

SEMINAR

Unearthing Petromodernity: Oil Studies in the Anthropocene

The rise of fossil fuels has been central to the political, economic, cultural, and material transformations of the past two centuries, yet the forms of power, knowledge, and life enabled by carbon energy often remain analytically invisible. As we confront the converging crises of the Anthropocene, the need to rethink the centrality of fossil fuels to modern life has never been more urgent.

At a moment when toxic landscapes, resource frontiers, and environmental inequality reveal the uneven geographies of fossil modernity, the humanities and social sciences are reorienting analytical attention toward the energetic foundations of modern life. From pipelines and refineries to plastics and everyday petrochemical products, the material properties of oil have fundamentally shaped modern infrastructures and forms of life. What forms of political and social power are created through fossil fuel industries? How have fossil fuels shaped modern societies, their economic models, governmental regimes, everyday lives? How have they contributed to uneven global geographies rooted in colonialism and capitalism? What kinds of transitions to post-carbon futures are possible?

Bringing together approaches from history, anthropology, political ecology, and geography, we seek to expand the field of oil studies beyond established narratives, geographies, and disciplinary boundaries, amplifying perspectives from the Global South and other sites of extraction and resistance..

Program

Every fortnight we will meet online to discuss an article or book chapter circulated in advance. The sessions will start with a 20–30 minute presentation, followed by discussion. The sessions will take place on Mondays at 2pm on the following dates: 30 March, 13 April, 27 April, 11 May, 25 May, 8 June, 22 June, 6 July.

We will explore key concepts such as petro-culture, carbon democracy, extractivism, fossil capital, energy regimes, and transition imaginaries, examining how energy dependence shapes modern subjectivities, infrastructures, economies, and ecological futures. The texts will be shared with participants in advance.

Everyone is welcome.

To register, please fill out the [online form](#). After registering you will receive the readings and access information ahead of each session.

For more information, please write to: unearthingpetromodernity@proton.me Or, directly to the organisers, Davide Scarso [d.scarso@fct.unl.pt], Amedeo Policante [policante@fcsch.unl.pt], or Ricardo Noronha [ricardonoronha@fcsch.unl.pt].

Schedule

30 March

Timothy Mitchell — *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil* (2011, Verso)

Selected Chapter (TBA)

Presenter: Davide Scarso

<https://www.versobooks.com/products/2222-carbon-democracy>

Focus: How fossil fuels structured democratic politics, labour power and modern governance.

13 April

Adam Hanieh — “Petrochemical Empire: The Geo-Politics of Fossil-Fuelled Production” (2021)

New Left Review, n.139

Presenter: Ricardo Noronha

<https://doi.org/10.64590/kbq>

Focus: Global production networks, the Gulf region and the restructuring of capitalism through petrochemicals.

27 April

Carola Hein (ed.) — *Oil Spaces: Exploring the Global Petroleumscape* (2022, Routledge)

Chapter 8: Peyerl, D. “Building Brazil’s Petroleumscape on Land and Sea: Infrastructure, Expertise, and Technology”

Presenter: Henrique Oliveira

<https://www.routledge.com/Oil-Spaces-Exploring-the-Global-Petroleumscape/Hein/p/book/9780367417499>

Focus: Infrastructure, territorial development and the spatial materiality of oil.

11 May

Stephanie LeMenager — *Living Oil: Petroleum Culture in the American Century* (2014, Oxford University Press)

Exact chapter/text TBA

Presenter: Raquel Ribeiro

<https://academic.oup.com/book/25640>

Focus: Oil, media, culture, and everyday life in twentieth-century society.

25 May

Appel, Mason & Watts (eds.) — *Subterranean Estates: Life Worlds of Oil and Gas* (2015, Cornell University Press)

Introduction “Oil Talk”

Presenter: Amedeo Policante

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctt20d87mv>

Focus: Anthropological and political-economic perspectives on oil extraction and everyday life.

8 June

Alice Mah — *Petrochemical Planet: Multiscalar Battles of Industrial Transformation* (2023, Duke University Press)

Chapter 2: “Enduring Toxic Injustice and Fenceline Mobilizations” (pp. 53–70)

Presenter: João Pedro Santos

<https://dukeupress.edu/petrochemical-planet>

Focus: Environmental justice, pollution, and grassroots activism around petrochemical industries.

22 June

Catherine Schields — *Offshore Attachments: Oil and Intimacy in the Caribbean* (2023, University of California Press)

Introduction and Chapter 1 (pp. 1–51)

Presenter: Anita Buhin

Focus: Oil economies, intimacy, and social relations in offshore extraction zones.

6 July

Di Muzio, T. & Dow, M. — “Global Capitalism and Oil” (2022)

In *Handbook on Oil and International Relations* (pp. 317–335)

Presenters: Davide Scarso, Amedeo Policante & Ricardo Noronha

<https://doi.org/10.4337/9781839107559>

Focus: Oil in international relations, financialization and the structure of global capitalism.