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NEOLIBERAL ENERGIES
Crisis, governance and hegemony

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When discussing the shift to neoliberalism a number of scholars focus on a single year: 1973 (e.g. Harvey 2005:12). This is not only the year the soon to be neoliberal reformer Augusto Pinochet was installed in Chile, but it is also the year of the Arab oil embargo. The concomitant quadrupling of oil prices and iconic experiences of petrol shortages in the USA is seen as plunging much of industrial capitalist world into a crisis characterized by both recession and inflation or ‘stagflation’. It is this economic context which provided the fertile breeding grounds for neoliberal ideas to take hold; or, as Naomi Klein (2007: 7) famously recounts the words of Milton Friedman, ‘only a crisis – real or perceived – produces real change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around.’ In one sense, the crisis that ushered in neoliberal hegemony (see Plehwe 2016) was an energy crisis. This, by itself, means there is a need for a careful analysis of the relationship between energy and neoliberalism. Yet, as I will argue in this chapter, the relations between neoliberalism run even deeper than that.

This chapter proceeds in three parts. First, I review the history of the political shifts to neoliberalism in the 1970s and argue that the energy crisis specifically provided neoliberal thinkers with a key empirical example of the problems with political interference in markets. Second, we must also consider how neoliberal policy shifts have affected the fields of energy governance in particular. I argue the Deepwater Horizon oil spill is a prime example of a disaster socially produced according to the logics of neoliberal capitalism. Third, while neoliberalism is often envisioned as applying to specific empirical slices of policy reality (e.g. environment, housing, energy, or whatever), it is less common to theorize the social and ecological relations of neoliberal hegemony itself. In this regard, everyday lived practices of energy consumption – specifically in relation to the privatization of housing and automobility – can be seen as underpinning a variety of populist neoliberal logics (e.g. hostility to taxes). I argue that the geography of life (in often suburban contexts) reinforced what Foucault (2008) isolated as the core of the neoliberal project – the enterprise form. Thus, we need not only think of the neoliberalism of energy, but also how energy fuels neoliberalism.

The phony crisis

The ‘energy crisis’ is phony and a hoax on the people.1

(Letter to Richard Nixon’s Energy Policy Office)
In order to understand how the energy crisis of the 1970s provided the conditions for the political ascendancy of neoliberalism, we must first understand how the Keynesian political and economic consensus of the postwar period was blamed as the cause of the larger economic crisis itself. Prior to the oil embargo of 1973, the early 1970s was marked by concern over the rising ‘cost of living’ or inflation. Polling data suggest that, in a decade with no shortage of crisis narratives, the American public felt inflation was their most pressing concern. In 1971, in addition to abrogating the dollar’s relation to gold, President Nixon established the Cost of Living Council, which was tasked with controlling wages and prices across the entire economy. Even though inflation is actually an incredibly uneven process – affecting the poor and moneyed interests far more than the ‘general’ public – it tended to be constructed as a problem for everyone equally. After all, everyone ‘feels’ it when the price of bread goes up a dollar.

As many have detailed (Harvey 1989; Jessop 2002), postwar capitalism in the USA and elsewhere was structured by a Keynesian consensus that highlighted the importance of government spending, social programmes, and strong unions. In particular, these forces were seen as keys to avoiding crises and fuelling ‘effective demand’ for a virtuous growth cycle of mass production for mass consumption. Yet, during the inflation crisis of the 1970s, it was precisely these forces that were blamed for the skyrocketing inflation. Government spending was seen as inflationary in itself by expanding the money supply. As Ronald Reagan put it in a radio commentary in November of 1977, ‘Whenever the federal government adds to the national money supply, it produces inflation’ (Reagan 1977a). Milton Friedman (Friedman and Friedman 1980: 264) posited the monetarist theory of inflation, ‘Inflation is primarily a monetary phenomenon, produced by a more rapid increase in the quantity of money than in output.’ He blamed the growth in the money supply on three forces in the USA: ‘first, the rapid growth in government spending; second, the government’s full employment policy; and third, a mistaken policy pursued by the Federal Reserve’ (ibid.). In other words, government-directed efforts at providing welfare and jobs to (some) – including Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society programmes – were causing price increases for the public at large.

Perhaps more politically important was the vision of labour unions as inherently inflationary. An ordinary citizen from Tampa wrote to Nixon’s energy office to claim that, in addition to the gas scarcities of the energy crisis, ‘These citizens are victims already of the runaway inflation that was brought about when the Congress enacted into law the infamous Wagner labor law in the 1930s.’ According to the labour historian Jefferson Cowie (2004: 84), ‘The 1970s ended up as the first decade in which, according to critics, organized workers simply made too much money and their high rates of pay caused a national crisis.’ From a neoliberal view, unions were seen as having unfair ‘monopoly’ position over the labour market – a centralized power structure that ‘set’ wages according to their own power rather than competitive market forces. Thus, according to neoliberal thought, unions were increasingly viewed as similar to corporations – special interests using their power towards individual gain at the expense of fair competition. Reagan (1977b) called labour unions, ‘The most powerful special interest group in America.’

In short, inflation was seen as generated through political claims on the market. Whether it was redistributive efforts at fighting poverty by the state, or unions demanding wage increases, these measures were seen as well-intentioned but distortive interventions of what is supposed to be free market forces. This was neatly summed up through a pamphlet circulated by the Cost of Living Council titled Inflation: On Prices and Wages and Running Amok:

In some activities, big corporations and big unions seem able to push prices and wages up even when demand is steady or going down. They are able to do this because
competition to provide the goods and services is limited or restricted in some way. Economists call this ‘market power.’

(Cost of Living Council 1973: n.p.)

For neoliberals, the market was meant to be apolitical: a decentralized, competitive system where no single individual or organization has the power to control the market. From such an ideological perspective, any centralized force in the market was seen as inherently unfair and distortive (except corporate monopoly – see Birch 2016). Moreover, because of President Nixon’s wage and price control programmes, the government itself was seen as a centralized force dictating prices. This also reinforced neoliberals like Milton Friedman’s critique of ‘big government’’s role in distorting the free market.

The energy crisis was seen as inflationary in itself. Since oil was a critical input and the transportation fuel behind nearly every commodity, a rise in its price, meant a rise in the price of all commodities. As Nixon’s neoliberal Treasury Secretary William Simon put it,

Petroleum is a unique commodity, entering into almost every facet of our economy, as the fuel for heating our residences and other buildings, as the fuel for transportation of goods and people and as the raw material for a myriad of products like fertilizer and petrochemicals.

(Simon 1975: n.p.)

Yet, in order to understand the insurgent neoliberal logics at play, it is important to examine how the energy crisis was explained and what forces were blamed. As it turns out, it wasn’t seen as a ‘real’ crisis at all, and the villains who engineered it appear similar to those responsible for inflation. Consumers and public commentators consistently blamed three political forces intervening in the oil market – rigging it for their own benefit at the expense of everyday workers. First, obviously, the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) is the antithesis of a free market. Even though it modelled itself after the capitalist US oil prorationing policy in the postwar period (Yergin 1991: 259), OPEC announced itself as a cartel with expressly political aims of keeping prices high. Even worse, the embargo itself was seen as using oil as a ‘political weapon’ against those who supported Israel when ‘common sense’ ideology demanded it be traded freely on the market. Second, polling data reveals that the US public held the most ire not for OPEC, but for the monopolistic oil companies who were seen as a private international cartel that overcharged consumers and earned mega-profits.

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Finally, the most obvious villain from a neoliberal perspective was ‘big government’. While the Nixon administration lifted wage and price controls for most of the economy in 1973, oil price controls persisted until 1981. The admittedly bureaucratic complexity of these controls provided endless fodder for neoliberals who lambasted government officials in their audacity to believe they could allocate goods and services better than a free market. Conservative icon William F. Buckley (1973) reasoned that price controls keeping petrol prices low were
ineffective, ‘You are much better off reducing the amount of gas spent by raising the price of gasoline than by setting up a giant bureaucracy charged with the impossible job of adjudicating everyone’s claim to gasoline.’ An editorial in the Altoona Mirror (1979) castigated the government control of the energy market. ‘[Government] actually has helped create the crisis by its unwise environmental laws, its red tape, and refusal to help the oil industry produce gas for American cars.’ Perhaps the most famous neoliberal ideologue, Milton Friedman (Friedman and Friedman 1980: 14) put it succinctly, '[Petrol queues were caused by]… one reason and one reason alone: because legislation, administered by a government agency, did not permit the price system to function.’ If the price mechanism is supposed to be a product of competitive forces, it cannot be directed by political forces – and the most obviously political force in a capitalist society is the government itself.

Overall, like inflation, the energy crisis was seen as being generated by a set of political forces intervening in the market. This was seen as problematic not only because it made the market unfair, with certain ‘special interests’ gaming the system for private (or government) gain, but also, more importantly, it allowed for a construction of political forces and decisions harming the everyday freedom and choices of ordinary consumers/drivers. Everyday oil-intensive consumers in the suburbs preferred to be ‘left alone’ by the machinations of ‘big government’ (perhaps most famously expressed in the ‘tax revolt’ in California in 1978). The logic of being left alone appeared to apply equally to private capital.

**Deregulation and the social production of normal accidents**

The historical shift to neoliberalism in the 1970s involved the energy crisis, but the policies and practices of neoliberalism itself meant a new regime of energy governance in the 1980s and beyond. In the wake of the energy crisis of the 1970s, it became increasingly ‘common sense’ that the market was the most appropriate mechanism to ensure the adequate production of energy. Ronald Reagan was elected in 1980 on an energy platform best summed up by this pithy phrase, ‘Our problem isn’t a shortage of oil. It’s a surplus of government’ (Reagan, cited in Jacobs 2008: 209). One of the first things Reagan did was ‘decontrol’ the price of oil in 1981, which lifted the maze of government control on oil prices. This set the conditions for the entry of financial markets in the shaping of the price of oil. In 1983, the first oil futures were traded on the New York Mercantile Exchange. If financialization accompanies neoliberalism (Harvey 2005), the oil market is no different.

Yet, the most important interface between neoliberalism and energy is in the actual governance of the production and distribution of energy itself. For this, we need to understand the critical role of competition in shaping neoliberal ideology. As Foucault (2008: 147) states, ‘The society regulated by reference to the market that the neoliberalists are thinking about is a society in which the regulatory principle should not be so much the exchange of commodities as the mechanisms of competition.’ Thus, state policies both aimed at increasing the competitiveness of particular territories in terms of attracting capital investment and staying competitive became the driving force shaping corporate discourse and ethics.

This ethos of competition infiltrated the state–capital nexus in energy markets. On the one hand, states and capital both viewed ‘regulation’ as burdensome threats to competition. This meant the decline in the specific rules and regulations overseeing the energy industry. Perhaps more important, however, was the underinvestment in regulatory agencies themselves. The Environmental Protection Agency and other energy-specific agencies were starved of funds and personnel to actually enforce rules and regulations on the books. As Reagan’s first Interior Secretary, James Watt, put it, ‘We will use the budget system as an excuse to make major policy
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decisions’ (cited in Faber 2008: 128). On the other hand, it became increasingly clear to energy corporations themselves that increasing innovation and global competition forced capital to enact a regime of relentless cost cutting in order to stay competitive. This cost cutting, of course, included wage and salary cutbacks (see Labban 2014), but it also meant the underinvestment in environmental and other safety procedures. In other words, the neoliberal ethos of increased competition almost guaranteed that capital would seek to externalize environmental costs onto society as a whole and the public sector in order to 'stay competitive'.

The evisceration of public regulatory agencies, combined with competitive cost cutting among energy capital, makes ‘accidents’ entirely predictable. Using Perrow’s (1984) concept of ‘normal accidents’, Prudham (2004: 344) examines a deadly water well poisoning in Walkerton, Ontario, caused by private farmers as what he calls, ‘a normal accident of neoliberalism’. While public officials tried to explain away this crisis as the result of exceptional circumstances and natural hazards, Prudham points to the systematic ‘undermining [of] the capacity of regulatory agencies, creating specific regulatory gaps while at the same time placing an overall chill on the regulation of capital’s access to and impacts on the Ontario environment’ (ibid.). In this case, private agricultural capital, left alone, tended to externalize ecological costs of manure application to be absorbed by the ‘public’ commons of local groundwater supplies. The failure of regulatory agencies to prevent this kind of systematic externalization of ecological harms on the public is what makes this accident predictable and normal.

The Deepwater Horizon disaster in 2010 – which killed 11 workers and expelled between 3 and 4 million barrels of oil into the Gulf of Mexico – is, of course, the most spectacular occurrence of a ‘normal accident of neoliberalism’. It is worth pointing out that, at least as far as British Petroleum (BP) is concerned, this ‘accident’ was only the latest in a disastrous run of corporate negligence resulting in a refinery explosion in Texas City in 2005, and multiple oil spills and pipeline malfunctions in Alaska (Lustgarten 2012). For BP, disasters were certainly a normal aspect of doing business. Yet, the Deepwater Horizon disaster conforms to the wider conditions of neoliberal deregulation in quite specific ways. First, the Minerals Management Service – the public agency in charge of overseeing offshore drilling – was completely ineffective at serving the public interest of insuring drilling was safe. Of course, there are the obvious and spectacular ways in which the agency was captured by oil capital – stories of parties between regulatory officials and corporate players are quite stunning (Dickinson 2010). Yet, more relevant were the ways in which the agency completely lacked the capacity to oversee a technologically complex and environmentally risky form of oil extraction because of a lack of staff and budget. As the scholar of the offshore oil industry Tyler Priest (2010) explained in the wake of the spill, ‘MMS has 55 inspectors for about 3,500 production platforms and 90 drilling vessels. The agency’s $342 million annual budget would cover only drilling the two relief wells at the Macondo site.’ Second, the reckless cost cutting displayed by BP – courts have now called their behaviour ‘grossly negligent’ (Gilbert and Scheck 2014) – is typical in the neoliberal era of heightened competition. BP not only underinvested in backup blowout preventers, but haphazardly ‘skipped a cement test’ and drilled 100 feet deeper when conditions suggested risks were increasing (Gold 2014).

If neoliberalism is characterized by increasing reliance upon the private sector for the public wellbeing, the spill itself revealed the disastrous consequences of such a conceit. In the wake of the spill, government officials bizarrely expressed confidence in BP’s ability to cap the well. President Obama said, ‘What is true is that when it comes to stopping the leak down below, the federal government does not possess superior technology to BP… BP has the best technology, along with the other oil companies’ (cited in Huber 2011b: 196). Admiral Thad Allen, in charge of overseeing the cleanup, went as far as to state, ‘I trust [BP CEO] Tony Hayward… They have
the eyes and ears that are down there. They are the necessary modality by which this is going to get solved’ (ibid.). This ‘trust’ was woefully misplaced. BP’s ‘emergency response’ oil spill plan was revealed to be a complete waste of paper, featuring a discussion of walruses (Dickinson 2010) and an ‘emergency contact’ person who had been dead for five years (Wright 2010). Their ‘junk shots’ (sending trash and golf balls down to the well) and other efforts to cap the well were laughably ineffective and revealed they really had little idea of how to handle a spill. The gushing oil continued for nearly three months before it was finally capped. Completely held hostage by BP’s incompetence, our public sector stood by and watched while a highly public disaster unfolded.

**Powering neoliberalism: energy and the geography of privatism**

We are all neoliberals now.

(David Harvey 2005: 13)

Much of the way neoliberalism is conceptualized is problematic. It is often seen as a monolithic ‘thing’ that has the agency to do things to particular communities and objects (Peck and Tickell 2002; Larner 2003). As I have argued previously (Huber 2013), the literature on neoliberal natures also conceptualized an empirical field called ‘nature’ or ‘environment’ that has neoliberal things done to it (see Collard et al. 2016). As Castree (2008) complained, the neoliberal nature literature comes equipped with its set of case studies (water, wetlands, forests) where the natural ‘thing’ undergoes neoliberalization. Environment becomes the object of neoliberal policy and reform. Yet, this kind of static and dualistic vision of neoliberalism/environment refuses to understand neoliberalization as not only a ‘process’, but also as relational in that it is produced through relations between society, resources, ecologies and, for the purposes of this chapter, energy. Rather than see the field of ‘energy’ as undergoing neoliberal deregulation and privatization (certainly a topic worthy of interest), we can also query how the wider socioecological process of neoliberalization is itself already ecological (cf. Moore 2011). This analytical frame must get to grips with David Harvey’s quote at the beginning of this section. How do we understand the wider cultural subjectivities, neoliberal norms and ‘common sense’ as being produced through the societal relation with energy resources?

This broader understanding of neoliberal politics itself is productively engaged with through a reading of Foucault’s (2008) lectures on the subject in 1978–9 called The Birth of Biopolitics. These lectures – given during the infancy of neoliberal hegemony – hold tremendous insight into the micropolitics of neoliberal subjectivity. Constituting the ‘neo’ of neoliberalism, a society regulated through competition requires the generalization of the enterprise form: ‘I think the multiplication of the enterprise form within the social body is what is at stake in neoliberal policy’ (ibid.: 148). According to Foucault’s account of German strands of neoliberal thought in the postwar period – or ‘ordoliberalism’ – the materialization of this enterprise form is assured through private property: ‘First, to enable as far as possible everyone to have access to private property’ (ibid.: 147). Putting property at the centre of social reproduction is central to the multiplication of entrepreneurial subjectivities. ‘What is private property if not an enterprise? What is the house if not an enterprise?’ (ibid.: 148). Indeed, the private homeowner runs their house like a business. So-called responsible homeowners are supposed to construct a family budget tracking spending against revenue, make investments with savings and pensions, and maintain a healthy long-term relation with credit markets. In this context, ‘[T]he individual’s life itself – with his [sic] relationships to his private property, for example, with his family, his household, insurance, and retirement – must make him into a sort of permanent and multiple enterprise’ (ibid.: 241).
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Thus, the construction of a propertied mass of homeowners – an ownership society, as George W. Bush called it – creates a situation where your very own life is seen as a product of your entrepreneurial choices. Your entrepreneurial capacities all combine to make a life – to make a living – for yourself. The overall product of a successful life is expressed through the material requisites of oil-based privatism – a home, a car, a family. This cultural politics of life differs markedly from Marx’s – and most orthodox Marxist – vision of proletariat life. For Marx, the proletariat was defined by his/her propertylessness. The question for a propertyless proletariat is: how will I live? The answer was, of course, to desperately sell your labour power in exchange for a wage that usually provided the bare minimum of subsistence (and often not because of the very disposability of wage labour). However, the question for the propertied mass of workers in the USA is not ‘How will I live?’, but ‘What will I make of my life?’ Of course, this question is undergirded by the very idea of making something of yourself, which assumes that your life itself is purely a product of atomized choices and individualized efforts. It is only in particular historical circumstances that such a question takes on such popular significance.

The logic of neoliberal hegemony – and its material and cultural basis in a propertied mass of suburban white male middle- to upper-income homeowners – is more understandable (although no less defensible) through the lens of this cultural politics of entrepreneurial life. Again, government welfare was seen as skewing the competitive landscape and unjustly rewarding uncompetitive bodies who were marked for not making the right choices in life. Worse still, government was itself seen as a public taking of private hard-earned money (taxes) that was, again, the product of one’s own individual entrepreneurial capacities.

The German strand of ordoliberalism Foucault reviews also stresses the, ‘decentralization of places or residence, production and management’ (ibid.: 147) which conforms to the actually existing geography of suburbanization in the USA and elsewhere. Yet, decentralization requires energy – specifically fuel for transportation – because, by definition, you are increasing the distances between critical spaces of work, leisure and residence. Thus, this particular cultural politics of entrepreneurial life is not possible – is not made common sense – without the material transformation of the everyday life centred upon reproductive geographies of single-family homeownership, automobility and voracious energy consumption. Energy, both in oil-fired auto-transport and electrified homes, produces a particular lived geography that allows for an appearance of atomized command over the spaces of mobility, home, and even the body itself. With all the work (or energy) accomplished through the combustion of taken-for-granted hydrocarbons, individuals could more and more imagine themselves as masters of their own lives severed from ties to society and public forms of collective life. Once high levels of energy consumption became more and more entrenched within the reproductive forces of everyday life, those forces informed a politics of ‘hostile privatism’ where individual homeowners imagined themselves as autonomous, hardworking subjects whose very freedom was threatened by the ever-extending tentacles of ‘big government’.

It is important to particularize this neoliberal class project. Entrepreneurial subjectivities discussed above flourished in the decentralized spaces of suburban geographies; again, the very spaces where high levels of energy consumption became everyday necessities. Yet, it would be a mistake to quarantine this politics in particular geographies. The language of self-made lives, of course, has deep historical roots and resonates throughout society as whole. Yet, for those left out of high-energy living – for example, those living in cities without a car who struggle with underinvested public transit systems, or those who rent from landlords who refuse to fix broken electric or heating systems – urban (or rural) poverty starkly reveals the structural barriers to self-made lives: not only because of systemic racial discrimination and a withdrawal of public
services, but also because their lives can only be made and remade through collective social support systems. Many do not live with any of the illusions provided by energized privatism.

Overall, if we are to view, as Harvey (2005: 31) instructs, neoliberalism as a ‘vehicle for the restoration of class power’ we might look to energized geographies of suburban populism as critical in the popular hegemony of that class project. Any movement beyond neoliberalism must confront these wider popular logics.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has attempted to review three particular ways in which we can examine the relations between energy and neoliberalism. First, the energy crisis itself provided the fertile political logics for the shift to neoliberal hegemony in the 1970s. Second, we can examine the field of governance over the production and distribution of energy resources as going through a process of neoliberalization characterized by the withdrawal of public regulation. The 2010 Deepwater Horizon is, perhaps, a quintessential example of a neoliberal disaster. Third, energy itself – the forms of consumption that power suburban life – has powered a more populist ideology of privatism. For those who have oil-fired cars and electric-fired homes doing so much work for them, it is easy to imagine that life itself is a product of individual choices and the public realm as a burdensome force meant to take what has been privately achieved. As American politics has been profoundly shaped by a suburban populism since the 1970s – undergirded by ideas of meritocracy and low taxes – we need to examine the broader field of politics itself as being shaped by regimes of energy consumption.

Overall, this means that overcoming the neoliberal relation to energy is about so much more than simply applying more regulation or public sector control of our energy system (a carbon tax, for instance). We must, first, tackle a more entrenched and everyday politics of privatism to convince energized (and atomized) individuals that, although their lives appear to be private affairs, it will take a renewal of ideas of the collective public good to not only save the planet from climate change, but also to make a more livable and just society.

**Notes**

1 Box 15, White House Central Files, Staff Member Office Files, Energy Policy Office, John A. Love, Richard Nixon Presidential Library, Yorba Linda, CA.


3 Box 8, White House Central Files, Staff Member Office Files, Energy Policy Office, John A. Love, Richard Nixon Presidential Library, Yorba Linda, CA.

4 For example, at the height of the petrol line crisis in February 1974, one Roper poll revealed that only 18 per cent of those polled felt the crisis represented a ‘real shortage’, whereas 73 per cent believed it was ‘not a real shortage’ and 9 per cent admitted not to know. Fast forward five years, at the height of the second oil shock in July 1979, and the numbers for each only varied slightly to 24 per cent, 58 per cent and 8 per cent, respectively (Richman 1979).

5 I have examined this system elsewhere, arguing that it tried hard to create the appearance of competition through price policy that actually protected a multiplicity of high-cost independent oil producers (Huber 2011a, 2013).

6 In an exhaustive study of various polling data, Richman concludes that, ‘the predominant view is that oil shortages have been contrived, particularly by the oil companies, to raise prices and profits’ (Richman 1979: 576).

7 Box 17, White House Central Files, Staff Member Office Files, Energy Policy Office, John A. Love, Richard Nixon Presidential Library, Yorba Linda, CA.
References

Gold, R. 2014. BP’s Decision to Drill 100 More Feet set Disaster in Motion, Judge Rules. Wall Street Journal, 4 September.

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