1. Oil and international relations: theory, materiality and the political

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The discipline of international relations (IR) has a long-standing and rich research agenda on the international politics of oil. This can be broken down into three broad areas. There is, first, how oil contributes to conflict, war and regional and international security. Second, there is the international political economy of oil, with the oil industry’s complex set of economic actors, its lack of a clearly defined international governance structure and its role as the most traded commodity globally. The third area is that of international justice, and oil’s links with the history of colonialism and imperialism, with dispossession and oppression, and with the continuing struggle between the Global North and the Global South.

These three broad areas break down roughly into the three main theoretical approaches within traditional IR: realism, liberalism and critical theory. The first objective of this chapter is to provide an overview and survey of the significant corpus of work that has been done on the international relations of oil, utilising this tripartite theoretical division. This will demonstrate the multiple ways in which the research contributions in IR have enriched our understanding of how oil has shaped and defined international and global politics. A particular focus of this analysis will be on how IR has addressed the question of the materiality of oil, and how it has conceptualised the interaction of the physical qualities of oil with its social, economic and political manifestations. This analysis will argue that IR has, in fact, taken the materiality of oil seriously, but that the nature of this engagement differs significantly dependent on the particular theoretical approach adopted.

The second objective of this chapter is to explore how the recent ‘material turn’ in international relations, incorporating insights from the new materialisms literature, can be used to better understand oil’s materiality. The chapter argues that new insights can be gained through looking anew at oil through three perspectives offered by the new materialisms: first, through a focus on agency and the agentic role of non-human subjects; second, through the idea of oil as an international assemblage; and third, through a relational ontology which does not privilege any particular body/actor or scale. The chapter concludes by calling for an ethic of care to be adopted as the transition towards a low-carbon future increasingly determines and defines the international politics of oil.

This chapter represents an initial exploration of the materiality of oil from a predominantly IR theoretical perspective. The chapters that follow by Bridge and Dodge (Chapter 2) and Balmaceda (Chapter 3) provide further ways of conceptualising and understanding the materialities of oil derived from other non-IR traditions.
IR THEORIES: THE TRIPARTITE APPROACH

The division of international relations into three discrete and self-contained theoretical traditions – realism, liberalism and critical theory – is inevitably a simplification, and a distortion of a much more complex reality. There are multiple theoretical approaches and innovations in IR which have moved beyond the traditional approaches and have, indeed, directly challenged and sought to displace them. There are also many studies in IR which have no explicit theoretical framework and are empirical in their nature. This is particularly evident in energy studies, where policy-focused research, which does not engage significantly with theory, is common. Nevertheless, there is a utility to maintaining these traditional categories so long as it is also recognised that these are ‘ideal-types’ that inevitably simplify a complex reality. This is demonstrated by the fact that this tripartite division is one which is accepted as a legitimate way of framing the historical development of the study of oil and energy in IR, even by those who wish to undermine and displace it. Indeed, in other social science disciplines as well, there is a recognition that the principal theoretical and methodological divide is between a primary focus on the state (realism, geopolitics and mercantilism) and a focus on the market (liberalism).

The Realist Approach

The realist approach is one which does take seriously the materiality of oil. The main materialist assumption, which realism shares with mercantilism and the tradition of geopolitics, is that oil is defined by its material scarcity. As a scarce and valuable resource, states have a natural desire to ensure that their access to global supplies is safe and secure. Given the realist assumption that international relations is an anarchical system, where there is no overarching sovereign and distrust pervades interstate relations, this inevitably creates the conditions for competition and conflict (Morgenthau 1960; Niebuhr 1960; Waltz 1979). During the Cold War period, it was the rise of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) in particular and the subsequent nationalisations of oil production in the post-colonial world, most notably in the Middle East, which brought oil most directly to the disciplinary attention of IR. The principal concern was primarily a realist-driven one and focused on how oil could be used as a weapon which could shift the regional and global balance of power. In particular, there was the question of the extent to which the Arab countries had gained a new ‘oil weapon’ which would be used to threaten and to gain concessions from the developed world. In the aftermath of the Iranian revolution and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the belief that the Soviet Union might be seeking to gain dominance of the oil-rich Persian Gulf led to a massive increase in United States (US) military engagement in the region. The promulgation of the Carter Doctrine in 1980 confirmed this doctrinally, with threats to the flow of oil in the Persian Gulf being recognised as a matter of US national security interest.

The end of the Cold War might have reduced the threat of Soviet expansionism but it did not eliminate strategic realist-driven concerns about the international politics of oil. Michael Klare has been a consistent voice arguing that the potential for conflict and war over resources has become stronger rather than weaker since the ending of the Cold War (Klare 2001, 2004, 2008, 2012). He offered an alternative perspective to either Francis Fukuyama’s liberal expectation of ‘the end of history’ or Samuel Huntington’s inevitability of the rise of ethnic and religious conflict and a ‘clash of civilisations’. Rather, he proposed that ‘it is resources, not differences
in civilizations and identities, that are at the root of most contemporary conflicts’ (Klare 2004, p. xii). This was because of a number of factors, according to Klare. First, oil supply was becoming more scarce and was now reaching its ‘peak’ and would start to decline. Second, most of the remaining oil reserves were to be found in some of the most fragile and internally weak states, where political and religious extremism was on the rise. And third, oil and the politics of the Middle East are closely linked to the rise of al-Qaida and the global threat of Islamist terrorism.

This post-Cold War focus on resources as sources of conflict has also been extended to the study of conflict within states, particularly in relation to inter-ethnic conflict. Again, this focus on the conflict-inducing properties of resources is linked to a rejection of the idea that the post-Cold War proliferation of civil wars is primarily due to conflicts over identity or ideology. Instead, influential economists such as Paul Collier have argued that it is material greed, the drive by elites to gain control over valuable internal resources, which is the principal driver of conflict (Collier and Hoeffler 1998; Collier 2000). Identities and ideologies might provide the formal external legitimation and justification for those fighting in these intrastate wars, but it is the inter-elite struggle to control such resources and thereby seize control of the state which is the real underlying source and cause of these conflicts. This is very much a realist explanation but now moved from an interstate to an intrastate context.

There has also been significant research which, while broadly remaining within a realist framework, has sought to qualify an overly deterministic and systemic application of the theory to oil. Colgan has highlighted how not all oil-rich states have a significantly greater propensity for war and aggression; this is only the case where the state also adopts a clearly revolutionary and revisionist political agenda (Colgan 2010, 2013). It is thus not accidental that a number of the most prominent revisionist states (so-called ‘pariah states’), such as Iran, Iraq and Libya, are all oil-rich and with a track record of external intervention. Le Billon has similarly demonstrated that not all oil-rich states have a tendency towards inter-ethnic conflict and civil war, but that this is more likely to be the case when the oil in such a state is found in a peripheral region and which thereby generates a centre–periphery conflict (Le Billon 2004; Le Billon and Cervantes 2009). This is evident, for example, in the Niger Delta, the Aceh province in Indonesia and in South Sudan. Hughes and Long have also shown that not all parts of the oil value-chain generate the same levels of security threats. In practice, the most sensitive security conditions come with the transportation of oil across the world’s oceans, where the US exerts an unrivalled naval dominance (Hughes and Long 2015). As countries such as Iran and Iraq can testify, the sanctions imposed by the United States, which is policed by their naval forces, represents a real threat to their national security. It is also a legitimate source of concern for China, as expressed in the so-called Malacca Dilemma, which points to the strategic vulnerability of US disruption of this vital sea line of communication (Lanteigne 2008). As such, there are legitimate military and strategic concerns that make it rational for China to follow a mercantilist and state-driven approach to ensuring its supplies of oil, rather than relying solely on the operation of the market (Lind and Press 2018).

The Liberal Approach

The liberal approach to international relations has its origins as a critique of geopolitical approaches to international politics. Historically, the liberal internationalist tradition emerged within IR as an anti-realist critique of the causes for World War I: that the tragedy and slaugh-
ter of that war was ultimately due to the political and military elites pursuing, without regard for public opinion and civil society, realist policies such as the balance of power, military expansion, secret diplomacy, nationalist xenophobia and the lack of respect for international legal norms and institutions. There is a similar approach in the liberal critique of the realist emphasis on the scarcity of oil and the struggle of states for control of these scarce supplies of oil. In contrast to the realist conceptualisation of the materiality of oil as defined by scarcity and conflict, liberalism presents the negative conflict-inducing materiality of oil as something which can be socialised and neutralised through cooperation and interdependence.

The core liberal argument is that the realist conceptualisation of oil misdescribes the reality of the ways in which oil is actually produced, transported and traded. First, the notion of scarcity is challenged by the role that the market plays in managing supply and demand, and how market signals along with technological innovation have consistently ensured adequate supplies of oil to meet demand. This approach thereby challenges the gloomy pessimism of the ‘peak oil’ thesis. The shale oil revolution, which relies on new technological innovations such as horizontal drilling and seismic surveys, provides a practical example of the limits of an approach based on assumptions of geological scarcity. Indeed, it is now generally recognised that peak oil will occur due to constraints on demand rather than supply. Second, the liberal approach challenges the primacy accorded to states in the international politics of oil. The liberal perspective has always presented the realm of international relations as a pluralist one where the state coexists with multiple other actors which also have power and agency (Keohane and Nye 1977). This is the case in the oil industry, where oil companies have consistently played a powerful role. More recent scholarship has also sought to show how the market has increasing numbers of important players, such as the little-known role of Swiss trading houses which currently control 35 per cent of the global market share in crude oil (Goldthau and Hughes 2020). The background to this is the transformation of the market in the late 1970s due to the nationalisation of domestic production, which broke apart from the vertical integration of the industry and which led to an increase in the fungibility of crude oil and the increased transparency and predictability of price formation. This in turn led to the creation of oil futures contracts and spot oil markets in New York and London, which cemented the formation of a ‘new oil world depending on short-term rather than long-term contracts’ (Goldthau and Witte 2009, p. 376).

In terms of the materiality of oil, the liberal approach tends towards seeing ways in which to socialise and dematerialise oil and thereby to exorcise the role of the state and its pathologies of control. This has led to scholarship in liberal IR that has concentrated on two main areas.

First, there is the role of regimes and institutions in the energy field which act as intermediate organisations that provide opportunities for cooperation. There has, as a consequence, been much work on mapping the global energy architecture and examining the interaction of bodies such as OPEC, the International Energy Agency (IEA) and the International Energy Forum (IEF). Some scholars have conceptualised this patchwork of energy-related institutions as a single and coherent body, understood as a ‘regime complex’, and have looked at how this complex has changed and adapted over time (Colgan et al. 2012; Van de Graaf 2013). There has also been much work on the European Union (EU) as an exemplar of a liberal institutional actor in relation to energy policy, and how the EU has used the power of EU energy markets to respond to Russia’s more realist-driven approach to European energy security (Goldthau and Sitter 2015).
Second, there has been considerable research into understanding the so-called ‘resource curse’, which focuses on understanding the causes of the multiple illiberal impacts of oil wealth, such as the prevalence of authoritarian regimes and lack of respect for human rights among many oil-rich states (Rosser 2006; Di John 2008; Frankel 2012). Here the material presence of oil is seen in a primarily negative light, as a source of wealth which can be captured by state elites in a way that is not possible with other sources of production, such as manufacturing. The concept of the ‘rentier state’ captures this sense of the resource-rich states as comparable to the aristocratic landlords that dominated traditional societies, and which liberalism sought to dismantle as the major sources of resistance to liberalisation and modernisation. The counterpoint to the repressive and poorly developed oil-rich states are the resource-poor but dynamic Asian tigers. The view that oil as a material resource should be understood through the prism of a ‘curse’ has been a powerful legacy that has been difficult to dismantle, and represents a significant legacy of a liberal approach to the international political economy of oil. Nevertheless, there is growing scholarship which fundamentally challenges the assumptions and deterministic outcomes of the ‘resource curse’ (Haber and Menaldo 2011).

The Critical Approach

Before the collapse of the Soviet Union, the third branch of the tripartite theoretical framework was often defined as Marxism or neo-Marxism. This subsequently changed into a broader critical theory, but the roots of this approach are in historical materialism. Clearly, this rootedness in the traditions of historical materialism involves a recognition of the materialities of oil, but it is a different understanding from the essentially material passivity of oil in realist accounts, and the attempted sublimation and diffusion of the materiality of oil in the liberal approaches. Instead, the materiality of oil is refracted in the critical approach within the broader material structures of international power and global capitalism. Susan Strange was an early scholar in IR who promoted energy – and by this she meant primarily oil – as a form of structural power. But she also conceived of energy as a secondary structure to what she saw as the four primary structural powers, which were security, production, finance and knowledge (Strange 1988). In this analysis, while states are understood as critical actors, their role is also defined by their facilitation of the multinational oil companies, the banks and financial investors, the military–industrial complexes, and the scientific communities that gain structural advantage through the various ways in which they control the production, flow and consumption of oil. Embedded within this analysis is the continuing domination of the North in the global capitalist and militarised structures which particularly negatively impact on the resource-dependent countries in the Global South.

This systemic analysis has been more fully theorised through the dependency and world systems approaches within international relations. The main thesis of dependency theory is that the post-colonial world remains caught in conditions of exploitation and underdevelopment since most of the countries in the South continue to depend upon a few basic export commodities, of which oil is one of the prime examples. This dependency is perpetuated by the consistent failure to possess the capacity to process these raw materials into high-value finished goods. Politically, this is the result of a symbiotic relationship between the core and the locally dominant economic and political elites, which detaches these elites from their local populations and prevents autonomous economic development. These local elites in turn rely upon a Western-supported military and security structure that suppresses all indigenous chal-
challenges to conditions of dependency and exploitative core–periphery relations. This approach has been applied to a number of regions of the Global South. For example, in the Middle East, Ray Hinnebusch views the general politics of the Arab states as one of a continual struggle between local forms of indigenous resistance, such as the radical Arab nationalist movements in the 1970s, and Western states and the oil multinationals that have continually sought to repress and eliminate such struggles for autonomy (Hinnebusch 2003). An example of this is how indigenous resistance led to the nationalisations of oil production among the Middle Eastern countries, but ultimately resulted in the formation of new structures of Western hegemony. This resulted from the US developing a security embrace of the Arab Gulf states, along with international oil companies developing non-OPEC production so as to reduce the market power exercised by the OPEC cartel.

The critical approach, therefore, provides a complex field of networks and structures of power which link the global and the national/local in conditions of exploitation and repression. Michael Watts expresses this well when he talks about the multiplicity of actors involved in the endemic oil-fuelled conflict in the Niger Delta. He states that it is:

not only IOCs [international oil companies], NOCs [national oil companies] and their service companies but also the petrostates, the engineering companies and the financial groups, the shadow economies (theft, money laundering, drugs, organised crime), the raft of NGOs [non-governmental organisations] (human rights CSR [corporate social responsibility] groups, monitoring agencies), the research institutes and lobby groups, the landscape of oil consumption and, not least, the oil communities, the military and paramilitary groups, and the social movements which surround the operation of, and the shape and functioning of, the oil industry narrowly construed (Watts 2009, p. 10; see also Watts 2001, 2004)

As well as this more fine-tuned analysis, there is also a more holistic dimension that seeks to examine the particular ways in which oil, and fossil fuels more generally, have helped to constitute the global capitalist order. Timothy Mitchell has noted how the particular material forms of oil, as against coal, have created different structures of power between capital and labour and between the North and the South (Mitchell 2009). He argues that while the development of coal created the conditions for an internal struggle for the expansion of democracy, this progressive dimension was not replicated in the sociopolitical development of oil. This highlights the need for considering the materiality of oil and its interaction with social and political structures as a historically evolving and continually shifting and emerging phenomenon.

THE NEW MATERIALISMS AND THE IR OF OIL

When it comes to the physicality and materiality of oil, it can be seen that the principal theoretical traditions in IR have engaged seriously with this material dimension, but in differing ways. Realism has primarily focused on oil as a scarce material resource; liberalism has sought ways to socialise and dematerialise oil through market integration and institutionalisation; and critical theory has highlighted the structural and historical determination of the interaction between the materiality of oil and the historical development of global inequalities and structural injustice.

The rest of this chapter explores the ways that the new materialisms, recently introduced to IR, can help to develop further insights and innovative new ways of thinking about the mate-
rality of oil. The new materialisms incorporate a number of diverse literatures, from a range of disciplines that have been variously called the ‘material turn’, ‘post-humanism’ and the ‘new vitalisms’. What binds together this varied collection of work is the need to rethink the concept of materiality and to articulate new perspectives on how material things relate to the political and the international, and how this might change and transform our understanding of the ‘political’ (Bennett 2010; Coole and Frost 2010). The claim made by the new materialisms approach is that the study of politics has tended to isolate and separate the ‘sociopolitical’ world from the material and non-human world. According to Coole and Frost, the cause of this is embedded in the history of philosophy, which has tended to identify ‘language, consciousness, subjectivity, agency, mind and soul’ as distinct from and superior to ‘mindless matter’, and has thereby marginalised the material as something essentially inert and inactive (Coole and Frost 2010, p. 2). In contrast, the new materialisms approach demands a deliberate re-assertion of the active role of matter; a rejection of the idea that political significance can only be deduced through linguistic representation; and a recognition that material objects and bodies can themselves be affective, active and a source of political significance in their own right.

Within IR theory, the main target of the new materialisms has tended to be constructivist and post-structuralist theoretical approaches, which have promoted the primacy of language and meaning, and argued that there is no clearly knowable ‘world out there’ but only the politically fused representations of that world. Constructivism and post-structuralism have claimed, in particular, that the traditional realist and liberal approaches are flawed through their positivist approach to the understanding of the international, in particular the key assumptions they make about the state, anarchy and the conditions of conflict and cooperation. For constructivists, these assumptions are not objectively given, but rather socially constructed through the discourses that elites use to embed privileged structures of power. Within political geography, there has been a similar critique of traditional geopolitics, with a radical reinterpretation of classical geopolitical thinking whose discourses and narratives supported imperialism and territorial expansion. Within energy studies, there have been similar attempts to deconstruct the concept of ‘energy security’ and to identify the processes through which energy is securitised by political and economic elites. Energy security, on this account, is not something objectively given, but something that is constructed and created to serve particular political purposes (Wilson 2019).

Nevertheless, the extent of such constructivist and post-structuralist accounts of the international politics of oil have generally been quite limited. Indeed, the area where securitisation theory has been most extensively developed is in relation to the European dependence on Russian energy imports, but in reality these concerns are primarily about Russian gas and not Russian oil supplies. However, the approach of the new materialisms does still offer a number of insightful and helpful ways of thinking about the IR of oil, and transcending the traditional tripartite approaches. This can be broken down into three main areas: the distinctive idea that material objects have their own agency; the idea of assemblages as dynamic, heterogeneous and contingent; and the adoption of a relational ontology which does not accord primacy to the international.
Materiality and Agency

One of the most striking claims of the new materialisms is that non-human objects and things more generally also have agency. This represents a fundamental shift away from the traditional ideas of the human domination of nature, reflected in neo-Cartesian assumptions of mind–body dualism, and of a strict divide between nature and society. It is an assertion that objects and non-human bodies have their own agency and dynamism, and that the ‘stuff of politics’, the objects, materials and forces around us, ‘help constitute the common worlds that we share and the dense fabric of relations with others in and through which we live’ (Braun and Whatmore 2010, p. ix). In other words, objects and things actually help to shape human interaction, contribute to defining the political communities we live in and are an integral part of the social and political interactions that shape the conditions for domestic and international political conflict and cooperation. Matter is not the ‘dead, inert passive matter of the mechanist’, but the ‘materialisation that contains its own energies and forces of transformation’ (Coole 2013, p. 453). Jane Bennett calls this ‘vibrant matter’, and challenges the traditional political analysis of seeing matter as dull and inert and human life as vibrant and alive. She identifies something called ‘thing power’, which is the ability ‘of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle’. Indeed, one of her principal examples of this is an electrical power-grid, which is a ‘volatile mix of coal, sweat, electromagnetic fields, computer programs, electron streams, profit motives, heat, lifestyles, nuclear fuel, fantasies of mastery, states, legislation, water, economic theory, wire and wood’ (Bennett 2010, p. 25).

Thinking about the materiality of oil in this more dynamic, agentic way offers potentially new perspectives on how research on the international politics of oil might be conducted. First, this approach takes seriously the materiality of oil as a starting point of analysis. In practice, this can only be done effectively when oil’s physical attributes and properties, and how these interact in complex ways with the social and political, are compared with other energy resources, such as the other fossil fuels of coal and gas as well as with renewables (Balmaceda 2018; Chapter 3 in this book). Oil’s distinctive physical features include its liquid form, which makes it considerably easier to transport long distances than gas and coal. It can also be transported in a variety of ways: pipeline, tanker, truck and rail. In the context of civil war and disintegration of state power, oil’s transportability makes it a potentially lucrative lootable asset. In terms of the global economy, this flexibility in the flows of oil create the conditions for oil to be intensively traded internationally. Oil is also distinctive because of its high energy density and its high value to volume, which marks it out compared to other energy sources. This is a principal reason why oil has a truly global market, compared, for instance, with gas, which primarily has a number of separate regional markets. It is this unique concentration of energy found in oil, and its relative flexibility, which give oil much of its economic power and attraction. This in turn becomes a matter of political and international contestation, because oil is not geographically dispersed but concentrated in certain regions. There is also much variation in the production costs of oil, with the Middle East, for example, historically enjoying significantly lower production costs as well as having the largest reserves. This, in itself, has created significant international political tensions and conflicts, most notably between foreign oil companies, the Middle Eastern producer states and consuming states. However, oil also has a high carbon density with negative environmental impacts, and the oil industry can also been seen as a ‘carbon conveyor’, taking carbon from its sequestered underground reserves into the atmosphere.
The materiality of oil can also be understood in terms of the ways in which it moves across space, in the hydrocarbon chain which flows from acquisition and exploration, to production and then to consumption with its environmental impacts. Crude oil is extracted from its underground reserves and then transported to be processed and refined in multiple spatial sites; these refined products are then converted either into petrochemicals and plastics or into fuels, which are then used in the engines of the cars, ships and planes which make possible the radically increased mobility of humans and goods. Oil’s hydrocarbon journey, if not recycled or carbon captured, then continues either into the atmosphere as greenhouse gas emissions or into the plastics that litter the oceans. The materiality of oil is here found in the multiplicity of physical forms and objects that it makes up a dynamic part of: the oil installations, both onshore and offshore; the large oil tankers that transport much of the world’s oil across the oceans; the refineries that process and refine crude oil and create oil products; and the cars, ships, trucks and planes that require oil for their effective operation. Oil is, in this sense, fully embodied in the world of both things and bodies, and gives them their vitality. As humans, we are inextricably invested in the oil-created and oil-sustained environments and landscapes that surround us in the places that we live (rural, suburban, city), the objects in which we move ourselves and the goods that we need around (cars, planes, ships), and the complex infrastructures that sustain all of this (refineries, service stations, airports, ports). In this sense, oil is truly ‘vibrant matter’ interacting in complex and multiple ways in our everyday embodied lives, and this recognition of oil’s materiality, and how this interacts with the social, political and international, is a fundamental starting position for an IR of oil.

**Oil as an International Assemblage**

A second useful step in how the new materialisms potentially contribute to thinking about oil’s materiality and its interactions with the social, political and international is to conceptualise oil in terms of assemblage theory. This theory is derived from the work of Deleuze and Guattari, which was later systematised by DeLanda (Deleuze and Guattari 1987; DeLanda 2006). There are, though, significant parallels and overlaps with the theories of networks, as developed for example in Latour’s actor-network theory and in Jervis’s complexity theory (Jervis 1997; Latour 2005). The distinctive features of assemblages as systematised by DeLanda is that they contain relations of exteriority, being arrangements of different heterogeneous entities linked together to make a new whole. Relations of exteriority mean that the different component parts cannot be reduced to their function in the whole, and indeed can also be part of other wholes or assemblages. There is also no assumption of what can be related – humans, things, ideas, materials – nor of hierarchies of dominance, and assemblages in this sense are sociomaterial, without any ontological preference accorded to humans. The different parts of these assemblages are nevertheless affected by their interaction with one another; crucially, this is not determined by the properties of the constituent parts, but by their capacities. While properties of materials are finite and limited, capacities are infinite and unlimited because they interact with the capacities of multiple other sets of components. There is here a powerful sense of the dynamism and contingencies of assemblages, which is expressed by Deleuze and Guattari through the metaphor of ‘lines of flight’. A further key feature of assemblages is that they are caught up in a dynamic of deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation. This is a central axis of assemblage theory, where ‘reterritorialised sides … stabilise it and cutting edges of deterritori-
alisation … carry it away’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, p. 87). Assemblages define territories as they emerge and stabilise, but also constantly mutate, break up and are transformed.

The dynamic of deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation is helpful in thinking about how the international oil assemblage has changed over time. The IR of oil is about the continual struggle in seeking control over the international oil assemblage. There was the reterritorialisation of the 1970s as OPEC and the oil-producing states reclaimed control over the sovereignty of their oil resources and sought to concentrate power in a cartel that would control the volumes of oil on the market. This was followed by a dynamic of deterritorialisation during the 1980s and 1990s as the component parts of the assemblage disintegrated to include new non-OPEC territories, and the power of the OPEC cartel splintered apart through the liberalisation of oil markets. This was again reversed in the 2000s when there was a further shift towards reterritorialisation as China’s extraordinary growth shifted the components of the assemblage, producer states gained greater control, resource nationalism became stronger and the earlier centripetal forces were partially reversed.

These are necessarily high-level and generalised descriptions of the changing dynamics of the international oil assemblage, and there are in reality multiple different component parts that are continually shifting and changing. An IR of oil must engage substantively with the need to define and describe the changing dynamics of the oil assemblage, requiring a strong historical and sociological perspective as well as an active awareness and recognition of the materiality of oil. As well as highlighting the path dependencies which inhibit change and hold together existing components, the assemblage theory approach also focuses on the multiple capacities for more progressive change in which futures are brought into the present in order to remake the present.

Bringing the desired futures into the present brings to the fore arguably the greatest challenge of the current oil assemblage: how to bring about a reversal of the oil assemblage and promote the ‘disassemblage’ of oil. While the IR of oil has mainly focused on the ways in which the past and present oil assemblage has international impacts, and how that assemblage can best be managed and governed, the imperative of a low-carbon transition brings the future of the oil assemblage to the fore, and the need to think radically about the ‘lines of flight’ that would lead to a final deterritorialisation of oil. This is essentially about how to stop the extraction of oil and leave it as a ‘stranded asset’ in the ground. There are a whole complex of different factors to be included in the disassemblage project, and IR has a critical role to play. This is not, though, a purely social, economic and political challenge; it is also one where the agentic power of oil, its physical components and how this interlocks with complex sets of assemblages meets some of the most vital needs of humans and the values and goods they depend on. Understanding the continuing exertion of the power and resistances of the oil assemblages is required if the project of disassemblage is going to be realisable.

Relational Ontology

A key feature of the assemblage approach is its commitment to a flat or relational ontology. There is not only a dissolution of the nature–society divide, where bodies interact with other bodies and also with things, but also a rejection of the privileging of any one site or scale of level of analysis over another. Assemblage theory is radically open to analysis of the ways in which the components of the assemblage have effects which cannot be limited to one particular scale or level of analysis. As such, assemblage thinking ‘foregrounds the ways in which
social/political processes are generated through relations between sites, rather than configured through “internal relations” in sites’ (Featherstone 2011, p. 140).

The traditional approaches to IR have tended to give authority to the global level. Primacy has been generally accorded to the state, and its international interactions are defined by relations with other states or with larger structural forces, such as global capitalism. Where individual agencies are recognised, these tend to be elites, whether in government or in business. This is also evident in the analysis of the international politics of oil in the traditional tripartite divisions that have been discussed above. A common feature in realist, liberal and critical accounts of the international politics of oil is that the principal actors are seen to be states, companies and elites. This is also the case with accounts which seek to critique these, such as the constructivist-inspired securitisation theory; in these accounts, primacy is still given to how elites seek to securitise discourses of energy so as to pursue particular elite-driven political projects. What is missing from such accounts is how these global interactions have effects on, and are affected by, their relations with everyday life and with embodied agents at more local levels. This also takes into account the feminist challenge to recognise how such bodies are also highly differentiated – by sex, but also by other differences – and that the failure to engage with this in traditional IR approaches embeds structures of inequality and discrimination. When this greater focus on the human body is supplemented by the materialism of assemblage theory, you have a much flatter ontology whereby it is through the interactions at the micro level which form the interactions at the macro level.

Examining the ways in which bodies have relations with the materialities of oil, and thereby construct the international, opens up relatively unexplored research agendas, at least within IR. There is, for example, the role of labour in the international oil industry and how labour relations have challenged and transformed the actions of both companies and states. Similarly, the ways in which race and white supremacy historically structured, and continue to structure, the oil industry and the international security and military arrangements which surround that industry represent a critically important dimension of the international oil assemblage. For example, the destruction and marginalisation of indigenous groups through oil exploitation are part of the ongoing effects of the international politics of oil. To be fair, one of the strengths of the IR of oil is that it has also emphasised oil’s impact on the politics of the Global South, which has not necessarily been present in a number of other disciplines. Nevertheless, there is still a need for the decolonisation of the ways in which both research and teaching of the international politics of oil is conducted.

At the more embodied local level, one of the distinctive features of the politics of oil is how it generates a range of emotions and effects. Studying and incorporating these emotions and effects, as an increasingly important theoretical approach within IR, offers new insights into the interactions of the international oil assemblage. Oil provokes emotions, ranging from those which come close to horror – oil as a ‘curse’, as a ‘weapon’, as a ‘destroyer’ of lives and the environment – to those which link oil to various critical human freedoms, such as the freedom of the car, the desirability of suburban life, the opportunities to travel abroad. For those countries which possess oil, this often translates into a form of national pride and as a blessing for the country. As discussed above, the liberal approach has focused significant attention on the negative linkages between oil and poor development and political outcomes. This dualism in the emotions and effects of oil is critically important in understanding the politics of transition and the constraints and opportunities for the ‘disassemblage’ of oil. While there has been powerful expression of the need for a radical shift from fossil fuels, as expressed through the
Extinction Rebellion movement, it should also be remembered that the spark which led to the ‘Gilets jaunes’ (Yellow Vests) popular protests in France was the decision to impose a green tax on petrol, which was taken to be an attack on the rights and freedoms of the rural population who depend on cars for their everyday transportation. It is these everyday struggles, undertaken at various national and sub-national local sites in a multiplicity of countries, which undoubtedly contribute to the emergent formations of the international oil assemblage.

CONCLUSION: TOWARDS AN ETHIC OF CARE

The overarching objective of this chapter has been to explore the relationship between the study of oil in the discipline of international relations and the materiality of oil. The chapter first analysed how IR has approached the materiality of oil through the three main traditional IR theoretical traditions: realism, liberalism and critical theory. The conclusion was that IR has addressed seriously the materiality of oil, but in different ways dependent on the particular theoretical perspective adopted. The next section provided an initial assessment of how the new materialisms theoretical approach can potentially provide new insights and ways of thinking about oil’s materiality, which can enrich and strengthen the study of oil in international relations. The argument was that this can be done in three ways: by focusing on agentic power of oil as a material resource, on how oil is embedded in an international assemblage, and how this oil assemblage is formed without privileging or prioritising any particular body or actor.

There is, though, one final dimension of the new materialisms that has a significant implication for the future study of oil in international relations. This is an implicitly normative dimension of this approach, which flows from the recognition of the changing and intensifying nature of the interactions between human bodies, materiality and sociopolitical life. This means that, according to Coole and Frost (2010, p. 15), it is ‘impossible to live apart from the more-than-human company that is now so self-evidently integral to what it means to be human and from which collectivities are made’. Coole and Frost call for a ‘political-ethical intervention’ and a ‘reckoning of the material circuits, flows and experiences that mark the 21st century’. Similarly, William Connolly promotes the need for an ‘ethic of cultivation grounded in the contingency of care for this world’, in response to the ‘increased vitality and periodic capacity for surprise in the variety of nonhuman force-fields’. He depicts the contemporary condition as fragile and that an ‘appreciation of the fragility of things requires greater sensitivity to the multiple ways in which contemporary institutions, role definitions and nonhuman processes intersect’ (Connolly 2013, p. 402).

The conception of the fragility of the multiple interactions of bodies and matter is particularly relevant for framing the nature and conditions of oil as an international assemblage. The shift to the politics of transition, the sense that the ecological conditions for survival in the Anthropocene age are becoming ever more endangered, provides the overarching context for highlighting the multiple complex ways in which the oil assemblage contributes to the fragility of all systems, but in particular how it is integrally linked to the rapidly shifting dynamics of climate change that represents such an existential threat to both human and non-human systems. This gives the study of the IR of oil a broader normative purpose that is not just limited to the international, but is also deeply embodied in the micropolitics of the assemblages affecting everyday life.
REFERENCES


