

temporalities of petro-capitalism: more of the same or the next
Terra Schwerin Rowe

For theorists of social transformation, resistance to the capitalist status quo has often meant emphasizing a disruptive, eruptive temporality. Yet, part of the slippery genius of petro-capitalism is that it has successfully integrated and depends on both temporalities of the same and the interruptive new. To imagine and embody an alternative to petro-capitalism then requires political movements that somehow resist both the same and the disruptive new. How do we think through this impasse?

progressive petro-capitalism, or more of the same

Critical analysis of the progressive linear timeline has been a regular feature of critical engagements with various iterations of heteronormative racial capitalism. Political theorists, queer and affect theorists, political theology discourses, and broader critiques of neoliberalism resonate around a diagnosis of the problematic, progressive temporalities of capitalism.¹ Queer theorists have analyzed the ways that capitalist temporalities reinforce heteronormativity, while political theorists have argued that time of capitalism, while seeming to rely on change, is only capable of reinforcing the same disguised as radical change.²

The promise of radical change merely materializing as more of the same emerges as a particularly apt description of petro-capitalism. In analyzing the last two hundred years of energy resources, Richard York and Shannon Bell conclude that new “alternative” fuel sources actually have ended up *increasing* overall energy consumption.³ Rather than acting as true replacements, new energy alternatives historically have acted as energy additions, merely adding to a cumulative increase in energy consumption. Consequently, they argue that the language of “energy transition,” commonly used among energy researchers like Vaclav Smil, the IPCC, politicians, and climate activists, is deceptive in that it does not account for the fact that in the past two centuries, “no established energy source has undergone a sustained decline with the addition of a new energy source. Rather, consumption of all energy sources has typically grown.”⁴ While “alternative energies” have promised transitions and radical change, in the end their cumulative effect—at least for the past 200 years—has merely been more of the same.

¹ Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); *Sexual Disorientations: Queer Temporalities, Affects, Theologies*, Kent L. Brintnall, Joseph A. Marchal, and Stephen D. Moore, eds. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018); Jeffrey Robbins, *Radical Democracy and Political Theology* (NY: Columbia UP, 2011); Clayton Crockett, *Deleuze Beyond Badiou: Ontology, Multiplicity, and Event* (NY: Columbia UP, 2013); on Judith Butler and Walter Benjamin, see more below.

² Clayton Crockett, *Energy and Change* (NY: Columbia UP, 2022).

³ Richard York and Shannon Bell, “Energy Transitions or Additions? Why a Transition from Fossil Fuels Requires More than the Growth of Renewable Energy,” *Energy Research and Social Science* 51 (2019): 40–3.

⁴ York and Bell, 41.

More recently, Mark Simpson and Imre Szeman have similarly identified this cycle of the same disguised as change. Rather than real change, “the logic of energy transition thus presumes that *absolutely everything else*—and especially neoliberal capitalism, its structures, practices, and protocols, and the vast inequalities of power and privilege they generate—will stay much the same.”⁵ Sheena Wilson too emphasizes that the danger of purely technoscientific solutions is that they reinforce “a fantasy that promises those of us in the West that we will be able to conveniently replace one form of energy for another and continue to live as we always have [...] The flawed fantasy [...] is one of radical sameness—business as usual disguised as radical innovation.”⁶ In short, too many proposed “alternatives” merely reiterate more of the same socio-political, economic dynamics.

messianic now time

In the midst of green new deal promises and hopes for energy transition that turn out to be more of the same, Simpson and Szeman assert that “energy impasse is actually the defining condition of our time.”⁷ Differentiating from blockages of obstinate resistance to climate mitigation, their sense of impasse describes a context wherein the conditions of possibility merely manage “to perpetuate the situation as it is.”⁸ While the impasse conveys the stuck temporality of the current moment, the duo emphasize it is also merely a symptom or iteration of a progressive temporality.⁹

Resisting the current impasse of progress, the authors evoke an alternative temporality: the “now time,” “not past-present-future but, instead, the now and the next.”¹⁰ Though not explicitly referenced, the strategy bears striking resemblance to Walter Benjamin’s messianic now time. Justice traditions seeking social transformation have often articulated the importance of the interruption of the new to disrupt cycles of the same old state violence. Describing the work of Walter Benjamin, Karen Barad emphasizes that “for Benjamin, questions of time and justice are

⁵ Szeman and Simpson, “Impasse Time,” *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 120, no. 1 (Jan 2021), 78.

⁶ Sheena Wilson, “Energy Imaginaries: Feminist and Decolonial Futures,” in *Materialism and the Critique of Energy*, edited by Brent Ryan Bellamy and Jeff Diamanity (Chicago: MCM Publishing, 2018), 380.

⁷ Szeman and Simpson, 79.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 80

⁹ “We venture that impasse has everything to do with time in relation to how we think futures, and so that the logic of transition (in energy systems as well as in ecological and environmental sensibility) has everything to do with futurity and the modes of its imagining” (*Ibid.*, 82). “The temporal schema of impasse is the cynical retelling of the progressive, eventual one” (*Ibid.*, 87).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 87.

inseparable.”¹¹ Indeed, his “messianic” time breaks into a cycle of the same with potential for the disruption of a violent or oppressive status quo. Take, for example, Judith Butler’s reading of Walter Benjamin. For Benjamin, according to Butler, redemption is “a disruption of teleological history and an opening to a convergent and interruptive set of temporalities. This is a messianism, perhaps secularized, that affirms the scattering of light, the exilic condition, as the non-teological form that redemption now takes. This is a redemption *from* teleological history.”¹² Benjamin’s messianic calls for a “now time” that resists the continuum of history and, in Benjamin’s case (as well as Butler’s reflections on the current state of Israel), the cycle of the same state sanctioned violence. Karen Barad enters into this Benjamin-Butler dialogue and affirms that Benjamin’s “thick now time” of the present (as opposed to the thin fleeting present of progress) is highly volatile and contains enormous amounts of energy—“energy sufficient to effect transformation.”¹³ For Barad too, Benjamin’s thick now time has “radical political potential.”¹⁴

I highlight these intriguing connections between current conversations on energy transition and theorists of social transformation for two reasons: 1) it seems likely such work might enhance our collective deliberations on transitions or the next and 2) observing their overlaps and points of connection can also foreground the way progress-disruptive, redemptive now time misses a key feature of current petro-capitalist temporality.

the disruptive new, or more of the same?

While energy “transitions” often do not carry through on a promise of something radically new but merely result in the same energy additions, the temporality of extractive capitalism is also much more disruptive than most analyses of progressivism account for. Where capitalism is critiqued for its faith in, and reinforcement of, a linear, progressive, law-like temporality, a specific focus on *extractive capitalism* reveals that its temporality is also fundamentally dependent on the disruptions of crisis, loss, and negation.

While energy growth in North America has certainly followed a trajectory of acceleration,¹⁵ there is reason to also emphasize that it has not been wholly characterized by a smooth linear accumulation consistent with a progressive temporality. As Frederick Buell has famously

¹¹ Karen Barad, “What Flashes Up: Theological-Political-Scientific Fragments” in *Entangled Worlds: Religion, Science, and New Materialism*, edited by Catherine Keller and Mary-Jane Rubenstein (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), 21.

¹² Judith Butler, *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism* (New York: Columbia UP, 2012), 103. Quoted in Barad, 24.

¹³ Barad, 26.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 27.

¹⁵ J. R. McNeill and Peter Engelke, *The Great Acceleration: An Environmental History of the Anthropocene Since 1945* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014).

demonstrated, oil successfully married catastrophe and exuberance.¹⁶ At least since World War II, energy consumption, like the “shock doctrine” of neoliberalism later,¹⁷ has capitalized on crisis to spark exuberant growth. In the time and space of extractive capitalism, high energy consumption sets the standard of the ordinary, the everyday, the habits and routines that make up the unrecognized foundation of the ‘good life.’ And yet, even when not resiliently responding to an existing crisis, new energy technologies, sciences, and ‘resources’ continually have been received as an interruption of the ordinary and expected that yet set a new accelerated norm.¹⁸ Even as extractive, energy-intensive capitalism depends on progressive gradual increases of accumulation, an overall trend of accumulation relies on crisis-driven ruptures of the smooth flow of time.¹⁹

Rather than a smooth accumulation of energy growth, twentieth- and twenty-first-century extractive energy capitalism has fundamentally depended on crisis, destruction, and loss, followed by resilient exponential increases. In this context, extractive capitalism needs to be more precisely diagnosed not at purely progress driven, but as only instituting an impression of progress by sublimating crisis interruptions into a progressive trajectory. Extractive capitalism requires resilience in that it depends on loss and destruction to bounce back each time stronger, more lively, more vibrant, more exuberant than before.

Functioning here is a surprisingly familiar dynamic between the ordinary and its exception. Extractive energy also functions according to the ideal of the sovereign exception: it both sets the law of the ordinary, while retaining the power of interruption.²⁰ Fossil capitalism provides both the foundation of the ordinary and its exception. Given the ways energy sciences and technologies—especially new “alternatives”—have emerged as exception to the ordinary or mundane that yet sets the ordinary (a new ordinary) in motion, there is need to think carefully and critically about the implications of this exceptionality for narratives of change, the introduction of newness, and the interruption of the established order of extractive capitalism.

¹⁶ Frederick Buell, “A Short History of Oil Cultures: Or, the Marriage of Catastrophe and Exuberance,” *Journal of American Studies* 46, no. 2 (2012): 273-93.

¹⁷ Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (Picador, 2008)

¹⁸ I’m employing resilience in the way Robin James analyzes it as a function of neoliberalism (*Resilience and Melancholy: Pop Music, Feminism, Neoliberalism* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2015).

¹⁹ Dan Barber emphasizes the impact of this energy exuberant response to the crisis of WWII in the history of modern architecture. See Barber, *Modern Architecture and Climate: Design Before Air Conditioning* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020). In *Of Modern Extraction: Experiments in Critical Petro-theology* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2022) I also emphasize the exuberant response to the late 19th century US crisis of energy maladies described by Cara Daggett (*The Birth of Energy*) and Carolyn de la Peña (*The Body Electric*) among others.

²⁰ Carl Schmitt famously argued that the “sovereign is he who decides on the exception”—the sovereign is the one who both makes and can break the law (*Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. Georg Schwab (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), 5).

Where capitalist temporalities might be chrononormatively linear and progressive, extractive capitalist temporalities also retain the ability to build progress through disruption—death, crisis, loss—of linear time. To resist the affects and temporalities of extractive capitalism, then, alternatives to both the linear, orderly, expected progressive temporality of growth *and* its exceptional disruptions are needed. Where disruption has become the name of the game in neoliberalism even an interruptive “now time” that has been seen to hold so much political potential for the left risks merely emerging as more of the same.

If the above is the case, then authentic alternatives to petro-capitalism would require political movements that both resist the march of the same, while also seeking alternatives to crisis driven disruption. In short, they must resist both the same and the new—but how remains to be thought. I therefore offer this problematic as an opening for discussion.