

# Anthropology Book Forum

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## **In the Time of Energy, it is Time to Make Place for Energy in Cultural Production**

**IMRE SZEMAN** 2019, *On Petrocultures: Globalization, Culture, and Energy*. Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 288 pp. ISBN 978-1-946684-88-2

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This thought-provoking book is a collection of essays that cultural theorist Imre Szeman has written over the last two decades. The author takes us through an informed epistemological journey in the deconstruction of the complex and paradoxical relationship between modern society and hydrocarbons. In his book, Szeman probes the nature of critical thinking and whether the autonomy of critiques of the modern world can be possible while it is maneuvered and pervaded by hydrocarbons. Szeman proposes that it is indeed oil that shapes culture, as all forms of energy have done in the past, enabling hegemonic systems such as Dutch mercantilism, British imperialism and US transnationalism (93-94). However, there has not yet been a cultural production which has actually challenged the energy systems in which it lives and from which it is sustained. The author, therefore, calls for new forms of “petrocultures.”

The concept of culture, so central in the book by Szeman, is indeed a hybrid. In fact, ‘culture’ in this book is the product of humanistic understandings together with more social aspects. Nevertheless, in the book the humanistic perception of culture as aesthetic production remains stronger than a culture understood and analyzed in terms of social relations. This is why, as an anthropologist, I took some time to identify with some of Szeman’s claims about culture. Szeman’s culture is presented, for instance, throughout in reference to a rich body of major contributions to cultural theory and applied to the analysis of globalization, modernity and climate change. In Chapter 1, the informative re-evaluation of Fredric Jameson’s “national allegory” calls for an “attempt to make sense of the relationship of literature to politics in the decolonizing world” (24). In fact, the author argues that “national allegory” is of value

because it is heavily contextualized and politicized. In contrast, the “rough assemblage of literary-critical commonsense” (25) that has clogged the cultural production since the fall of colonialism, serves only the de-politicization of capitalism. In the same chapter, Szeman stresses mediation as a key component of the cultural project itself (33). Hence the cultural project must be one of the platforms on which the gap between politics and human desire and freedom of expression can be bridged. Chapter 2 focuses on problematizing at large how the role of culture has shifted since globalization and how it “has circulated in and alongside globalization discourses” (49). Chapter 3 deals chiefly with the literary criticism that has played an essential political role during this era of globalization. The chapter aims to discuss globalization as a political project, with the author claiming “there is a politics that extends far beyond the establishment of aesthetic categories” (77). In fact, the possibility of literary criticism lies not only in the re-definition of the practices of globalization “in light of a world of transnational connections and communications” (81), but should also be open to experiment with new narratives, imagination and critics (86).

Another significant reference to major contributions of cultural theory is introduced in Chapters 5 with the deconstruction of Richard Florida’s “creative class category,” a mere allowance of capitalism to human creativity at the expense of *autonomy*. In fact, according to Szeman, the oxymoronic strategy embedded in the “production of creativity” is powerful in shaping space and labor, especially in modern urban city hubs (122-123). As a result, creativity becomes but an essential asset for economic capitalistic growth. Chapter 9 also addresses the role of entrepreneurship as the new and at times only common-sense way of “navigating the inevitable, irreproachable, and apparently unchangeable reality of global capitalism” (201). In Chapter 7, the author dissects narratives of petrocultures embedded in movies and documentary productions.

Chapter 4 is one of the more compelling chapters in the book where the author succeeds in conveying the power of dependency of modern life on petroleum. Szeman is inspired by thinkers such as Amitav Ghosh, who, in books like “The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable” (2016) interrogates the motives and consequences of human inertia when faced with climate change. This is evident in Chapter 4 where Szeman eloquently demonstrates the polarization of anticipation of the end of hydrocarbons embodied in the practices of either left-wing pessimistic “apocalyptic environmentalists” (103) or by their ruthless right-wing counterpart, the “strategic realists” (98). Not much hope is afforded to

those in the last category that Szeman individualizes, the more optimistic “techno-utopianists” (100), who have blind faith in contradicting and unreliable technological strategies (100).

The book is a challenging read. At certain moments, such as in Chapter 1, the reader is at a loss to comprehend the relevance of the sophisticated interaction between critical theory and the broader scope of the book, which aims to create “a critical theory of energy” (9).

However, *On Petrocultures* arrives at a decisive moment in the production of knowledge. In fact, more than ever the survival of the humanities and social sciences is threatened unless it functions, impacts and services global capitalism. Szeman skillfully reveals the deep entanglements of oil within human phenomenology: the way we, citizens of the modern world, perceive, understand and act has enormous consequences, such as climate change, precariousness, increased global social inequality and vulnerability. In addition, Szeman warns of an epistemological project of culture that, since oil, is fast shifting and becoming a token, an entrepreneurial asset of an accelerated capitalistic world. The author is rightly concerned about the future of “real” freedom of expression. Szeman certainly succeeds in transmitting a sense of uneasiness and a deep concern not only for the future of our planet and our future generations, but also for the future of the achievement of expression, free expression of the human body, mind and soul. Moreover, Szeman clearly warns against the dangerous omission of politics in cultural production. He warns against the reduction of uncountable narratives, for example of nation states, but also of smaller scale realities like communities and groups to the dangerously homogenizing one of the “globalized world.” There is a “fake universality” (43), a “falsely utopic space” (42) which is unfortunately reproduced in cultural production. These narratives, coined as “strategic realism,” “Techno-utopianism” and “apocalyptic environmentalism,” although seemingly contrasting, are similar in the sense that neither of them leave room for imagination, creation or “real” possibilities (see Chapter 4).

Throughout the book, Szeman laments the fact that culture is becoming or has already become dangerously a-political. The book skillfully unveils numerous paradoxes of culture and cultural life being created and continuously controlled and shaped in the function of capitalism, like a sad “domestication of art” (131) in the form of “allowances of capitalism” (131). In Chapter 6, the author paints the picture in even darker tones: oil is “the structuring ‘real’ of our contemporary sociopolitical imagery” (138). Due to this fact, in the dangers of “colonization of the globe by capital” (84), the lack of imaginative vocabulary, the absence of alternative metaphors and counter-narratives to globalization stop alternative understandings

and thus challenge dominant narratives (84). In Chapter 8, the author's argument is that as there are multiple ways to relate to and therefore to know oil (for example as a resource, an obstacle, a curse or a blessing) and that the "how" individuals and states relate to oil is fundamental for building the critical theory of oil. In Chapter 10 Szeman claims that adding "energy" in its various manifestations to world literature, might generate a new "ecological relationship to the apparatuses and objects of modern petroculture" (234) and thus a new way to comprehend climate change. The last two chapters of the book (Chapter 11 and 12) focus on oil infrastructures: on the role that especially pipelines play in politics and culture. The presence of these pervading entities is not only physical –as they cross lands and sea- but also ideological as they affect geopolitical decisions and thus cultural choices and production across the world.

Ultimately the book is a valuable contribution to the establishment of a "critical theory of energy" and a call for a more interdisciplinary approach to the study, deconstruction and the critique of energy systems. A critical theory of energy is a body of expertise, that comes from the humanities and social sciences, which is profoundly inspired and informed by energy. At the same time, the aim of the critical theory of energy is to examine and deconstruct the socio-historical and political contexts of energy dynamics and ultimately provide constructive concrete solutions to the challenges created by our petro-controlled world. Nevertheless, the book is a challenging read for those who are not familiar with literary criticism or cultural theory. At times, for this audience, namely social scientists and non-humanists in general, it may verge on the inaccessible. This is not to say it is *not* an excellent book. Given the scrutiny and deeper consideration it deserves, *On Petrocultures* produces many valuable reflections, providing ample food for thought. These reflections should be assimilated to constitute a starting point from where a paradigmatic shift in cultural production, critical theory and analysis should start. I would therefore highly recommend this reading to all academics who deal with research on the energy and oil complex.

#### References:

Ghosh, A. (2018). *The great derangement: Climate change and the unthinkable*. Penguin UK.

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