Russian Revolution of 1917. What is at stake in the American oil industry is essentially the difference between the meaning of the word "strike" for the oil industry and for labour activism. Paul Watkins is a sounding board for these events and movements, a worker and organiser whose service in the First World War and subsequent redeployment to fight a secret US war against Bolsheviks and Bolshevism in Siberia stirred his political consciousness (Hitchcock 93). Indeed, the final section of the novel focuses increasingly on the debates over the significance of the Russian revolution in American politics. Ross, for his part, evidently views socialism and communism as detrimental to business, and he is pleased that 'Red Scare' reporting keeps oil magnate schemes off the front pages of newspapers. Paul views the oil industry as a microcosm of labour versus capital in American society, but he is convinced that the oil barons' greed will only result in more war and minimal long-term benefits for the American working class. Labour opposition is a counter-discourse, and a commendable one in light of the Rosses of the world, but one may begin to question the novel's suitability as a geocultural form within the representational complexities of oil logic. In Sinclair's novel, the question of an appropriate cultural form is also symptomatic. While the narrative of Bunny's passage into adulthood frequently echoes the implied reader's naiveté about the realities of the oil business, Bunny's role extends beyond that of his father's narrator. He is not only a symbol of moral ambivalence between the competing claims of capital and labour, as exemplified by his alternation between Dad and Paul, but also a keen observer of Southern California's cultural life. This is reflected in Bunny's relationships, particularly his love for silent film star Vee Tracy and Paul's sister Ruth Watkins, who is arguably the superior leftist activist.

The significance of oil's geoculture lies in its permeation of economic and political logic as well as its relatively autonomous persistence, as if it rests on the social as its truth in fiction. As evidenced by our examination of both oil wars and imaginative narratives, anti-oil activism has been contemporaneous with the logic of oil and has sought to dissolve its cruel antimony. But because capitalism must be revolutionary to survive, it is not above attempting to facilitate the dissolution of oil geoculture on its own, despite being enamoured of the massive surpluses accruing from scarcity and oligopoly. Thus, although one must acknowledge the emergence of peak-oil speculative fiction such as Kunstler's World Made By Hand and Eschbach's Ausgebrannt, it is not beyond the possibility of a missed encounter when one considers how modern oil companies are attempting to reinvent themselves as the key to a sustainable future. Even as oil economies must decline in accordance with predictions of peak oil, oil fiction persists, posing as an alternative to itself.

Ultimately, the geoculture of oil must address its extensive history of exploitation of the South and labour. As Munif's fiction affirms, these are both first encounters and the present, as the story of appropriation in Iraq continues to emphasise. As a result of Ghosh's audacious challenge, we are increasingly exposed to pertinent criticism from creative works that either supports or refutes his original thesis. Nonetheless, since the ecological impact of fossil fuels is no longer a trade secret, there is a growing need to rethink the complex ways in which oil economies have fashioned cultural formations (and foreign policies) aimed at squelching or displacing opposition to the rationale of oil extraction. In the case of the United States, this has frequently resulted in oil encounters as war, but between *Oil*! and *There Will Be Blood*, the geopolitical void is filled by a confrontation of a different order that battles silence or the inexpressible at every turn. Articulating this fantasy is, if nothing else, the prospect of the end of oil.

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