

**History 106**  
*Global Environmental History*

Professor: Tucker Sharon

**Essay 2**

**Oils Race**

Word Count: 1103

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**Prompt:** Choose an energy source (human/animal power, coal, oil, water/dams, solar/wind, nuclear power). Make an argument about how that energy source (energy regime) structures human societies, including infrastructures, environmental impacts, and cultural norms. More broadly, how do our energy sources shape our societies and individual lives?

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In this technological era, one of the most fundamental resources needed for societal functioning is Energy. With the exponentially growing population, there has also been an exponential increase in human needs.<sup>1</sup> To meet such growing demands, humans have learned to harness the various forms of renewable and non-renewable energy available to us, increasingly efficiently. However, while this ability to utilize energy has helped humanity ‘progress’, it has also made us dependant on a very complex regime of Energy. Oil, sometimes called the Black Gold, is a fossil fuel with the highest demand, but a limited supply that is heavily regulated by its indefinite and geographically restricted availability. This has led to the emergence of a global and complex network of trade and transportation for the resource.<sup>2</sup> The Energy Regime of Oil is driven not just Economically, but also Politically. We have been witness to various instances of political strong-arming, with profits being prioritized, while the environment and are people disregarded. With such malpractice, the energy regime of oil has re-structured several societies and environments across the globe. This study will examine such incidents and its consequences in places such as Russia, The Niger Delta, and Ecuador. Hence, this paper argues that the economically and politically driven energy regimes of Oil, have restructured<sup>3</sup> several societies, causing severe and irreversible changes to their environments.

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<sup>1</sup> Vaclav Smil (2006), Energy: A Beginner’s Guide, Oxford 101-111

<sup>2</sup> Vaclav Smil (2006), Energy: A Beginner’s Guide, Oxford 101-111

<sup>3</sup> *Restructured: Defined as the alteration of the normal way of life of locals and a change to local environments.*

Setting up an oil industry requires massive infrastructure to transport the resource. With oil usually being extracted from remote areas, such infrastructure passes through hundreds of miles of fragile regions, increasing the likelihood of disasters. In 1998, in the Niger Delta, an oil pipeline that belonged to Shell and the Nigerian government leaked and exploded, incinerating more than a thousand people instantly. *“Two villages burned to cinders. (And again,) In 2006 two additional oil pipelines elsewhere in Nigeria killed about six hundred people.”*<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, such impacts are not just restricted to land; Within two months of the worst spill at sea known to man, the BP spill, *“40 percent of the known population of brown pelicans died oily deaths.”*<sup>5</sup> Therefore, the infrastructure used to transport oil poses a high threat to the surrounding environments, with severe and irreversible impacts if disaster strikes.

Just like any other business, the Oil industry has been set-up to exploit the resource and maximize profits. With enough political and economic incentives, various companies and governments have been known to take extreme measures, prioritizing profits over people and the environment. For instance, the poorly managed regime of Oil in Russia drastically impacted lives and culture of several Indigenous populations. Russia is one of the world’s most oil-pipeline leak affected landscapes. It was estimated that in the 1990’s, Russia had thousands of leaks from its pipelines, losing about 20% of its total oil production. McNeill et al. argue that Russia’s low oil prices in the decade were a result of, *“a business culture that put scant value on routine maintenance, especially*

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<sup>4</sup> McNeill, J. & Engelke, P. (2016). 1. Energy and Population. *The Great Acceleration*(pp. 7-62). Cambridge, MA and London, England: Harvard University Press. Retrieved 22 Jun. 2018, from <https://www.degruyter.com/view/books/9780674970731/9780674970731-002/9780674970731-002.xml>

<sup>5</sup> McNeill, J. & Engelke, P. (2016). 1. Energy and Population. *The Great Acceleration*(pp. 7-62). Cambridge, MA and London, England: Harvard University Press. Retrieved 22 Jun. 2018, from <https://www.degruyter.com/view/books/9780674970731/9780674970731-002/9780674970731-002.xml>

*in an economically disastrous decade.*”<sup>6</sup> These frequent leaks heavily degraded the Arctic environment and directly impacted the lives of Indigenous populations, who were left unable to hunt, fish, or herd deer. Therefore, a poorly managed regime, has several implications for the environment and can drastically impact the lives of locals.

The exploitative tendencies of various governments and companies attract Less Economically Developed Countries such as Ecuador into opening up their pristine lands for the excavation of Oil. Evidently, such excavation has proved to help such countries improve their economy by creating jobs, supporting industries, trade markets, and attracting investments.<sup>7</sup> However, this widespread extractivism, if not regulated well, can also lead to severe environmental degradation and impact the life of locals, eventually restructuring society. “*Oil revenues proved so tempting to the Ecuadorian state that it scheduled two-thirds of its Amazonian territory for oil and gas exploration.*”<sup>8</sup> While this could have been an economically profitable and arguably an environmentally neutral venture, the poor regulation and enforcement by the Ecuadorian government allowed for malpractice by contractors such as Exxon, Chevron, and Petroecuador who cut corners to save money, with little regard for the local environment and people. Unfortunately, this created several local externalities such as deforestation, the pollution of air and water, a loss of biodiversity, while severely impacting the health, culture, and lifestyle of natives that resided around the Oil fields; “*Such costs are not easy to translate into money terms, but they*

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<sup>6</sup> McNeill, J. & Engelke, P. (2016). 1. Energy and Population. *The Great Acceleration*(pp. 7-62). Cambridge, MA and London, England: Harvard University Press. Retrieved 22 Jun. 2018, from <https://www.degruyter.com/view/books/9780674970731/9780674970731-002/9780674970731-002.xml>

<sup>7</sup> Alier, J. (2007). Keep Oil in the Ground: Yasuni in Ecuador. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 42(42), 4227-4228. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40276572>

<sup>8</sup> McNeill, J. & Engelke, P. (2016). 1. Energy and Population. *The Great Acceleration*(pp. 7-62). Cambridge, MA and London, England: Harvard University Press. Retrieved 22 Jun. 2018, from <https://www.degruyter.com/view/books/9780674970731/9780674970731-002/9780674970731-002.xml>

*are often very real and irreversible.*”<sup>9</sup> Therefore, ‘benefits’ from the oil industry have proved to be merely economic; they are for a short term and superficial. The externalities that such unethical excavation created have had long lasting implications for the environment and people.

It is quite evident how our energy sources have restructured our societies and individual lives. While the problem is a result of how poorly humans have utilized and harnessed these sources of energy, it is also a problem of distribution; the limited geographic and quantitative availability. This has made it a political race, which obviously the stronger nations have led. The first law of petro-politics states that, *“the price of oil and quality of freedom in a given nation invariably travel in the opposite directions.”*<sup>10</sup> This has become increasingly evident with the exploitation of several resource rich Less Economically Developed Countries with internal/external companies and governments expanding Oil operations despite several protests from citizens.<sup>11</sup> *“Many of the most prosperous countries tend to be those who have made “arrangements” to consistently receive large supplies of oil, at reasonably low prices, for an extended period of time. These entities will often be willing to use whatever political means they find necessary to protect their position of prominence.”*<sup>12</sup> Therefore, it is the agency of select few in such governments and companies who exercise their power to control the Oil regime, but also indirectly restructure the environment and society in the process.

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<sup>9</sup> Alier, J. (2007). Keep Oil in the Ground: Yasuni in Ecuador. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 42(42), 4227-4228. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40276572>

<sup>10</sup> Andrew Nikiforuk (2008), The First Law of Petropolitics. *Tar Sands: Dirty Oil and the Future of a Continent*, 152-166.

<sup>11</sup> Thomas Homer-Dixon (2013). The Tar Sands Disaster. New York Times op-ed, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/01/opinion/the-tar-sands-disaster.html?emc=eta1>

<sup>12</sup> Dept, E. (2009, October 23). The Oil Industry And Its Effect On Global Politics. Retrieved June 22, 2018, from <https://oilprice.com/Energy/Oil-Prices/The-Oil-Industry-And-Its-Effect-On-Global-Politics.html>

It is crucial for countries to realize that this current regime that extracts Oil at the expense of people and the environment is unsustainable. The most impacted seem to be the developing countries as they usually have weak governments that heavily prioritize profits in order to 'develop'. It is in their best interest to pull out of the oil industry before they become so embedded that most of their economy depends on it, as it does for several middle eastern countries. Interestingly, most nations in the middle east seem to have asserted strong control over the Oil regime and managed the excavation well while protecting their population; There is not much to degrade with respect to their desert environments anyway. Hence, the key difference is that developing nations have both their environment and people at stake with an increased risk due to their weak governments. It is high time that we switch to green alternatives that require no exploitation of the planet or people. This would further imply that energy is 'free' and there are no politics involved, as every country is free to harness energy from the sun, air, and potentially water. If the developed nations cannot change their energy regimes, maybe the developing nations can set an example for the world to follow instead.

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