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System Failure: Oil, Futurity, and the Anticipation of Disaster

> Siri sipped at her coffee. "I would have thought that your Hegemony was far beyond a petroleum economy."
>
> I laughed. . . . "Nobody gets beyond a petroleum economy. Not while there's petroleum there."
>
> —Dan Simmons, *Hyperion*

> And lurking behind any possible reconfiguration of world politics would be questions of access to energy and to water, in a world beset by ecological dilemmas and potentially producing vastly more than existing capacities of capitalist accumulation. Here could be the most explosive issues of all, for which no geopolitical manoeuvring or reshuffling offers any solution.
>
> —Immanuel Wallerstein, "The Curve of American Power"

The way one establishes epochs or defines historical periods inevitably shapes how one imagines the direction the future will take. And so it is with the dominant periodization of the history of capital, which has been organized primarily around moments of hegemonic economic imperium: Dutch mercantilism, British imperialism, U.S. transnationalism. All the effort in reading the tea leaves of contemporary capitalism is thus directed at determining when the current hegemonic formation will collapse and which

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new one (or ones) will come in its stead. According to Giovanni Arrighi, David Harvey, Immanuel Wallerstein, and others, the U.S. moment is at an end; the new hegemonic formation will emerge only after a turbulent and violent interregnum that is already upon us, even if we do not yet recognize it. Through it all, it seems, capitalism emerges largely unscathed: different in content, perhaps, and no doubt occupying a different space on the globe, but essentially the same in form—a system organized around limitless accumulation, at whatever social cost.

What if we were to think about the history of capital not exclusively in geopolitical terms, but in terms of the forms of energy available to it at any given historical moment? So steam capitalism in 1765 creates the conditions for the first great subsumption of agricultural labor into urban factories (a process of proletarianization that is only now coming to a completion), followed by the advent of oil capitalism in 1859 (with its discovery in Titusville, Pennsylvania), which enabled powerful and forceful new modalities of capitalist reproduction and expansion. From oil flows capitalism as we still know it: the birth of the first giant multinationals—Standard Oil (whose component elements still persist in Exxon Mobil, Texaco, and British Petroleum), DuPont, and the Big Three automobile makers; the defining social system of private transportation—cars, air travel, freeways, and with these, suburbs, "white flight," malls, inner-city ghettoization, and so on; and the environmental and labor costs that come with access to a huge range of relatively inexpensive consumer goods, most of which contain some product of the petrochemical industry (plastics, artificial fibers, paints, etc.) and depend on the possibility of mass container shipping. No petroleum, no modern war machine, no global shipping industry, no communication revolution. Imagined in geopolitical terms, the future is one in which U.S. hegemony gives way to (say) a Sino-Russian bloc or perhaps to some hydra-headed creature made up of economies that have passed from socialist caterpillar to capitalist butterfly (Brazil-India-China). But if we think of capital in terms of energy, what do the tea leaves tell us about what comes next? Wind capital? Solar capital? Biomass capital? A seemingly impossible conjunction of terms. Nuclear capital? Hydrogen capital? These are somehow more imaginable—even if the technological problems of the latter have yet to be worked out and the nuclear option would require a staggering and unprecedented investment in building new reactors, an expenditure that is not on the horizon anywhere.[1]

Oil capital seems to represent a stage that neither capital nor its oppo-

nents can think beyond. Oil and capital are linked inextricably, so much so that the looming demise of the petrochemical economy has come to constitute perhaps the biggest disaster that "we" collectively face. The success of capital is dependent on continuous expansion, which enables not only profit taking but investment in the reproduction of capital that is a necessary condition for its continuation on into the future. During the period of oil capital, this expansion and reproduction was fueled by cheap and readily available sources of oil, not least (until the early 1970s) in the United States itself. In "Critique of the Gotha Program," Marx reminds us that "labor is *not the source* of all wealth. *Nature* is just as much a source of use values (and it is surely of such that material wealth consists!) as labor which is itself only the manifestation of a force of nature, human labor power."[2] The discourse of disaster around the end of oil recognizes that, unimaginably, at least one part of the use values originating in nature (the one that only seems to come for free) is on the verge of being exhausted. What happens to capital now that oil is (at best) likely to remain expensive or is (at worst) actually running out? What future can be imagined not only for oil capital, but for capital as such?

There seems to be general agreement that even if we have yet to reach Hubbert's peak—the point of maximum global oil supply prior to its downward decline to zero—the point at which we will is coming soon.[3] More optimistically (at least from one perspective), taking account of all possible sources of fossil fuels—tar sands, hard-to-access or currently off-limits sources of oil and gas (in the deep sea, in natural reserves and national parks), and especially coal—some economists and resource experts have estimated that the global economy could continue to be hydrocarbon based for 200 to 500 years, depending on the levels of growth in energy usage.[4] Whether oil is disappearing or in relative abundance, the recent triangulation of military adventurism, the demands of rapidly expanding developing economies as a result of globalization, and the hard cold facts of global warming and ecological catastrophe has led to a feverish explosion of discourses about the probable future of oil—and, to a lesser degree, of oil capitalism. It is the orientation of these discourses toward the "disaster" of the end of oil and the potential futures with which I will concern myself in this essay. Though the scientific veracity of the claims made on behalf of this or that narrative of the likely fate and future direction of oil capital is not incidental, it is also the case that the power of these narratives and the likelihood that one or another is adopted (to whatever degree and how-

ever incompletely) as a way of precluding the collapse of oil capital depend less on the judiciousness of the notoriously shaky predictions of petroleum geologists or traders in commodity futures than on the way in which they mobilize and intersect with existing social narratives of expertise, technology, progress, consumption, nature, and politics. In the case of such narratives, precise statistics and measurements hardly begin to capture the social anxieties, fears, and hopes embodied in discourses that try to imagine the shape of future social formations.

Is the end of oil a disaster? This depends, of course, on the perspective one has on the system in danger of collapse: capitalism. The disaster discourses of the end of oil are necessarily anticipatory, future-oriented ones—narratives put into play in the present in order to enable the imagined disaster at the end of oil to be averted through geopolitical strategy, rational planning, careful management of resources, the mobilization of technological and scientific energies, and so on. What is all too frequently absent from these quintessentially modern discourses is the shape and configuration of the political. Eco-dystopians and techno-utopians alike take the current configuration of the political and economic as given. Because of this, it seems impossible from these perspectives to envision a systemic revolution. This deficit within existing narratives of the end of oil should alert us to the largely unarticulated political possibilities that lurk within them. The task here, then, will be to critically assess existing "end of oil" narratives in order to consider their lessons for a Left that has the difficult task of generating and articulating alternatives to oil capital. While the equation "blood for oil" effectively draws attention to one dimension of the geopolitics of oil, it leaves unaddressed how one conceptualizes energy demands for a human polity that is expected to grow to 9 billion by midcentury. Indeed, in celebrating the possibilities of the potentialities of South America's "Bolivarian Revolution" or the continued attractions of even latter-day Scandinavian social democracy (which, especially in the case of Norway, is fueled by oil), the Left has seemed to resist thinking too deeply about the larger consequences of petroeconomies, of their sustainability as social and political models, and of what, if anything, comes after.

What might a Left position on oil capital—and its aftermath—look like? There are three dominant narratives circulating today concerning what is to be done about the disaster of oil: strategic realism, techno-utopianism, and eco-apocalypse. In what follows, I take each one up in turn in order to see what lessons they have to offer for the Left, before concentrating on one of

the most contentious recent confrontations with oil capitalism: the "Blood for Oil?" chapter of Retort's *Afflicted Powers*.[5]

Strategic Realism

It has become a given that contemporary geopolitical maneuvering is driven by access to goods and resources, chief among these being access to oil. In describing the actions and motivations of imperialist jockeying between the major powers at the turn of the last century, Lenin evokes the name Standard Oil, but only as one of the many capitalist monopolies that had established themselves by the beginning of the twentieth century: there is nothing to distinguish it from any of the others he lists, such as the Rhine-Westphalian Coal Syndicate, United States Steel, the Tobacco Trust, and so on.[6] Today, steel and cigarettes have receded, and oil has come to the fore as a prime factor guiding the political decision making and military actions of both advanced capitalist countries and developing ones. As Daniel Yergin notes, oil arrives on the geopolitical stage at the outset of World War I when Winston Churchill, First Lord of the Admiralty, decides to power Britain's navy by oil from Persia as opposed to coal from Wales—a shift designed to improve the speed of the navy, but at the expense of national energy security.[7] This founding equation between oil and military power has been consistently in force ever since. The political character of the Middle East in particular has been shaped throughout the past century by the military and political struggle of Britain, France, the United States, and other powers to secure access to a commodity essential to the smooth operation of their economies.[8]

The Advanced Energy Initiative (AEI), announced early in 2006 by President George W. Bush's administration, is intended to reduce dependency on foreign oil by promoting the clean use of oil, nuclear power, natural gas, and a variety of renewable resources.[9] "Let me put it bluntly. . . . We are too dependent on oil," Bush stated at a 2006 conference organized by the U.S. Departments of Energy and Agriculture to promote the use of biofuels (such as ethanol) in support of the AEI.[10] This bluntness and the announced aim by the administration to support new forms of energy have little impact on the necessity, at the moment and for the foreseeable future, to do whatever it takes to keep oil flowing into the U.S. economy. As the AEI notes, it is not just the U.S. economy that requires oil, but countries such as China and India, which are consuming more oil and at an accelerating

rate.[11] Even if the United States and other major consumers of oil (China, Japan, Russia, Germany, etc.) should manage to reduce consumption and develop alternative sources of energy, there is no question that it remains an essential commodity, growing in demand even as its supply decreases.

What I have termed *strategic realism* is a relatively common discourse around oil that derives from a strict realpolitik approach to energy. Those who employ it—and it is a discourse employed widely by government and the media alike—suspend or minimize concerns about the cumulative environmental disaster of oil or the fact that oil is disappearing altogether, and focus instead on the potential political and economic tensions that will inevitably arise as countries pursue their individual energy security in an era of scarcity.[12] What is of prime interest in strategic realism is engaging in the geopolitical maneuverings required to keep economies floating in oil. At the heart of strategic realism stands the blunt need for nations to protect themselves from energy disruptions by securing and maintaining steady and predictable access to oil.

These maneuverings around energy can and do take multiple forms, from military intervention intended to shore up existing "power interdependencies"[13] (due to the U.S. invasion of Iraq, military intervention has come mistakenly to stand as the prime mode through which access to oil is secured) to economic agreements between states, and from the creation of new trade and security arrangements of mutual benefit to the big users of oil (looking down the road, the United States, China, and India)[14] to even the (largely) quixotic attempt to create energy independence by promoting the use of alternative fuels. What ties these various approaches together is an element so obvious that it appears hardly to need mentioning: the centrality of the *nation-state* itself in the calculations of oil accessibility and security. When it comes to the potential disaster of oil, in the discourse of strategic realism the figures, concepts, and protagonists that we have all come to love in the discourses of globalization—the withered nation, Colossus-like transnational corporations, the mixed sovereignty of empire—seem not only to fade to the background but to disappear altogether. Strategic realism is a discourse that makes the nation-state the central actor in the drama of the looming disaster of oil, an actor that engages in often brutal geopolitical calculations in order to secure the stability of national economies and communities. While oil is hardly divorced from the operations of global finances, its political value as a commodity is such that it is apparently not permitted to slosh autonomously through markets that we have been

repeatedly told take little note of borders today: the state must be present in order to ensure that every day the right amount of oil flows in the right direction.

Discussions of the strategic calculations at work when it comes to oil are hardly limited to the Right. While right-wing discourses, especially those that adopt a "might is right" approach to the defense of the homeland are both more prominent and less troubled by the ambiguous and unpalatable outcome of petrorealism—support for antidemocratic oligarchs being the least of these—there are both liberal and Left responses to and employment of the discourse of strategic realism. In *Blood and Oil*, for instance, Michael Klare explores the consequences of the U.S. dependency on foreign oil, drawing attention to the huge sums of money that are spent annually to keep access to oil open. He argues that "ultimately, the cost of oil will be measured in blood: the blood of American soldiers who die in combat, and the blood of many other casualties of oil-related violence."[15] For Klare, the proposed solution is for Americans to "adopt a new attitude toward petroleum—a conscious decision to place basic values and the good of the country ahead of immediate personal convenience."[16] The reality of continued growth in energy use in circumstances in which oil is disappearing isn't at issue. Rather, what is proposed is a potentially less violent and more stable way of managing the geopolitical realities created by struggles over access to energy, including vast reductions by Americans in their individual energy usage. The nation remains the central actor, and the mis-fit between supply and demand for oil is one that needs to be seriously considered so that existing differentials of national power are maintained into the indefinite future. As for the larger consequences of oil usage for the environment or for humanity as a whole? Strategic realism recognizes only that oil is essential to capital and capital is essential for the status quo to remain in place in the future. The disaster in this discourse is figured as the mismanagement or misrecognition of geopolitical strategy, such that a commodity essential to state power is no longer available in the abundance necessary for economic growth.

On the Left, meanwhile, there continues to be an abiding fascination with the dynamics of capitalist geopolitics, not, it seems, to plot weaknesses and to imagine something beyond it, but because of the inherent interest in ceaseless rearrangement of deck chairs on a capitalist ship that seems in little real danger of sinking.

Techno-utopianism

Strategic realism sees the disaster of oil as a problem primarily for the way in which nations preserve or enhance their geopolitical status. A founding assumption is that the political future will look more or less like the present: strategy can't be developed around the promise of new sources of energy but emerges out of plans to capture and control (economically, diplomatically, or militarily) existing ones. A second narrative related to the looming disaster of the end of oil looks to science and technology to develop energy alternatives that will mitigate the end of oil. This form of techno-utopianism can be used as an element of strategic realism, but in practice these narratives are kept discursively distinct. For instance, the text of the AEI barely mentions oil, focusing instead on nuclear energy, clean coal, natural gas, and renewable energies; the strategic military intervention in the Persian Gulf lies outside of this narrative of future alternatives. Whereas in strategic realism the future is imagined as a continuation of the present, the AEI announces a belief in the new future, albeit one secured by existing sources of energy: "It will take time for America to move from a hydrocarbon economy to a hydrogen economy. In the meantime, there are billions of barrels of oil and enormous amounts of natural gas off the Alaskan coast and in the Gulf of Mexico."[17]

What I am calling techno-utopianism is a discourse employed by government officials, environmentalists, and scientists from across the political spectrum. With respect to the end of oil, it proposes two solutions: either scientific advances will enable access to oil resources hitherto too expensive to develop (the Alberta tar sands, deep-sea reserves, etc.) while simultaneously devising solutions for carbon emissions (exhaust scrubbers, carbon sequestering, etc.), *or* technological innovations will create entirely new forms of energy, such as hydrogen fuel cells for space-age automobiles. As with strategic realism, its ubiquity today makes techno-utopianism a familiar discourse. It can be employed as mere political rhetoric to defer difficult decisions with negative economic impacts to some distant future, as in Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper's recent announcement concerning "intensity-based" emissions standards: "With technological change, massive reduction in emissions are possible. . . . We have reason to believe that by harnessing technology we can make large-scale reductions in other types of emissions. But this will take time. It will have to be done as part of technological turnover."[18] Somewhat more convincingly, techno-

utopianism also underwrites the activities of those working actively in science and technology, who hope through their work to offset the civilization blunder of hitching a complex global economy to a nonrenewable dirty fuel source fast evaporating from the earth.

The utopia I have in mind here is the "bad utopia" of future dreamscapes and fanciful political confections—"utopia" not quite just as an insulting slur against one's enemies, but rather as a projection of an alternative future that is, in fact, anything but a "conception of systematic otherness."[19] In "The Politics of Utopia," Fredric Jameson speaks of "one of the most durable oppositions in utopian projection"—that between city and country. He asks: "Did your fantasies revolve around a return to the countryside and the rural commune, or were they on the other hand incorrigibly urban, unwilling and unable to do without the excitement of the great metropolis, with its crowds and its multiple offerings, from sexuality and consumer goods to culture?"[20] Techno-utopian discourses of future alternatives to oil magically resolve this opposition: since the future is undeniably urban, great metropolises are envisioned as leafy green oases, filled with mid-twenty-first-century flaneurs and cyclists who move between buildings crowned with solar sails.[21] All of our worst fears about the chaos that will ensue when oil runs out are resolved through scientific innovations that are in perfect synchrony with the operations of the capitalist economy: problem solved, without the need for radical ruptures or alterations in political and social life.

An excellent example of such techno-utopianism can be found in a 2006 special issue of *Scientific American,* "Energy's Future: Beyond Carbon." The issue's subtitle announces its politics directly: "How to Power the Economy and Still Fight Global Warming." The issue presents technological strategies for carbon reduction, new transportation fuels, efficient building design, clean options for coal, possibilities for nuclear power, and so on.[22] The long-term impact of existing energy use—primarily oil—on the environment is the focus here; each article provides a potential solution based on current scientific research and technological innovation. The articles all begin in much the same way, noting first the deleterious environmental effects of existing social and cultural practices, especially those in the developed world, followed by the failures at the level of politics to mobilize and enforce necessary changes to environmental laws and standards. In his introduction to the special issue, Gary Stix writes: "The slim hope for keeping atmospheric carbon below 500 ppm hinges on aggressive

programs of energy efficiency instituted by national governments."[23] But since such programs don't seem to be on the horizon, scientific innovation rushes into the gap vacated by public policy. In the coming disaster of oil, technology absorbs and mediates all the risks that might normally unfold at the level of the political. A profusion of developments from the astonishing to the relatively banal—new refrigerators use one-quarter of the energy of their 1974 counterparts, LCD computer screens 60 percent less than CRT monitors—will bring about not only a cleaner environment but a soft landing for oil capital. If the various timescale charts and projections for reductions in oil usage are less than comforting, we are reminded of the following: "Deeply ingrained in the patterns of technological evolution is the substitution of cleverness for energy."[24] The natural temporal flow of scientific discovery will resolve the energy and environmental problems we have produced for ourselves.

The notion of technological evolution lies at the heart not only of techno-utopian solutions to the disaster of oil but of modern imaginings of science more generally. Technology is figured as just around the corner, as always just on the verge of arriving. Innovation can be hurried along (through increased grants, for instance), but only slightly: technological solutions arrive just in time and never fail to come. In a perversion of Marx's comments in the preface to *A Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy*, it would appear that mankind produces only such disasters as technology can solve; the disaster arises only when the conditions in which to repair it are already in the process of formation.[25] This is, as we see above in Harper's comment, certainly part of the political dream of techno-utopianism. It is equally part of the scientists' self-imaginings as well: "The vast potential of this new industry underscores the importance of researching, developing, and demonstrating hydrogen technologies now, so they will be ready when we need them."[26] At the core of the notion that technological developments are on the horizon to address even such massive, global problems as the end of oil lies a further temporal imagining. If technological developments are thought to be poised to imminently bring about a change from oil capital to (in this case) hydrogen capital, it is because technological developments in the past have always appeared in the nick of time to help push modernity along. But where? And how? History offers no models whatsoever: the fantasy of past coincidence between technological discovery and historic necessity simply reinforces the bad utopianism of hope in technological solutions to the looming end of oil.

Apocalyptic Environmentalism

In his editorial in *Scientific American,* Gary Stix writes:

> Sustained marshalling of cross-border engineering and political resources over the course of a century or more to check the rise of carbon emissions makes a moon mission or a Manhattan Project appear comparatively straightforward. . . . Maybe a miraculous new energy technology will simultaneously solve our energy and climate problems during that time, but another scenario is at least as likely: a perceived failure of Kyoto or international bickering over climate questions could foster the burning of abundant coal for electricity and synthetic fuels for transportation, both without meaningful checks on carbon emissions.[27]

Narratives of the end of oil that focus on this other scenario are best described as eco-apocalypse discourses. If strategic realism is largely a discourse of the Right, its Left complement is located largely in eco-apocalypse discourse. These take the disaster of oil capitalism head on: the deep political and economic investments in oil are assessed, the dire social-political-environmental consequences of inaction on oil are laid out, and because it becomes obvious that avoiding these results would require changing everything, apocalyptic narratives and statistics are trotted out. Strategic realism and techno-utopianism remain committed to capitalism and treat the future as one in which change has to occur (new geopolitical realignments, innovations in energy use) if change at other levels is to be deferred (fundamental social and political changes). Eco-apocalypse sees the future more grimly: unlike the other two discourses, it understands that social and political change is fundamental to genuinely addressing the disaster of the end of oil—a disaster that it relates to the environment before economics. However, since such change is not on the horizon or is difficult to imagine, it sees the future as Bosch-like—a hell on earth, obscured by a choking carbon dioxide smog.

The volume *The Final Energy Crisis*, edited by Andrew McKillop and Sheila Newman, is but one of many books and articles in this genre.[28] With great care, clarity, and attention to the scientific evidence about fossil fuel depletion and environmental impacts, the volume lays out the case for getting serious about the looming disaster. The statistics pile up to paint an alarming picture of the disaster. Fertilizers are impossible to produce with-

out fossil fuels; in their absence, the earth's carrying capacity for human life will necessarily fall by 50 to 60 percent; the growth in car ownership in India and China to Western levels, even with conservative estimates as to distance traveled, would require 10 billion barrels of oil each year, "*three times the total oil imports of all EU countries in 2002*, nearly three times the maximum possible production capacity of Saudi Arabia"; the postoil population carrying capacity of France is estimated as 20 to 25 million and in Australia less than 1.5 million; and so on.[29] Everything in the volume points to the coming disaster that is the only possible outcome of oil capitalism.

At issue is not the veracity of such claims, which are here always presented relatively conservatively, but what such information is intended to accomplish. All three of the discourses delineated in this essay make claims on the social, inviting it to participate in the framing of a response to the end of the energy source around which we structure social reality—and social hope, and social fantasy. Unlike the other two, the discourse of eco-apocalypse understands itself as a *pedagogic* one, a genre of disaster designed to modify behavior and transform the social. The McKillop and Newman book is exemplary in this regard, combining serious scientific articles (replete with charts and even equations) with Spinozian *scholie*-like passages by McKillop that narrate the coming end.[30] Even while recognizing the potential traumas for human communities and for capital, strategic realism and techno-utopianism operate within existing understandings of the way the world operates. Eco-apocalyptic discourse makes it clear that disaster cannot be avoided without fundamental changes to human social life. With hope for a new way of doing things, the conditions for avoiding disaster are put forward: "A simpler, non-affluent way of life"; "more communal, cooperative and participatory practices"; "new values" ("a much more collective, less individualistic social philosophy and outlook"); and, of course, "an almost totally new economic system. There is no chance whatsoever of making these changes while we retain the present consumer-capitalist economic system."[31]

The difficult question of *how* such a complete transformation of social life is to be brought about remains open. At best, the reality of a coming future disaster is imagined as being enough on its own to produce the shift in everything from values to economic systems that would be necessary to counter it. There is a form of "bad" utopianism at work here too. Although a new social system is outlined in utopian fashion (down to what kinds of houses should be on a single street and the kinds of animals that we

might find in our suburbs[32]), the subject roaming through this landscape is none other than a liberal one, motivated by pleasure, convenience, and comfort. Despite the demands and claims for changing individual behavior and social reality, at the heart of eco-apocalyptic discourses is a recognition that even if its coming can be established, nothing can be done to stop the disaster from coming. Indeed, there is a sense in which disaster is all but welcome: the end of oil might well be a case of capitalism digging its own grave, since without oil, current configurations of capital are impossible.

The Left and Oil Capitalism: Retort and Disaster

National futures, technological futures, and apocalyptic ones. We can, as a form of critical activity, point to the limits of such discourses—to the revival, for instance, of nations and nationalism in strategic realism, or to the shaky temporality of techno-utopianism, or to the political limits of eco-apocalyptic discourses. However valuable such criticisms might be, the issue of what kind of response would frame this disaster in a manner that would create alternatives to oil capitalism still needs to be addressed more forcefully.

The very possibility of a disaster on the scale of the end of oil seems, on its own, not to be able to generate the kind of social transformation one might expect would be needed in order to head off a crisis that would be felt at every level—including that of capital accumulation and reproduction. Jacob Lund Fisker notes:

> The increase in human wealth and well-being during the past few centuries is often attributed to such things as state initiatives, governmental systems and economic policies, but the real and underlying cause has been a massive increase in energy consumption. . . . Discovering and extracting fossil fuels requires little effort when resources are abundant, before their depletion. It is this cheap "surplus energy" that has enabled classical industrial, urban and economic development.[33]

With the end of "surplus energy" thus comes the collapse of surplus profit—or so one would think. It may be that the disaster of oil is already prefigured in the temporal shift of the capitalist economy that goes by the name of neoliberalism. The ferocious return of primitive accumulation, now directed not only toward the last remaining vestiges of the public sector (such as universities and hospitals) but also inward into subjectivity,

announces, too, a temporal recalibration of capital away from the future to the present. There is no longer any wait for surplus or any attention to the reproduction of capital for the future; instead, as if the future of capital is in doubt, profit taking has to occur as close to immediately as possible, whatever the long-term consequences.

Something like this view of contemporary capital informs the collective Retort's arguments in *Afflicted Powers: Capital and Spectacle in a New Age of War*. The book as a whole is intended to be a rallying cry for a new Left vanguardism that emerges out of the book's framing of the post-9/11 political landscape. This landscape is one structured by a "military neoliberalism" (72) that is described as "no more than primitive accumulation in disguise" (75); this neoliberalism in turn operates largely unopposed due to the dynamics of the "spectacle," which, as in so many appropriations of Guy Debord's concept, appears as a social situation defined by advertising and consumer images—that is, ideology through image form as well as image content.[34] Oil figures as a prominent part of Retort's account of the contemporary political situation. While the authors are struck by the bluntness of the slogan "No blood for oil," as it appears to directly name the reasons for the use of U.S. military force in Iraq, they take pains to argue that placing oil at the causal center of the war is misleading. "Oil's powers," they write, "are drawn from a quite specific force field having a capitalist core that must periodically reconstitute the conditions of its own profitability" (54). The idea that the U.S. invasion was prompted by a kind of petro-Malthusianism—of the kind, it must be said, that informs discourses of strategic realism—is premised on a false assumption about the market for oil. "The history of twentieth-century oil is *not* the history of shortfall and inflation, but of the constant menace—for the industry and the oil states—of excess capacity and falling prices, of surplus and glut" (59).

For Retort, the argument against oil as the cause of the war in Iraq allows the authors to draw out the broader motive driving the use of the military today, which is to support "'extra-economic' restructuring of the conditions necessary for expanded profitability—paving the way, in short, for new rounds of American-led dispossession and capital accumulation" (72). This in turn permits them to consider our contemporary political options against capitalism. Rhetorically, the book makes use of anxiety about the war in Iraq to draw its readers into broader consideration of the dynamics of neoliberal globalization and possible responses to it. The final chapter, "Modernity and Terror," is both where Retort comes clean about its political

aims and where it runs up against the limits of envisioning an end to oil capital. The argument the authors make in this chapter is a powerful one. For the Left, the opponent is nothing less than the "disenchantment of the world"—modernity itself. There are two central processes that they associate with capitalist modernity. The first is a consumerism that functions by seeming to offer a solution to modernity's disenchantment: "It promises to fill the life-world with meanings again, with magical answers to deep wishes, with models of having and being and understanding (undergoing) Time itself" (178). In other words, commodity fetishism, figured here as the lack of social resources that would allow us to recall the "mere instrumentality" of objects "in a world of meanings vastly exceeding those that any *things* can conjure up" (179). The second process is the "process of endless *enclosure*" (193), a continuation of the long process by which natural and human resources were taken from the common for the exclusive use of capital. The goal they set for themselves is to set out a "non-nostalgic, non-anathematizing, non-regressive, non-fundamental, non-apocalyptic critique of the modern" (185). They admit: "The Left has a long way to go even to lay the groundwork of such a project . . . but it is still only from the Left that a real opposition to modernity could come" (185).

Despite the grandeur of such a goal, who could disagree with such a project? Or perhaps just as important: how is this modernity any different from the capitalism that the Left has been opposed to all along, even if consumerism and the processes of enclosure are both more intensive and more extensive than in previous eras? One thing that is glaringly absent is any consideration of future disaster. Though Retort pushes oil to the sidelines in its attempt to bring those chanting "No blood for oil!" into its larger critique of neoliberalism, when it considers the function of oil in relation to capital it only looks backward at the history of the twentieth century and not toward the horizon of the disaster that oil's absence will create. Recall Fisker: "It is this cheap 'surplus energy' that has enabled classical industrial, urban and economic development."[35] Oil is hardly incidental to capital or to modernity—which is not the same as saying that it is the prime mover of all decision making by nation-states or other actors in the global economy. At the same time, the growing sense of this coming horizon and the necessity of having to respond to it—whether through the machinations of resource strategy or by leaving it to technology to figure things out—cannot be simply left aside in shaping responses to the dark modernity sketched out by Retort. It is telling, for instance, that there is not even an appeal to

the discourse of eco-apocalypse—barely anything at all about environmental limits, population carrying capacity, the need to think up to and beyond oil capitalism. Retort proposes a Left response—typically and understandably sketchy and open-ended (how could it not be?)—to the violence of military neoliberalism. But as for a Left discourse on oil capitalism that would go beyond the pedagogic gestures of eco-apocalyptic discourse, we have yet to find it.

Can such a discourse even exist? Retort suggests that opposition to what it terms "consumer metaphysics" is rooted in a crisis of time. "What is the current all-invasive, portable, minute-by-minute apparatus of mediation," the authors ask, ". . . if not an attempt to expel the banality of the present moment?" (183). The hope, drifting throughout the social, is for "*another* present—a present with genuine continuities with a retrieved past, and therefore one opening onto some *non-empty*, *non-fantastical* vision of the future" (183). Such futures—futures that are in a very real sense "post"-modernity—are in the process of being created planetwide and in those very spaces where enclosure is violently taking place and consumer metaphysics is at its weakest. As Mary Louise Pratt points out, "Where identities cannot be organized around salaried work, consumption, or personal projects like upward mobility, life has to be lived, organized and understood by other means. People generate ways of life, values, knowledges and wisdoms, pleasures, meanings, hopes, forms of transcendence relatively independent of the ideologies of the market."[36] These narratives of meaning can take many forms, from classic Left narratives to wild new religions like the one Pratt discusses, Alfa y Omega, whose two primary symbols are the lamb of god and a flying saucer.[37] Whether such futures are "non-empty" or "non-fantastical" is open to question, even if one was careful to resist measuring them by the standard of whether they figure disaster, much less imagine a way of addressing it.

Whither capital? Will the end of oil capital bring an end to capital as such (and thus, potentially, in its wake, bring new political possibilities)? The expectation that haunts the future is not the end of capital, but that, despite everything, oil capital will not end until every last drop of oil (or atom of fossil fuels) is burned and released into the atmosphere. Fredric Jameson's often-repeated suggestion that "it seems to be easier for us today to imagine the thoroughgoing deterioration of the earth and of nature than the breakdown of late capitalism" points to a limit in how, to date, we have framed the coming future and its disasters.[38] It is not that we can't name or

describe, anticipate or chart the end of oil and the consequences for nature and humanity. It is rather that because these discourses are unable to mobilize or produce any response to a disaster we know is a direct result of the law of capitalism—limitless accumulation—it is easy to see that nature will end before capital. As Jan Oosthoek and Barry Gills write, "What is most urgently needed . . . is not short-term technological fixes but a different paradigm of political economy. This new political economy must take our impact on the planet's environment fully and realistically into account."[39] Easy enough to say, but much, much harder to produce when what is called for is full-scale retraction against the flow of a social whose every element moves toward accumulation and expansion.

Notes

1 "A new nuclear power plant would have to open every few days to replace the world's fossil fuel use in a century, and the problems of renewable, low-density, hard-to-store, distant renewable energy sources will take a lot of time and money to overcome on the scale needed." Julie Jowett, "Fossilised Myths: Fresh Thinking on 'Dirty' Coal," *Guardian Weekly*, March 17–23, 2006, 5.

2 Karl Marx, "Critique of the Gotha Program," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd ed., ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), 525–41, at 525.

3 The literature addressing the end of oil is now extensive. For some representative studies, see Kenneth Deffeyes, *Beyond Oil: The View from Hubbert's Peak* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2005); David Goodstein, *Out of Gas: The End of the Age of Oil* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2005); Richard Heinberg, *The Party's Over: Oil, War, and the Fate of Industrial Societies* (New York: New Society, 2005); and Paul Roberts, *The End of Oil: On the Edge of a Perilous New World* (New York: Mariner Books, 2005). For a contrary view, see the study by John H. Wood, Gary R. Long, and David F. Morehouse, "Long-Term World Oil Supply Scenarios: The Future Is Neither as Bleak or Rosy as Some Assert," posted on the U.S. government's Energy Information Administration Web site, www.eia.doe.gov/pub/oil_gas/petroleum/feature_articles/2004/worldoilsupply/oilsupply04.html (accessed September 19, 2006).

4 These figures come from Mark Jaccard, *Sustainable Fossil Fuels: The Unusual Suspect in the Quest for Clean and Enduring Energy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). For other studies that take the view that oil remains relatively abundant, see Wood, Long, and Morehouse, "Long-Term World Oil Supply Scenarios," and the especially influential "2000 U.S. Geological Survey World Petroleum Assessment," http://pubs.usgs.gov/dds/dds-060/ (accessed September 19, 2006). Wood, Long, and Morehouse place peak oil production as late as 2047, while the USGS estimates that there remain as much as 2.3 trillion barrels of usable oil on earth (including reserves, reserve growth, and undiscovered reserves).

5 Retort, "Blood for Oil?" in *Afflicted Powers: Capital and Spectacle in a New Age of War* (New York: Verso, 2005), 38–77. Hereafter cited parenthetically by page number.

6 V. I. Lenin, *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* (London: Pluto Press, 1996), 11–26.
7 Daniel Yergin, "Ensuring Energy Security," *Foreign Affairs* 85.2 (2006): 67–82.
8 David Harvey, *The New Imperialism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 1–25 and 183–212; and Neil Smith, *The Endgame of Globalization* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 177–209.
9 See "Energy Security for the 21st Century," www.whitehouse.gov/infocus/energy/ (accessed March 26, 2007).
10 Alexei Barrionuevo, "Bush Says Lower Oil Prices Won't Blunt New-Fuel Push," *New York Times*, October 13, 2006, http://select.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=F10910FE3A540C708DDDA90994DE404482.
11 "China's share of the world oil market is about 8 percent, but its share of total growth in demand since 2000 has been 30 percent. World oil demand has grown by 7 million barrels per day since 2000; of this growth, 2 million barrels each day have gone to China. India's oil consumption is currently less than 40 percent of China's, but because India has now embarked on what the economist Vijay Kelkar calls the 'growth turnpike,' its demand for oil will accelerate." Yergin, "Ensuring Energy Security," 72.
12 As just one example, consider the recent report of a "blue ribbon" task force on U.S. energy policy prepared for the Council on Foreign Relations, which focuses on solutions to U.S. dependency on foreign oil. "The task force suggests that energy security has not been a central focus of U.S. foreign policy, though it noted the widespread perception that the invasion of Iraq and other interventions in the Middle East have been driven by the desire to control the region's oil supplies." Shawn McCarthy, "Report Slams U.S. Domestic Energy Policy," *Globe and Mail*, October 13, 2006.
13 Smith, *Endgame of Globalization*, 188.
14 Yergin, "Ensuring Energy Security."
15 Michael Klare, *Blood and Oil: How America's Thirst for Petrol Is Killing Us* (New York: Penguin, 2004), 183.
16 Ibid., 182.
17 See the summary of the Advanced Energy Initiative on the White House's Energy Security Web page, www.whitehouse.gov/infocus/energy/ (accessed March 26, 2007).
18 Prime Minister Stephen Harper, quoted in Bill Curry and Mark Hume, "PM Plans 'Intensity' Alternative to Kyoto," *Globe and Mail*, October 11, 2006.
19 Fredric Jameson, "The Politics of Utopia," *New Left Review*, no. 25 (2004): 35–54, at 36.
20 Ibid., 48.
21 See Kenn Brown's illustration in *Scientific American* 295.3 (2006): 51.
22 "Energy's Future: Beyond Carbon," *Scientific American* 295.3 (2006): 46–114.
23 Gary Stix, "A Climate Repair Manual," *Scientific American* 295.3 (2006): 46–49, at 49.
24 Robert H. Socolow and Stephen W. Pacala, "A Plan to Keep Carbon in Check," *Scientific American* 295.3 (2006): 50–57, at 52.
25 The original reads, "Mankind only sets itself such tasks as it can solve; since, looking at the matter more closely, it will always be found that the task itself arises only when the material conditions for its solution already exist or are at least in the process of formation." *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 5.

26 Joan Ogden, "High Hopes for Hydrogen," *Scientific American* 295.3 (2006): 94–101, at 101.

27 Stix, "A Climate Repair Manual," 49.

28 Andrew McKillop with Sheila Newman, ed., *The Final Energy Crisis* (London: Pluto Press, 2005). See also Julian Darley, *High Noon for Natural Gas* (White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green, 2004); Kenneth Deffeyes, *Hubbert's Peak: The Impending World Oil Shortage* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001); David Goodstein, *Out of Gas*; Richard Heinberg, *The Party's Over*; James Howard Kunstler, *The Long Emergency: Surviving the Converging Catastrophes of the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Atlantic Monthly, 2005); and Paul Roberts, *The End of Oil*, among others.

29 McKillop and Newman, *The Final Energy Crisis*, figures from 7, 232, and 265–73, respectively.

30 See, for instance, the following chapters from McKillop and Newman, *The Final Energy Crisis*: "Apocalypse 2035," 186–90; "The Chinese Car Bomb," 228–32; "The Last Oil Wars," 259–64; and "Musing Along," 289–94.

31 Ted Trainer, "The Simpler Way," in McKillop and Newman, *The Final Energy Crisis*, 279–288; quotes from 280, 283, 286–87, and 284, respectively.

32 Ibid., 281.

33 Jacob Lund Fisker, "The Laws of Energy," in McKillop and Newman, *The Final Energy Crisis*, 74–86, at 74.

34 For a more philosophically thorough treatment of the concept of the "spectacle," see Anselm Jappe, *Guy Debord* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 5–30.

35 Fisker, "The Laws of Energy," 74.

36 Mary Louise Pratt, "Planetary Longings: Sitting in the Light of the Great Solar TV," in *World Writing: Towards a Poet(h)ics of Globalization*? ed. Mary Gallagher (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, forthcoming).

37 Ibid.

38 Fredric Jameson, *The Seeds of Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), xii.

39 Jan Oosthoek and Barry K. Gills, "Humanity at the Crossroads: The Globalization of Environmental Crisis," *Globalizations* 2.3 (2005): 283–91, at 285.