“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 pursing 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 of 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)
Nikolas Rose, Powers of Freedom: Reframing Political Thought, chap. 2, "Freedom"
Additional Reading:

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

**Week 3. February 6 Oil Rents and Democracy**

**Required Reading**

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

**Additional Reading: The Rentier State**


**Additional Reading: “The Resource Curse”**

**Week 4. February 13**

**Capitalism, Carbon Fuels, Democracy**

**Required Reading**

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

**Additional Reading: Origins of Modern World Economy**

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**

Haim Gerber, The Social Origins of the Modern Middle East (Lynne Rienner 1987)
Simon Bromley, Rethinking Middle East Politics (University of Texas 1994)
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)  

**Week 6.  March 6  Actor-Network Theory**


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**

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, “Petroknowlege, or the Resources of Economics”

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

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*  

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)