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2015

Review of Lifeblood: oil, freedom, and the forces of capital

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BOOK REVIEW

Lifeblood: oil, freedom, and the forces of capital, by Matthew T. Huber, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2013, 253 pp., \$25 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-08166-7785-6 / \$75 (library cloth)

Mathew Huber's *Lifeblood: Oil, Freedom, and the Forces of Capital* offers a theoretically rich alternative explanation for 'oil addiction' in the USA. The received wisdom is that the dependency of the US economy on cheap oil stems from cabals of powerful political actors, or collective imperatives of imperialism, or even rampant conspicuous consumption. In these dominant narratives, oil is also bestowed with agency, invoking wealth and poverty, driving booms and busts, and having implications for freedom and authoritarianism. Instead Huber offers a framework that, while not denying the political economy of oil, offers a way to add to it by describing the deep cultural inscriptions of oil on the American way of life that deepen this dependency. In this way the book has affinities with other work on neoliberalism and the cultural politics of entrepreneurial life.

Huber argues that the dominant narratives of US oil addiction fetishize oil as a thing. Instead, he sees oil as a socio-ecological relation, drawing on Marx's productive forces, Gramsci's view on hegemony, and Foucault's micro-politics and the production of subjectivities. Using this framework, Huber shows how the embodied practices through which subjects come to experience oil in daily life are acts of social reproduction – the social practices necessary to bring workers back to work. 'Without oil, life, family, and everything else could not be reproduced' (p. 83). This forms the basis for a micro-politics that assumes that 'life is seen as improvable by one's own effort and entrepreneurial capacity' (p. 64). This individualistic notion of entrepreneurialism ties oil prices to a form of cheap energy populism. Because higher prices interfere with social reproduction, they undermine the 'freedom' and 'choice' seen as necessary to improve everyday life.

The book traces the roots of this cultural politics to the Great Depression and the New Deal responses of the 1930s through the post-War America where oil-powered automobility came to be a dominant privatized socio-spatial form of existence and freedom. Huber carries this historical arc forward to the 1970s when inflation and high-energy prices became a widespread concern in the USA. Inflation was seen as driven by Keynesian economic policy commitments, labor unions, and wage and price controls. This led to a widespread view that political controls were increasingly affecting the freedom and choice that forms the basis of entrepreneurial life. Government interventions in the economy were largely seen as negative, leading to increasing discourses around free markets, fair competition, and deregulation, core shibboleths of neoliberalism. More specifically, energy policy was seen as a tax on the hardworking, disciplined subjects of entrepreneurial life, as well as the oil that forms the 'material basis for a privatized geography of wealth accumulation centered on the home and automobile' (p. 159).

Through the 1980s and 1990s, the concerns about energy prices subsided, but by the 2000s, high prices for energy were again at the center of US politics. This time much of the clamor about high-energy prices ran to the contrary to emerging concerns about 'blood for oil' and climate change. Despite mounting concerns about fossil fuel reliance, the cultural

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and political power of this notion of entrepreneurial life rendered any collective attempt to manage energy policy ineffectual. In many ways this is a more important observation than the contemporary focus on climate denial, where so much political effort is currently aimed: ‘Far more disturbing are the more entrenched and everyday forms of living, thinking, and feeling that make cheap energy a “commonsense” necessity of survival’ (p. 151).

My sole contention is with Huber’s parting observations, which I believe may have been different with engagement with the work of Langdon Winner. In *The Whale and the Reactor*, Winner (1986) argues that certain technological forms are more or less amenable to forms of democracy and authoritarianism. I would disagree with the claim that large-scale industrial solar energy system offers the emancipatory potential sought by Marx (Lipschutz & Mulvaney, 2013). Similarly, I do not believe the notion of local, distributed energy is a naive view; there are real ongoing conversations about how future energy systems will be organized. Winner would further argue that decentralized solar energy systems are inherently more democratic. Distributed solar energy also fragments the political constituency for cheap energy, with competing notions of freedom, this time from the grid. Tea-party goers and distributed solar energy advocates are strange bedfellows in this regard.

Overall *Lifeblood* is rich in theory, elegant in prose, and strong on historical empiricism. The book should have widespread appeal to people interested in exploring the social roots and cultural politics of the political economy of oil. The book is heavily footnoted for those seeking specific sources or explanations that dive deeper into passing concepts. It should become a mandatory reading in courses that deal with the social dimensions of energy, and would fit advanced political ecology or environmental studies courses as well. It should be standard reading for anyone who simply asserts that the solution to our various ecological and climate crises is to properly price fossil fuels as it raises a deeply inscribed cultural specter that will undermine its politics.

References

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14649365.2014.927267>