

Peak Oil? Why not Peak Water

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Global Research, September 25, 2010

25 September 2010

Theme: [History](#), [Oil and Energy](#)

Peak Oil? Why not Peak Water, after all, water is much more crucial to life than oil ever will be and it's being consumed in vast quantities by the same economic system that chows oil?

In fact, water is a far more potent and relevant symbol of the way capitalism chows the planet than is oil. Although it too is a finite resource, it also a renewable resource through the process of recycling, something that is done by nature in another of its amazing cycles that keep (kept?) the biosphere stable; what we call homeostasis where life, chemistry, physics and geology all meet. Water is thus far more symbolic of the irrationality of capitalist production than is oil, where even a renewable resource is *consumed* by capitalism.

This is why I just cannot get my head around the fact some on the left (who I think should know better) are buying into the 'peak oil' BS. 'Running out of oil' is *essentially a problem for capitalism*, but not for you and me. In fact, 'running out of oil' maybe a blessing in disguise. Just think, we could once again be living in a world *without* plastic bags![1]

Clearly, oil and gas are non-renewable resources[2] but then so is every other element, mixture and compound present on Earth.[3] What makes oil so important is its centrality to capitalist production and especially its ability to wage war, that's why there's all the fuss about it[4]. But why *has* the left bought into this 'peak oil' BS?

I suspect that part of the problem lies with the ideological position on the left that on the one hand rightly opposes consumerism, a way of life that ultimately consumes *everything*, with the much more difficult problem of posing an alternative. Oil has become symbolic of the capitalist way of life, yet it's ridiculous to advocate that we stop using oil, at least in the short term. The real question is how it should be consumed and critically who decides?

It also has to be accepted that we who live in the West have adsorbed the ideology of Empire and this includes those of us on the left, who assume that the nature and quantity of their consumption is non-negotiable, unless of course capitalism does it for them.

Sure, we could 'run out of oil', but so what? We're also 'running out' of helium. But let me rephrase this: we're running out of *economically viable* sources of oil. And by economically viable, they mean profitable to extract, not that there's a shortage.

Then there's the issue of global warming/climate change to which undoubtedly burning fossil fuels is major contributor in the form of carbon dioxide. But an even more inflammable contribution to global warming is the gas methane (ten times more heat retaining than is carbon dioxide), produced in vast quantities by beef cattle for all those billions of burgers. Once again, the problem is not production *per se* but the quantities and the inevitable

distortions and inequalities that monocultures create and perpetuate.

Thus consumption of oil, in order to satisfy the demands of shareholders, is but one aspect of an all-consuming capitalism. To single out oil, to make a special case out of it, seems pointless and just like the 'over-population problem', a gigantic red herring, pointing away from the real solution to our crisis.

The bottom line is that capitalist economies do not want to change the way they 'do business' just as companies often resist the introduction of new ways of doing things because they deem them not to be profitable or too expensive to implement. If pursuit of profit is the only driving force then clearly we're going to 'run out of oil' and a bunch of other things. And let us not forget that the single biggest consumer of oil on the planet is the US military machine.

Undoubtedly because oil is so central to capitalist economies and as it gets more expensive to extract it, it becomes (yet another, if major) source of conflict but no more so than other strategically critical materials are, especially the so-called rare earth elements so necessary to electronics sector.

So why has oil been singled out and not initially by the left but by the oil industry itself?

For the past one hundred years the major western powers have had a lock on petroleum resources. Two world wars and uncounted 'minor' ones fought over access to, and ownership of, oil. The question therefore is not its abundance or lack thereof but who controls it and who determines how it is used?

Media commentary in the West should be our guide as to the role of oil in our economies where it is assumed that access to oil is our God-given right, therefore we constantly hear the refrain 'energy security' and now closely followed by the refrain 'peak oil'.

There are new reserves of oil and gas being discovered all the time but they are no longer concentrated in a few locations. So it's not that the world is 'running out of oil' but the West's access to the world's supplies are now not only constrained by the cost of extracting it[5] but that it entails the West, principally the US need to control more and more locations, necessitating the expansion of its military bases. It becomes a vicious cycle of consumption, production, expansion and war.

Oil, along with many other resources (including people) fuels the endless expansion of capitalist production. Forget 'peak oil', instead let's get rid of capitalism and then we can decide how we can best we can share and maintain the Earth's resources between *all* of its inhabitants, present and future.

Notes

1. Apparently, we 'consume' 600 million tons of plastic products each year, and all of it is made from oil.
2. Unless you subscribe to the theory of abiogenesis, or the [non-organic origins of oil](#). But even if this hypothesis is correct, the raw materials that oil is made of are also finite just like everything else. See also [this](#) for some background on 'peak oil'.

3. Actually, the Earth is a net *importer* of energy and materials, it's what makes planets so special as they operate anti-entropically unlike practically everything else in the universe. All the energy sources on Earth originate from the sun (it's energy production is scheduled to 'peak' in 5 billion years time). And we also get millions of tons of elements entering the Earth's atmosphere from outer space every year in the form of meteorites and other space debris.

4. Although competition between economies was one of the essential causes of the two World Wars, in both cases oil acted as a catalyst. In the First world War it was Germany's push Eastward where it threatened the British Empire's possessions and access to resources. In the second, Hitler's invasions, also Eastward, was essential to fuel his armies and later, it was the US embargo on Japan's access to oil, also in the East, that signaled the attack on Pearl Harbor.

5. In any case, the 'cost' is determined *not* by the *actual* cost of extracting it, but by what price it commands on the world market. Were oil to become so expensive, whether through actual shortages or like now, through economic downturn, that its consumption dropped radically, wouldn't that be good thing? We might then be *forced* to turn to alternative sources, like gas or any number of alternatives. Were there the will to do so.

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