Author’s response

First of all, I’d like to thank Robert Vitalis for engaging with my book. His own book America’s Kingdom (Vitalis 2007) had a major impact on me in graduate school at Clark University (an institution where Vitalis once taught). While I’m sure I could find some poorly worded sentences, the book proves one can analyze the politics of oil in the Middle East without falling into hackneyed geopolitical tropes around security and strategic control. I’d also like to say up front that his review points out some regrettable errors that, unfortunately, I did not catch in the many opportunities I had to review the manuscript before it was finalized. I won’t try to offer an excuse for such mistakes.

Much of the review focuses on Vitalis’s critique of the “neo-mercantilist” ways in which oil is viewed solely in geopolitical terms of state “control” and “access”. Although Vitalis doesn’t seem to agree, this is a critique I wholeheartedly share (see Huber 2011). Yet, Vitalis’s review actually shows the problematic ways in which academic turf or territory is also projected as a domain in need of geopolitical security and protection. In the bulk of his review, Vitalis argues against particular claims I make in relation to oil and the Middle East. As a scholar of Saudi Arabia and the imperial culture of US oil companies, this is Vitalis’s “territory”. What he doesn’t really point out is that my book is not (yet another) exposition on the relations between the oil and the Middle East (in the overproduced catalogue of such books, Vitalis’s stands above with its nuance and historical detail). Several issues he brings up—my misstating of the year of the Suez

1 I wish Vitalis was present for my 2013 AAG paper “Beyond the Spigot: Oil, Empire, and the Expanded Reproduction of Capital” in which I argue that David Harvey’s (2003) The New Imperialism reproduces this problematic “neo-mercantilist” vision of oil.
Crisis, my speculations about the causes of the Iraq War, my interpretation of FDR’s meeting with the Saudi King in 1945—were either simply “background context” or speculative asides that were only meant to set up the main focus of my analysis—the relation between oil and the culture and politics of the United States.²

In the protection of his turf, Vitalis also seems to consistently misunderstand the object of analysis in the book. He claims, “Huber repeatedly turns to those same ‘big forces’ such as ‘geopolitical strategy’ and ‘global oil capital’ favored by diplomatic historians and radical political economists for explaining issues of war and intervention” (p.2). The point of the book is not to explain “issues of war and intervention”, or even what is “really” behind the global geopolitical economy of oil as a whole (e.g. the real motive behind the Iraq War). Rather, readers of the book will find that it is about how lived practices of oil consumption—and specifically the geographies of suburban privatism³—shape the wider field of American politics.

Vitalis also mistakenly characterizes my account of the 1970s energy crisis as “giant oil companies or the state acting for capital as a whole…aided and abetted if not engineered the crisis” (p.9). I make no such claim. Again, I’m not really interested in what “really” caused the crisis. My focus—from reviewing opinion polls, archives, and newspapers—were the wider popular explanations of the crisis. These explanations (coming from all sides of the political spectrum) did in fact largely blame the crisis on OPEC, oil monopolies, and government oil price controls (some focusing more on one or the other). I do not investigate the accuracy of such

² Vitalis calls this focus on US politics “methodological nationalism” (p.2)—a horrific accusation for a geographer to hear! I would, of course, concede that American political culture is heterogeneous and produced through global relations, but, overall, I would suggest there is also something specific and particular about US politics that can be an object of analysis for a book like mine.

³ The focus on “suburban” geographies is complicated. If I were to reduce particular forms of political subjectivity to suburban contexts it would be a classic form of geographical determinism. My argument is more that suburban forms of privatized life were conducive to ideas and politics that slowly became “hegemonic”—that is, popular “common sense” ideas that were held by many people both in and outside suburban contexts.
explanations. Rather I use them to show how they focus upon “anti-competitive” forces unfairly intervening in the marketplace. I argue that such popular explanations of the crisis undergirded wider political shifts toward neoliberalism—an ideology that vilified precisely these “anti-competitive” forces (monopolies and Keynesian forms of state intervention). The logical conclusion of such explanations was to construct a fair and competitive free market (and this is in fact what Ronald Reagan claimed to do in energy markets).

Yet, the ultimate “territory” that explains Vitalis’s selection as the reviewer of the book is oil itself. A reader of *Lifeblood* recently told me she believes the book isn’t actually about oil at all—it is about how the “class compromise” of the New Deal in the 1930s laid the foundation for the rise of the right and the turn toward neoliberalism in the United States. I agree that is the main political aim of the book. Vitalis has very little to say about this apart from something about David Roediger’s (1999) book *The Wages of Whiteness*, which, I must admit, I have trouble following. It appears Vitalis seem wants to put me in some a vulgar Marxist camp (with Roediger) that treats energy politics (or race) as an, “invention of capital” (p.8) or, worse, reduces them to the “logic of capital” (p.2). Vitalis might be surprised to learn that there are many diverse forms of Marxist scholarship and most (these days) argue stridently against such reductionist theorizing. By focusing on ideas of “life” and everyday practices, my goal was not to conceptualize capital as an external economistic force, but a process that must be reproduced and struggled over in ways that are simultaneously material, cultural, and political.

I don’t want to completely disavow myself of oil—this book *is* about oil. My goal is to offer deeper explanation of why—despite decades of understanding the problems of petro-dependence—oil remains so central to the material ecology of life in the United States. I argue it is American political culture as a whole—rather than some narrow terrain we might describe as “the politics of oil”—that can help us explain better why this “oil addiction” persists. While many are quite happy to blame such persistence on “Big Oil” and its grip on the state (something
Vitalis wrongly thinks I’m doing! I argue we need to focus on a wider neoliberal populism—what Evan McKenzie (1994: 19) calls an “ideology of hostile privatism”. It is this populist disdain for government and taxes (among other things) that forecloses any large-scale collective or public project to transition away from oil and other fossil fuels. By situating the problem in the wider field of politics—and not simply “energy” or even “environmental” policy— I want to convince readers that our efforts to fight climate change and change our energy system will only come through a broader political struggle against neoliberal capitalism as a whole.

References


4 Indeed, neoliberal hegemony has also been defined by “single-issue” politics and the projection of a multiplicity of distinct and self-contained “causes”.

4