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Beyond the resource curse and pipeline conspiracies: Energy as a social relation in the Middle East

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ABSTRACT

This article identifies problematic tendencies in current analyses of the Middle East's energy relations. All social relations are frequently seen as determined by resource extraction, use and transfer, contributing to the uniquely instable social relations of the Middle East. Social structures despite being energy rich, are seen as incapable to react to old and new geopolitical crises and the effects of global climate change, adding to a picture of chronic underdevelopment and conflict. This article offers an alternative, more optimistic perspective on the Middle East's energy relations. Privileging the social over the material, calorific, geological or topographic dimensions of energy relations, it argues that social life developed in relation to its natural resources, matter and energy, but is not singularly determined by it. It proposes to historicise and re-politicise the Middle East's social energy relations, including its nutritional and geopolitical dimensions. Emphasising their dynamic character, energy and its associated infrastructures are subsequently re-defined into political categories, a field of social contestation and change, rather than a limiting biophysical structure. The concept of Social Energy, thus, transforms nature from a constraining externality into an integral part of social analysis and transformation in the Middle East.

1. Introduction

The current global conjuncture is dominated by a multiplicity of crises. The financial crisis of 2007/8 remains unresolved while Europe finds itself in the midst of a so-called 'refugee crisis', accompanied by a crisis of political sovereignty in the Middle East. This constellation appears to have turned into a political crisis in the West, too, with the rise of populist right-wing politics. To many, this means the end of the global liberal order as we know it. Yet despite multiple sources of uncertainty, the hydro-carbon economy at the heart of the contemporary environmental crisis keeps growing unabatedly, further aggravating the effects of anthropogenic global climate change. In sum, the world is at an intersection of crises, not infrequently formulated around the politics of oil or fossilised forms of energy, which still provide the main material or rather mineral base for socially reproducing the contemporary global political economy. The Middle East represents this global contradiction better than most regions. Here a stereotypically orientalised imagery of an instable political landscape meets a dystopian vision of an ecology not only ravaged by conflict but by the dramatic effects of global climate change, too. New energy infrastructures, from hydro-dams to oil and gas developments keep expanding, most recently into the Eastern Mediterranean. Paradoxically, valorising and eventually burning these resources, which once promised wealth and prosperity to the region, are now known to cause more havoc, from the resource curse to global warming.

The region's instable geopolitics, the detrimental role of hydrocarbons on development or the potentially devastating effects of climate change are indeed beyond doubt. Still, much of the debate on the crisis ridden energy relations in the Middle East is formulated in simplistic, deterministic and orientalist narratives. This is not only problematic with regards to the Middle East itself. The orientalised imagery of the Middle East's broken social energy relations not only misrepresents the social reality on the ground. It also obscures the inner workings of a crisis that is not regional, but global in scope. Instead of offering a meaningful global and holistic social analysis, this leads to the narrowing of its origins geographically where mechanistic explanations are al to common, from Neo-Malthusian visions on scarcity and population growth to cultural essentialisms causing 'sectarian clashes'.

This article offers a reversal of this logic. It re-centres the Middle East's energy relations and its infrastructures at the heart of an optimistic, rather than dystopian vision. It maps out a different, dialectical understanding of nature-society relations. In doing so, it develops the 'Social Energy' approach, privileging the social over the material, calorific, geological or topographic dimensions of energy. Thus, energy is not treated as biophysical matter, but as historically and geographically specific set of social relations. Energy infrastructures, from dams to transfer pipelines are not understood as economic necessities but as

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avoidable political choices by the region's developmental states and the global political economy they inhabit.

Introducing the concept of 'Social Energy' is not only meant to improve the analysis of energy politics. Social life, it is argued, developed in relation to its natural resources, including matter and energy. This does not imply that it should, therefore, be determined by it, in the Middle East or elsewhere. Instead, it proposes to historicise and, thereby, re-politicise the Middle East's social energy relations. This reveals the spatio-temporally dynamic, rather than materially determined character of 'Social Energy'. Energy is, thus, understood here as a political category, a field of social change and contestation, rather than a limiting biophysical structure. The concept of Social Energy, thus, transforms nature from an asocial, quantitative constraining externality into an integral part of social analysis. Crucially, this also turns energy infrastructures from a necessity of uneven development, a tool of social engineering, into a potential source of social transformation in the Middle East. Finally, this paper will evidence this potential for emancipatory social change around Social Energy in historical practice detailing the case of the so-called 'Rojava' revolution in Northern Syria.

Social energy relations are not unique to the Middle East. It is here, however, that a particularly damaging understanding of energy determinism prevails. It is, therefore, in this regional context that the concept's emancipatory potential is disproportionately high. Energy politics in the Middle East is seen more as more than an infrastructural challenge. Rather, it is not only a political, but also a geopolitical one. Energy and energy security are, thus, not only national and international policy concerns. Energy is integral to the many everyday conflicts in the region. For example, the never ending intra-Palestinian feud between Hamas and Fatah is carried out via Gaza's electricity supply from Israel. The Palestinian Authority (PA) stopped funding the already deprived coastal strip's supplies, leaving it not just without electricity, but also without substantial services such as waste water treatment and health services [21]. Saudi Arabia's geopolitical ambitions, enabled by the abundance of oil and the arms funded by its revenues, has not only become more interventionist in the region, but has also maintained low prices to undermine revenue and power of its rivals and competitors [72]. At the same time, most Gulf countries develop ambitions to diversify their economies away from the current dependency on hydrocarbon rents [82]. These developments equally demonstrate strengths as well as vulnerabilities and that energy is ubiquitous in Middle East politics. No analysis of the region's complex relations is thought to be complete without considering at least an 'energy' component. Over time, however, the perception of this component has changed from being an enviable source of unlimited wealth to a poisonous curse, a social ill. While the need for hydrocarbon consumption has survived all political and economic crises in the West, the Middle East has gone through many ruptures in its relationship with energy.

Despite this centrality, surprisingly, notions of 'energy' or 'energy security' are mostly taken for granted and are hardly ever specified, let alone discussed [42]. Based on the region's geology, most 'energy' analyses of the Middle East, from security to geopolitics to political economy, remain focussed on hydrocarbons. Water-energy relations [62] and developing hydro-electric infrastructures are analysed within the context of transboundary river regimes, usually in relation to irrigation for agriculture. Apart from the financing of dam construction, water relations are rarely meaningfully related to the hydrocarbon economy [83]. Similarly, analyses of renewable energy sources focus on the potential for solar and wind production for local use and potential electricity transfers to Europe, which still raises issues with vulnerability and security [45]. They are, however, hardly ever related to the complex social geo-political constellations within which they emerge [52].

What remains constant throughout time, space and different approaches to the Middle East's social energy relations and its corresponding infrastructures is an understanding of its ecology as space of exception. Unprecedented riches or hardships related to resource deprivation are generally seen as 'unnatural nature'. The same humanity considered to be in control of its own destiny in subjugating nature in the north is disproportionately dominated by an environment not conducive to stability or development in the Middle East. This and the centrality of fossil resources to any analysis of the Middle East remain dominant in academic, journalistic and policy accounts [16]. Even if scarcity doesn't necessarily lead to outright conflict, the Middle East's political order is still seen as being disproportionately dominated by its environment. Ever since Karl Witfogel's description of Oriental Empires having centralized politically due to their irrigation needs [74], orientalist environmental determinism remains a popular form of analysing Middle East politics. Precarious environments and the assumed mismanagement by local elites served as a pretext for colonial rule in the name of both rescuing as well as appropriating a 'pristine' nature, paradoxically threatened by its native inhabitants, not by its outside invaders [17]. Postcolonial states are alleged to have failed in their ambition to take over these colonial forms of power projection in an insecure environment. They are thought to mismanage both polity and ecology. The effects of climate change have further revealed what is now known as a lack of 'resilience' or 'adaptive capacities' of these states. Arguments about Sudan's and Syria's civil wars being triggered by climate change [40,61], collapsing the already fragile and dysfunctional post-colonial order into inevitable wars and devastation, close this cycle of modern 'Environmental Orientalism' in the West's ecological imaginaries of the Middle East.

This modern reading stands in sharp contrast to the emphasis of the Middle East's lush and productive environments, the origins of human agricultural cultivation in Mesopotamia and Palestine, making it the Biblical cradle of humanity itself. Even in the contemporary world, the Middle Eastern environment's perceived precarity can be contrasted with its central role in the global hydro-carbon economy and increasingly also the services industry. Different forms of appropriating nature, thus, seem to sustain as much they disrupt systems of rule. This can be traced from the postcolonial all the way to the 'Islamic' state [20]. Mirrored in this schizophrenic relationship is the political economy of fossil fuel. This source of wealth [38], having degenerated into an outright "curse" [73], is now portrayed as inviting corruption, conflict and neo-colonialism as much as it is a source and condition of progress. Once thought of as the catalyst of development, fossils now inhibit 'sustainable' and progressive social change beneficial for humans and nature alike.

This tension-ridden relationship between the 'precarious' environment and the political structures it generates, imposes or, indeed, destabilises, is expressed in relation to water, climate, agriculture and energy. Hydro-carbon discoveries are, thus, only a recent addition to the region's problematic relationship with its rich, yet, potentially disruptive ecology. Energy relations are not just geological though. Energy infrastructures, most notably in the form of transfer routes, such as pipelines, invite conspiracy theories about the over-determination of the region's geopolitics. Syria's civil war quickly became a 'Pipelineistan War' [54,47], where the US and Iran allegedly not only compete over Syria's resources, but also over major East-West energy transfer routes [23]. This emphasis on hydro-carbons as central to all Middle East geopolitics somewhat mirrors deterministic arguments about climate-change, but neither of them are new phenomena. Both emulate an older orientalist environmental determinism. A picture of the Middle East emerges that explains all conflicts, if not all social relations altogether with the absence or presence of its ecological features, from transboundary waters to geology to the topography relevant for energy transfers, themselves conditioned by 'Western' demand. The combination of dysfunctional native social energy relations and the quasi-imperial appropriation (or attempts thereof), thus, generate all sorts of morbid phenomena, from the 'rentier' to the 'petro' [41], to the outright 'failed' state.

This article identifies these problematic tendencies in dealing with the Middle East's energy relations as a triple determinism. First, there is