Syracuse University assistant professor of geography and Clark PhD Matthew Huber argues that the left in the US gets it more wrong than right in trying to understand the causes of “America’s oil addiction” and thus of the wars allegedly fought over “access” to increasingly “scarce” supplies. We attribute outsized explanatory power to “big oil” and to oil itself as a “thing” with conflict-generating properties, and not enough to the ways in which these ideas have become naturalized or part of our “commonsense”. In his words, “oil is too often constructed as a fetishized object of geopolitical conflict, state formation, corporate profits, or profligate consumption habits” (p.xix). I agree. Understanding both the genealogy and unexamined, often false premises of these ruling ideas is vital.

At its best, *Lifeblood* is a provocative counter to conventional ways of thinking about petroleum and grand strategy through its focus on the moral economy of millions of American oil consumers. Huber’s book provides the most thoughtful account I know of, for lack of a better term, the contemporary “folkways” of oil in the US, of the “truths” that go without saying, the outsized power of big oil being just one of them. The book should cause us to pause over the distinction routinely made in politics and international

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1 The critical study of beliefs about and representations of oil, the oil industry, and national security in American popular culture is rare. For one account focused on populist representations of the industry see Roger and Diana Olien’s (2000) *Oil and Ideology*. Stephanie LeMenager’s (2014) *Living Oil* considers some of the same effects of oil’s omnipresence in our daily lives, as do various of the contributors to the *Journal of American History* (2012) special issue “Oil in American History”, although from different theoretical and disciplinary positions.
relations between “material” interests such as oil and those that are instead culturally constituted through “a framework of meaning.”

_Lifeblood_ though fails to fulfill all its promises. If others exaggerate oil’s conflict-generating and democracy-hindering capacities, Huber’s account of “petro-capitalism in the US” greatly inflates oil’s role in producing neoliberal subjects. As the narrative unfolds, Huber repeatedly turns to those same “big forces” such as “geopolitical strategy” and “global oil capital” (p.xi) favored by diplomatic historians and radical political economists for explaining issues of war and intervention. The biggest problem however is the blindspot it shares with policy makers and ordinary SUV owners when it comes to the so-called need let alone ability of the US “military state” somehow to “control” Middle East (or world) oil. In some stories “it” gains strategic advantage. In Huber’s, the logic of capital compels it. It is an old idea that first emerged around the same time as another erstwhile piece of geopolitical knowledge about the variable relationship of whites to the temperate and tropic zones (where the raw materials were) of the world economy. It is a mystery why critical geopolitics continues to invest in this spatial myth of empire and lends it social scientific legitimacy.

The version of methodological nationalism Huber favors (a “historical geographical materialist perspective”) in telling the story of how oil’s “centrality to US capitalism and hegemony…was historically and geographically produced in the first place” (p.6) has some

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2 It is a distinction that virtually every analyst of the “cultural” or “ideological” dimensions of US-Middle East policy insists on, including Melani McAlister (2001), Douglas Little (2002) and Matthew Jacob (2011).

3 It is primarily radical anti-imperialist theorists who continue to emphasize “control” or oil in their accounts, where others speak more generally although no less coherently about needing to guarantee “access to oil”. The radicals divine some remarkable capacity on the part of US leaders and agencies. The objectives ostensibly driving the pursuit vary from analyst to analyst. The key point is that none stands up to scrutiny (see Vitalis 2013). On races and the tropic and temperate zones of the world economy, see Vitalis (2010a).
additional problems, since oil (and not just oil) was already, to use his word, “fetishized” in the
US and in other imperial centers decades before a post-World War II workers’ world of “homes,
cars, and yards” (p.xiv) came into existence. The story he tells doesn’t add up.

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In his introductory theoretical chapter, “The Power of Oil?”, Huber argues for making energy
regimes central to Marxist analyses of the development of industrial capitalism. Oil, he says, has
underpinned a particular cultural politics of capital or “way of life” (p.xv) in the US for much of
the twentieth century until now, and it is that way of life that secures the consent of worker-
consumers. He thus follows Foucault’s lead in taking up the “micropolitics of neoliberal
subjectivity” (p.20). Americans today imagine themselves, to paraphrase a Discover Brokerage
ad from the 1990s that he reproduces, C.E.O.s of their own lives. Suburban single-family home
ownership and automobility are critical parts of that imaginary. “Cheap enough” energy
consumption underpins it. For ordinary Americans, “access to oil” is a kind of moral right–
although this is another one of those ideas about “energy resources” that goes back a century.
Huber also uses the chapter to try and carve some analytical space from Timothy Mitchell’s
(2011) towering Carbon Democracy, to which his study of how the materiality of oil matters
politically as it is pumped, refined, and turned into an array of consumer goods will inevitably be
compared.

Chapter two, “Refueling Capitalism”, provides a brief, stylized account, for those who
don’t know the history, of what Huber calls the New Deal’s project “to refashion the American
way of life” through material gains for white workers, the extension of mortgage credit, and
highway building. Black exclusion from these gains, Huber guesses, may be due to Roosevelt’s
“tenuous connection with racist Southern Democrats” (p.36). He switches gears midway in the chapter to retell the story of the Roosevelt administration’s efforts to avert the collapse of the domestic oil industry through imposing a system of quotas on a state-by-state basis, a model that would later inspire the creation of OPEC.

Chapter three, “Fractionated Lives”, shifts from the oil fields to refineries (chapters four and five will begin at the gas pump), and from there to discussions of automobility and the widening array of petroleum products—from asphalt and plastics to fertilizers—that made up modern life for those who escaped from the cities and from the farms. Huber says the payoff of his material and ecological approach begins here. That is, he wants us to revise our understanding of the social and temporal origins of the “neoliberal revolution” back to the new post-World War II white working class suburbs, which served as “incubator”. I leave it to others to assess the value of identifying a slightly longer “prehistory” of ideas than the competitors.

Huber makes great use of advertisements and other cultural artifacts in the latter half of the book. Chapter four, “Shocked”, focuses (albeit with side trips) on the overblown 1970s “energy crisis” that in part fueled the war against what remained of the New Deal. Chapter five, “Pain at the Pump”, keys in on the anxiety and growing insecurity of the mass of American worker-consumers in the neoliberal era, manifested in populist anger in the recent past over high gasoline prices. Huber is right that such sentiments make it harder to delegitimize the militarism empowered by entrenched ideas about enhancing energy “security” and seeking energy “independence”. The ancestors

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4 Why guess and why “tenuous”? As Nicholas Lemann (2013) recently wrote, anyone “who ever took an American history course is aware that the South was an essential part of the Democratic Party coalition during the New Deal” until its collapse in the 1960s and 1970s, a story that matters to Huber’s discussion in the later chapters of the rise of neoliberalism.
argued the same thing in the early decades of the twentieth century. These are the chapters I liked the best but also question the most.

First there are matters of fact. The Suez Canal Crisis began in 1956 not 1957, and the “Gulf Oil States” (there were two at the time), both staunch US allies, did not seek to counter “Euro-American-Israeli imperialism” through an oil boycott. (He conflates these events with the 1967 Six Day War.) Rather, the war itself caused the closing of the Canal, a primary export route, which, on top of the emergency outlays to Nasser’s Egypt, actually cost the Saudis a lot. Huber takes us back briefly to the meeting between President Roosevelt and King Ibn Saud (or `Abd al-`Aziz, not, as he writes, “Saud”) aboard a heavy cruiser in the middle of that same canal ten years earlier, in February 1945, which, he says, is often misremembered as the beginning of US dependency on foreign and Arab oil.

He is right that the idea is false. He is only half right when he says that the “the problem of ‘foreign oil’…has not always had the same discursive power that we recognize today” (p.104), and wrong when he says that until the 1970s it was a problem only for domestic high cost oil producers and for the geologists whose models of US production decline were one of the sources of what Roger Stern (2013) calls “oil scarcity ideology”. The promotion of oil scarcity paid huge dividends for investors seeking the assistance of the state in their competitive rivalries in Mexico, the Caribbean and Southeast Asia in the 1920s, the 1940s, and beyond (see also Stern forthcoming).

Rising anxieties in the post World War I decade over foreign countries locking out American investors from sources of “vital” raw materials of all sorts, oil included, shaped the political economy no less than the more familiar and putatively more culturally resonant accounts of the threats that trans-Pacific Japanese, and African-American south-north, migrations posed to white racial hegemony (Lake and Reynolds
2008). After all, it is when the ideas about “big oil” and imperialism that Huber argues can’t do the heavy lifting today first emerged in books and pamphlets such as *The Oil Trusts and Anglo-American Relations* (Davenport and Cooke 1923), *Oil and the Germs of War* (Nearing 1923), *The World Struggle For Oil* (l’Espagnol de la Tramerye 1924), and *We Fight For Oil* (Denny 1928). If the Paul Thomas Anderson film *There Will Be Blood* (2007) serves as proof of the power of everyday ideas about oil in our contemporary life, then Upton Sinclair’s novel *Oil* (1927), on which the film was based, tells us at least as much about popular representations of companies’ corrupt pursuit of concessions beyond US borders. Anderson, like Sinclair and other novelists of the 1920s, drew on the story of Edward Laurence Doheny; this larger than life LA oil tycoon was a central figure in the Teapot Dome bribery scandal of the early 1920s who, as President Harry Truman (1949) put it when imagining a new, less rapacious turn in US foreign oil policy after World War II, stood for “the old…interests and people who robbed the Mexicans before” (see also Vitalis 2007: 14, 46-54).

It is back in Doheny’s day that one also finds the first economists and political scientists challenging what they called the “new mercantilism’s” illusory pursuit of control of raw materials, including “energy resources”. The professors also sought, like Huber, to understand how such ideas had become unquestioned commonsense among ordinary citizens of imperial powers. Critics, among them British journalist and political economist John Atkinson Hobson, now routinely misremembered as an “anti-imperialist” theorist, advocated for rational management through the League of Nations of the far-flung resources that were the “civilized” world’s right. Such policies would both protect backward races from exploitation and western whites from the imperialist rivalries that

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5 The same anxieties manifested themselves in the countries that feared the worst given the dominance of US producers over the world’s supply.
led to World War I (Hobson 2012). What is striking now, almost 100 years later, is how tightly many critics cling to the idea that political leaders and their functionaries (or “states”) have a rational need, and in their repertoire some kind of means, to control oil resources.

So, Huber asserts that famous meeting between FDR and King `Abd al-`Aziz in 1945 “was about securing Saudi oil not for American consumers but rather for US oil capital” (p.104). He doesn’t tell us why he thinks a meeting mattered, since the firms had signed long-term concession contracts in the 1930s that already secured the ability to make production decisions over the reserves. No threat to this market power then loomed on the horizon, as far as I know. Perhaps he intends to reflect what policymakers believed or maybe he means it as a kind of metaphor.

I doubt it, however, since he continues in this vein throughout the book. “Evidence abounds”, he insists, meaning, once one reaches the footnote, that a handful of radical accounts assert it, that the 2003 Iraq War “was at least in part about controlling some of the richest and untapped oil reserves in the world” (p.149, emphasis added, to a phrase that suggests danger, analytical minefield ahead). Ordinary men and women might think that the invasion was at the behest of or would benefit American refiners and gasoline users, and thus march under the banner of “no blood for oil”. Huber knows better. The invasion’s goal “was the restriction and control of the supply of Iraqi oil to protect the first sustained price boom since the 1970s” (p.150). His proof? A speculative footnote from another dissertation-turned-first book by a fellow Clark PhD. Although Iraq was then, as now, a member of OPEC, Saddam Hussein, apparently unlike all other oilgarchs, together with giant French and Russian oil companies with which he made “deals…threatened to unleash a glut of Iraqi oil onto global markets”. Hussein, in this view, was seemingly unconstrained by the potential for price destruction from such action, and the firms by the financial markets on which they depend. His proof? None. Thus the line he
would draw dividing the theorists like himself from the ranks of workaday strategists let alone suburban homeowners is not as distinct as he imagines.

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Huber’s theoretical turn–from materially determined causal stories that focus on big structures and actors to understanding how commonsense, psychologically complex understandings are produced from the bottom up–is one that others have taken before him. In the 1990s American historian David Roediger (1991) revised Marxian accounts of racism in the US as an invention of capital for purposes of keeping the working class divided by demonstrating the ways in which race consciousness is made and remade by working class “whites” as they came to identify themselves.6

Roediger’s account resembles Huber’s, who argues that his identification of oil’s centrality to popular ideas about freedom under neoliberalism poses daunting obstacles for environmental social movements. Roediger’s analysis similarly led many to conclude that a strategy of social change premised on black-white working class solidarity had to be rethought.7 It is impossible however to imagine Roediger leaving readers to guess about the truth or not of the biological claims in defense, say, of the laws against miscegenation in the 1920s and later as he explored the ways in which a white racial identity continued to matter.

Huber instead starts from the premise that arguments about oil “are not so much false as they are discursive expressions of particular social and ecological relations” (p.4). So what interests him about the positions in the various policy debates at the time of the 1973 “oil crisis”

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6. The revised edition of Roediger’s (1999) *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the Working Class* includes a discussion of the critical responses to the book. While the original analysis focused on the antebellum era, in later works he extends it to the present day (see, for example, Roediger 2008).

7. See, or example, one of Roediger’s sympathetic but nonetheless sharp critics from the left, Theodore Allen (2001).
(he has little if anything to say about what subsequent scholarship over the succeeding decades tells us) is how they all seemingly “reinforce the shift” to neoliberalism (p.99). Popular representations and interpretations (encompassing letters of outraged citizens that he found in the Nixon Library but also analyses in the pages of the *New Republic* and the halls of the American Enterprise Institute) emphasized the “contrived” nature of the crisis, although the left and right identified different “real” reasons for the price rises, gasoline lines, threats to seize the Saudi oilfields, and so forth. They did so however in precisely the same way that Huber does when identifying the real cause of the 2003 Iraq War in the “likely” though hidden preferences of the US oil industry.

Huber is wrong to think that “the left” had concluded from this moment that imperfect markets and regulatory states were the problem, not least since theorists called for more rather than less of the latter in the form of third world socialist transformation (or state capitalism) and nonalignment. Rather it was monopoly capital, dependency relationships, western allied comprador bourgeoisies, and “the oil sheiks”, as he puts it, that accounted for the crisis (see Vitalis 1996). There is not much other than nomenclature and the arrival of English translations of Foucault’s lectures that distinguishes him from those who back in the day guessed that giant oil companies or the state acting for capital as a whole had aided and abetted if not engineered the crisis. He is on firmer ground in seeing the positions taken by conservative thinkers and organizations as part of the neoliberal ideological turn of the times. For that reason, perhaps, he downplays their importance in inserting an element of rationality to the exaggerated accounts of the success of the so called “boycott” and other suspect beliefs of the rising ranks of specialists on oil and geopolitics. Most crucially, such thinkers and organizations opposed the increasing militarization of the region by exposing the irrational underpinning of much neo-mercantilist, “realist”, and, yes, radical theory about the objective need to secure access or control of oil. As

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8 For the increasing focus on Saudi Arabia at the time as supposed key to America’s future, see Vitalis (2010b). For the continuing relevance of economists’ accounts today see, for example, Taylor (2013).
MIT’s leading oil economist, Maury Adelman (2004), who goes unreferenced in *Lifeblood*, argued, in a global market with lots of buyers and sellers, everyone has access.

More generally, “market information”, to use Roger Stern’s term, which served as the critical counter to the post-World War I neo-mercantilist visions of the marshalling of state power to secure access to raw materials, has lost none of its analytical value, only it is the rare geostrategic thinker or radical critic of oil and American hegemony who knows how energy markets work. Huber understands the value of market information, since he turns to it toward the end of his book, citing an American Petroleum Institute report as his source. An Omaha, Nebraska citizens’ group had launched a boycott of oil from “terrorist countries”, and a filling station soon opened that promised it sold gasoline exclusively sourced from the US and Canada. Only, it is impossible “to trace the origins of the oil” that stations sell. As a spokesperson for the supplier, Sinclair Oil, later admitted, it buys the oil it refines on the New York Mercantile Exchange, an “open market” where buyers have no idea of the source (p.156).

A poorly worded sentence in the introduction inadvertently captures the tension in Huber’s (partial) turn away from explanations that privilege firms, states, and their organic intellectuals in order to zero in on the “relations between oil and commonsense ideas of the ‘the American way of life’”. “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” (p.xii, emphasis mine).

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