

### **After Oil School 3**

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I have not had much time to prepare a response to the organizers' thoughtful prompt, but I have a few thoughts I want to share. My first thought is that the anxiety I see as motivating questions about the role of the critic/theorist/writer in a period of acute danger is not a new one. My sense is that concern about the humanities' social or political function extends back many decades. I am reminded of questions posted by WJT Mitchell at the onset of the US war in Iraq: "What can criticism and theory do to counteract the forces of militarism, unilateralism, and the perpetual state of emergency that is now the explicit policy of the US government?... What can the relatively weak power of critical theory do in such a crisis?"

On the one hand, climate change seems to represent a different kind of crisis, and so perhaps represents a different kind of crisis for the humanities. Beyond the potentially existential threat of climate change, the methods of political legitimation that seem to define this "late capitalist" moment—where the "ruling class" can maintain its rule no longer by manufacturing consent but by insisting that no alternative is possible and backing up that insistence with violence, breeding cynicism and despair—would seem to neutralize the force of oppositional speech, art, and criticism. Perhaps the converging crises of the early 21st century represent the final test of the humanities' value, where we're forced to "put up or shut up" if we want to avoid, as Jonathan Gottschall put it, "spinning off into a corner of irrelevance to die." On the other hand, it does feel like we've been here before. The humanities' critical theories have been in something of a permanent crisis since the 1970s, when the failures of revolutionary movements at home and abroad decoupled Marxism and anti-colonial theory from concrete political projects, relegating these theories to university departments where questioning the political merits of "theory" would itself become a recognized genre of theoretical analysis. My guess is that scholarship that has political aspirations—as the Energy Humanities seems to—but which is divorced from concrete political projects will always wrestle with doubts about its role and efficacy.

My second thought, somewhat in tension with the first, is that perhaps concerns about the humanities' limited political force are overblown. This is partly a self-criticism, since I have been concerned with what I see as the limitations of "critique"—and specifically a naive politics of visibility that treats the act of revealing some kind of (inevitably bad) structuring logic beneath the surface of everyday appearance as a political act in and of itself. I worry, though, that this dissatisfaction with critique at best underestimates significant contributions made by humanities' scholars to our understanding of how energy systems shape modern life (a worthwhile project that ought to be defended on its own terms) and, at worst, indulges a Left philistinism that dismisses such scholarship as bourgeois navel-gazing that distracts from "real work" happening wherever your imagined space of authentic praxis happens to be: the streets, the pipeline blockade camp, the union hall, the party congress, the engineering lab, the UN, etc. I

found my own concerns about the political limits of the humanities challenged by many of the presentations at the Petrocultures Conference—especially those showing how personal, national, or subcultural identities become articulated to specific energy systems, making the question of energy “transition” a question of total transformation. Even if this is, as the prompt suggests, the basic thesis of petrocultures research, it is nonetheless useful to see this thesis fleshed out, refined, and complicated with specific case studies, whose specificity demands analysis rather than moralism (e.g., fossil fuels bad; solar power good). I am still chewing over several points Cara Daggett raised—that the zeal with which conservatives in the US attack the humanities certainly seems to suggest that there is something subversive about critical inquiry, and that perhaps we on the Left risk adding fuel to the anti-intellectual fire when we demand that the humanities prove their practical worth. Even if the rubrics we use to judge the humanities’ value seem somehow purer than the economic rubrics favored by our enemies (e.g., English courses can be tolerated if “critical thinking skills” help students get jobs), maybe it’s the case that asking the humanities to make a legible contribution to some political project—whether it has to do with energy transition or something else—overlooks the humanities’ unique contribution, which is that it gives us time, space, and methods to reflect critically on what our goals as a society ought to be, as well as why and how we come to determine these goals. Besides, there’s lots of bad political art—especially art about climate change—and boring criticism. And usually it’s bad or boring because it trades thinking for sloganeering; it feels didactic, performative, closed off. This seems important to try to avoid.

Decarbonization needs to happen quickly but we also need time to think critically about our aims and methods of achieving them. The injunction that “we” “do something” to address climate change now or face certain catastrophe risks ceding power to our political enemies. Kasia Paprocki paraphrases E.P. Thompson in her recent book on “climate adaptation:” insisting that we are in an emergency situation, however well-intentioned, can create an atmosphere in which *anything* might be done because *something* must be done immediately. When something must be done immediately, those with the most social power usually get to decide what it is. Witness the rise of “green capital” in the US and globally, which has positioned itself, including via the much-celebrated Inflation Reduction Act, as the only viable path to 2 degrees—a dubious claim that nonetheless gets to stand if we cannot articulate a coherent alternative. Even more sinister are quasi-fascist responses to planetary warming which treat predicted chaos as further reason to militarize borders and police fertility—and which, at the nightmarish horizon, may deal with a hotter and more convulsive world by distributing social protections to a narrowly defined national citizenry who can act as a palace guard for a global finance class committed to sucking every last dollar out of fossil assets while securing the raw materials, labor, and markets needed to control the means, direction, pace, and goal of a clean energy transition. Critical reflection is important, in other words, because in its absence the contradictions generated by fossil-fueled capitalism are likely to provoke quick deferrals and partial resolutions that preserve the material power, on a new energetic basis, of the people who dragged us into this mess. The “climate

crisis" does not demand that we simply "do something" but that we do the right sorts of things. I want to affirm any attempt to think about what those things are, how we can do them, and in the service of what long-term goals—even if this means sitting with some irresolution.

I think there is political value in hermeneutic analysis, or "close reading," specifically—even though paying attention to individual texts would seem about as far from "serious" politics as one can get. Hermeneutics demands close attention to form and convention, to the way a particular word or sentence or text is made meaningful by the regime of sensibility in which it sits (a language, grammar, literary tradition, etc.) while also changing those conventions. To paraphrase Gramsci (the committed communist who spent the last, confined years of his life studying philology), textual analysis is important *methodologically* because it provides a way of thinking about history that can illuminate mechanisms for conscious social change. Language is both the model and material of human freedom. Every text affirms that existence is socially determined—that what we can see, think, express, communicate, and do are all constrained by the forms of mediation we inherit from previous generations—as well as fundamentally open and mutable. This is the old Marxist saw—*Man makes his own history...*—but expressed a way that affirms the central role of mediation in providing the materials to make history within certain parameters. Taking mediation seriously reminds us that social relations are fundamentally *conventional* but that changing our conventions is not something that can be done alone (no degree of deviation from the norm in a single case can change what the norm is) or haphazardly, but rather can and must be done collectively and consciously.

Given the necessity (as I see it) of collective and conscious intervention, I'm not sure that critical reflection is enough, though. The question I find myself asking is how to build support and political muscle for a vision of a "just transition" I think many of us share in broad strokes: a transition to a political economic system powered by non-fossil energies whose material and social features support more just, egalitarian, and democratic forms of social, cultural, and political life. To build support and muscle for such a vision, it seems necessary to challenge the hegemony not so much of fossil fuels but of capitalist class relations—which have historically been maintained by fossil fuels but which could conceivably be sustained by new, clean energy sources. It seems to me that, while fossil attachments circulate in culture "semi-autonomously," it is principally the centrality of fossil energy to capitalist social reproduction (highly commodified and mediated by waged/salaried work) that sustains many people's attachments to fossil fuels. These fuels at best offer people genuine freedoms (freedom from hard labor being perhaps the most significant) and, at a minimum, promise people the ability to make it through the day, the week, the winter. I think about "fossil hegemony" as a set of ideologies actively supported by the material conditions of fossil-fueled life, or which help rationalize problems created by fossil-fueled political economy. What would it take to build a counter-hegemony to this fossil hegemony that (a) affirms the very real benefits fossil energy has brought to billions of people, while (b) refusing the hostage situation many people find themselves in with respect to

oil, coal, and natural gas? I tend to think that, while criticism can and should play a role in constructing alternative plans and visions, building a counter-hegemony is something that requires not just persuasion but also organization.

My third thought is that, if we want our work to make political contributions (I don't assume that everyone wants this), it might be useful for scholars to work with organized social movements (plenty already do, of course). My pitch would be to work with the labor movement. I agree with Matt Huber that climate change is class war. I don't think it is likely that we will see a "just transition" to non-fossil energy systems unless the balance of material power, globally and in major energy producing countries like the US and Canada, shifts decisively in favor of the working class (defined in broad, Marxian terms), who have an interest in reorganizing production to promote social and ecological wellbeing but who currently depend on capital (and its energy systems) for survival. Nor do I think a shift in the balance of material power is likely absent a concerted effort to organize people into blocs conscious of their economic leverage (as workers, debtors, consumers) and prepared to take risks for an alternative vision. This might look like strengthening established unions or building new labor organizations—traditional vehicles of working-class and ultimately socialist/communist politics, which not only consolidate workers' material power but also provide a means of consolidating a culture that can affirm values like equality, solidarity, and democracy.

This sort of talk always risks coming off as wishful thinking or radical posturing from ivory tower Marxists. Maybe it is that to a certain degree. But there are also precedents. I've been thinking about Raymond Williams' and Paolo Friere's working-class "adult education" projects, which sought to strengthen ordinary cultures of reflection, discussion, and debate and, in doing so, help people see the social conditions in which they live as historical, that there is no divinity legislating who we are and what we could become. Do energy scholars have a role to play in adult education projects today? Is this something anyone is even interested in? Does it stray too far from the question of "energy"? Does it undersell our social role as college and university teachers, or our economic leverage as workers in a firm like any other?

To this point, I wonder what humanists think about supporting, in a coordinated and sustained way, higher ed unions. It seems that, at a minimum, we need strong defenses against the one-two punch of neoliberal cost-cutters and reactionary cultural warriors who would relish seeing the humanities obliterated. At the utopian horizon, I can imagine wall-to-wall higher ed unions as a means of giving university workers, in all divisions and job roles, more control over what sorts of knowledge are produced, how, by and for whom, and to what end. A worker-run university would not eliminate capital's coercive power over university priorities, maintained by restricted philanthropic donations and direct meddling by state legislatures, but it may at least be a way to assert new and democratically determined priorities for teaching and academic research backed up by the material power of labor withdrawal. Risks abound—including the risk that our thinking

gets narrowed, intentionally or unintentionally, by ambient expectations about what it means to be “progressive,” “radical,” “left,” “pro-labor,” etc. Our postmodern media hellscape seems capable of stripping every critical term, expression of ethical concern, and display of support or solidarity of its substance, reducing political speech to personal branding and cultural currency. Given this, I think there is value in defending the humanities as a realm of thought unbound by the requirement to do anything in particular. I also think there is value in trying to reunite theories and approaches which have their origins in specific movements for social revolution with those movements’ contemporary iterations.