

Prof. Tim Mitchell

Petroleum and Democracy

Provisional Syllabus

“The Pneumatic Parliament[®] is a parliament building that is quick to install, transparent, and inflatable. It can be dropped onto any terrain and unfolds by itself. In a mere one and a half hours, a protective shell for parliamentary meetings is ready, and within the space of twenty-four hours, the interior ambience for these proceedings can be made as comfortable as an agora. The Pneumatic Parliament seats 160 parliamentarians and fits into a 20-foot-long container for easy transport. Thus in only twenty-four hours, plus flying time, the architectonic prerequisites for the democratic process can take shape.” Peter

Sloterdijk et al., “Instant Democracy: The Pneumatic Parliament[®]” in *Making Things Public—Atmospheres of Democracy*, edited by Bruno Latour & Peter Weibel (MIT Press 2005)

Recent events in Iraq have raised the question of oil and democracy—in more than one way. The most common debate is conceived very narrowly: Does the possession of large oil resources make it more difficult for a country to become democratic? Thirty years ago, an answer to this question was framed in terms of the problem of the “rentier state.” Recent contributions to the debate have presented persuasive evidence that countries that depend significantly on the production and export of oil are less likely to have democratic forms of politics. But the scholarship has been less and less able to explain why this might be the case. (Week 1)

Why these difficulties? First, studies of oil and democracy have often relied upon minimalist conceptions of democracy. Although not always as minimal as Peter Sloterdijk’s proposal for a Pneumatic Parliament to be parachuted into Iraq, these understandings of democracy cannot go far in explaining how earlier democratic arrangements were assembled, or how large flows of oil might affect these assemblages. Minimalist theories of democracy have these weaknesses for particular reasons. They were designed in the 1930s as part of an effort to reengineer the forms of democracy practiced in the West. This effort developed into the political movement known as neoliberalism. So to understand the question of oil and democracy, we first need to understand the neoliberal democratic project and trace its continuing effects. (Week 2)

The difficulties faced by studies of oil and democracy also stem from a second weakness. They have a minimalist conception of oil. They have very little to say about the socio-technical arrangements through which oil is produced and circulated. Oil is said to be important because it generates rent, or excess profits, concentrated in the hands of the state. Accounts of the rentier state trace what happens to these funds, trying to understand how they undermine the development of representative democracy. But how does oil get transformed into these profits? What technical arrangements, human forces, political powers, distribution systems, forms of expertise, and coercive mechanisms does oil require? What kinds of social and economic orders are built around oil? Should we think of oil as just a resource that “affects” the economy or the political system? Are there other ways to approach the question of oil and politics? (Week 3)

One way to begin is to stop thinking of oil as an external factor that affects politics or democracy only in exceptional cases. The rise of democracy is said to coincide with the rise of the west. Democracy is associated with the emergence of capitalism. In recent

debates about the rise of capitalism in Europe, particular importance has been attached to the transition from renewable sources of energy to non-renewable fossil fuels. The switch from animal, human, water, wood and other essentially solar-produced forms of power to subterranean carbon deposits—first coal, then oil—now appears as a critical factor. It marked a change from ways of living based upon restricted but practically inexhaustible sources of power to forms of socio-technical life based upon energy that was almost limitless in the short term but unsustainable, it seems, for more than a few generations. These considerations require us to rethink both the origins of democracy and its future prospects. They also open up important connections between energy, democracy, and questions of territory, in ways to be explored. (Week 4)

Nothing in contemporary political theory or in contemporary studies of the Middle East offers much help in addressing these larger questions about oil and democracy. The goal of this seminar is to see whether we can develop an alternative approach. To find help, we are going to begin with some work in the history of technology. Two seminal studies, Thomas Hughes's (1983) examination of the development of the modern electricity industry and William Cronon's (1992) study of the transformation of technology and environment in the nineteenth-century Midwest provide models. These studies do not ask how electricity or railways or capital or other "factors" transformed society or politics, as though forms of energy or technology are external forces that somehow alter or distort their environment. They explore how the building of new technological assemblages—the distribution of electrical light, the creation of a global grain market—required the simultaneous engineering of politico-econo-technical worlds. Does this offer a way to think about the building of the politico-technical worlds of oil? (Week 5).

To explore these questions further we are going to turn to work in the social study of science and technology, specifically the Paris school that has developed around the writings of Michel Callon and Bruno Latour. Latour and Callon argue that to understand, and advance, the prospects for democracy we should abandon our certainty that nature and society, technology and politics, belong to separate and stable spheres. (Week 6)

In the second half of the semester we will return to the study of oil, to explore whether the questions and tools with which we have equipped ourselves enable us to trace the technopolitics of oil in new ways. We will rely mostly on the existing literature on the history and politics of oil in the Middle East. But we will try to identify the work of assembling technopolitical systems and the moments of crisis, contestation, and reassembly that might reveal the challenges and the actor-networks involved. By examining the question of oil at this level we may be able to better understand how oil resists democratization, and at what points of assembly it might be open to more democratic processes in the future. With this approach, moreover, the problem of democracy and oil will no longer reside only in "rentier states," but at many different points within the carbon network, including in the United States, where the politics of oil has repeatedly escaped democratic control (weeks 7-10).

We will also consider current concerns over the future supply of oil and the role of fossil fuels in causing catastrophic climate change. These issues of concern point to the larger ways in which current forms of democracy are unable to cope with the challenges to collective futures that the carbon economy presents. How might our thinking about democracy be reformulated to enable it to cope with the kind of techno-social world in which we live, and to help shape the kind of post-carbon world we might need to achieve? (Week 11)

The final two classes will be devoted to discussion of drafts of the term papers you are writing. (Weeks 12 and 13)

Requirements:

Participants in the seminar are asked to submit a 300-400 word reaction to the week's readings, for eight out of the ten classes from week 2 through week 11. You may choose which two weeks not to submit. The reaction papers should be drafted as a contribution to framing each week's seminar discussion. They should draw out what you see as the most important or problematic aspects of the week's readings, relate the readings to the issues we are pursuing in the course, and pose questions we might discuss.

You will be asked to write a term paper, the topic to be agreed with me and addressed to some aspect of the questions about oil and democracy raised in the seminar. Papers should be 8,000 words, longer by prior agreement. Drafts of the papers will be circulated on April 10 and discussed by the class on April 24 and May 1.

Deadlines:

Feb 24: Precis of paper topic, after discussion with me (via Blackboard dropbox)
Mar 24: Paper outline and annotated bibliography (via Bb dropbox)
April 19: Draft of paper for class discussion (via Bb dropbox)
May 5: Paper (via Bb dropbox, plus hard copy in my mailbox at 726 Broadway).

Course Website

Access Blackboard via NYU Home (<http://home.nyu.edu>), under the "Academics" tab, or <http://classes.nyu.edu/webapps/login>. I will post on the website class notices, changes to the reading assignments, and links, where available, to electronic copies of readings.

Readings

All assigned readings and most additional readings will be available on reserve at Bobst Library.

Week 1. Jan 23 Introduction

No readings assigned.

Week 2. Jan 30 The Neoliberal Democratic Project

Required reading:

Walter Lippmann, *The Phantom Public* (pp. to be announced)

Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, Part IV (pp. 235-302)

Wendy Brown, "Neoliberalism and the End of Liberal Democracy," *Theory and Event*, 7/1 (2003).

Thomas Lemke, "'The Birth of Bio-Politics': Michel Foucault's Lecture at the Collège de France on Neo-Liberal Governmentality." *Economy and Society*, 30 no. 2 (May 2001): 190-207

Nikolas Rose, *Powers of Freedom: Reframing Political Thought*, chap. 2, "Freedom"

Additional Reading:

Daniel Bell, *The End of Ideology: On The Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties* (The Free Press, 1960)

Robert A. Dahl, *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971)

Samuel Huntington, "The United States," in *The Crisis of Democracy: Report on The Governability of Democracies to the Trilateral Commission*, ed. Michel Crozier, Samuel Huntington, and Joji Watanuki (New York University Press, 1975)

Adam Przeworski, Michael Alvarez, José Antonio Cheibub, and Fernando Limongi, "What Makes Democracies Endure?" *Journal of Democracy* 7 (January 1996);

Adam Przeworski, "Minimalist Conception of Democracy: A Defense." In *Democracy's Value*, ed. Ian Shapiro and Casiano Hacker-Cordon (Cambridge 1999).

Week 3. February 6 Oil Rents and Democracy

Required Reading

Michael Ross, "Does Oil Hinder Democracy?" *World Politics* (2001)

Hussein Mahdavy, "The Patterns and Problems of Economic Development in Rentier States: The Case of Iran," in M. A. Cook, ed., *Studies in the Economic History of the Middle East* (London:Oxford University Press, 1970).

Hazem Beblawi, "The Rentier State in the Arab World," in Hazem Beblawi and Giacomo Luciani, eds., *The Rentier State* (New York: Croom Helm, 1987).

Giacomo Luciani, "Allocation vs. Production States: A Theoretical Framework," in Beblawi and Luciani, eds., *The Rentier State*.

Terry Lynn Karl, *The Paradox of Plenty: Oil Booms and Petro-States* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), chaps 1, 3 and 9;

Andrew Rosser, "Why Did Indonesia Overcome The Resource Curse?" IDS Working Paper 222, March 2004

Additional Reading: The Rentier State

Ghassan Salamé, ed., *Democracy without Democrats? The Renewal of Politics in the Muslim World* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 1994).

Kiren Aziz Chaudhry, *The Price of Wealth: Economies and Institutions in the Middle East* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1997).

Gwenn Okruhlik, "Rentier Wealth, Unruly Law, and the Rise of Opposition," *Comparative Politics* 31 (April 1999).

Douglas A. Yates, *The Rentier State in Africa: Oil Rent Dependency and Neocolonialism in the Republic of Gabon* (Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press, 1996);

John Clark, "Petro-Politics in Congo," *Journal of Democracy* 8 (July 1997); idem, "The Nature and Evolution of the State in Zaire," *Studies in Comparative International Development* 32 (Winter 1998).

Nathan Jensen and Leonard Wantchekon, "Resource Wealth And Political Regimes In Africa," *Comparative Political Studies*, 37, 7 (September 2004): 816-841.

Additional Reading: "The Resource Curse"

Jeffrey D. Sachs and Andrew M. Warner, "Natural Resource Abundance and Economic Growth," Development Discussion Paper no. 517a (Cambridge: Harvard Institute for International Development, 1995)

Jeffrey D. Sachs and Andrew M. Warner, "The Big Push, Natural Resource Booms and Growth," *Journal of Development Economics* 59 (February 1999);

Carlos Leite and Jens Weidmann, "Does Mother Nature Corrupt? Natural Resources, Corruption, and Economic Growth," IMF Working Paper, WP/99/85 (1999);

Michael L. Ross, "The Political Economy of the Resource Curse," *World Politics* 51 (January 1999); (review of Karl, and Warner and Sachs)

R. M. Auty, *Resource Abundance and Economic Development* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

Week 4. February 13 Capitalism, Carbon Fuels, Democracy

Required Reading

Sieferle, Rolf Peter. *The Subterranean Forest: Energy Systems and the Industrial Revolution* (2001).

Kenneth Pomeranz, *China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton University Press, 2000).

Huber, Rueschemeyer, and Stephens, "The Impact of Economic Development on Democracy", *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 7/3 (1993)

Margaret Kohn, *Radical Space: Building the House of the People* (Cornell 2003)

Additional Reading: Origins of Modern World Economy

Robert Brenner, "The Origins of Capitalist Development: a Critique of Neo-Smithian Marxism" *New Left Review* No. 104 (1977): 25-93.

J.M. Blaut, "Robert Brenner in The Tunnel of Time," *Antipode: A Radical Journal Of Geography*, 26 No. 4 (1994): 351-76.

Abu-Lughod, Janet. (1989) *Before European Hegemony: The World System A.D. 1250-1350*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Andre Gunder Frank, *Reorient: Global Economy in the Asian Age* (California 1998)

Wong, R. Bin, *China Transformed: Historical Change and the Limits of European Experience* (Cornell 1997)

Additional Reading: Origins of Democracy

Barrington Moore, *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (Beacon Press 1966)

Jack Goldstone, *Revolution and Rebellion in the Early Modern World*

Additional Reading: Capitalism and Democracy in the Middle East

Isam al-Khafaji, *Tormented Births: Passages to Modernity in Europe and the Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris 2004)

Haim Gerber, *The Social Origins of the Modern Middle East* (Lynne Rienner 1987)

Simon Bromley, *Rethinking Middle East Politics* (University of Texas 1994)

Joel Beinin and Zachary Lockman, *Workers on the Nile: Nationalism, Communism, Islam, and the Egyptian Working Class, 1882-1954* (Princeton 1989)

Robert Vitalis, *When Capitalists Collide: Business Conflict and the End of Empire in Egypt* (California 1995)

February 20 Presidents' Day Holiday. No class.

Feb 24: Precis of paper topic due via Blackboard digital dropbox

Week 5. February 27 The Politics of Technical Systems

Thomas Hughes, *Networks of Power: Electrification in Western Society 1880-1930* (Johns Hopkins 1983)

William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (Norton 1992)

Wiebe Bijker, Thomas P. Hughes, and Trevor Pinch, eds, *The Social Construction of Technological Systems: New Directions in the Sociology and History of Technology* (MIT 1989).

Week 6. March 6 Actor-Network Theory

Michael Callon, "Society in the Making: The Study of Technology as a Tool for Sociological Analysis," in Bijker, Hughes, and Pinch, eds, *The Social Construction of Technological System*, pp. 83-103

Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (Oxford 2005)

Bruno Latour, *Science in Action: How to Follow Scientists and Engineers Though Society* (Harvard 1987)

Additional Latour Reading:

Bruno Latour, *The Pasteurization of France*

Bruno Latour, *Aramis, or the Love of Technology*

Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*

Bruno Latour, *Pandora's Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies*

March 13 Spring Break. No Class

March 24: Paper outline and annotated bibliography due (via Bb dropbox)

Week 7. March 20 Assembling Oil Networks 1

Geoffrey C. Bowker, *Science on the Run: Information Management and Industrial Geophysics at Schlumberger, 1920-1940* (MIT 1994)

Daniel Yergin, *The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money, and Power* (Simon and Schuster 1991), parts 1-3, pp. 1-388

Week 8. March 27 Assembling Oil Networks 2

Daniel Yergin, *The Prize*, parts 4-5, pp. 1-389-788

T. Mitchell, "Petroknowledge, or the Resources of Economics"

Week 9. April 3 British Petroleum, Iran, and Democracy

J. H. Bamberg, *The History of the British Petroleum Company*, vol 2, *The Anglo-Iranian Years, 1928-1954*.
Ervand Abrahamian, "The 1953 Coup in Iran," *Science and Society*, 65 no 2 (Summer 2001), 185-215

Week 10. April 10 Oil, Democracy, and Iraq

Hannah Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq*.
Naomi Klein, "Baghdad Year Zero"
Human Rights Watch, "Considerations for the Management of Oil in Iraq"

Week 11. April 17 The Carbon Economy and its Limits

Kenneth S. Deffeyes: *Hubbert's Peak*
Larry Lohmann, "Making and Marketing Carbon Dumps: Commodification, Calculation and Counterfactuals in Climate Change Mitigation" <http://www.thecornerhouse.org.uk/item.shtml?x=397694>

April 19: Draft of paper for class discussion due (via Bb dropbox)

Week 12. April 24 Discussion of term papers drafts

Week 13. May 1 Discussion of term papers drafts

May 5: Final papers due (via Blackboard digital dropbox, plus hard copy in my mailbox at 726 Broadway, 7th floor)