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### Book reviews

#### Oil, capitalism, and crises

**To Cook a Continent: Destructive Extraction and the Climate Crisis in Africa**, N. Bassey. Pambazuka Press, Cape Town (2012). x + 190 pp.

**Oil and Security: A World Beyond Petroleum**, E.G. Frankel. Springer, Dordrecht (2007). xxvii + 172 pp., Hardback, ISBN: 978-1-4020-6381-7

**Oil, Dollars, Debt, and Crises: The Global Curse of Black Gold**, M.A. El-Gamal, A.M. Jaffe. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge (2010). xiv + 217 pp., Paperback, ISBN: 978-0-521-72070-0

#### 1. Introduction

'Before the Industrial Revolution', wrote the energy scientist Harold Schobert, 'society relied on three energy sources: human and animal muscles, firewood, and the energy of wind and water'. 'Since then', Schobert continues, 'there have been three major historical transitions in our use of energy. First came . . . coal. Second was . . . electricity. Petroleum became the dominant global energy source by the end of the twentieth century' ([1], p. 4). The dominant position of oil under industrial and financial capitalism remains to this day, but the future and role of oil have been the focus of major controversy in contemporary political economic analysis.

There is a vast literature that proclaims the natural exhaustibility of oil, or 'peak oil', as it is more widely known [2] and, simultaneously, studies that argue that there will always be oil. In between these polarised positions are those which view the argument for geographical finitude of oil as exaggerated, even if oil supplies for the earth will run out eventually [3]. So, while the 'death' of oil is proclaimed, its reign or allure continues. The recent discovery of new oil wells around the world deepens the controversy about oil and seemingly immortalises this 'black gold', especially where oil discoveries are marked by national religious events, and social pomp and pageantry [24]. On the consumption side, 'oil consumers' have been said to be 'like dope addicts who are easily hooked. . .' (Frankel, 2007, p. 140). Both the advanced industrialised countries and their fast growing counterparts in Brazil, Russia, India, and China, BRICS, for short, are oil addicts, so the oil kingdom warrants careful study.

The books under review agitate established views about the oil kingdom. Their insights interrogate matters of oil power and addiction, demystify the world's most powerful source of energy and problematise the existing fragmentary state of knowledge about oil. They do so in three distinct, complementing, but also contrasting ways. While all three books view oil as a crucial link in world crises, they focus on different shades of crisis – climate and ecological (Bassey), energy and security (Frankel), and economic (El-Gammel and Jaffe). The focus on such important and urgent

problems makes these books worthy of serious attention. However, the books require attention for another reason.

All the authors are well-known in their fields. Bassey is a leading ecological activist, held in high esteem by the International Social Science Council and his opinion sought by the German Green Party's scholarly wing: Henrich Broll Foundation. Frankel and El-Gamal are economists by both education and profession. The former has worked as Professor of Management at the Sloan School of Management and Professor Emeritus of Ocean Systems at the School of Engineering at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, while the latter, El-Gamal, currently works as Professor of Economics and Statistics and Chair of Islamic Economics, Finance and Management at the Department of Economics, Rice University. On her part, Jaffe has been writing about energy for decades now and is currently Executive Director of Energy and Sustainability at Graduate School of Management, University of California, Davis. For these reasons, the books under review require more than a passing comment: they demand a longer review.

In what follows, this essay analyses the books according to four criteria, namely their (a) unit of analysis (b) key emphases/arguments (c) proffered solutions and (d) preferred agents of change. Table 1 offers a summary of the books along these lines.

Table 1 shows that, while all the three books seem to agree on the need to diversify away from oil, there is no agreement on what institutions should lead the way. As will become evident, even those arguing for transformation away from a systemic problem surprisingly end up endorsing the handmaiden of the system: markets. This in itself is not a problem neither is it a problem to have different emphases in analyzing the oil kingdom. Students can combine different and knit together seemingly fragmentary ideas. However, there are other spaces these books leave behind which require more significant effort to bridge. These challenges relate to the authors' fascination with biofuels as alternative energy, neglect of diverse property relations, and non-engagement with oil cities even though they are increasingly becoming the face of the oil kingdom and capitalist empire. So, while these books are brilliant their contribution should be judged in terms of preparing firm grounds for even more formidable and thoroughgoing assessment of the oil kingdom within the capitalist empire.

#### 2. Oil, socio-ecological contradictions, and Africa

In *To Cook a Continent: Destructive Extraction and the Climate Crisis in Africa*, Nnimmo Bassey, Africa's illustrious environmental activist, sets out to do three things: (a) provide a graphic description of the environmental injustices of transnational oil companies and transnational oil extraction in Africa (b) demonstrate their colonial, neocolonial, and imperial roots; and (c) provide suggestions for how to overcome what he calls 'destructive extraction'.

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**Table 1**  
Summary of books under review.

Books	Destructive extraction	Oil and security	Oil and crisis
Unit of analysis	Africa	America–Middle East	Middle East–America–World
Emphasis/Argument	Ecological–Social contradictions	Energy–Security–Economy relationships	Energy–economic–social imbalances
Solutions	Diversification	Diversification	Diversification
Transformative institutions	Community and State	Market and state	Market and state

The book is divided into eight chapters that introduce (1) and clearly provide the evidence that Africa is resource-rich and its resource riches have served as a magnet for intense external interest and related contradictions (2). Chapters 3–5 offer a detailed analysis of environmental pillage, chapter 6 is a critical reflection on existing and proposed solutions, while chapters 7 and 8 contain the book’s preferred solution. The geographical scale of analysis in this book is much bigger than in other books such as *Natural Resources, Conflict, and Sustainable Development: Lessons from the Niger Delta* [4].

*To Cook a Continent* draws examples from Africa as a whole but it also refers to politics in the Middle East, including the political economy of the OPEC countries, broader issues about free trade, and the neoliberal policies of the IMF (pp. 50–52) and specific post-colonial African countries. Of the three books, *To Cook a Continent* is the most personal and written with the most flare to engage the proverbial ‘general public’. While unashamedly polemical in tone, a feature that does not give much surprise given that the book is written by an activist, this book is carefully argued in many parts and well supported. It pays respect to the leading postcolonial thinkers on the continent such as Franz Fanon and Walter Rodney. The book’s postcolonial lenses help to dig deeper into the so-called ‘oil curse’ thesis which mainly emphasises local factors, pays only scant attention to history, and fails to consider different historical moments simultaneously with the world system.

Nnimmo emphasises transnationals, places, and nature in his analysis. By documenting extractive destruction across places by different transnational corporation but with similar deleterious effects on nature and society, Bassey provides a powerful book that connects with but transcends our current state of knowledge. He notes how Africa contributes proportionately less to climate crisis but stands the highest risks from climate change some of which entail population movements to conflict zones.

Bassey considers the mainstream environmental solutions – but dismisses them. Market based solutions such as carbon sequestration, cap and trade and clean development mechanism are discussed but dismissed on grounds of empirical evidence and for being business as usual or do nothing solutions.

Bassey argues that ‘Africans need soil, not oil. The environment is the cradle in which Africans are nurtured. Crude oil extraction has effectively uprooted the people from the soil. It has polluted their waters and poisoned their air’ (p. 121). So, ‘we must simply leave the oil in the soil, the coal in the hole and the tar sands in the land’ (p. 117). Friends of the Earth Nigeria, the organisation which Bassey leads, recognises that stopping the production of oil could throw oil dependent countries into a long crisis and hence offers a carefully developed alternative. The model is based on a three-step logic. First, calculate how much oil revenue can be obtained per capita. Next, ask the citizens to pay this amount in taxes, so that the state will obtain the same amount of revenue anyway. Then, as not everyone can pay these taxes, share the remaining ‘unpaid taxes’ among those who can shoulder more.

Rich civil society groups can also support the initiative by buying oil under the soil – without actually receiving them. Leaving oil under the soil has many benefits, according to the group: it is a sure bet against flaring, pollution, and oil-extraction related climate

change. It will put an end to the displacement of local communities, nip corruption in the bud, put an end to violent conflicts, and restore clean environment (pp. 127–129). On a broader level in the march against climate crisis, Bassey draws on examples of community activism, and community decision making to advocate a community-led, government-supported governance system to rein in the continent’s, but also the world’s climate crisis.

Whether a world addicted to oil can adopt this alternative and how to let producing countries, especially those latecomers in Africa to see the importance of diversification are crucial questions for which there are no easy answers. Yet, E.G. Frankel tries to demonstrate the economic case for doing so and how that economic success will provide energy security.

### 3. Oil and energy security

E.G. Frankel looks at past and current trends in the demand and supply of oil and, on that basis, makes projections into the future in his book, *Oil and Security: A World Beyond Petroleum*. In doing so, the book is divided into 7 chapters. Frankel looks at how oil overtook coal and became the world’s leading fuel source (chapter 1). He challenges existing arguments and policies about oil, including the well-known peak oil analysis in chapter 2, considers alternative energy sources in chapter 3, and examines the political and socio-economic ramifications of the post oil world in chapter 5. As Arabia is likely to be the most transformed because of its almost entire dependence on petroleum, Frankel isolates this dependent economy to study its unique and complex dynamics and how they will look – beyond petroleum (chapter 6) before turning to the world beyond oil (chapter 7). In addition to Frankel’s closing arguments in the conclusions (pp. 145–147), the book has a postscript (pp. 149–151) in which Frankel updates his analysis and a ‘finale’ (pp. 153–154) where Frankel highlights some key trends about America, UK, and the Asian two, Japan and China. Frankel also offers some technical details in the book’s appendices (pp. 155–163). Bibliography (pp. 165–168) and the index (pp. 169–172) are presented as usual.

Frankel’s argument is hard to place in the left–right framework. On the one hand, he calls for a radical departure from oil and a consideration of alternative energy, particularly solar. While, this is consistent with an ecologically sustainable argument of the left. However, his reason for calling for a change is not because of ‘peak oil’. For Frankel, there is enough oil to support current and future growth trends. Indeed, he shows how oil dependence, intensified use, the growth of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa and other developing countries have all not led to the depletion of resources predicted over two centuries ago. Instead, there continue to be new discoveries of oil around the world. Technology has become more sophisticated and more oil has been found in different areas and in the same areas but in different parts. So, it may be worth probing peak oil accounts.

What is changing, Frankel notes, is the cost of production. While, technology now makes it easier to find new oil, drilling in such new reserves is often very costly. Drilling in conflict prone areas is not getting less costly: there are more social, environmental, and political costs that now accompany bringing petroleum onshore.

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