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Energy Complicity in Trinidad

Review by Sandra Moore

Energy Without Conscience: Oil, Climate Change, and Complicity

by David McDermott Hughes

Duke University Press, 2017

Throughout history, humankind's energy sources have advanced from simple wood-fueled fires for warmth to complex extraction and development of deeply buried fossil fuels to fuel vehicles and heat homes. In *Energy Without Conscience: Oil, Climate Change, and Complicity*, David McDermott Hughes, a Professor of Anthropology at Rutgers University, aims to better understand "cultural dispositions and discourses on oil" (p.1). He also strives to understand why many are complicit about oil's role in climate change. In this part-historical, part-ethnographic work, Hughes focuses on the non-event everyday workings of the oil industry, rather than the abnormal events, such as oil spills and pipeline leaks, that often evoke moral outrage.

Hughes questions why hydrocarbons (oil, coal, natural gas, bitumen) do not inspire moral outrage more often. He explores this question by looking at the non-event everyday workings of the oil industry in Trinidad, the larger island of Trinidad and Tobago, a South American country off the coast of Venezuela. It was on Trinidad in 1859 where Walter Darwent drilled the first continually productive oil well in the world; today Trinidad has "... the most prolific seep of petroleum in the world" (p.12). Hence, Trinidad's abundant petroleum resources, lengthy oil drilling history, and lack of abnormal oil events make it an ideal location to explore how people view the everyday workings of the oil industry. It is also an ideal place to explore why hydrocarbons and their contribution to climate change have yet to become a moral issue for many people who are directly impacted by the hydrocarbon industry.

Trinidad's early energy economy developed to solve a technical issue and evolved into a moral issue. Sugar plantations needed large amounts of labour and the global human slave trade supplied that labour. Eventually, people began to question the moral issue of using human beings as slaves to produce goods. This led to an increased demand for other forms of energy and a transition into a hydrocarbon energy economy. Energy demand continues to increase as global culture generates an ever-increasing desire for more hydrocarbon fueled vehicles, appliances, and large homes (Ghosh, 2016), but there is a cost to the environment for producing and burning these hydrocarbon fuels.

Hughes asserts the main theme of this book is complicity. He compares Trinidad's slave-labour energy economy of the eighteenth and nineteenth-century with today's oil economy. These two forms of energy relied on complicity from both producers and consumers who disregarded the immoral nature of these forms of energy. However, the slave-labour energy economy eventually encountered strong resistance, whereas oil has raised limited resistance among Trinidadians over the last century and a half.

Divided into five chapters, and two sections, this brief book focuses mainly on Trinidad's energy history. Hughes provides a comprehensive historical analysis in the two chapters of the first section. He details early suggestions for harnessing solar energy and discusses human slavery as the first forms of energy on the island. The first chapter delves into the island's potential for growing crops. Cacao was one of the first crops grown by Spanish settlers on the island. Five years after a dismal cacao crop year in 1727, visiting Jesuit Joseph Gumilla envisioned landless settlers coming to the island and using the abundant energy of the equatorial sun to revive the cacao industry. No new settlers were sent, and a smallpox outbreak a decade later drastically decreased the number of settlers already on the island.

By the late eighteenth-century, the Crown installed a new governor, Don Josef Maria Chacón. He was instructed to implement the royal edict of 1783 encouraging planters and their slaves to move to Trinidad. Chacón knew the island's sugar plantations needed massive amounts of human energy to be successful in the competitive Caribbean sugar markets. Shiploads of enslaved Africans were brought to Trinidad, but gradually shifting morality led to the abolishment of the sugar industry's main source of relatively inexpensive energy – slaves.

The second chapter explores the sugar industry's transition away from slave energy toward oil energy.

Hughes draws interesting comparisons of both slaves and oil as consumable energy commodities. He also discusses the complicity associated with the immoral nature of both slavery and the oil industry from both producers and consumers. However, unlike oil, within a short period of time people began to develop a strong conscience against working slaves to death as a consumable source of energy.

As the immorality of using free labour from the human bodies of slaves became an issue, sugar plantations required new forms of inexpensive energy. Trinidad's most influential German immigrant Conrad Friedrich Stollmeyer believed that harnessing the energy of the human body was immoral and he envisioned the work in plantations being accomplished by iron slaves, metal, solar-powered robots, rather than human slaves. In the mid-nineteenth century, Stollmeyer and his partners came up with an alternative to using human bodies for energy. They developed a method for distilling the heavy asphalt found on the island into light, combustible oil.

In time, Stollmeyer's views on humans and work shifted as he witnessed the idleness of many islanders. He believed that people needed work to be invigorated and he focused on selling his oil for lighting, rather than finding ways to decrease labour on the sugar plantations. In 1859, Walter Dewant drilled one of the world's first oil wells on the island, but it was not until the mid-twentieth century that oil took an active role in Trinidad's economy. As the use of hydrocarbons were introduced on the island, Trinidadians "...wavered between inspiration and indifference" (p.41).

Hughes refers to the second section of the book as an ethnographic analysis. Comprised of three chapters, this section focuses on how the informed people of the island "... avoid reflecting ethically or emotionally upon oil" (p.2). In these three chapters Hughes explores informant's notions of plenty and how opportunism clouds their judgement on climate change. Many of the technocratic informants that Hughes engaged with included energy experts and oil company employees. However, he also engaged with informants who did not work in the industry, such as anti-industry activists, or climate change policy makers in Trinidad. With these diverse informants he explored the discourses surrounding and/or obstructing a moral view of oil and how it contributes to climate change. Some of Hughes' informants promote the oil industry or reap the benefits of the industry, some do not, yet he feels almost all his informants are complicit about the impacts of the industry on climate change.

This complicity frustrates Hughes as he, and many others in the world, advocate for an energy

transition away from hydrocarbons to increased clean forms of energy. Globally, the impacts of non-renewable hydrocarbons on the environment are frequently seen as a moral concern. Yet, the common disdain, fear, and anger towards hydrocarbons are not as prevalent with Hughes' informants in the petrostate of Trinidad. Most understood that hydrocarbons impacted their environment and contributed to climate change, but many were apathetic, felt powerless to do anything, or viewed the impacts as minor irritants.

Hughes illustrates that as consumers we rarely see oil; we inject oil into our vehicles without seeing it or thinking about the long-term impacts this fuel has on the environment. He asserts that the oil industry in Trinidad operates as it is supposed to every day with no abnormal events to encourage questioning the safety of the oil industry. Abnormal events like the BP oil spill in 2010 from the explosion on the Deepwater Horizon drilling rig in the Gulf of Mexico cause people to look at the oil industry in a more critical manner. As Freudenburg and Gramling (2011) indicate, the oil industry has been cutting corners for years and an abnormal event like the Deepwater Horizon explosion was a disaster waiting to happen.

However, when abnormal events occur, like the BP oil spill, we see the oil and the impact it has on the environment as vast efforts are dedicated to the cleanup process. Abnormal events decrease apathy toward oil and encourage people, states, and countries to express moral outrage and question their energy choices. Moral outrage towards the oil industry is minimal in Trinidad due to limited abnormal oil events and "... open governance and technical competence" (p.13) that keeps oil associated violence and corruption low. Hence, the people of Trinidad see the problems the oil industry has solved (unemployment, economic development) more than they do the problems the industry has created (pollution, climate change).

As Hughes identifies, the people of Trinidad have become complicit with the oil industry. He explores this complicity from the perspectives of his informants, but also from his own reactions to his informant's complicity with oil and climate change. He explains that "I did not approach these men and women dispassionately, and I have not written about them with the usual ethnographic sympathy" (p. 4). He frankly states that he opposes his informant's efforts and sees oil as an immoral industry on the verge of extinction. Additionally, he affirms at the end of the book that the petro-geologists he interviewed "... are in the wrong and doing wrong" (p.151); they take credit for producing

hydrocarbons, but little credit for their role in contributing to climate change.

Many of the informants that Hughes writes about are advocates of the oil industry, mainly because their livelihood depends on it. As his personal views promote the eradication of the oil industry, Hughes recognizes that he is advocating for the demise of his informant's livelihoods. Hence, he claims to write about his informants with understanding and ethnographic nuance, while being "... prepared to reveal and criticize the wider harm that person may cause" (p.4). However, he is focused on the concept of morality, which is defined differently across cultures. As Ghosh (2016) points out, conversations about morality and climate change are often confounded by differing categorizations - spiritual, intellectual, political, philosophical - associated with the word moral and different understandings of what climate change is and how it is created.

Many ethnographers and anthropologists advocate for researchers to take sides. Most often the side they take is that of the people they are researching, the proverbial oppressed. Hughes emphatically states throughout this book that he does not share the same views as many of his informants. His disdain for the hydrocarbon industry is evident and it shadows his presentation of a nuanced analysis of his informants and their cultural context. It is unfortunate that much of this brief book is focused on the history of energy in Trinidad, and less so on an in-depth ethnographic analysis of his informants with greater detail on who they are and how they think. However, Hughes has contributed greatly to an understanding of how climate change is viewed in locations outside of the modern Western world.

Hughes affirms that complicity toward the oil industry in Trinidad has created a narrow, obsolete politics of pollution and "one can no longer plead ignorance" (p.15). As he points out numerous times, the oil industry will not evoke disdain for many in Trinidad until they are given a tangible, visible reason to fear and despise the industry. Changing the narrative around the oil industry in Trinidad will not occur overnight, nor will it take a lone abnormal event to spur Trinidadians to moral disdain of the industry. Rather, the commonly accepted narrative that hydrocarbons are necessary and vital to support energy demand, livelihoods, and economic development on the island needs to be challenged to move from complicity to conscience.

References Cited

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