

*Crude Reality: Petroleum in World History.* Brian C. Black. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2012. ISBN: 9780742556333

In *Crude Reality*, historian Brian Black argues that oil is a “terribly irrational resource” (p. 67). The complex fluid geology of oil deposits, its immense stored chemical energy, and the mutability of its hydrocarbon molecule chains have made it a top-priority among global resources. In this monograph, Black searches for a deeper understanding of the evolution of the global reliance on petroleum, contemporary society’s oil addiction, and the search for alternative energy sources, all in the context of political debates regarding the scarcity of the commodity and climate change. Few if any other natural resources have been so central in shaping modern global culture.

*Crude Reality* is divided into four parts, including eight chapters, several interesting photos and figures, an epilogue, as well as useful chronologies of petroleum in world history and oil spills. The text appears to be written primarily for environmental and energy historians, but could also be used as a supplemental reading for a contemporary global history course.

Part I of Black’s book examines the discovery and commoditization of “black goo” into “black gold” through the development of markets for lubricants, lighting, and transportation in the 1800s. Contrary to widespread belief, oil development has always been messy and highly risky, and this required significant organization of the industry, boom and bust cycles, and corporate integration. These challenges led to the rise and fall of Rockefeller’s Standard Oil Company, as well as a global hunt to control the largest and most accessible reserves (chapters 2-3). The U.S. and British “rule of capture”, which states that the first person to “capture” the resource owns it, not only encouraged rapid development but resulted in historical periods of oversupply, price collapse, and the need for government intervention to manage supply. As Black points out, one of the great ironies of the oil industry is that through its history it has rarely operated as a free market, and extremely large corporations (often nationalized) have had an inherent advantage in dealing with resource and global markets.

“Part II: Going Mobile, 1890–1960,” suggests that “Big Oil” enjoyed enormous success while increasing production. By the early twentieth century, abundant oil supplies paired with the shift

from kerosene to electric illumination drove oil prices down. Desperate to find other uses, oil producers saw new opportunities in the internal combustion engine. The victory of gasoline and private automobiles was, Black argues, in part a result of the advantages conferred by cheap oil. The immensely popular culture of automobiles (and all the “freedom” that came with them) was fixed to the maintenance of cheap global oil supplies. In the same period, the two world wars demonstrate how oil became a military necessity.

In addition to shaping the auto industry by making ownership more affordable, what is often overlooked is the way in which cheap oil raised the standard of living of millions by providing them with inexpensive plastics and food. Black expands on the cultural and geopolitical consequences of cheap oil in “Part III: The Globalization of Petroleum Domination, 1960–Present,” arguing that by 1976 the volume of plastic manufactured was greater than that of steel, copper, and aluminum combined. Black leads the reader through the history of how “Big Science” helped “Big Oil” and the establishment of a global, oil-consuming culture.

While this marriage resulted in enormous social and economic benefits, it also led to widespread pollution, cancer, and significant oil spills. *Crude Reality* includes short case study examples of these from around the world, including adverse socioeconomic effects in “developing” countries such as Nigeria and Ecuador. Subsequent chapters explore the geopolitical and military implications of the mass consumption, the forces of climate change and peak oil driving a transition away from oil dependence, and considers alternatives such as electric and hybrid cars, biofuels, and efficiency.

Black’s work is not the first to examine the significance of oil to world history, and he effectively integrates standards such as Daniel Yergin’s *The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money and Power* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991), Amanda Little’s *Power Trip: The Story of America’s Love Affair with Energy* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2010), and Hugh Gorman’s *Redefining Efficiency: Pollution Concerns, Regulatory Mechanisms, and Technological Change in the U.S. Petroleum Industry* (Akron, OH: University of Akron Press, 2001). But what really separates *Crude Reality* from this and many other oil books is Black’s ability to integrate environmental and cultural history, and weave the state and corporate

development of global oil resources into conventional narratives of twentieth century geopolitics. This may reflect the larger trend of these histories influencing science, environment, and technology studies, as inspired by Bruno Latour and others. Brian Black's most original contribution is his analysis of oil itself as a "critical actor, capable of shaping an entire way of life" (p. 1).

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