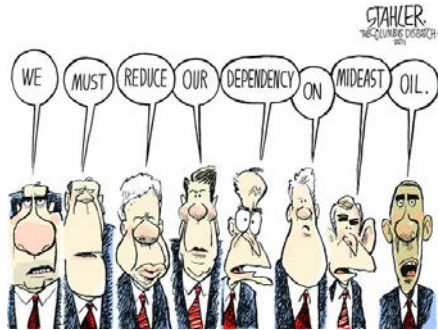


Energy, Independence, and American Self-Identification

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The early 21st Century “shale revolution” or “hydrocarbon renaissance” in the United States has given rise to new calls for energy independence that have far-reaching implications for the future of energy policy, the environment, and national security. In this paper I explore the construction, persistence, and implications of ideas about energy independence in the United States from the 1970s through today. I argue that exaggerated fears of dependence on foreign oil, bolstered by the metaphor of addiction, mobilize a particular American imaginary that fetishizes independence and produces shallow moralistic politics in ways that are deeply problematic for thinking about the future of energy policy. The common platitudes that America is “dependent on foreign oil” or “addicted to oil” carry moral baggage that sit uneasily with stories about American independence and visions of security that valorize autonomy. If narratives of independence are constitutive of American self-identification, the specters of addiction and dependence threaten to undo these identities.



“Louisiana no longer slithers in oil; it drowns in it. It is also high on natural gas, thanks to the recent boom in hydraulic fracturing”

Nathaniel Rich, New York Times Magazine (2014)¹

“The horrifying truth: Our oil addiction is only getting worse”

Michael Klare, Salon (2014)²

“More than eight years ago, then-US President George W. Bush warned that “America is addicted to oil.” He was right about the diagnosis. But he was wrong about the treatment.

Bush called for replacing Mideast oil imports with homegrown ethanol. That’s like prescribing methadone for addicts who can’t stay off heroin. Except that methadone actually helps addicts live healthier lives, whereas ethanol is even worse for the climate than gasoline

[...]

Instead of looking to scientists, politicians, and economists for ideas about how to address the climate crisis, maybe it’s time to turn to mental health professionals. They’re the experts on why people engage in self-destructive behaviors, and on what can help addicts break these bad habits. The first step, of course, is for us gas-guzzling Americans to recognize that we have a problem—and not just with Congress or with oil and gas companies. A problem with our own brains.

[...]

All it takes to get started is a simple admission that our lives have become unmanageable and we need help. Hi, my name is Dawn, and I’m a fossil fuels addict.”

Dawn Stover, Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists (2014)³

“America’s self-image is inextricably bound to the concepts of freedom and autonomy.”

Richard Bryce, *Gusher of Lies* (2009)

¹ “The Most Ambitious Environmental Lawsuit Ever” NYT Magazine, 2 October 2014, available: <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2014/10/02/magazine/mag-oil-lawsuit.html>

² “The horrifying truth: Our oil addiction is only getting worse” Salon, 6 September 2014, available: http://www.salon.com/2014/09/06/the_horrifying_truth_our_oil_addiction_is_only_getting_worse_partner/

³ “Addicted to Oil” Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, 18 May 2014, available: <http://thebulletin.org/addicted-oil7174>

In May 2015 a statement on the Sierra Club website read: “America’s addiction to oil is a threat to our national security, as well as our economy and our environment. This connection is important enough that the Sierra Club and the American Security Project have recognized the shared need to come together.”⁴ Membership of the Set America Free Coalition, an organization dedicated to building support for the pursuit of American energy independence, includes representatives of the liberal Natural Resource Defense Council and the Apollo Alliance⁵ as well as the hawkish Center for American Values and Committee on the Present Danger.⁶ Energy independence, as journalist Charles Homans suggested in a *Foreign Policy* article from 2012, “might be the last truly bipartisan policy agenda in Washington, and the least plausible one.”⁷

If Homans is right, which I think he is, then what explains the persistence of this idea in both policy circles and the popular imagination? How is it that energy independence can be both an illusion and garner bipartisan support for upwards of four decades? What has made this idea of energy independence not only linger for almost half a century, but undergo a recent revival? I will suggest that this persistence has little to do with how realizable any vision of energy independence may be and more to do with the literary and imaginative constructions of what is entailed in dependence on or addiction to oil. Although rhetorically powerful and evocative, the fears and dangers projected by these terms are critically misaligned with the 21st Century realities of how energy, and oil in particular, moves through the world.

In this paper I argue that the rhetoric of energy independence has persisted in large part

⁴https://secure.sierraclub.org/site/SPageNavigator/adv_eodo;jsessionid=19DFAF8E447D718CAD030A8B956AEBB2.app205a Note: Since the original drafting of this paper the Sierra Club has removed this statement and the link now redirects to the homepage of the website. I am working on locating evidence of this connection elsewhere, but so far have found only minimal traces of it anywhere. It has been erased.

⁵The Apollo Alliance is a blue-green coalition of labor unions and environmental organizations that was created by United Steelworkers and the Sierra Club in 2006.

⁶ For a slightly different formulation of this observation that inspired me to probe more deeply into the signatories of the Set America Free Manifesto, see Bryce 121-122.

⁷ Charles Homans: “Energy Independence: A Short History” in *Foreign Policy*. January 3rd, 2012.

because of the moral problem that seems to emerge from a condition of “dependence” and “addiction.” Although international relations scholars use *dependence* in a specialized manner, when the idea of “dependence on foreign oil” gets picked up by the media and many self-proclaimed energy security experts the term loses this precision and becomes a more generalized descriptor for decrying the condition of energy markets in the U.S. Furthermore, the technical language of dependence is often supplemented by, or used interchangeably with, the language of *addiction*. “Addiction to oil” has become the regnant metaphor in popular analysis of energy. The claim that America is “addicted to oil” constitutes a common sense understanding of the polity’s relationship to oil.⁸

An energy independent future appears desirable because of that which it promises to negate (dependence and addiction) and that which it promises to restore (autonomy and dignity). In an era in which there is widespread anxiety about the decline of the United States’ ability to take effective unilateral action in the international sphere, inability to secure its borders, and the ever-increasing interdependence of a globalized world, fear of decline and promises of autonomy sustain the illusion of energy independence just over the horizon.

This paper is divided roughly into three sections. The first offers a brief overview of the ways that the idea of dependence on foreign oil has figured in American political considerations since the 1970s. The second examines the idea of addiction as it figures in both energy politics and other discursive fields. The final section explores the implications of what I call the “moralism” that emerges when concerns about dependence and addiction are made central to analysis of energy politics.

⁸ See, e.g. Thomas Friedman’s 2006 documentary *Addicted to Oil*.

From Project Independence to Project Interdependence: Two Visions of Energy Security

Although the recognition of the need for certain institutions to have reliable access to domestic supplies of oil dates to the early 20th Century (e.g. the Navy’s strategic petroleum reserves), it was not until the oil shocks of the 1970’s that the notion of “energy independence” on a national scale entered mainstream public political discourse. It appeared as a response to perceptions of scarcity and the price shocks of 1973 and 1979, which many understood to have crystalized the reality and problems of dependence on foreign oil. But from that moment onwards there was disagreement about the best alternative: independence or interdependence?⁹

In the panic immediately after the launch of the 1973 oil embargo, Nixon announced the start of Project Independence, which was a program intended to develop self-sufficiency in U.S. energy needs by the end of the decade.¹⁰ Although, in Ikenberry’s words, the independence proposal was “met with skepticism almost at the moment of its unveiling” and “Nixon’s officials soon began to concede that the national economy would remain dependent on foreign sources of energy for some time to come” (Ikenberry, 116), the rhetoric of independence has continued to be a powerful force in American politics. Not only has such rhetoric been persistent, new voices have appeared and old ones have become amplified since the shale boom of the past decade has renewed hope that energy independence may finally be attainable. But Homans was wrong about the level of consensus: there might be some bipartisan agreement about energy independence, but that doesn’t mean that this agenda is without opposition or that there is agreement on what energy independence would look like. The opposing camp is a diverse group who advocate reducing reliance on foreign oil under the guiding ideal of “interdependence” rather than independence. Their preferred strategy is to promote the values of complexly networked markets

⁹ I borrow the framing of this question from James Caporaso’s writing on dependency theory from the late 1970s.

¹⁰ See Nixon’s “Address on the Energy Emergency,” November 7, 1973. Also cited in Ikenberry 106.

while also appealing to ideas about *self-reliance* and *self-sufficiency* within them.

In 2014 the Brookings Institution announced a new program before Congress that representatives called Project Interdependence. The specific context of Project Interdependence was advocacy for the repeal of the crude oil export ban that had been in place since the 1970s, but more generally the proposal illustrates the alternative logic to Project Independence. Charles Ebinger of Brookings illuminatingly argued that “Keeping the ban in place and attempting to manipulate policy to control a globally traded commodity with hopes that the US oil boom will lead the US to energy independence is a fallacy, as the US is part of the global market and therefore must participate in it” (Ebinger in Dec. 11 address to U.S. House Committee on Energy and Commerce). His argument is one for treating oil like any other commodity that circulates in complexly networked markets and no longer giving it special status and certain protections in U.S. policy. In other words, he makes a case for ideological consistency in U.S. policy that decries protectionism and promotes participation in globally networked markets. It would be tempting make an argument about a historical shift from the reactionary logic of independence in the ‘70s to the interdependence logic of today, but the two have coexisted since inception and the story is more complicated. Although “interdependence” had already become a buzzword in many circles in the 1970’s (Keohane and Nye, 228), the crises of 1973 and 1979 led many scholars, politicians, pundits, and other commentators to treat energy, i.e. oil, as an exception, as a strategic commodity too important for interdependence. In this way oil is understood as the “lifeblood” of modernity, a resource that is not governed by the “normal” laws of free trade and market exchange because of its importance for national security.

In the Keohane and Nye telling of this story, at the height of the Cold War “national security” had symbolic power such that its invocation could justify policy that ran against liberal

ideological assumptions (such as trade protectionism). But as the pressures of the Cold War slackened and the national security imperative diminished, the call became intellectually ambiguous, and could no longer justify foreign involvement or market intervention quite so easily (Keohane and Nye, 5-7). Yet this narrative does not hold so well for oil. First: in the context of 9/11 and the perceived threat of terrorism, the national security imperative has gained new traction in the United States in the last fifteen years. Second: oil's special association with the Middle East, emerging largely from a form of energy policy-trauma of the 1973 embargo and more recently from the common misperception that American oil purchases are indirectly funding terrorism, places national security squarely on the agenda and is reflected in the proliferation of numerous volumes and articles on energy security.

Yet there are many “strategic mineral commodities” that serve critical functions in the U.S. economy, many of which are imported to a far greater degree than oil, but which do not stir up the same sets of anxieties or garner much policy attention.¹¹ For much of the 20th Century, but especially from the '70s onwards, oil has been treated in policy circles as a special resource largely because of the capacity for wreaking havoc that the disruption of oil exchange entails. Price shocks and disruptions of supply have the capacity to cripple states' economies, transportation sectors, and militaries. It is for this reason that most states created strategic petroleum reserves after 1973 and began developing energy security programs. The conventional understanding of this strategic threat is that producer states are in possession of an “oil weapon” which they could deploy against consumer states at will.

¹¹ This paradox is in itself worthy of thorough examination but beyond the scope of this paper. The key questions would be: Why does oil garner special treatment relative to other strategic commodities? When did this practice emerge and what is the history of this “oil exceptionalism”? And how do we understand seemingly self-contradictory figures like Thomas Friedman who condemn dependence, advocate for energy independence, and simultaneously preach the values of globalization and free trade?

Does this “oil weapon” actually exist? Do producer states actually have the capacity to hurt their purchasers in significant ways? In the past few years some carefully researched scholarship has emerged that has begun to undercut the myth of the “oil weapon” that producing states are supposed to possess. Hughes and Long argue that the conventional wisdom of there being great risk in the coercive power of oil producers is wrong (Hughes and Long, 188). Rather, they conclude that the belief that oil-importing states are in a weak position relative to producing states is not only mistaken, but that the U.S. has a strong ability to impose significant costs on others, while, due to changes in global markets and the organization of central actors (especially the breakup of vertical integration), the potential for coercion has fallen. In other words: the “oil weapon” is a hollow threat guided by substantial misperception of other states’ abilities and desire to influence U.S. imports. So why the persistent overstatement of the threat of the oil weapon and the willingness of states to use it?¹²

A similarly critical perspective on vulnerability and the possibilities of disruption comes from Roger Stern in his dual critique of “oil scarcity ideology” and the “oil weapon.” Stern makes an historical argument about the Cold War which points to the exaggerations of both threats: predictions of peak oil and impending scarcity have been recurrent despite the failure of the predictions to materialize, and the “oil weapon” only presents a real threat if actors in the Middle East are understood to be irrational and willing to forfeit revenue from sales in order to harm the U.S. (Stern 2014, 41). This line of reasoning aligns well with Sebastien Herbreuth’s argument that the way being dependent on foreign oil figures in the American political imagination has deeply orientalist foundations that relate to broader ways of seeing the Middle

¹² An alternative explanation, which I suspect is correct but is beyond the scope of this paper, is that there are interests at work in lobbying and advertising that benefit from developing domestic energy sources and keeping trade barriers intact, so they exaggerate the threats posed by foreign supply.

East and its inhabitants (Herbstreuth, 2014).¹³ Overestimations of the oil-weapon threat rely on the presence of an imagined Middle-Eastern “other” as an irrational non-economic actor (or before that, the Soviets). During the Cold War the credibility of the “oil weapon” threat depended on severe overestimations of Soviet desire and capacity to pursue control of Middle East oil, especially that in Iran. In other words, both scarcity and the oil weapon have historically been misperceived and overstated in ways that encourage threat exaggeration and have justified aggressive foreign policy in attempts to ensure security of supplies.

Both of these explanations suggest that the U.S. is not as vulnerable to the disruption of foreign oil supplies as the advocates of energy independence would suggest. If the level of vulnerability is overstated, then the degree of dependence is also. Pure dependence is an exceptionally infrequent phenomenon and security discourses tend to overstate the level of threat posed by any level of dependence. What I will suggest is that, following Keohane and Nye, it is *asymmetries of interdependence* that matter more than a binary of dependence or independence, between which there is no clear line. This more nuanced approach allows for the distinction between sensitivity and vulnerability to factor in to the story.¹⁴ As they explain, “All too often, a high percentage of imports of a material is taken as an index of vulnerability, when by itself it merely suggests that sensitivity may be high” (Keohane & Nye, 13). In other words: the frequent discussion of vulnerability to oil disruption, i.e. the “oil weapon,” is likely both a conflation of terms and a rhetorical strategy of threat inflation that is likely a hangover from the oil shocks.

¹³ He asks: Why is dependency on Canada not a problem, and framed in terms of interdependence, but trade with the ME framed as dependence and perceived as particularly dangerous? In his analysis, the designation of relationships of “dependence” is related to larger discourses of Self and Other (Herbstreuth 2013, 26) in which Canadians figure as part of the the Western Self but Arabs figure as an unreliable and dangerous Other.

¹⁴ According to Keohane and Nye’s definitions, sensitivity refers to degrees of responsiveness in a given policy framework to external changes, and they cite the early 1970’s oil price shocks as an example of such sensitivity (Keohane & Nye, 10). Vulnerability on the other hand rests on the relative availability and costliness of alternatives (Keohane & Nye, 11), which, in the case of oil markets, happen to be abundant.

Each of these explanations suggests the systematic presence of *threat inflation* when it comes to foreign oil. I would like to suggest that this inflation is due in part to the history of Cold War politics and today the fear of radical Islamism, but also in part to the forms of rhetoric, images, and symbols that circulate around oil. The exaggerated debates about oil and its consequences feed what Daniel Kahneman and Jonathan Renshon have called “hawkish biases.” Their research in social psychology has suggested that biases in conflict situations tend to be “hawkish,” by which they mean that they tend to demonstrate a “propensity for suspicion, hostility and aggression in the conduct of conflict, and for less cooperation and trust when the resolution of a conflict is on the agenda” (Kahneman and Renshon, 79 in Thrall and Cramer)¹⁵. There are, of course, historical reasons for such biases to exist in the U.S. today. Jack Snyder points out that all the great empires of the 19th and 20th centuries had legitimate fears of disruptive attacks from “unruly peoples” along the empires’ turbulent frontiers (Snyder, 41 in Thrall and Cramer). Actors associated with OPEC or “rogue states” get framed as “unruly” by security experts and policy makers: they are understood as willing to take extreme and self-damaging action to hurt the U.S. for ideological reasons. They get framed as unpredictable and posing seemingly inescapable threats of disruption that escalate pervasive senses of fear, xenophobia, and isolationism. But fear of disruption of oil supplies is based on a common misunderstanding of the 1973 embargo: the embargo did not effectively cut off supplies of oil to the U.S. in any substantial way, but created a global price shock that interacted with domestic market rigidities (created by heavy regulation, import quotas, etc.) to produce a *sense of deprivation*.

To be more specific, three deeply interrelated fears that condition discourse on oil and energy security today: peak oil, foreign dependency and the “oil weapon,” and global

¹⁵ See also Kahneman and Renshon: “Why Hawks Win” <http://foreignpolicy.com/2009/10/13/why-hawks-win/>

warming/climate change. The peak oil issue has been recurrent since the 1920's, when the first wave of "oil scarcity ideology" swept through policy circles in the United States (Stern). Closely related to the peak oil issue, and heightened by the sense of impending struggle over the remaining resources, has been the fear of becoming dependent on and therefore subservient to a foreign power that controls access to critical resources. Then only relatively recently has the specter of global warming shown to be connected to fossil fuel consumption, but in that time it has come to haunt discussions about energy security. My argument here is that these three issues interact to produce a sense of impending crisis that makes the moralizing language of addiction and dependence have widespread appeal. Each of these fears is connected to particular visions of decline and catastrophe couched in terms of national decline, waning empire, American powerlessness, the collapse of "civilization", and apocalyptic destruction of the earth.¹⁶ The responses that grow from such a climate of fear and anxiety are amenable to dramatic rhetoric and moralistic politics, but both are significantly out-of-joint with the complex realities of what would need to be done to effectively address the problems.

My suggestion is that the rhetoric of energy independence is best understood in a much larger and older context as a wave of recurring independence rhetoric that appears regularly in response to perceived national security threats.¹⁷ Energy independence is one facet of a much larger set of American political attitudes that also play out in desires for sealing the borders to illicit trade, immigration, etc. This particular wave of national security rhetoric has emerged at

¹⁶ See, e.g. Stern p.28 section "We are terribly vulnerable"

¹⁷ Ideologies of independence are coded in America's founding documents and movements for nonimportation and non consumption have existed since the earliest years of the American Republic (see Gargarella 2010 p. 37, referencing Sandel 1996). Not only are such valuations encoded in the founding documents, but disputes over the "separateness," i.e. the particular qualities of dependence, were frequent in the American colonies in the century leading up to independence (Greene 1986, 10). *The early statesmen's fears were not only that imports from Britain would bring with them luxury and vices, but the relations of dependence that such trade would create would be productive of those vices, and that that dependence was in itself a vice.*

precisely the time when globalization has accelerated enormously and networked *interdependence* become the common parlance of liberal economists. The language of independence and vilification of dependence appears as a reaction to these changes in global political economy and fears that the United States as the core of capitalist growth may be losing its place of dominance in global markets.¹⁸

Addiction of the Body Politic

Concerns about dependence on foreign oil appeared in American political discourse around the same time as an amplification of domestic criticism directed at the welfare state and individuals who were perceived as dependent on it for social security. It was also at this moment that the War on Drugs was taking off addiction was figuring in the popular imagination in newly visible and demonized ways. In this section I suggest that both of these trends have implications for how the ideas of dependence and addiction get produced, develop meaning, and circulate in relation to oil.

In the mid 1990s the political theorist Nancy Fraser and historian Linda Gordon coauthored a short “genealogy of dependency” that explored various liberal conceptions of dependence by focusing primarily on poverty and the welfare state. Following their invocation of Bourdieu, I want to build on their claim that “Keywords typically carry unspoken assumptions and connotations that can powerfully influence the discourses they permeate—in part by constituting a *doxa*, or taken-for-granted commonsense belief that escapes critical scrutiny (Fraser and Gordon 1994, 310). At the core of their argument is the claim that “dependency” is

¹⁸ These fears are perhaps nowhere more clear than in Graetz’s concern that America’s dependence on Middle Eastern oil could be replaced by a different dependence on Chinese manufactured green energy technology (Graetz, 170). Friedman has expressed similar concerns, *passim*.

an ideological term (*ibid.*, 310), but also that meaning and moral valences cannot be contained within particular discursive fields. Deprecation of individuals' dependence or reliance on the welfare state, as well as individuals' addiction to various substances, carries over into understandings of national security, oil, and international trade. In my analysis, this argument holds true for the use of dependency and addiction: part of the taken-for granted commonsense is that dependence is a dangerous state of insecurity that poses a significant threat to the American public and the wellbeing of the state. This understanding applies both to security generally and oil in particular, but as I suggested earlier via Stern, Herbstreuth, and Hughes and Long, this commonsense is not entirely correct and the threats are exaggerated.

Fraser and Gordon's piece suggests that the vilification of dependence as a moral failing has roots in liberal notions of the individual and individuals' relations to others and the state. The identification of dependence as a condition that signals a degeneration of moral values, work ethic, etc. is a characteristic of liberal understandings of the individual which then get scaled up to the state and the level of interstate relations. Since Carter's statement about the 1970s energy crisis being the "moral equivalent of war" the American energy discourse has frequently invoked energy dependence as a moral failure on the part of the country. If the Nixon used the War on Drugs to capture a set of domestic moral concerns in the early '70s, by the end of the decade Carter was describing the energy crisis as the "moral equivalent of war" and energy independence as a moral imperative. In other words: the decade of the 1970s saw the infusion of moral discourse into energy policy vis-à-vis other concerns about dependence and addiction in the body politic.

If in liberal discourse the language of dependence involves an individualized moral critique, such that to be dependent is a state of moral failure, the language of addiction presents

an even stronger moral judgment. In the liberal mode of reasoning dependence has moral content insofar as it valorizes an ethic of self-reliance and decries its loss, but addiction carries a set of moral judgments that are more closely bound to economies of vice. Addiction suggests gluttony and failures of reason and the will; it suggests attachments to practices or substances that produce pleasure but are self-destructive. In short, the language of addiction involves more severe moralizing than the language of dependence. How then, to understand the relationship between the more technical “dependent on foreign oil” the popular refrain “addicted to oil”? What are the implications and consequences of using the language of addiction to talk about a relationship with oil? What is the relationship that “addiction” is describing?

There are two primary figurations of addiction in energy discourse. First is the idea that the U.S. as a whole is addicted to importing foreign oil. This idea underlies the soft-isolationism of those who promote American energy independence. Second is the idea that the world as a whole is addicted to oil consumption to fuel modern forms of life. This perspective underlies the environmentalist approach that advocates the elimination of fossil fuel consumption and hydrocarbon extraction.¹⁹ These two figurations and their supporting groups come together around the possibility that green energy might be a way to wean the U.S. off of both fossil fuels *and* foreign oil imports (hence the bipartisan alliances described at the start of this paper).

“Dependence” is already an imprecise term: what is the relationship that it captures? Is it a *feeling* of being dependent, or is there a quantifiable threshold at which an actor becomes dependent on some other entity? The lack of precision with dependence already presents a set of issues that IR scholars have addressed with various methods of understanding complex interdependence, etc. But with the language of addiction there is even less clarity and more

¹⁹ I have to thank Isaac Gabriel Salgado for suggesting the witticism “crack babies and ‘frack babies” in this context.

rhetorical flourish. Dependence suggests a structural dependency akin to the QWERTY phenomenon, but addiction suggests self-destructive *pleasure*. The addicted body is indeterminate, which encourages indiscriminate and excessive use of the metaphor. Who is the “we” or what is it that is addicted? Certain bureaucracies or institutions that rely on oil rents? The body politic that relies on oil to power its military forces? A culture that experiences freedom affectively and connected to automobility? A civilization in which membership is predicated on the ability to perform conspicuous displays of energy consumption? The world? This addiction metaphor frames perception and understanding in ways that have consequences for policy making. In other words, my concern is with what the framing of these issues in terms of addiction implies and what sorts of responses it licenses. What does the metaphor of addiction *do*? My contention is that most centrally, it feeds anxieties about dependence and valorizes independence in ways that have created a common sense or popular wisdom about oil that is out of touch with how it is produced, exchanged, and consumed.

In certain branches of constructivist IR theory, especially the “securitization theory” of the Copenhagen School, there is a well-established tradition of exploring the effects of representing political problems in the medical terms. David Campbell even draws a direct connection between how the production of sociomedical discourse that centers on pathologies of health/illness and normality/deviancy is often driven by *moral* concerns (Campbell 1998, 84). Although he is primarily concerned with the framing of political phenomena in terms of disease and contagion Campbell’s analysis is helpful in understanding the idea of addiction insofar as it draws out the moral dimension of sociomedical framing:

Representing perceived moral concerns and social dangers in medical terms has a number of consequences. Informed by a ‘received view’ of medical practice, it casts the danger as an aberration that deviates from the norm of health and threatens the integrity of the body or its habitual functions; it establishes a power relationship in which the authority making

the diagnosis occupies the position of a doctor vis-à-vis the patient, thereby reproducing the notion that the health (or security) of the larger population is dependent on the specialized knowledge of an elite; it renders complex problems simplistically as the symptoms of an alien infection that is external in origin; and it mandates (often violent) interventions as the appropriate course of action that will result in a cure (Campbell 1998, 84).

The representation of oil importation and consumption as addiction works similarly. The idea that importing foreign oil constitutes a habit of dependence and addiction casts the danger as an aberration that deviates from the norm of healthy self-sufficiency and obscures ways the US is necessarily and complexly involved with other countries for energy supply.²⁰ Most of the isolationist policies of seeking to become independent would have devastating effects on the US economy and foreign relations, and would not be as effective as proponents hope. Oil trades on a global market, which means that no state has as much control over the sources of its oil as discourses of dependence on ME oil would suggest. As for the consequence of establishing a power relationship vis-à-vis a diagnosis: they who diagnose the “oil addiction” establish their credentials via a statement of moral authority as much or more than by displaying any particular knowledge about oil or energy markets themselves. The consequence of rendering complex problems simplistically is that it obscures the complexities of the markets, which is one of the central challenges of studying energy today: few people actually understand how the markets work. Finally, the mandating of intervention to restore the “normality” of energy markets is characteristic of both American foreign policies in the late 20th and early 21st Centuries and the forms of intervention that the state has pursued in domestic markets. It was precisely the rigidity of these market regulations (price controls, import quotas) that exacerbated the effects of the 1970’s oil shocks and rendered the U.S. market unable to respond effectively to global changes.

²⁰ Just as people are always more dependent on one another (interdependent) than most liberal ethics of individualism and self-reliance would have one believe.

But there are also important differences between Campbells' rendering of sociomedical discourse and the ways that the metaphor of addiction circulates. While Campbell is concerned with the discourse of disease because it conveys the sense that the disease is always from somewhere else (Campbell, 86), the discourse of addiction conveys a sense the problem is somehow internal, one of morals and a lack of resolve. The dangerous substance comes from elsewhere (the desert, the exotic spaces of unreason) but the reasons for consumption are internal. In the realm of foreign policy, when the problem of "Arab oil" is represented as a foreign threat, the cause is frequently identified as poor policy choices, complacency, and a lack of vision on the part of American policymakers and diplomats. In the realm of environmental concerns, the problem gets cast as the lack of foresight in the depletion of finite resources, lack of responsibility for the wellbeing of future generations, and the triumph of short-term over long-term interests. In other words, the discourse of addiction treats threats as foreign but traces their origins to past mistakes by American leaders.

In this sense, the entire discourse of addiction is closely bound up with American fears about waning hegemony or international influence more generally. In the 1970s Keohane and Nye offered an illuminating prediction of this cacophony of discordant attempts to manage a sense of decline. In commenting on general issues of statehood and foreign policy, they suggested that "it is quite plausible to expect an inconsistent and incoherent pattern of involvement and withdrawal. Isolationist policies will be tempting as responses to the frustrations in dealing with a world no longer under hegemonic control" (Keohane and Nye, 208). The various projects for American energy independence should be understood as one instance of these isolationist policies.

Fear and Moral Panic

Oil has come to occupy a special place in various American imaginaries that are deeply shaped by orientalism, visions of empire, security, and independence/autonomy. In this final section I want to zoom-out from this particular analysis of oil and energy security, and think about how the concerns that emerge from these issues articulate with a related yet different specter: global warming. Specifically, I want to suggest that global warming compounds with anxieties about peak oil and dependence to create a tone of *moral panic*. Although perhaps none of these fears presents strong enough concerns to generate such panic on their own, a substantial amount of threat inflation and the compounding of the three issues crystallizes a pervasive sense of looming disaster and severe threat. The concept of moral panic most frequently appears in the context of economies of vice: illicit drugs, sex, alcohol, and generally in issues of social deviancy—precisely those that draw concerns about addiction. But today it also captures a certain set of attitudes that have developed around this particular constellation of concerns related to energy and the environment. Because the discourses of addiction and dependence frame these issues as specifically internal and moral problems (foreign threats yes, but ones that have manifested because of failings of the self), they constitute a phenomenon akin to moral panic. Furthermore, the lens of moral panic helps explain why peak oil, foreign dependence, and global warming have come to constitute a sense of crisis and of an emergency situation that justifies exceptional security measures and facilitates moralistic politics.

The moralizing that emanates from statements about dependence and addiction, while rhetorically persuasive, makes for shallow analysis, unclear assignation of responsibility, and exaggerated rhetoric. My use of “moralism” follows Raymond Geuss, for whom moralism in politics is the view that the distinction between good and evil is clear and easy to discern to all

those of good will, that is, to all those who are not themselves morally corrupt (Geuss 2010, 32). Moralism has become characteristic the politics of oil in the United States since at least Carter’s presidency and is most clearly illustrated by the language of addiction.²¹ The problem is that the distinction between good and evil is *not* always clear, and the claim that it *is* clear, presents an accusation against the polemical target as being either morally corrupt or lacking good will. Importing foreign oil is not necessarily bad or dangerous, but the energy independence advocates rely on an impulsive reaction to the idea of dependency rather than reasoned arguments or nuanced understanding of oil supply chains.

A politics centered around this kind of moralizing “mirror[s] the structure of certain emergency situations” (Geuss 2010, 32), but my contention is that on closer examination, the three primary fears that underlie oil politics today—peak oil, foreign dependence, and global warming—*do not* present this kind of emergency situation, or at least not in the way in which they are often presented. There are of course problems with supporting militarized authoritarian governments through oil contracts, but importing some oil from such sources does not pose a threat or constitute a crisis in the way that hysteria about the “oil weapon” suggests. Thinking moralistically in terms of addiction promotes xenophobic attitudes not just towards people, but towards things (fear of Saudi oil coursing through American gas pumps and infecting a body politic that is supposed to be self-reliant) *and* it demonizes the people who provide these foreign/alien substances. In other words, the moralizing language of addiction, which carries over into the discourse of dependence, demonizes the sources of supply. Like the drug-dealer who is targeted as the originator of addictive substances, the suppliers of oil to the U.S. become singled out in ways that promote xenophobia and hawkish foreign policy. That said, I am not

²¹ The aforementioned Carter speech about reducing energy independence being the “moral equivalent of war” is paradigmatic of these moralistic positions.

trying to excise moral considerations, but to argue that the moral concerns of addiction and dependency are the wrong ones to focus on.

In this sense there are two different registers in which moralism operates in energy discourse. On the one hand is that of the energy independence rhetoricians who decry dependence and exaggerate the threat of foreign import. On the other is an empirically grounded examination of the destructive effects of oil extraction and consumption on communities, the environment, and local economies. This first form of moralism I have been trying to condemn throughout this paper, while the second I support wholeheartedly.

Geuss can provide one last word of guidance. He suggests that “the most valuable kinds of political imagination are precisely those that depend on both empathy and an ability to envisage concrete changes to the present situation rather than on direct moral reaction to the surface properties of events (Geuss 2010, 33). It is easy to make broad statements condemning the consumption of oil and the “oil complex” (or what Nader has called the “energy establishment”) that facilitates extraction, processing, and consumption after major events like oil spills, facility explosions, wars, etc. And these events should be condemned, along with the forces that produced them. But such events are also easy polemical targets, and it is easy to moralize in anguish over them, but too often these are mostly “moral reaction[s] to the surface properties of events” and not an enduring pursuit to change the underlying relations that make them possible. The future of American energy policy research needs to be directed not so much at vague concepts such as dependence and addiction, the inadequacy of which I have tried to demonstrate here, but at issues of subsurface property rights in the U.S., the relationship between states and MNCs/TNCs *in North America*, and the modes of financialization that are facilitating dynamic change in the energy industry.

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