What a Difference a Substance Makes

Reflections on the Delta Oil

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Niger Delta
crude oil
climate crisis
ecosystem
christmas tree
energy transition

Oil makes a difference—it might make all the difference. The combustion of crude oil is responsible for 32 percent of global fossil energy greenhouse gas emissions[1] and thus contributes majorly to the climate crisis which might jeopardize safe and healthy living conditions for people on Earth. Processed into plastic, crude oil is responsible for 80 percent of marine debris polluting global oceans.[2] The onset of global oil use coincides with the beginning of the Anthropocene,[3] the geological era in which human societies have become a "force of nature," interfering with biogeochemical cycles visible in stratographic records. Originally existing in local deposits in specific areas, oil is one of the products most traded internationally. For all these reasons, oil has become a global substance, directly or indirectly affecting all humans, all non-human organisms, geological strata around the globe, as well as the atmosphere.

At the same time, however, the production and consumption of oil affect different actors differently, and thus have very localized, context-specific impacts. Fifty-two percent of global greenhouse gas emissions, for example, are caused by only ten percent of the global population, i.e., those with the highest incomes and the highest per-capita consumption.[4] At the same time, poor and vulnerable communities, who are responsible for very few emissions, as well as future generations, who have not caused any emissions at all, are, and will be, most affected by the impacts of the climate crisis. The consumption of oil rests upon visions of unlimited freedom and liberty, which are fueled by industries benefiting from growing sales of oil and oil products. On the other hand, lives and livelihoods are threatened by oil, either through the impacts of oil consumption, with the climate crisis degrading the health of ecosystems, or as a direct consequence of oil extraction in the sites affected.

The photograph *Christmas Tree* by George Osodi, taken in the Niger Delta in 2007,[5] visualizes many of the differences introduced by the substance: In the foreground,

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George Osodi
Christmas Tree, 2007

we see an oil pump which provided crude oil to European companies in the past, while the surrounding water is still black and shiny from continuous pollution through the exiting substance. In the background, a local woman dressed in clothes produced in Holland with a traditional Nigerian pattern holds a European bicycle. Even the title of the photograph represents the difference between contextualized and disconnected meaning: a Christmas tree, in the context of Nigerian oil exploitation, is not (only) an ornamented tree symbolic of a Christian holiday, but also the device closing an oil well after the end of its use. The photograph thus demonstrates how a global substance changes the real living conditions of people in an area of oil extraction, as well as the symbolic meaning of things in the local context.

Transitioning out of oil will require an unprecedented global effort.

While much of the debate in the past has focused on the technological challenges of such a transition, and potential technical solutions, now the political, social, and economic challenges are increasingly being addressed. A transition towards a global society which satisfies the needs of all people on Earth while not overusing global ecological capacities will involve no less than negotiating among different interest groups, developing new governance systems for common pool resources, and creating economies that support ecological health, among others. After all, the changes required to transition out of oil will need to be as dramatic as those that brought the world into the oil age: a post-oil future will differ from the present as much as the pre-oil past has differed from today.

1 Pierre Friedlingstein et al., “Global Carbon Budget 2020,” in *Earth System Science Data 12*, no. 4 (2020): 3269–3340, https://doi.org/10.5194/essd-12-3269-2020.

2 International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), “Marine Plastic Pollution. Issues Brief,” (2021), https://www.iucn.org/sites/default/files/202204/marine_plastic_pollution_issues_brief_nov21.pdf.

3 Simon L. Lewis and Mark A. Maslin, “Defining the Anthropocene,” in *Nature* 519 (2015): 171–180, https://doi.org/10.1038/nature14258.

4 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), “Demand, services and social aspects of mitigation,” in *Climate Change 2022: Mitigation of Climate Change. Contribution of Working Group III to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* (Cambridge, UK, and New York, USA: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 10.1017/9781009157926.007.

5 George Osodi, *Christmas Tree*, 2006, from the series *Oil Rich Niger Delta*.