

HYDROCARBON HUNGER OR THE WILL OF THE OIL GOD

**ANTTI SALMINEN, TERE VADÉN, *ENERGY
AND EXPERIENCE: AN ESSAY IN NAFTHOLOGY***

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In the disputes dividing new materialists from cognitivists, that is, in the disputes about what should be considered first – matter (“nothing but matter”) or information (“it from bit”) – we have forgotten about a third term: we have forgotten about energy. In the disputes that have divided the supporters of virtual philosophy, that is, the philosophy of radical contingency (Quentin Meillassoux) and the philosophy of cosmotechnics and recursion (Yuk Hui), which aim to describe planetary cybernetics, we have forgotten that the complement of the Aristotelian category of potency (*dynamis*) is actualisation (energy). Potency is the basis of change (motion) and determines how change is possible. Potency alone, however, does not guarantee the reality of change. In Aristotle’s thought, matter is pure potency, which owes its reality to constant actualisation. Everything that exists is defined by the ability to perform work, which maintains the state of the system and postpones destruction.

Two writers from the University of Turku and the University of Lapland in Finland, Antti Salminen and Tere Vadén, whose book *Energy and Experience: An Essay in Naftology* is worth reading over and over again, remind us of this forgotten term – of the exclusion of energy from philosophical discourse and its obscuration by “naked matter” or “pure difference.” This book comprises five excellent essays on the subject of energy

understood broadly, that is, as a material but also a spiritual and institutional condition of the economy. This book is a beautiful example of transdisciplinary and openly anti-disciplinary thinking. It has been a long time since I read a book that emanates such freshness and courage and power of thought. The authors combine reflections from the fields of economics, engineering, sociology, history, and, above all, philosophy. The authors quote with equal freedom David Graeber, Karl Marx, Martin Heidegger, George Bataille, Friedrich Nietzsche, Ernst Jünger, Max Weber, Slavoj Žižek, Paul Virilio, Jared Diamond, Albert Borgmann, Reza Negarestani, Simone Weil, and many others. All these references are made with the same competence and interpretative inventiveness.

Salminen and Vadén see energy and, above all, oil, as a new God who governs the conditions of our survival, a God who is generous in his extravagance but also severe in his assessment of our exploitation of his gift, that is, the gift of oil. Unlike matter and information, energy is not something given and is never obvious. Energy requires exploitation, extraction, and work in order to reveal its real power. Hence, it is almost a sacred power. Energy is shown at the moment of explosion, releasing the forces of creation and destruction contained in it. Energy, as Aristotle seemed to know, is actualisation. We – modern people – are still not atheists: not because “God is unconscious” (Jacques Lacan), nor because our lives are constantly governed by the spirit of asceticism (Friedrich Nietzsche), but because our lives depend on the God of Oil. This discovery is the strength and weakness of this important book, which makes energy a mystery equal to the mystery of the incarnation of God in the Christian religion. Every religion lives in mystery and there is no religion without mystery.

The authors of the book leave us with no illusions about the religious and apocalyptic aspect of our culture, writing that

After God was killed in the bourgeois revolution, He went underground in order to be utilized as oil by its descendants. [...] The death of God and the birth of the age of oil have been experienced together precisely by keeping them apart. The distinction – the sacred and the meaningful here, the economic and useful there – is one of the most essential characteristics of the age of oil. After His death, God turned into oil, and oil became a surrogate God with very straightforward utility: everything that smacks of being sacred is burned in the black engine of economic growth. (Salminen & Vadén 2015: 2)

Economics and, in a sense, calculability, save the thesis about the sacred nature of energy from strictly religious discourse or its caricatured incarnations.

The authors of *Energy and Experience* interestingly elaborate on the theme of the philosophy of technology, which is necessary to exploit nature. The authors' views on technology are clear: neither Marx nor Heidegger, who are both wrong about technology. After the rejection of Marx and Heidegger, the tradition of the Dark Enlightenment remains. This tradition stretches from Giordano Bruno to Ernst Bloch, Georges Bataille, and Nick Land. It sees both overt and hidden forces in matter, and destructive as well as evolutionary powers. The power of the fallen God and the power of the raging God, which is contained, hidden in matter, is precisely energy. In Giordano Bruno's understanding, everything is matter, but not in the sense given to this term in the natural sciences. Matter is permeated with the soul of God, and in the God–matter continuum, there is no hierarchy. The same idea will return in the inhuman and Dark Vitalism of Georges Bataille and Nick Land, Simone Weil, and Reza Negarestani. The demonic nature of oil is another name for the experience of its violence and vitality: the energy in oil is fundamental, but the fascination resulting from the multiplication of explosions of fire distorts the seemingly rational calculations of a digital calculating machine in the age of planetary cybernetics.

The technology of exploitation is neither about the commodification of energy nor about introducing nature into a pure resource but about something else. What is it? Perhaps it is about mobilising to manage the energy that never remains “waste.” One of the unique properties of hydrocarbons, particularly oil, as a basic substance is their pure stellar energy, which can be described by the concept of energy return on investment (EROI). The value of this return is calculated by dividing the amount of energy gained by the amount of energy spent. If the value is greater than one, energy has been “gained”; if it is less, energy has been “lost.” If the work required to produce one barrel of oil is greater than the energy compressed in the barrel, the energy return in the production process is less than one. In such a situation, we are on a slippery slope, which means that the world and the economy are governed by the desire for destruction, the desire for absolute dissipation, and the heat death of the cosmos.

I would place *Energy and Experience: An Essay in Naftology* near Andreas Malm's book *Fossil Capital* (2016), and Jason W. Moore's *Capitalism in the Web of Life* (2015). Malm realised the dependence of economics on fossil fuels, and he suggested a simple definition of the fossil economy as “an economy

of self-sustaining growth predicated on the growing consumption of fossil fuels, and therefore generating a sustained growth in emissions of carbon dioxide” (2016: 21). Malm, while declaring the need to move away from this type of economy, remained a Marxist to the end, and after criticising what he calls “the myth of the human enterprise,” proposed complex models of economic cycles in which he describes “the real subsumption of labour by means of really subsumed nature” (2016: 375). Malm is also tempted by theories of power in which physical force translates into a political force that crushes physical nature and human bodies and minds, reducing them to bare resources. Malm declares that the power derived from fossil fuels was dual in meaning and nature from the beginning. For Malm, the fossil economy cannot explain the entire human impact on the climate. The burning of fossil fuels is just one cause of global warming, just as the Sun is just one of the bodies in the solar system, and the American president is just one actor in a larger team, yet it can be said that the burning of fossil fuels is the hard core of the future destruction of the world.

For Malm, the Anthropocene started in the second half of the eighteenth century. Analysing air trapped in polar ice has shown that global carbon dioxide and methane concentrations began to grow in this particular period. This date also coincides with James Watt’s design of the steam engine in 1784. What we see in the world today are the large-scale effects of establishing a fossil economy. Timothy Morton seconds these statements, describing our location in time and history as follows:

The end of the world has already occurred. We can be uncannily precise about the date on which the world ended. It was April 1784, when James Watt patented the steam engine, an Act that commenced the deposition of carbon in Earth’s crust – namely, the inception of humanity as a geophysical force on a planetary scale. (Morton 2013: 7)

Everything begins not with the Death of God but with a certain invention – the gadget of the steam engine.

Jason W. Moore, unlike Malm, did not define nature as the content of the form of capital but showed something more ambiguous. *Capitalism in the Web of Life* tells the story of how capitalism works “through nature” and how nature works in the more limited territory of capitalism. Moore (2015) calls this double movement – capitalism thought “through nature”

and nature thought “through capitalism” – the “double internality.” He writes explicitly that the “economy” and the “environment” are not independent of each other. Capitalism is not an economic system; it is not a social system but a way of organising nature. Moore also adds unequivocally that all social relations are spatial relations, that is, relations in the web of life, and capitalism – or modernity, or industrial civilisation – emerged from Nature, which means that it drew wealth from disturbed, degraded, or ruined Nature. The present time is a time of retribution, in which Nature will take revenge. This revenge entails catastrophe – the downfall of the world as we know it.

Capitalism has survived not by destroying nature but through projects that force nature-as-an-economy to work harder and harder – for free or at very low cost. For Moore, capitalism–nature crises are crises of what nature does “for capitalism” rather than what capitalism does “with nature.” The appropriation of cheap nature has not only forced capital to seek new sources of cheap labour, food, energy, and raw materials, but also to close the atmosphere as a giant greenhouse gas dump. For Moore, the essence of capitalism is not the profit from energy or the invention of the heat engine, which modernised human labour, but the overall rate of profit. When capitalists can turn small amounts of capital and appropriate large amounts of unpaid labour/energy, the costs of production fall and the rate of profit rises. The unpaid “labour of nature,” that is, in the short term, of agriculture, in the intergenerational period, of child-rearing, in the geological time, of creating fossil fuels, is the pedestal on which the paid “labour of capital” thrives. In short, for Moore, the end of the world is the end of Cheap Nature, not the destruction (or birth) of demons that have emerged (or been trapped) in oil.

What do the analyses of “fossil capital” and “cheap nature” contribute to a better understanding of naftology? Neither Malm nor Moore go so far as to sacralise oil or nature; on the contrary, their writing seems to contain both profanation and desacralisation. The specificity of Salminen and Vadén’s discourse is that it does not sensitise us to connection, but on the contrary to disconnection: “con-distancing.” Economics as a science is born through con-distancing, when money is separated from the physical world and work. Economics is separated from politics; oil is the separator and connector between these poles. The work done by oil creates a distance between the economy and nature; this same work also leads to the destruction of nature. Everything that is deeply connected, on the level of

visibility, is separated. We see capitalism and nature, politics and economies, as separate spheres; this “optical separation” is necessary for the ontological connection to work.

The age of oil is characterised by a movement that, like a hammer drill, combines constant rotation with rhythmic blows; the blows are the drillings for new oil deposits and the circulations are work cycles. The authors of *Energy and Experience* diagnose humanity as immersed in a deep oil narcosis. Using an idea borrowed from Reza Negarestani’s *Cyclonopedia* (2008), the authors claim that the word for oil, “nafth” comes etymologically from Persian and Arabic. “Nafth” is a mystical and occult matter that creates a phantasmatic collective and political unconscious. This unconsciousness again operates through isolation, separation, and con-distancing – in the West, oil is poured into engines, while in the East, it is the lubricant for apocalyptic Islamism. We will not change the world as long as this Dark God rules us and condemns us to a kind of economic unconsciousness. We are part of a dark vitalism, which, in opposition to the Sun and the Eye of Enlightenment, sees forms of life only from the perspective of destruction and death. The book’s authors seem to abandon us – the readers – in a burning forest. We have no idea how to escape from it; the return of the logic of sovereignty in a world of universal dependence is not a rational solution.

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