

INTRODUCTION

Oil, Life, Politics

In the summer of 2008, the global price of oil skyrocketed to \$147 per barrel, and in the United States, gasoline prices reached a historic peak of \$4.11 per gallon. President George W. Bush was acting very much like an “addict” leader of the country he accused of being “addicted to oil” in 2006.¹ Bush made two visits to Saudi Arabia within five months to plead with the kingdom to open up its valves to lower oil prices.² Later in the summer, claiming to speak for “American families,”³ Bush attempted to lift a twenty-seven-year-old ban on offshore drilling on most of the eastern and western coasts of the United States.⁴ In May, presidential candidates John McCain and Hilary Clinton found common ground in a proposal to offer a federal “gasoline tax holiday” for the summer driving season.⁵ Both struck populist tones as Clinton spoke out for “hard pressed Americans who are trying to pay their gas bills at the gas station” and McCain said he just wanted “to give low-income Americans . . . a little relief.” Although the proposal would serve to lower prices and guarantee more oil consumption, Clinton bizarrely claimed that opposing the policy would “stand with the big oil companies.”⁶ Perhaps the high point in McCain’s otherwise floundering campaign was his mobilization of popular energy through pro-oil development slogans such as “Drill, Baby, Drill” and Newt Gingrich’s illogical rallying cry, “Drill here, drill now, pay less” (published as a book).⁷ Later in the summer, McCain held a rally of motorbike enthusiasts in South Dakota ridiculing then Democratic nominee Barack Obama’s call for energy conservation measures such as basic tire inflation. He declared, “My opponent doesn’t want to drill . . . he wants you to inflate your tires,” as the crowd roared in laughter.⁸

With less than 5 percent of the global population, the United States is by far the largest global consumer of oil, using 19.1 million barrels per day—around 22 percent of total consumption (see Table 1). Despite popular fears of skyrocketing demand from emerging economies, it is worth pointing out that the United States still consumes more than the so-called BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India, and China) countries *combined*. Thus the gas tax holiday stood in stark contrast to opposite policy analysis that suggests the need to increase the already miniscule gasoline taxes in the United States in line with European levels in order to curb driving and oil consumption.⁹ Yet such an increase is viewed as politically impossible.¹⁰ As evidence of this political impossibility Barack Obama's campaign also placed the *lowering* of gas prices as the ultimate priority: "We do need to bring down gas prices, and as President, I will."¹¹ He also focused on the populist suffering of the American working class: "I hear from families every single day who are feeling the crushing burden of higher gas prices."¹² Sensing the political risk of opposing domestic drilling, in early August 2008, Obama reversed his early opposition and announced openness to some forms offshore drilling.¹³ The concession was followed by President Obama's real proposal for the expansion of offshore drilling three weeks before the biggest maritime oil spill in U.S. history in the Gulf of Mexico in April of 2010.

Table 1. Top Ten Oil World Consumers, 2010

<i>Country</i>	<i>Petroleum consumption (million barrels per day)</i>	<i>Percentage of world total</i>
1. United States	19.1	22 percent
2. China	9.4	11 percent
3. Japan	4.4	5 percent
4. India	3.1	4 percent
5. Russia	3	4 percent
6. Saudi Arabia	2.7	3 percent
7. Brazil	2.6	3 percent
8. Germany	2.5	2.9 percent
9. South Korea	2.2	2.5 percent
10. Canada	2.2	2.5 percent
Total world consumption	87.02	100 percent

Source: Energy Information Administration, 2011.

After the release of Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth* in 2006 and the 2007 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report, it seemed that real change of the U.S. energy system was not only necessary but actually possible. Yet the summer of 2008 revealed that hope of such change was false and that, more accurately, the winning campaign would be the one that promised more oil at cheaper prices. The 2012 campaign promised more of the same with a 2011–12 gasoline price surge constructed as danger for Obama's reelection bid.¹⁴ The popularity of "Drill, Baby, Drill" sentiments and public outrage over high gas prices reveal the bewildering paralysis of energy politics in the United States. Since at least the 1970s, there has been a substantial consensus that levels of U.S. oil consumption forebode deepening ecological, geopolitical, and social crises. Yet no political coalition has been able to actually tackle this problem. While many on the environmentalist left are comfortable attributing this impasse to a conspiracy between the oil industry and the U.S. state, the uncomfortable fact, underscored by populist rhetoric, is that policies meant to curb oil consumption—such as gasoline taxes and fuel efficiency standards—are unpopular to a U.S. electorate for whom cheap gasoline has become a basic aspect of everyday survival in an era of eroding economic security. It seems that no amount of wars or oil spills—not even the prospect of the extinction of our species—is enough to push U.S. politics away from this kind of energy populism based on cheap-fossil-fueled livelihoods. It certainly does appear that the United States is indeed as a society addicted to oil. Yet the "addiction" metaphor presumes that oil is an overarching, uncontrollable force hovering over society. The question posed by this book is how this came to be.

Problematizing U.S. Oil Addiction

It has become "common sense" that the level of U.S. oil consumption is a massive yet intractable problem. It is important to be precise about the specific consumptive practices that rely on oil. In popular discourse oil is too often conflated with energy in general, but oil is mainly a source of energy as *liquid fuel* for the transportation sector—gasoline for automobiles, diesel fuel for trucks, jet fuel for airplanes, and heavy fuel oils for ocean tankers, railroads, and other kinds of mobile machinery.¹⁵ Overall, 71 percent of U.S. petroleum consumption goes toward transportation, and 93 percent of all energy consumed in transportation comes from petroleum. The bulk of the rest of oil is used in the industrial production of a whole host of products from chemicals to plastics.¹⁶ Ever since the oil shock of the 1970s, virtually none of the oil consumed in the United States

is used to generate electricity, which is, of course, a major and quite different aspect of everyday energy consumption, from using televisions and lights to recharging batteries for iPods and cell phones (and increasingly automobile batteries now and in the future). Oil is primarily about powering a certain kind of mobility characterized by an individuated command over space, or what Raymond Williams called “mobile privatization.”¹⁷ Thus, when it comes to “oil addiction,” most agree the problem is rooted in the particular form of auto-centric suburban development prevalent in the United States.¹⁸

We are well aware of the problems of “oil addiction.” Ecologically, the combustion of petroleum in the United States is the leading emitter of carbon dioxide (43 percent of the total), and the extraction, transportation, and refining of petroleum produces ecological degradation all along the commodity chain.¹⁹ Ever since the oil embargo in the 1970s, U.S. oil consumption also produces geopolitical discourses of anxiety over dependence upon foreign sources of oil from racialized zones of the Middle East implicated with authoritarianism, terrorism, and greed.²⁰ The sociospatial patterns of suburban life made possible by automobility and massive oil consumption create crisis narratives of declining social solidarity and community and the individualization of American culture.²¹ Moreover, this geography of dependence is framed as utterly doomed because of the imminent arrival of “peak oil” and geological scarcity that will yield explosive price increases and usher in a *Mad Max*-style dystopia structured by scarcity and conflict.²²

The “addiction” metaphor frames oil as an uncontrollable thing trapped in the American bloodstream—pernicious, yet practically unavoidable. A 2011 *National Public Radio* story featured citizens trying to “quit” oil, but they soon were overwhelmed by the inundation of petroleum products within common everyday practices: “Even those who carry on the most ascetic, pared-down existence depend on petroleum in some form or other.”²³ Of course, there is the automobile, but plastics, food, and *any commodity* that is transported by truck is also tied to the use of oil. Clearly, the unavoidability of oil is central to the addiction narrative, which positions oil as an overarching force hovering over the public.

More than anything else, the discourse of addiction *naturalizes* petroleum consumption as an unavoidable aspect of life that cannot be changed through politics or culture. The very idea of addiction presupposes a *physicality* that supposedly escapes psychology, culture, and politics. Thus the “prescription” for ending this material addiction requires a form of technocratic behavioralism—policy mechanisms that influence behavioral change (e.g., traffic congestion pricing), subsidies

that encourage alternative energy technological innovation (e.g., federal loans for electric vehicles), and market mechanisms that put a price on ecological destruction (e.g., a tax on carbon). Moreover, the problem of “oil addiction” is too often imagined as a *purely* material problem composed of the sheer amount of demand, the absolute space between home and work, the convenience of plastics, and the energetics of fossilized food production. In this book, however, I argue that the problem of oil addiction is about not only our material relation with energy resources but also how energized practices shape particular forms of thinking and feeling about politics. If the textbook definition of energy is the ability to do work, I pose a different question: can energy do political work? What if the most problematic relation to oil is the way it powers forms of social life that allow individuals to imagine themselves as severed from society and public life? Oil is a powerful force not only because of the material geographies of mobility it makes possible but also because its combustion often accompanies deeply felt visions of freedom and individualism. It turns out these ideals are much harder to shake than the built environment of petroleum-fired suburbanization. This is not an “idealist” proposition of the need to think about culture and politics *against* materialism but rather a perspective on materiality that is always already cultural and political.²⁴

Those who emphasize the political and historical roots of our oil predicament often focus on large powerful forces shaping the social use of energy. Many scholars have told the history of “oil addiction” as simply the product of a class alliance of oil, automobile, and real-estate capitalists who conspired to destroy public transit and lock in internal combustion-fired automobility and suburbanization.²⁵ In this story, oil consumers are featured as “dupes” in the master plans of profiteering capitalists. In a broader sense, the story of oil is almost always told from the perspective of “big” forces—geopolitical strategy, oil kingdoms, titans of oil finance, and global oil capital.²⁶ The struggle for the oil ‘prize’ is a “great game” between powerful actors with the globe as their stage.²⁷ Yet the problem with these big stories of oil is they ignore the fact that oil is also incredibly *ordinary* because it is embedded in everyday patterns of life. In the realm of petroleum and everyday life, others have importantly focused on the more pernicious forms of injustice along the petroleum commodity chain—from the destruction of livelihoods in the Niger Delta to the segregation and violence imposed on the oil workers in Saudi Arabia²⁸—but this injustice is reproduced through the other, ordinary ways in which oil consumption becomes naturalized in the United States and elsewhere. Approaching oil from the perspective of everyday life leads to much

different understandings of oil politics: less big, geopolitical, and strategic and more banal, taken for granted, and “commonsense.”

This approach focused on everyday practices of consumption is anchored through a focus on a quite ordinary idea—that of “life.” The centrality of oil is not simply the product of self-interested capitalists seeking a market but also a product of wider struggles over the sociospatial stuff of everyday life—housing, transportation, and urban spatial form. Timothy Mitchell’s important new work instructs us to “follow the . . . oil itself,” but in order to understand the complex relations between oil and ideas of “the American way of life” we must also follow social relations, politics, and struggles over how life is lived that stretch far beyond the wells, pipelines, and refineries immediately stained with oil’s toxic residues.²⁹ In the chapters that follow, I will trace the history of how oil became constitutive of a specific cultural politics of life in the United States. Indeed, as a recent Gulf Oil campaign suggests (Figure 1), oil is now *equated* with life itself, a life that *necessitates* a form of spatial practice “one mile at a time.” Although the easy shorthand—“the American way of life”—best approximates this cultural politics, this phrase is all too often vague and all encompassing. My aim is to untangle the specific political logics underlying this vision of life and suggest that this broader politics has as much to do with the persistence of our “oil addiction” than anything else.



FIGURE 1. “LIFE . . . ONE MILE AT A TIME.”

Gulf Oil’s ad campaign “Life . . . One Mile at a Time” was developed in the mid-2000s and persists today. It not only equates life with oil but also invokes a specific geography of mileage. Photograph by Michael Wall.

Oil and the Meaning of Life

In the aftermath of September 11, 2001, and specifically the revelation that fifteen of the nineteen hijackers came from oil-rich U.S. ally Saudi Arabia, U.S. oil consumption habits were increasingly framed as having specific linkages to emerging discourses of “terrorism.”³⁰ Such a linkage obviously created much anxiety after a decade framed by low gas prices and the rising popularity of sport-utility vehicles (SUVs).³¹ A November 2001 *New York Times* article titled “Made in America, and Never Mind the Gas Mileage” raised the question of a possible hypocrisy within a culture that both bought SUVs “like crazy,” in the words of one car salesperson, and equated big American-made cars with a certain level of patriotism.³² The reporter spoke with one woman loading groceries into her Chevy Tahoe; she said: “I don’t think it’s unpatriotic to use so much gas. . . . It’s very patriotic. It’s our way of life. . . . Why should we cut back? . . . We’re an affluent society. Should I hate my neighbor because she has a better house, a better car, more money?”³³ It is easy to caricature such views as evidence of American profligacy, excess, and arrogance. Indeed, according to certain perspectives aligned with the consumer-as-dupe outlook, American culture is easily ridiculed as wasteful and blithely unaware of the profound relations of destruction bound up within each tank of gas. Take peak oil icon James Howard Kunstler, who is well known for his infantilization of U.S. culture and “the American way of life”: “We’ve become a nation of overfed clowns and crybabies, afraid of the truth, indifferent to the common good, hardly even a common culture, selfish, belligerent, narcissistic whiners seeking every means possible to live outside a reality-based community.”³⁴ In essence, according to Kunstler, we are a zombie nation of cultural dupes too self-absorbed to wake up and face the “real world” of impending energy constraints.³⁵

Yet such easy caricatures belie the complex subjectivities and cultural politics that underlie such an equation of “using so much gas” with “our way of life.” The concept of “way of life” or *livelihood* is commonly mobilized as a claim to justify access to resources.³⁶ Whether articulated by indigenous groups or shared ideals of national ways of living, these claims create moral economies around resource practices. Again, as political ecologists have so often shown, what is most important is not purely the material relation to those resources but the cultural and political depth of such livelihood claims.³⁷ Thus it is essential to dig deep into this *moral* economy of “the American way of life.” It is not simply a cultural form of entitlement to the resource-intensive geographies but rather a vision of life itself as “made” within a field of competitive market subjects. The woman

quoted crucially asks, “Should I hate my neighbor because she has a better house, a better car, more money?” This question fundamentally interrogates the assertion that the money and material commodities accorded to individuals are not deserved. Rather, it suggests that this particular way of life is structured by a social field wherein wealth and material goods *justifiably flow* into privatized hands that “worked hard” to achieve a particular material standard of life.

Following Michel Foucault’s recently translated lectures on neoliberalism, I call this imaginary “entrepreneurial life.”³⁸ I argue that this vision of life came to be equated with what is known as “the American way of life” based on privatized social reproduction, single-family housing, and automobility. This vision of “entrepreneurial life” has deep roots in American culture and politics. From Jeffersonian agrarianism to Emersonian self-reliance, from Horatio Alger tales of rags to riches to the Protestant work ethic, American politics has always been shaped by an ideology of self-made lives.³⁹ Yet I propose that prior to World War II, it was rather difficult to translate this vision of life into a popular mass appeal—the lives of the majority of workers in the United States were too structured by material deprivation and either an urban proletarian or rural smallholder sense of injustice. In the U.S. context, the absolute despotism of machine production and the deprivation of working life reached its ideological and economic limits with the Great Depression of the 1930s. To create a populist politics of entrepreneurial life—a view that one could actually shape a life as one’s own—it took, in a word, *energy*—political and biophysical. It is well known that during the New Deal, mass political movements among workers and consumers pushed the state to profoundly restructure capitalist social relations around high wages (for some) and the Keynesian Welfare State.⁴⁰ Out of the crisis emerged social struggles and political projects reconfiguring the geographies of social reproduction—what Cindi Katz calls “the messy, fleshy stuff of everyday life”⁴¹—for a specific stratum of workers in the United States: a postwar social construction of life as composed of homes, cars, and yards.

It took biophysical energy as well—access to the prodigious powers of fossil fuel was further generalized to the public in the form of internal combustion engine-powered cars and a whole host of household appliances.⁴² Therefore, rooted in the *material transformation* of social reproduction centered upon the spatiality of single-family home ownership and automobility, oil helps power what others have called “the real subsumption of life under capital,” where subjectivity itself mirrors the entrepreneurial logics of capital.⁴³ This transformation gave millions of Americans the wages, the public infrastructure, and the financial institutions to mobilize

a whole host of energy-intensive machines in everyday life that surrounded what was once called the “electric-oil-auto complex.”⁴⁴ Energy powered the privatization of social space. By extending the productive forces of capital—large-scale industry powered by fossil fuel—to the reproductive forces of everyday life, a specific stratum of American workers could now live, think, and feel an individuated sense of *power* over the geographies of everyday practices. Life appeared to some as a coherent space of privatized freedom—the house, the car, the family, the yard—that was entirely produced by and reducible to one’s own life choices and entrepreneurial efforts. This way of life became synonymous with capital—an entrepreneurial life of choice and freedom to *make* a life for oneself.

Understanding the meaning of life cannot become a transhistorical, speculative exercise but rather must make clear the historical specificity of *capitalist* life. Too often injustice and environmental destruction is blamed on the noun *capitalism*. Yet, as Marx instructs, “capital is not a thing but a social relation.”⁴⁵ Capitalism should not be an explanatory concept; capital’s reproduction must be the object of explanation. “Life” under capitalism is only made possible through working for a wage (working under the command of capital) and thereby gaining access to the commodified means of subsistence. The precarious dependence of life upon capital must continually be produced and reproduced through what might be called the cultural politics of capital: the lived practices and meanings that naturalize capitalist forms of power and hegemony. For my purposes, the distinction between production (work) and reproduction (life) is critical.⁴⁶ The centrality of oil to a particular construction of “the American way of life” is itself a specifically capitalist construction of “life” opposed to “work.” As Marx put it, “life for [the worker] begins where this [work] activity ceases.”⁴⁷ As I will discuss at length, fossil-fuel-powered machinery is critical to the construction of a specifically capitalist form of despotism over “work”—or the labor process. On the other hand, oil specifically has become important in efforts to compensate for that despotism through the construction of a “way of life” aligned with the logics of capital—freedom, property, and entrepreneurialism.

Toward a Historical Ecology of Neoliberalism

In this book, I argue that oil’s relation to “the American way of life” is central to the rise of neoliberal hegemony in the United States. In so doing, I aim to intervene in debates on neoliberalism in two ways. First, I follow recent historical research examining how the rise of conservatism in the United States was based on the mobilization of suburban populist anger

over high taxes and government efforts at wealth redistribution.⁴⁸ While most of these studies have focused on the particular cultural and political discourses emanating from suburban geographies, I focus on the material and ecological relationships that make those geographies possible in the first place.⁴⁹ Oil is but one of many of a whole host of material- and energy-intensive products that came to saturate suburban life in the post-World War II period. I'm specifically interested in the ways in which the incredible reservoir of "work" provided by fossil energy has provided the ecological foundation for a peculiarly privatized sociospatial existence. Rather than simply lament the ecological "footprint" of these practices, I seek to understand the ways in which their very materiality actively shapes political structures of feeling, reinforcing what Evan McKenzie calls "an ideology of hostile privatism."⁵⁰ It is the entrenchment of oil within these cherished ideas of property, freedom, family, and home that makes its deleterious ecological consequences that much harder to reverse. Indeed, while there has been considerable work on the neoliberalization of "the environment" or "nature" as a contained field of governance over naturalized realms of water, forests, wetlands, and fisheries,⁵¹ we need to further understand neoliberalism itself—its ideologies, its core practices and policy prescriptions—as fundamentally shaped by the societal relation to resources, energy, and waste. In short, we need to move from understanding the politics of ecology and toward the ecology of politics.⁵²

Second, I aim to complicate the standard *periodization* of neoliberalism as emerging out of the crisis of the 1970s and reigning until the present.⁵³ Although there are tremendous accounts of the *intellectual* prehistory of neoliberalism in the post-World War II period—from Mont Pèlerin to Milton Friedman's steady work in the 1950s—the popular roots of neoliberal hegemony were also *laid* in the postwar era through the steady expansion of suburban geographies in the Sunbelt and throughout the United States.⁵⁴ My contention is that the postwar period must be viewed as neoliberalism's *incubation period* wherein popular resentment of government, taxes, and Keynesianism festered and built itself until the political moment of opportunity in the 1970s emerged—a moment structured in no small part by concerns over "oil shocks." In fact, the historical roots of neoliberalism stretch back to the contradictions of the New Deal project itself (if not much earlier). Although New Deal liberalism was based around collective narratives of public solidarity and the beneficial role of state intervention, it created the conditions for a privatized geography of suburbanization. Despite the substantive gains achieved by a specific white male breadwinning factory worker, what has been called the "golden age" of capitalism or the "capital-labor accord"

was structured by profound exclusions based on race, gender, and ideas of citizenship.⁵⁵ It was precisely those divisions that were mobilized by the forces on the right in the 1960s and 1970s to construct efforts to extend civil and economic rights to African Americans, migrant farm workers, and women as forms of “unfair” redistribution of wealth from working-class white males to an “undeserving” underclass.⁵⁶ Thus the rise of neoliberal hegemony can be seen as a rather predictable consequence of the limitations of the ultimately liberal–reformist nature of the New Deal project to *restore capital* rather than as a fundamental challenge to its core precepts.⁵⁷ Specifically, the “capital–labor accord” maintained what Marx calls “the despotism of capital” in the realm of social life called “work” or “production” and fundamentally reproduced a class of workers who depended upon commodity relations and wages (however “high”) to survive in the realm of “life.”

Ecology and the Forces of Capital

As a natural resource and key element in contemporary discussions of climate change, a political economic perspective on energy must also speak to what Margaret Fitzsimmons famously referred to as “the matter of nature.”⁵⁸ The theoretical analysis of the ecology of capital has been primarily concerned with the ways in which capitalism is inherently destructive of a domain called “nature.” Many ecological Marxists argue that ecological degradation—the pollution of water or the spewing of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere and consequent climate effects—is not a form of market or regulatory failure but rather an internal product of specifically capitalist forms of competition and accumulation. James O’Connor argues that capitalist competition drives individual capitalists to systematically externalize costs onto the environment and society.⁵⁹ Thus the “second contradiction of capitalism” is its inherent tendency to degrade the *conditions* of production, which include the *ecological systems* such as water systems, soil fertility, and the climate. John Bellamy Foster and others have also charged a social realm called capitalism with inducing a “metabolic” rift with natural patterns of ecological circulation from soil nutrient recycling to the overloading of the biosphere with greenhouse gases.⁶⁰ Overall, these perspectives tend to construct a curious and undialectical dualism between capitalism and nature—as if nature is solely the depository of capitalist waste and destruction.⁶¹ This not only ignores the many theoretical debates over the impossibility of pure distinctions between nature and society, but also assumes there is a realm called “capitalism” that is purely social.⁶² Thus theories of the capitalist

destruction of an externalized nature fail to consider how ecological relationships with resources, wastes, and ecosystems already constitute the social and material geographies of capitalism itself. Focusing only on the moments where socialized capital confronts an externalized nature only skims the surface of the deeper metabolic relation between nature and society. While we cannot downplay the spectacular history of capitalist degradation of an externalized and imagined nature, an effective ecological critique of capital must also seek to understand the ecology internal to capital itself. By focusing on fossil fuel, we can begin to construct an ecology of capital where nature is not only seen as something “produced” by capitalism or as an external, uncommodified “condition” of production but is constitutive of and internal to the productive forces and social relations of capital.⁶³

More empirically, there is a rich tradition of political ecology and resource geography that seeks to uncover place-based engagements between society and nature.⁶⁴ Yet these studies as a whole also assume that the real societal relation to nature is visible on the ground in specific sites of “nature-based” engagement (mines, forests, agricultural fields, and even urban parks and water systems) or the expulsion of waste into nature as “sink” or “environment.” This allows one to assume that the societal relation to nature begins and ends in these naturalized spaces.⁶⁵ I contend that we must seek to also confront *denaturalized* geographies of nature–society relations—geographies constructed as highly unnatural and dominated by large-scale technologies and the built environments of intensive material and energy consumption and waste production. Indeed, it is these industrial spaces of massive energy and material throughput that are most responsible not only for global environmental concerns like climate change but also for more local concerns with air and water pollution. As this book will show, understanding the geographies of petro-capitalism requires understanding not only the politics of extraction or refinery pollution (although this is critical—see chapters 2 and 3) but also the socioecological relations of gasoline stations, single-family homes, automobility, and the dominance of petrochemicals and plastics in everyday life.

Materiality and the Plan of This Work

This book centers upon oil and the role of energy in shaping a particular regime of mass consumption.⁶⁶ But consumption, or consumerism, is often spoken of in the very abstract terms of the market itself—as an undifferentiated “mass” of goods and commodities that serve to

reproduce a standard of living. Ben Fine's "vertical" approach to the "world of consumption" insists that each particular commodity—as a specific use value—is contained within its own "system of provision": "Each commodity or commodity group is best understood in terms of a unity of economic and social processes which vary significantly from one commodity to another, each creating and reflecting upon what will be referred to as its own system of provision."⁶⁷ While this approach is often used to focus on cultural and economic processes underlying consumption, each commodity is also situated in a specific *ecology* of provision.⁶⁸

Oil is too often constructed as a fetishized *object* of geopolitical conflict, state formation, corporate profits, or profligate consumption habits and not as an active material force in itself. The system of petroleum provision is structured by the specific materiality of the processes of extraction, distribution, refining, and consumption. Indeed, understanding the ecology of the forces of capital means a deeper understanding of the materiality of oil: how the biophysical attributes of oil itself—its dense energy, its liquid propensity to flow, its chemical composition—actively shape not only "the politics of oil" but also *politics* more broadly. This book is structured chronologically, but also materially—each chapter focuses on a specific aspect of the materiality of oil and how it shapes its "system of provision." Chapter 1 provides a theoretical introduction. Chapters 2 through 5 examine particular moments of crisis and stability in the long-term development of petro-capitalism in the United States (e.g., 1930s, 1945–73, 1970s, and 2000s). In chapter 1, I offer a theoretical critique of what I call the "fetishism of oil" that is reproduced in much of the critical political economy literature. I propose a broader historical-materialist perspective, taking into account the role of energy (and fossil fuel specifically) in the production and reproduction of life under capitalism. In sections on production and reproduction respectively, I argue that fossil fuel in general, and oil in particular, needs to be theorized as a specifically material aspect of the alienated—seemingly autonomous—power of capital over living labor. Specifically, I situate oil as a central energy resource shaping the forces of social reproduction, or what I call the real subsumption of life under capital. Under this form of subsumption, life *appears as capital*, or what Foucault's calls the "the enterprise form" so central to neoliberal subjectivities.

In chapter 2, I argue that the social struggle to produce the conditions for an oil-fired and commodified "American way of life" were complicated by problems of oil overproduction rooted the contradiction between a U.S. legal regime of private property and the materiality of petroleum

as a *subterranean resource*. During the 1930s, this property regime led to massive overproduction, glut, collapsing prices, and eventually a political regime dedicated to curtailing how oil reached the U.S. market. This created what was called the prorationing system that set “allowable” production quotas for thousands of wells across the United States. My goal is to situate these struggles over oil with the larger reconstruction of capitalist life surrounding New Deal reforms in housing, labor, and infrastructure policy.

Mitchell instructs that we need to “follow the carbon,” but, in the case of petroleum-based life, it is perhaps more important to follow the *hydrocarbons*.⁶⁹ In chapter 3, it is oil’s status as a complex chemical assemblage of hydrocarbons that allows the oil industry not only to extricate thousands (millions?) of petroleum-based products from a given barrel of oil but also to craft narratives emphasizing the unavailability of oil through the saturation of chemicals, plastics, medicine, food, and gasoline in everyday life. The torrent of petroleum products produced through the refining process not only came to symbolize a specific set of cultural practices encircling “the good life” but also increasingly supplemented a vision of entrepreneurial life as an atomized project made possible through a specific set of material products in the postwar period.

Perhaps the most important material feature of oil in shaping larger visions of scarcity and geopolitics is its exhaustibility and the uneven geography of reserves. In chapter 4, I discuss how the peaking of U.S. oil production combined with the concentration of massive and highly productive (low-cost) fields in the Middle East shaped the geopolitical anxieties of the “oil shocks.” Although these concerns of scarcity and geopolitics proliferated throughout the public imagination, I argue that the popular interpretation of the “oil shocks” was that the crisis itself was not “real”—if by “real” we mean natural scarcity and a market response of high prices—but rather a *contrived* crisis engineered by anti-competitive forces intervening within what should be an apolitical and pure space of the market. Drawing from letters written to newspaper editors and the Nixon administration, I show how popular disdain for monopolistic oil companies, racialized oil sheiks, and government oil price controls all coalesced to reproduce an emerging neoliberal idolatry of a pure, free, and, most important, *competitive* market. For the decentralized suburban “Silent Majority” of Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan’s America, fairness was only realizable through the expurgation of large, centralized and visible forces intervening in the market—of which oil cartels, unions, and governmental redistribution were all representative forms.

Finally, in chapter 5, it is the liquid nature of petroleum that represents the condition of possibility of the *liquid landscapes* of mass gasoline availability in pumping stations scattered throughout the urban, suburban, and rural geographies of American life. It is this *omnipresence* of gasoline and its price that structures what I call the pain at the pump discourse of the 2000s, which bemoans high gas prices as a pervasive form of everyday oppression under neoliberalism. I argue that populist anger at high gas prices was less about cultural entitlement and excess, and more about life (and death) under the neoliberalism characterized by falling wages, mounting debt, and increasing job insecurity. Although cheap energy and natural resources represented a short-term reprieve from these forces in the 1980s and 1990s, the rising cost of energy and food in the 2000s represented the last in a long line of threats to social reproduction for working people in the United States. Yet the popular resistance to high energy prices—often framed in neoliberal terms as “energy taxes”—has disturbing implications for an ecological and anti-imperial politics.

I conclude by interrogating the relationship between oil, energy, and a central idea of “entrepreneurial life”—freedom. Just like imaginaries of freedom beyond work implicit in the idea of “the American way of life,” Karl Marx hoped for a society beyond capital based on a “realm of freedom” made possible through the capitalist development of the productive forces and quarantined in a space for individual creative development *apart* from material production. Yet for Marx, this vision of freedom was only emancipatory *for all* if it was achieved through the democratic control over society’s productive powers. The neoliberal concept of freedom certainly created expansive geographies of *privatized* social control over the home, the car, and the family (for some small sectors of the global working class), but even for the suburbanites of the United States, it ultimately ceded the world of work, production, and the market to the despotism of capital. The ecological and economic crisis before us lays bare the need to assert democratic social control over not only the production and distribution of energy resources but also economic life in general.