Producing Petroculture: Ads, Automobility, and the "American Way of Life", 1929-1939

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Abstract

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John Conor Kilroy

This study focuses on the cultural construction of oil in the United States that occurred during the Great Depression to reexamine accepted historical narratives on race, class, and gender. Though it is present in thousands of products and represented in countless visual forms that we buy and see today, oil has paradoxically become a difficult thing to grasp and concept to represent historically; oil is both *physical substance* and *social material* that has defied adequate materialization in scholarship. Of particular interest to this study are the intersections between the symbolic economy surrounding oil use and automobile culture, and how both reflected a particular discourse that defined "American ways of life" and who was deserving of it. Critically, this study examines how automobile ownership and automobility reconfigured particular middle-class imaginaries during the 1930s. A discursive analysis of print advertisements from this time, therefore, provides unique historical insight into the peculiarities of middle-class American lifestyles developed by and premised on the combustion of oil (petroculture), and why today many Americans are loathe to disentangle themselves and their definitions of life from it. Chapter one explores the development of American consumer culture during the early twentieth century that normalized the centrality of oil in human life. Chapter two discusses how and why New Deal policies created societal institutions to provide Americans with "modern" standards of living premised on the mass consumption of oil. Chapter three analyzes how automobile advertisements became the single largest factor promoting petro-capital life in which social, gendered, and racial division were (re)produced and legitimated via acts of oil consumption and the exercise of class power. In so doing, automobile advertisements re-envisioned the aesthetics of life through representations of mobility, freedom, distinction, and modernity; the most prominent fantasies within white, middle-class consumer society mediated and enabled by oil energy.

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It gives me immense pleasure to thank each person who has helped me produce this thesis, even if this feeling is tempered by a nagging worry that I might forget someone. If I do, please know how much I have appreciated your guidance and take assurance from the fact that you have not only illuminated the pages below but their author as well.

First and foremost, I am indebted to my thesis supervisor, Dr. Wilson Jacob. It was through Dr. Jacob's continued support and precise feedback that I was able to not only conceive of this project but be able to articulate what are in my opinion some of the more nuanced and infinitely more appealing ideas surrounding oil and culture in the United States. Moreover, it was because of Dr. Jacob's unique insight into and brilliant instruction on the histories of violence and oil, that the historian within me was awoken. For that, no amount of thanks can be properly given.

History is sometimes a daunting discipline to understand, let alone write. Dr. Penney's course on historiography was instrumental in framing this study and, more importantly, gave me the theoretical knowledge with which to make History not only approachable but comprehensible. Dr. Razlogova's course on historical non-fiction writing, likewise, equipped me with the tools to take the swirling mass of thoughts in my head and fashion them into a coherent and what I hope is an interesting piece of history. I am honored to have Drs. Matthew Penney and Elena Razlogova chair my defence.

I must also thank Drs. Nora Jaffary and Simon-Pierre Lacasse, both of whom encouraged me to apply for graduate school to continue my intellectual journey. Without their steady guidance and kindness, I would not have had the confidence to attempt this project.

It cannot be overstated that a great teacher does more than impart knowledge but inspires and provokes change. In this sense, I owe a debt of gratitude to Drs. Max Bergholz and Barbara

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A special thanks to archivist Julie Botnick at the National Museum of American History is also in order. Her professionalism and forbearance when helping an archival greenhorn, such as myself, went above and beyond her official duties.

Though this thesis is a product of collaboration, producing it – that is, the time it took to sit, focus, and write – was a solitary endeavor. Yet at the end of each day, when I left a murky past to reemerge in the florid present, it was you, Catherine, who grounded me. I appreciate you.

Dedication

This work is dedicated to my children.

May you always engage with the world critically and appreciate who you are.

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"California Incline," Santa Monica, California (2015). Courtesy of *Flickr*.

Introduction

To me, this photograph depicts the Los Angeles everyone likes to imagine – sun-baked, beach accessible, and warm. You can almost feel the intensity of sun beating down on the road, smell the ocean breeze tinged with salt and gasoline fumes, and hear the cacophonous rumble and screech of cars. Known as the California Incline, or just "The Incline", this road leads to one of the most traveled highways in the United States, the Pacific Coast Highway (State Route 1/ Highway 1). Motorcyclists, school and city buses, campers, RVs, SUVs, family vans, coupés, hard tops, convertibles, and many other highway-regulated motor vehicles, freely navigate this jewel of the

Golden State. Winding its way north along 644 miles of scenic coastline, the Pacific Coast Highway was completed in 1934 and stands as an asphalt metaphor for how oil, as both substance and social material, is a difficult concept to grasp within American culture.[1] Although the photograph captures just an instant in time, the cars seem to have a sense of momentum to them, albeit relaxed and listless. Perhaps, it is because the cars' occupants are enchanted by the view; it is hard not to imagine everyone rolling down windows, opening sunroofs, or retracting convertible tops, to take advantage of such a cloudless and picturesque day.

This Los Angeles, a city where thousands of miles of asphalted roads snake along the ocean, slice through mountains, or are choked with bumper-to-bumper traffic, is where I grew up in the 1990s. It was (and still is) a city where existence and sociality were narrated by and revolved around ceaseless automobility. I never considered myself lazy or environmentally careless when I commuted by car to the nearest grocery store, indeed I felt a certain sense of liberation through and connection with my car. It was more than a machine; it was an extension of myself. I washed it, gave it fuel and a name, patted the dashboard when I felt it needed encouragement, took it to a mechanic went it "felt" unwell, and even spoke to it (though only when driving alone). Moreover, there were little to no alternatives: buses were intermittent; the subway was inaccessible; sidewalks were almost never built; and bicycle lanes, consigned to the shoulders of roads by a society that valued oil- over muscle-powered mobility, were terrifying at best. It is no wonder then that Angelinos came to choose the personal automobile as the safest, most comfortable and efficient means of travel. For the most part, we never questioned whether we should be driving (unless we were in traffic) or that driving was anything other than the freedom to go where we pleased when we pleased. Indeed, since the weather was nearly always the same, what constituted small talk

[1] Heather Millar, "The Ups and Downs of Highway 1," *Smithsonian* 30, no. 3 (1999): 48.

amongst my family and friends was arguing about the best and fastest commuting routes or which gas stations had the cheapest prices.[2] We reveled in our personalized mobilities, and the geographies of driving largely consumed our imaginations. As far as I was concerned, the automobile was technological progress and comfort made manifest, and any consideration of returning to a Los Angeles where commuting by foot, horse, or Red Car was the predominant means of mobility was a moot point. That carless Los Angeles was dead and buried, and over its resting place was built the 405, 101, 10, 5, and 1 highways.

It never occurred to a sixteen-year-old me to question my assumptions, and it has taken me over twenty years to critically engage with them. I had lived in a society where people daily immersed themselves in the wild excesses of oil energy. The challenge then was how to grapple with the ways in which oil has shaped American subjectivities and intersubjectivities – how imaginations, senses, and expectations of being fully human were played out in everyday hydrocarbon rites. Driving emblematized who we were as a modern people, but it was also where our culture was embodied – our bodies grew accustomed to exhilaration of speed, our senses acclimated to the spew of exhaust, the feel of the steering wheel, the sight of thousands of symbols and signs that directed our movement, and our imaginations ran wild with the capabilities of our oil-fuelled mobilities. But how and why did the automobile and its infrastructures – the roads, highways, freeways, gas stations, drive thrus and ins, roadside motels and hotels, parking lots (O, so many parking lots!), automobile and tire dealerships, door-to-door delivery services, repair and aftermarket shops (the popular television shows *West Coast Customs*, *Pimp My Ride*, and *Street Customs* come to mind), and the thousands of other automobile-related industries – come to define our sense of selves and the possibilities associated with modern American life? If our modernity

[2] For more information on what this small talk looked like, see the SNL sketch "The Californians". Keep in mind, our discussions were held unironically. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LhYPycqRg0k.

is a product of oil, then why is this fact so underrepresented in art, literature or dominant critical understandings of modernism? What does it mean to *see* oil culturally, and in doing so give epistemic coherence to our oil ontologies? What if the most problematic relation to oil today is not political or economic, per se, but the way it informs social and cultural life that allows people to imagine themselves as free individuals and consider their rise in prosperity and liberation from work separate from, but nonetheless increasingly reliant on, oil energy?

The commuters in the above photo are all participants in the cultural construction of oil. They are caught up in the momentum of automobility, of the unimpeded forward movement produced by the power of oil refinement and combustion. Each driver performs a sophisticated act in a modern energy system that is their stage, aided by props that are serenaded and savored in accordance with an aesthetic code that values movement over fixity. Compared to the slow, discombobulated, and teeth-chattering modes of transportation like the horse-drawn carriage that used to populate American cities, automobiles are fast, sleek and smooth, and drivers calm and in control of their own machines. Provided by a strange combination of alloys, leather, synthetics, rubber, and most importantly the potential energy of oil, automobility has become inseparable from and a central component in their experience of human and natural worlds. Their automobiles place technology and the power of energy squarely in the middle of their lives which are thus transformed by the ways oil has redefined movement and extended the sensory experience in the United States. If there is enough gasoline, then automobiles dominate the spatial imaginary of freedom so central to an "American way of life", one that lodges petroleum, according to Mathew Huber, "into an imagery of progress defined as speed and [oil] power to traverse space."[3] Yet this embodiment of oil energy neither begins nor ends with the pleasures of the automobile; nor is it

[3] Matthew Huber, *Lifeblood: Oil, Freedom, and the Forces of Capital* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 76.

limited to the liberated imagery of automobility. While such things shape our imaginaries, they represent the façade of a much more profound phenomenology of American "ways of life", configured and made present through the combustion of carbonized lifeforms from the prehistoric past.

This "American way of life", a life intimately tied to the use of oil-based commodities, was shaped by a culture of mass consumerism developed during the 1930s. Of particular interest to this thesis is how and why the "American way of life" was uniquely represented in popular advertisements during this time.[4] The sociocultural processes that helped to make oil an omnipresent substance and social material within modern-American, consumerist life began with the introduction of New Deal policies that attempted to rescue American capitalism from the throes of the Great Depression.[5] As a result, the politics and struggles that produced the New Deal ushered in a dramatic material transformation of the standard of life and living for millions. If not explicitly, this transformation centered on oil.[6] Indeed, President Franklin Roosevelt mobilized the power of this "cheap energy" to reconfigure and systematize standards of living based on his notion of "the abundant life", a vision of life characterized by prosperity and freedom and materialized through the accumulation of oil commodities.[7]

Developing alongside "American ways of life" contingent on oil use was the propaganda of consumerism largely represented by printed advertisements beginning in the 1930s.[8] Just as the

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[4] For a comprehensive history on the development of advertising in the United States that preceded but fully matured during this time, in addition to how advertisements transformed American perceptions of middle-class life, see James D. Norris, *Advertising and the Transformation of American Society, 1865-1920* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990).
[5] Matthew Huber, *Lifeblood*, *xx*, 29-30.
[6] Daniel Yergin, *The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money and Power* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991), 6.
[7] Waldemar Kaempffert, "Power for the Abundant Life," *New York Times*, 23 August 1936.
[8] For a more nuanced understanding of propaganda consumerism, or "capital realism", in relation to advertisements during the 1920s and 30s, and how the advertising trade appealed to the social, cultural and ethical activities of Americans with disposable income, see Stuart Ewan, *Captains of Consciousness: Advertising and the Social Roots of the Consumer Culture*, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976) and Christopher

effects of consumerist American life cannot be understood outside of their social, cultural, and ethical contexts, the effects of mass advertising during the 1930s cannot be understood outside of the tastes, desires, and needs of the American public that were reproduced in advertisements and which ad agencies endorsed and helped standardize. While the principal purpose of advertisements was to vend a particular commodity, advertising tried to inculcate consumption as a transformative process that stood in opposition to and served as an antidote for personal incompetence, class inequities, and social malaise. As a result, the conception of the "good" life, through which Americans began to define themselves and to relate to each other and the natural world, was increasingly bound to patterns of consumption that addressed the dilemmas of living with a single, all-purpose solution: buy something. My thesis, therefore, primarily examines advertisements commissioned by automobile industries during this period of intense economic and social change. Of particular interest are the intersections between the symbolic economy surrounding oil use and cultural production in the United States expressed through advertisements, and how both reflected a particular middle-class discourse surrounding abundant life and who was deserving of it.

In its liquid form oil is only but the raw material fuelling the much larger energy regime of "petromodernity", according to Stephanie LeMenager in *Living Oil*. In other words, modern life is based upon the consumption and representation of "cheap energy systems made possible by oil."[9] The everyday experience of modern Americans is energized by and immersed within oil – they live with it, breath it, and register it with their senses. Suspended within this culture of oil, American society is shot through with largely unexamined aesthetic values and representational

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Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: Norton, 1979).

[9] Stephanie LeMenager, *Living Oil: Petroleum Culture in the American Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 67.

forms that have historical consequences.[10] Indeed, in a book review of Abdelrahman Munif's *Cities of Salt*, Amitav Ghosh wonders why the "oil encounter" has "proved so imaginatively sterile" in modern literature.[11] What Ghosh describes as oil's "slipperiness", the ways in which it "tends to trip fiction into incoherence" evokes the great paradox that surrounds American imaginaries of oil: it is everywhere at once and nowhere, crucial yet largely unacknowledged, an object of social distinction and a subject of regulation.[12] But what if narratives of modern history made oil's energy and materiality their central focus? Would previous ways of knowing and our understanding of history change if we acknowledged how our human relationships to the man-made and natural worlds are mediated by oil consumption?

By focusing on the cultural construction of oil in the United States, both the ways its energy exerts pressure on culture and how culture exerts pressure on energy systems, this thesis intends to reexamine, indeed complicate, accepted historical narratives on race, class, and gender. The economics of American oil consumerism, I argue, began in the 1930s, and was shaped by a cultural politics of exclusion, wherein ad agencies and oil companies were influenced by white, middle-class male attitudes, preferences, and perspectives on what constituted the ideal life and who had the right to enjoy its privileges. This ideal "American way of life" was predicated on automobile ownership and individual entitlements to oil, a substance and material that became the predominant medium through which certain Americans began to not only re-envision the aesthetics of what it

[10] LeMenager, *Living Oil*, 6.
[11] Amitav Ghosh, "Petrofiction: The Oil Encounter and the Novel," *New Republic* (2 March 1992): 30.
[12] Ibid., 30-31. Ghosh is specifically referring to oil's saturation of the infrastructure of modernity in the United States that has paradoxically obfuscated its cultural representation in American literature. Ghosh claims that a literature reflecting oil's great influence – what he terms the 'oil encounter' – never materialized and consequently no "Great American Oil Novel" has been produced precisely because oil "reeks of unavoidable overseas entanglements, a worrisome foreign dependency, economic uncertainty, risky and expensive military enterprises; of thousands of dead civilians and children and all the troublesome questions that lie buried in their graves."

meant to be modern but reinforce social, gendered, and racial hierarchies. A discursive analysis of print advertisements from the 1930s that aestheticized the transformative powers of automobility, therefore, provides considerable and unique historical insight into the peculiarities of middle-class American lifestyles developed by and premised on the consumption of oil, and why today Americans are loathe to disentangle themselves and their definitions of life from it.

I focus on the personal automobile and how its representation in advertisements during the 1930s reflected interpretations of "American ways of life", for three reasons.[13] First, by the early twentieth century, the increasing quantity and evolving techniques of ad agencies made advertising a significant factor in the nation's social, cultural, and ethical consciousness, simultaneously reinforcing the values of mass consumption and being reinforced by forms of identity politics in favor of those values.[14] To encourage mass consumption, companies appealed to and helped reshape contemporaneous concepts of the "good life" and began to target middle-income white families as autonomous institutions, whose members expressed their ideologies, personal liberty, and sexuality through the consumption of commodities.[15] "The goal of advertising," argues Arthur Berger in *Ads, Fads, and Consumer Culture*, "was not only to sell products but also to *create* consumers" who adopted and reproduced the tastes and preference of the people or groups they identified with.[16] Second, the personal automobile mechanized and "liberated" American mobility and work. Mileage and time, once prohibitive hurdles for muscle-powered mobility and labor,

[13] By personal automobiles, I mean single-occupant or single-family automobiles. Before the 1930s, automobile owners were just as likely to carpool to share the cost of gasoline or use their vehicles as a means of employment, resembling a form of proto ride sharing that pre-existed the likes of Lyft or Uber. Charles P. Hobbs, *The Hidden History of Transportation in Los Angeles* (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2014), 129-30.

[14] Philip Gold, *Advertising Politics, and American Culture: From Salesmanship to Therapy* (New York: Paragon House, 1987), 25.

[15] Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920-1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 13; Ewan, *Captains of Consciousness*, 131-32.

[16] Arthur Asa Berger, *Ads, Fads, and Consumer Culture: Advertising's Impact on American Character and Society* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2020), 226, emphasis added.

suddenly became irrelevant as more and more Americans relied on fuel-powered machines. As Peter Hitchcock poignantly states, the overwhelming presence and significance of petroleum-based products became "naturalized within cherished ideas of American life" and living, so much so that the ideological conditions through which people began to understand the natural and built world were premised upon the basic assumptions of petroculture.[17] Third, particular "American ways of life", developed by New Deal policies, visualized through advertisements, and predicated on automobility, were erected on the basis of exclusion. The ability and impulse to buy and own a privatized parcel of property – the single-family, suburban house – was inextricably linked to white America's newfound freedoms associated with automobility.[18]

Analyzing the aesthetics of advertisements from this time – that is, why advertisers chose and how consumers interpreted particular images and messages within advertisements – provides critical insight into how certain groups of individuals within affluent societies consumed as a form of self-expression. While many of the advertisements that I have analyzed do appeal to the quality or price of certain oil-based goods as a selling point, the majority consider what the brand or product they are trying to vend communicates – what kind of self the product expresses. As Deborah Cameron and Ivan Panović suggest, in their book *Working with Written Discourse*, the discursive analysis of advertisements, both the way they sell products and the "way they sell ideas, beliefs, and ideologies that are not often apparent", is a productive way to examine how people consumed oil to aspire to or affirm their belonging within certain social groups.[19] In short, the advertisements presented in this thesis offered themselves as guides to personal expression and

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[17] Peter Hitchcock, "Oil in an American Imaginary," *New Formations* 69, no. 69 (2010): 81-98.
[18] Alyssa Katz, *Our Lot: How Real Estate Came to Own Us* (NY: Bloomsbury, 2009), 5-7. For an insightful history on the development of the first suburbs in America, including the infamous Levittown, see James T. Patterson, *Grand Expectations: The United States, 1945-1974* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).
[19] Deborah Cameron and Ivan Panović, *Working with Written Discourse* (New York: Sage Publications, 2014), 73.

social belonging via the consumption of oil.[20] This developmental process by which oil commodities and their consumption mediated American's affective relation to the world, or petroculture, not only galvanized the automobile's transcendence from mode of transportation to an embodied form of freedom but created narrative forms that naturalized automobility as a social order. As Allan Stoekl argues in *Bataille's Peak*, "all is mediated through the automobile: everyone derives meaning of their lives through it: as a status marker, as simulacrum of the freedom movement and consumption … as the timelessness of a religion shared by all."[21]

The romanticization of the automobile as "self" and driving as a "right" – of the shared American desire for subjective autonomy – is a common narrative that appears throughout many forms of American petroculture.[22] This dynamic aestheticization of political expression and personal intimacy with the objects of oil became especially pronounced in automobile advertisements during the 1930s that showcased automobiles, often with a lone driver, speeding

[20] Marilyn Kern-Foxworth, *Aunt Jemima, Uncle Ben, and Rastus: Blacks in Advertising, Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow* (Westport, CT.: Greenwood Press, 1994), 44-5.
[21] Allan Stoekl, *Bataille's Peak: Energy, Religion, and Postsustainability* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 184.
[22] For a more detailed explanation on American automobility and autonomy, see Loren Lomasky, "Autonomy and Automobility," *The Independent Review* 2, no. 1 (1997): 5-28; Mimi Sheller, "Automotive Emotions: Feeling the Car," *Theory, Culture, Society* 21, no. 4/5 (2004): 221-42; and Jane Holtz Kay, *Asphalt Nation: How the Automobile Took Over America and How We Can Take It Back* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1997).

Figure 1. "The Great Smokies are mountains to us ... but molehills to the Lincoln-Zephyr." Advertisement by N W Ayer & Son for *The New Yorker* (1936). Courtesy of Smithsonian, National Museum of American History.

through a scenic countryside or traversing imposing landscapes. Advertisements, such as Figure 1, are demonstrative of what Michael Malouf terms "petro-individualism": the "psychological identification with automobiles" that give us the freedom to go wherever we want, whenever we want that normalizes our reliance on oil energy.[23] The aesthetics of automobile ownership in advertisements, therefore, reflect the broader materialistic virtues of consumption inherent within American petroculture that have both an economic and social effect: they generate revenue for automobile companies and emphasize existing feelings toward life; they are idealized renderings of the "liberated" American whose automobility imbues them with the freedom of choice and characteristic of a unique cultural programming necessary to both inculcate and understand such imaginaries.[24]

[23] Michale Malouf, "Behind the Closet Door: Pixar and Petro-Literacy," in *Petrocultures: Oil, Politics, Culture*, eds. Wilson Sheena, Adam Carlson, and Imre Szeman (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017), 142.

[24] Americans are exposed to more advertising than people in any other society, according to *Statista*, a data and business marketing firm. Total advertisement spending in the United States (digital and print) by 2023 reached the $350 billion mark, outperforming the next twelve countries combined. "Advertising – United States," *Statista*, accessed 4 October 2024, https://www.statista.com/outlook/amo/advertising/united-states.

Jean Baudrillard argued that in modern consumer societies, such as the United States, the act of purchasing was not only to be enjoyed but celebrated as a civic duty. He writes in *The Consumer Society*:

> One of the strongest proofs that the principle and finality of consumption is not enjoyment or pleasure is that that is now something which is forced upon us, something institutionalized, not as a right or a pleasure but as the duty of the citizen … Consumerist man regards enjoyment as an obligation; he sees himself as an enjoyment and satisfaction business. He sees it as his duty to be happy, loving, adulating/adulate, charming/charmed, participative, euphoric and dynamic.[25]

It was an American's duty to have fun, and they accomplished this task, to a large degree, by accruing product knowledge and an understanding of how particular goods, when purchased, conferred a higher degree of social standing within contemporary consumer culture. Purchasing and driving an oil-built and operated automobile, I argue, was the paradigmatic expression of middle-class America's civic duty, whereby petrochemical wants and needs were translated into petrocultural fealty and enjoyment.

As many scholars have noted, middle-class American desires to move from urban to suburban households were informed by their perception of the city as a site of filth, vice, and social decay.[26] The geographies of suburbia, outside populated urban centers, dispersed, and typically accessible only by personal automobile, as a result became both idyllic refuge for millions of middle-class, primarily white, American families who, Kevin Kruse argues, wished to escape the squalor of

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[25] Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures* (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 1998), 80.
[26] See, for example, Robert Beauregard, *Voices of Decline: The Postwar Fate of US Cities* (London: Routledge, 2002); Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (London: Verso, 1990) and *Prisoners of the American Dream: Politics and Economy in the History of the American Working Class* (London: Verso, 1986); Arnold R. Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago, 1940-1960* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983); Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton, NJ.: Princeton University Press, 1996).

urbanity and erect "racial buffer zones" that demarcated white from non-white living spaces.[27] Furthermore, automobile advertisements utilized a gendered vocabulary that mirrored a cultural impulse to represent automobiles as women and women as automobiles, and thus equally and interchangeably, as commodities: objects to be bought. In this sense, as Edward Madden in "Cars are Girls" has argued, "this reversible metaphorization [attests to] the traffic in women [that] may mark the sociosymbolic relations between men … that in many ways structure society."[28] More specifically, the representation of women as automobiles and automobiles as women marks both as "objects" derived from, sustained by, and dependent on oil industries. As such, this thesis begins to consider the specific ways in which American petroculture, the cultural system that derived meanings of the natural and built world in the context of twentieth-century oil use, reflected how a predominantly white, masculinist middle class felt about and in automobiles that reinforced their expectations toward racial segregation and gender performativity. While the automobile and the liberative potential of oil energy created a revolutionary force for lower-class workers, non-whites, and women during the twentieth century, such drastic changes to the stability of white, middle-class families and their perceptions of social harmony created, argues Ray W. Sherman in 1927 issue of *Motor*, a threat "to yesterday's order of things."[29] The social appropriation of the automobile within the United States thus threatened to destabilize established categories of class, race, and gender that generated a backlash and an attempt to restore a certain hegemonic order,

[27] Kevin M. Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton, NJ.: Princeton University Press, 2005), 12. For more information on the specific language used in discriminatory housing advertisements within the United States before and after 1968, see Ian Kennedy, et al., "Racialized Discourse in Seattle Rental Ad Texts," *Social Forces* 99, no. 4 (2021).
[28] Edward Madden, "Cars are Girls: Sexual Power and Sexual Panic in Stephen King's *Christine*," in *Imagining the Worst: Stephen King and the Representation of Women*, eds. Kathleen Margaret Lant and Theresa Thompson (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1998), 143.
[29] As quoted by Virginia Scharff, *Taking the Wheel Women and the Coming of the Motor Age* (New York: Free Press, 1991), 117.

that of the white supremacist now in middle class form, through a discursive regime that represented and fashioned the respectable and modern white, middle-class male automobile owner.

This thesis primarily engages with two bodies of secondary literature: the histories of oil and advertisements in the United States. While the history of oil and consumerism has been examined through the lens of popular culture, most of these histories either stop short of creating a critical framework to map the complex and often contradictory ways in which oil had come to be positioned in public imaginaries or ignore altogether middle-class identity politics.[30] The novelty of this project is that it brings together both literatures to analyze primary sources that reveal the 1930s was marked by a tense dialectic of abundance and poverty echoed in an unique American oil culture of triumphalism and oppression, economic enrichment and immiseration, and human liberation versus gendered and racial exclusion. Moreover, by examining how this dialectic was driven by middle-class American imaginaries of standards of living and the "abundant life" and how oil ads appealed to these fantasies, we can begin to complicate previous interpretations of oil's role in the United States as either a material foisted upon the public by titans of industry to produce exceptional wealth or "cursed" commodity violently pursued by US politicians to ensure American supremacy.

If we are going to understand the transformative powers of oil in the United States more fully, then we must appreciate how and why oil held (and continues to hold) its significance within the American public's imagination as a result of social and historical narratives and processes that enabled its extraction, and which shaped the cultural forms, experiences, and expectations of life

[30] See, for example, LeMenager, *Living Oil*; Sara Stanford-McIntyre, Rachel Lutz, and Robert Lifset, eds, *American Energy Cinema* (Morgantown, WV.: West Virginia University Press, 2023); Ellen Lupton, et al, *Graphic Design in the Mechanical Age: Selections from the Merrill C. Berman Collection* (New Haven, CT.: Yale University Press, 1998); Jonathan Day, *Robert Frank's The Americans: The Art of Documentary Photography* (Bristol: Intellect, 2011).

within which petroleum circulated.[31] Yet, some of the earliest literature on oil in the United States emerged as a political response to waning US hegemony in global oil production, particularly in Latin American and West Asian markets.[32] This scholarship was primarily an industry-focused, and in many cases overtly triumphalist, assessment of the rise and development of oil capitalism, highlighting American exceptionalism and delegating oil to a peripheral role within larger histories of Western industry.[33] Furthermore, being mostly biographical in nature, these studies treated oil as a disembodied material, a "thing" that was "discovered" by entrepreneurial wildcatters who personified the American success story.[34] Oil (and indeed, energy more generally), in these cases, has largely been examined as an external input into our sociocultural systems and histories, that is, as a material resource kneaded into a social form that pre-existed it, rather than the other way around.

By the 1990s historical interest shifted to the political economy surrounding Americans' addiction to oil, rather than focus solely on the "Great Men" of industry.[35] Here I speak of authors

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[31] Imre Szeman, "System Failure: Oil, Futurity, and the Anticipation of Disaster," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 106, no. 4 (2007): 806-11.

[32] Mexico was one of the first countries to nationalize oil in 1938, followed by Iran (1951), Brazil (1953), Iraq (1961), Egypt (1962), Argentina (1963), Peru (1968), and Bolivia (1969), depriving American oil companies' direct oversight over production and transportation. Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil (*New York: Verso, 2011), 173.

[33] See for example Charles W. Hamilton, *Americans and Oil in the Middle East* (Houston: Gulf Publishing Company, 1962); and Harold Francis Williamson, *The American Petroleum Industry* (Evanston, IL.: Northwestern University Press, 1959).

[34] Gerald D. Nash, "Oil in the West: Reflections on the Historiography of an Unexplored Field," *Pacific Historical Review* 39, no. 2 (1970): 194-5. Think of the character Daniel Plainview in Paul Thomas Anderson's *There Will Be* Blood. However, when viewed through a cultural lens this film is a rather accurate depiction how oil became central to American imaginaries of the "abundant" or "ideal" life, in which the image of the oil-consuming family became dominant vision of social reproduction during the twentieth century, and how the stability of gender roles was intimately tied to changes in oil production and availability. Daniel Worden, "Fossil-Fuel Futurity: Oil in *Giant*," in *Oil Culture*, 109-28.

[35] This 'addiction' is also commonly referred to as the oil curse, a part of the body of literature on the resource curse, or Dutch disease. See for example, Pauline Jones Luong and Erika Weinthal, "Prelude to the Resource Curse: Explaining Oil and Gas Development Strategies in the Soviet Successor States and Beyond," *Comparative Political Studies* 34, no. 4 (2001): 367-399; Michael L. Ross, "The Political Economy of the Resource Curse," *World Politics* 51, no. 2 (1999): 297-322; Norio Usui, "Dutch Disease and Policy

Daniel Yergin, Roger and Diana Olien, Brian Black and Robert Vitalis.[36] A common theme within these scholars' works is their argument of how oil, perhaps more so than any other fossil fuel, had profoundly altered US international relations and national politics; that oil so captivated the American imagination, the entire life of a nation was oriented around its use. The commonplace metaphorical connection between American oil "dependence" and alcohol or drug abuse, reimagined, these authors argue, oil capitalism itself as it enabled a society-wide moral weakness, particularly insofar as the collective American level of "dependence" has worsened over the decades without any material progress toward a solution.[37] Thus, the discovery of oil did not create American capitalist society, but the form of capitalism responsible for the United States' rise to global dominance through violent interventions known as neoliberalism, in addition to the social and political structures that reproduced the spectacle of capital accumulation that ingrained the lived reality of class divisions. As Daniel Yergin argues, threats to one key commodity alone – oil – overshadowed US geopolitics between the 1930s and 1950s, as American politicians justified encroachment onto foreign oilfields by stoking middle-class anxieties over the possibility that oil would run out or be cut off.[38]

Adjustments to the Oil Boom: A Comparative Study of Indonesia and Mexico," *Resource Policy* 23, no. 4: 151-162.

[36] For American geopolitics and oil, see Daniel Yergin, *The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money, and Power* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991); Brian Black, *Crude Reality: Petroleum in World History* (Lanham, MD.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2002) and *Petrolia: The Landscape of America's First Oil Boom* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000); Robert Vitalis, *America's Kingdom: Mythmaking on the Saudi Oil Frontier* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007). For more information on the development of oil economics and US national politics, see Roger Olien and Diana Davids Olien, *Oil and Ideology: The Cultural Creation of the American Petroleum Industry* (Chapel Hill, NC.: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

[37] Many of these authors split hairs over whether the continued collective reliance by Americans on oil is a dependency issue or pathological addiction, defined as "substance use that is continued despite knowledge of having persistent physical or psychological problem that is likely to have been caused or exacerbated by the substance." American Psychiatric Association, eds., *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-V)* (Washington, D.C.: APA, 2013), 197. However, many literary works have associated oil prosperity with risk of hedonistic excess. See for example, Upton Sinclair's novel *Oil!* (1923) or Frank Herbert's *Dune* (1965).

[38] Yergin, *The Prize*, 7.

It was not until after the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 that scholars began to explore the multiple dimensions of energy politics through the intersecting histories of democracy, environmentalism, war, energy crises and oil during the twentieth century. However, rather than evaluate whether oil limited or altogether prevented the expansion of democracy, they began to engage with oil as a sociocultural material – and I would suggest, as a force not only limited to economic or political life, but also in everyday modes of living and aesthetics.[39] A particularly useful polemic this body of scholarship advances is that studies on oil and American life tend to confine their attention to the problem of oil money – the income from oil production and its corrupting powers – rather than starting with the processes through which oil is produced and distributed. The transformation of oil into unaccountable fortunes, Timothy Mitchell argues, is not the root cause of the "problem of democracy and oil", but the outcome "of particular ways of engineering political relations out of the flows of energy."[40] The issue with the "Great Men" narrative, I contend, is that the focus of inquiry is centered on the struggle for oil between powerful actors, ignoring the fact that oil is also incredibly *ordinary* because it is embedded in the everyday patterns of American consumerist life.

The "American way of life" would be altogether unimaginable without an oil economy characterized by industrial surplus production, neoliberal accumulation, state militarism, and more critically, automobility, mass consumerism, and oil's mystification. I argue that those who ascribe the historical and political roots of American democracy's corruption merely to its unsustainable

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[39] For democracy and oil, see Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy*; Robert Vitalis, *Oilcraft: The Myths of Scarcity and Security that Haunt U.S. Energy Policy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020). For environmentalism, see Daniel Yergin, *The Quest: Energy, Security, and the Remaking of the Modern World* (NY: Penguin Press, 2011); Steven Coll, *Private Empire: ExxonMobil and American Power* (NY: Penguin Press, 2012). For war and energy crises, see Peter Maass, *Crude World: The Violent Twilight of Oil* (NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009); Kenneth S. Deffeyes, *Beyond Oil: The View from Hubbert's Peak* (NY: Hill and Wang, 2006). For an extensive examination of oil as a sociocultural material, see Matthew Huber, *Lifeblood: Oil, Freedom, and the Forces of Capital* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013); Ross Barret and Daniel Worden, eds., *Oil Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).

[40] Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy*, 8.

oil consumption or overemphasize the alliance between oil capitalists and politicians who conspired to addict the American public for profit, fail to articulate that oil is a powerful material force not only because of the products and wealth it produces but also because oil use often accompanied deeply felt visions of freedom and individualism. The imagined correlation between freedom and petroleum products transformed modes of transportation, home, work, and leisure within the United States that made oil indispensable to the production and reproduction of an imagined American national community with its distinct culture and identity.[41]

Despite ecologists, environmentalists, and thousands of scholars throughout the United States and the world hoping to change prevailing American values toward oil, Americans continue to be either unwilling or unable to disentangle themselves from this cataclysmic attachment. As Frederic Jameson has argued, "it seems to be easier for [Americans] today to imagine the thoroughgoing deterioration of the earth and nature than the breakdown of late capitalism; perhaps that is due to some weakness of imagination."[42] However, this thesis suggests that rather than some sort of imaginative fragility within the American public to tackle oil's environmentally destructive potential, it is the very mystification of oil within the American public imagination that engenders powerful structures of desire and disavowal as pervasive cultural attitudes.

Popular cultural images of particular Americans enjoying the fruits of oil-derived power, largely reproduced in advertisements that saturate the public consciousness, simultaneously obscure any visible signs of the oil economy's disfiguration of the landscape and reinforce meaning-making narratives supportive of petro-capitalism. "Individually and collectively," Donald Pease argues, "these mythemes form a relay of connected beliefs: that reclamation can return the land to its predevelopment state; that petro-capitalism's putative enhancement of social

[41] LeMenager, *Living Oil*, 81-9.
[42] Frederic Jameson, *The Seeds of Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), xii.

power can remunerate its theft of political agency; that jobs, fines, and taxes adequately compensate environmental pollution; and that surplus production and mass consumption of oil can continue without any permanent cost."[43]

Regarding the history of advertising in the United States, my approach owes much to the scholarship of historian Philip Gold, art historian Ross Barrett, geographer Matthew Huber, and communication arts professor Imre Szeman, each of whom evaluates the intersections between oil and popular culture in the United States and how both shaped visual representations of race, gender normativity and social status beginning in the early twentieth century.[44] Situated within this tradition, my project will illustrate the critical importance of understanding oil as both physical substance and social material that shapes culture which in turn sustains a distinct American sociopolitical order. Accordingly, my research also focuses on the ways oil's visual representations reflected a middle-class discourse that justified the subordination of women and racialized communities via the consumption of oil. A particularly generative concept produced by this scholarship is Philip Gold's "Commodity Self". Influenced by the psychological methods used by therapists to encourage self-reflection, advertisers by the late-1920s, Gold argues, attempted to turn the consumer's "critical function away from the product and toward himself" in a very limited sense: as a failed consumer whose personal defeats or disappointments "could thus be defined as a lack of purchasing power."[45] This form of personal, intimate marketing, I argue, was especially

[43] Donald Pease, "America," in *Fueling Culture: 101 Words for Energy and Environment*, eds. Imre Szeman, Jennifer Wenzel, and Patricia Yaeger (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), 34.
[44] Philip Gold, *Advertising Politics, and American Culture: From Salesmanship to Therapy* (New York: Paragon House, 1987); Huber, *Lifeblood*; Barrett and Worden, *Oil Culture*; Imre Szeman and Jeff Diamanti, eds., *Energy Culture: Art and Theory on Oil and Beyond* (Morgantown, WV.: West Virginia University Press, 2019); Imre Szeman, *On Petrocultures: Globalization, Culture, and Energy* (Morgantown, WV.: West Virginia University Press, 2019); Imre Szeman and Timothy Kaposky, eds., *Cultural Theory: An Anthology* (Malden, MA.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011).
[45] Gold, *Advertising Politics*, 24-5.

pronounced in automobile advertisements in the 1930s which mirrored a middle-class American ethos of individuality, rugged determination, and entrepreneurialism, popularly believed to have saved American capitalism from the Great Depression.[46] Automobile advertisements thus became an "illusion industry" or "diversion industry", according to Manfred Knoche, in the interest of perpetuating (petro)capitalist production and (petro)capital relations of life within a broader context of societal conflicts of power.[47] This type of ideological advertising, whereby the flaws of the industry are shifted away from producers and onto individual consumers, served to legitimate petrocapitalism as the best possible economic system and represent petroculture as the only meaningful expression of American life. Automobile advertisements by the 1930s, therefore, attempted to refocus the consumer's attention away from the depredations caused by capitalist modes of production and onto their individual shortcomings, that, through retail therapy and the transformative "miracle" of oil energy, could be refashioned into social advancement, indeed personal salvation.

Another useful concept is Imre Szeman's "petro futurity", or the idea that societies by and large have been and continue to be "locked in" to a fossil fuel-based energy system.[48] Any liberal notion, Szeman argues, which seeks to address how to mitigate environmental disaster when too much oil is consumed or plans for a future when or if oil runs out, often fails to articulate alternatives to oil capital.[49] Szeman states:

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[46] For a provocative, albeit rather esoteric, explanation on popular reproductions of the American ethos and mythos and how visual culture reinforced Americans' sense of self, see Ian Gordon, *Superman: The Persistence of an American Icon* (New Brunswick, NJ.: Rutgers University Press, 2017).

[47] Manfred Knoche, "Advertising – a Necessary 'Elixir of Life' for Capitalism: On the Critique of the Political Economy of Advertising," *triple: Communication, Capitalism & Critique. Open Access Journal for a Global Sustainable Information Society* 21, no. 2 (2023): 123.

[48] Imre Szeman, "System Failure: Oil, Futurity, and the Anticipation of Disaster," *South Atlantic* Quarterly 106, no. 4 (2007): 815

[49] Here Szeman is referring to the three dominant discourses through which the crisis of the end of oil has been described and comprehended to date: strategic realism, dealing with the problem of oil as being primarily about the ways in which governments secure ongoing access to diminishing supplies of energy;

> From oil flows capitalism as we still know it: the birth of the first giant multinationals – Standard Oil (whose component elements still persist in Exxon Mobil, Texaco, and British Petroleum), DuPont, and the Big Three automobile makers; the defining social system of private transportation – cars, air travel, freeways, and with these suburbs, "white flight", malls, inner-city ghettoization, and so on; and the environmental and labor costs that comes with access to a huge range of relatively inexpensive consumer goods, most of which contain some product of the petrochemical industry (plastics, artificial fibers, paints, etc.) and depend on the possibility of mass container shipping. No petroleum, no modern war machine, no global shipping industry, no communication revolution.[50]

Within this landscape of mass consumerism and unprecedented surplus capital, the real power of oil has been the representational erasure of its modes of production and social reproduction – what Amitav Ghosh describes as the "muteness of the Oil Encounter" – on the one hand and its ability to offer people a solution to their perceived economic and social insufficiencies on the other.[51] The possibility of disaster the end of oil would create, it would seem, may not be able generate the kind

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techno-utopianism, that imagines and champions heretofore undiscovered or underutilized technological solutions that would substitute new forms of energy for those on which we currently rely in order to perpetuate our current global, social, and political reality and energy needs; and eco-apocalypse – the most common narrative in liberal discursive circles – that focuses on the need to reshape contemporary social life. Imre Szeman, "The Cultural Politics of Oil," in *On Petrocultures: Globalization, Culture, and Energy* (Morgantown, WV: West Virginia University Press, 2019), 139.

[50] Szeman, "System Failure," 806. Not to mention the technosphere! Or the new earth "system", emerging from the industrial processes of oil production and its resulting waste. Consisting of between 30 trillion to 50 trillion tons (who's counting?) of industrially made components and commodities (roughly 50 kilograms of human-consumed matter per square meter of earth that takes between 20 to 500 years to degrade), in addition to urban stratum made of both above-ground structures and below-ground meshwork of tunnels, pipes, and cable, the technosphere is our mind-numbingly large "gift" to future archaeologists. Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 72-3. This does not even consider per- or polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS), such as Teflon or C8, troublingly known as "forever chemicals". 500 years is a drop in the bucket compared to PFAS which are applied to anything from cook ware and automobile paints to rain-repellant outerwear and indoor furniture. Designed by petrochemical giant DuPont during World War II to coat tanks, Teflon, the first of many thousands of polyfluoroalkyl substances, was reintroduced into domestic US markets and caused a slew of cancers and genetic malformations in people who ingested it. Environmental Working Group, "The 'Forever Chemicals' in 99% of Americans," *PFAS Chemicals*, accessed 21 April 2022, https://www.ewg.org/areas-focus/toxic-chemicals/pfas-chemicals. Unfortunately, for humans, PFAS have no known natural or large-scale means to break them down into benign molecules. "Recent advances on PFAS degradation *via* thermal and nonthermal methods," National Library of Medicine/National Center for Biotechnology Information, last updated 2 December 2022, https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10013708/#:~:text=Ref.&text=In%20summary%2C%20PFOA%20and%20PFOS,has%20not%20been%20studied%20yet.

[51] Amitav Ghosh, *Incendiary Circumstances: A Chronicle of the Turmoil of Our Times* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2005), 140; Iain Boal, et al., *Afflicted Powers: Capital and Spectacle in a New Age of War* (San Francisco: Verso, 2005), 178.

of cultural transformations required to head off a crisis that would be felt, to varying degrees and at every social level, precisely due to the transformational powers of oil energy. As Jacob Lund Fisker notes:

> The increase in human wealth and well-being during the past few centuries is often attributed to such things as state initiatives, governmental systems and economic policies, but the real and underlying cause has been a massive increase in energy consumption…. Discovering and extracting fossil fuels requires little effort when resources are abundant, before their depletion. It is this cheap 'surplus energy' that has enabled classical industrial, urban and economic development.[52]

Once oil had become naturalized into both social and economic life, old constraints on both physical and social mobility were purportedly relieved. Everyone from corporate executive to wage worker, as a result, had individual access to new products that relied on and were mechanically produced by oil energy.[53] That is to say, oil is not just energy. Oil is history, a source of cheap and abundant energy without which the past century and half would have been utterly different; oil is ontology, the structuring commodity of our modern existence; and oil is a social relation, being both an abundant resource that has given shape to and is shaped by the laws of neoliberal capital – limitless accumulation through dispossession – and material that is paradoxically absent from social life but nonetheless suffuses just about every facet of our human worlds.

Finally, Matthew Huber's notion of "sociospatial existence", describing the material and technical transformation of the geographies of everyday American life – suburbanization and personal transportation – borne out of Depression-era petroculture, is particularly insightful.[54] Critically, Huber's examination of oil advertisements illustrates how the spatiality of suburbia,

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[52] Jacob Lund Fisker, "The Laws of Energy," in *The Final Energy Crisis*, eds. Andrew McKillop and Sheila Newman (London: Pluto Press, 2005), 74.
[53] Frederick Buell, "A Short History of Oil Cultures; or, The Marriage of Catastrophe and Exuberance," *Oil Culture*, eds. Ross Barrett and Daniel Worden (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 74-7.
[54] Huber, *Lifeblood*, *xii*.

consisting of single-family households, lawns, cars, and non-public roadways, reflected a middle-class ideology of "hostile privatism" and became a generalized social phenomenon among mainly middle-income white-male workers and their families who wished to distance themselves from public life.[55] How did it come to be, Huber asks, that Americans have come to presume "that oil is an overarching, uncontrollable force hovering over our society", more often described as an 'addiction' than as the product of political and economic choices?[56] However, oil's meanings are more complicated and nuanced than this common-sense metaphor suggests, Huber argues, because its consumption in the United States "often accompanied deeply felt visions of freedom and individualism" and helped create "a populist politics of entrepreneurial life – a view that one could actually shape a life as one's own."[57] Similarly, this thesis contributes to our historical understanding the ways in which oil became entrenched within and shaped cherished ideas of freedom, modernity, and mobility that resulted in the atomization and auto-mization of the middle class. Thus, this thesis seeks to read American petroculture through its representations of oil to understand its relations dialectically, to gain critical purchase not only on how oil was (and still is) constitutive of middle-class culture but also how cultural politics influenced (and still influences) who was entitled to and who was excluded from the "right" to oil technologies. In other words, despite also being a physical substance and a critical resource for innumerable commodities, oil is also a social relation. It is this latter assertion that recognizes oil's metaphysical capacities that have been mobilized in specific historical circumstances and how oil holds its significance within

[55] Ibid., 17. For more on the relationship between suburban home ownership and the increasingly aggressive ways middle-class Americans 'protected' their private property, see, Evan McKenzie, *Privatopia: Homeowners Associations and the Rise of Residential Private Government* (New Haven, CT.: Yale University Press).
[56] Ibid., *ix*.
[57] Ibid., *xiv*.

modernity because of the cultural narratives that inform our understanding of it.[58] Oil animates and enables all manner of abstract and affective imaginaries, including freedom, mobility, desire and social distinction; it shapes and is shaped by societies in every possible way and at every possible level, from the scale of our populations to the modes of production and built infrastructure that sustain us, from the objects we have at hand to the food we consume and the muscles that grow as a result, from the possibilities of movement and space to the expectations of the capacity to move, interact with, or distance ourselves from one another.[59] Oil, Huber emphasizes, is "*life itself*."[60] Critically, oil is a way of knowing, of understanding modernity as an oil modernity and capital, in its present form, as oil capital. Seeing oil for what it is – *fundamental* to the idea of modern society we now hold – subverts our expectations that the life we now know would continue along without it. Indeed, toward the end of *The Long Emergency*, James Kunstler, states:

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[58] Huber, *Lifeblood*, 4.

[59] If nitrogen constitutes a building block of life – from it, all biological life produces amino acids, proteins, and nucleic acids – then its synthesization using prodigious amounts of oil became, according to Vaclav Smil, the most important invention of the twentieth century. The biological manipulation of crops using synthetic nitrogen and pesticides has allowed humans to wholly ignore the carrying capacity of the Earth. It is estimated that half of the world's population is fed because of synthetic nitrogen. Vaclav Smil, *Enriching the Earth: Fritz Haber, Carl Bosch, and the Transformation of World Food Production* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001). In terms of food, I have in mind one specific commodity: corn. Today in the United States, hybrid corn constitutes 95 and 66 percent of cattle and chicken feed, respectively. U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Institute, "Feedgrains Sector at a Glance," *Corn and Other Feedgrains*, last updated 2021, https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/crops/corn-and-other-feedgrains/feedgrains-sector-at-a-glance/. When planted, hybrid corn requires massive amounts of synthetic fertilizers and pesticides, themselves products derived from petroleum, to grow. When fully ripened and ready to harvest, hybrid corn is suited for neither human nor animal consumption. Regardless, hybrid corn is used in industrialized feed lots, where it is ground into a fine powder, mixed with nutrient dense additives, and then fed to cows and chickens. The result are cows and chickens that literally explode with growth. If not for the invention of antibiotics and antacids, used to reduce gas build up, cows stomachs, naturally evolved to breakdown the simple carbohydrates of grass, would rupture. Michael Pollan, *Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 46. In terms of movement, space, and social interaction, I am referring to what Henri Lefebvre defines as the "social production of space," or the consumption of energy in ways that makes a specific spatiality possible: the use of wind in mercantile exchange, the burning of coal to mobilize steam powered railroads and ships of global market integration in the nineteenth century, the firing of natural gas to heat the home, and the combustion of gasoline to power us through urban and suburban spaces. Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).

[60] Huber, *Lifeblood*, 4.

> The collective imagination of the public cannot process the notion of a non-growth economy, even though the limits to growth are visible all around us in everything from paved-over suburban landscapes, to the steeply rising gas prices, to played out aquifers, to the death of the Atlantic cod fishery. We are *not* [my italics] capable of conceiving another economic way. We are hostages to our own system.[61]

The past twenty years has witnessed the emergence of a new body of historical and theoretical research perceptive to oil culture's presence in various, social, political, and economic realms that comprise the US energy system. Each author that I have mentioned is alert to the significance energy provides in envisioning the recent past in which the presence of oil is one of the central forces shaping human life, if not the single point around which all other narratives crystallize. As Stephanie LeMenager rightfully asks, "Can the [modern] human persist, practically speaking, without such forms indebted to fossil fuels?"[62] By representing the role of oil in "American ways of life" and advertising, what Ross Barrett and Daniel Worden in *Oil Culture* argue is the "vast economy of cultural representations" that reorganized "everyday life in North America", this thesis seeks to illustrate the sociocultural processes that have helped to make oil ubiquitous within, unique to, and a defining characteristic of modern-American, white, and middle-class life: a life premised on privileged access to oil.[63] If we want to understand the deep cultural imperatives of modern existence – the how and why humans worship the dead ecologies of trillions of tons of prehistoric life, extracted, transported, and transformed – then this thesis suggests we must start by addressing where and when this concept of existence began and *how* Americans continue to know oil, as opposed to thinking about what they need to do to live without it.

Toward this end, this thesis uses several kinds of primary sources. The most significant of these are print advertisements produced by N W Ayer & Son Advertising Agency of Philadelphia during

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[61] James Kunstler, *The Long Emergency: Surviving the Converging Catastrophes of the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2005), 193.
[62] LeMenager, *Living Oil*, 6.
[63] Ross Barret and Daniel Worden, eds., *Oil Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), *xxv*.

the 1930s. Founded in 1869 by Francis Wayland Ayer, N W Ayer & Son represented one of the oldest and largest ad agencies in the United States and produced print advertisements of everything from new clothing fashions and automobiles to face creams and cookies that were published in newspapers and magazines across the nation.[64] Representing hundreds of clients, including some of the largest American corporations, N W Ayer & Son was in a unique position to help normalize the aesthetics of petroculture and standardize the language of consumerism in the United States during the 1930s, a time when American life was profoundly reshaped. It was in this institution of advertising that the act of consuming commodities was articulated, celebrated, and represented as the key to contemporary "American ways of life". In so doing, N W Ayer & Son attempted to turn the attention of an entire nation toward the possibilities and capabilities of a particular way of life premised on the consumption of oil by representing it as not only a useful substance with seemingly unlimited applications but also as a material that reinforced and reinscribed new social patterns.[65]

As far as confining my research to the 1930s, this period represented the direst years of the Great Depression in the United States and highlighted the ideological and economic limits of machine production and the associated deprivations of working life. By 1933, at the height of the crisis, over 12 million Americans were jobless and found themselves without the income to buy the commodified goods of capitalist production.[66] To save the American people and democracy from the worst economic disaster in US history, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt instituted a

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[64] Ralph Hower, *The History of an Advertising Agency: N.W. Ayer & Son at Work, 1869 – 1949* (Cambridge, MA: Havard University Press, 1949).

[65] The word "advertising" means "to make known". However, if we break down the word into its Latin roots, *ad* means "toward", and *vetere* means "to turn".

[66] In 1929, 1.55 million Americans were unemployed, or about 3 percent of the total labor force of 49 million. By 1933, when the Great Depression reached its zenith, 12.83 million Americans were jobless, or about one in four out of 51.59 million working-age Americans were unemployed. Stanley Lebergott, "Labor Force, Employment, and Unemployment, 1929–1939: Estimating Methods," *Bureau of Labor Statistics* (2014): 50-53. Even those lucky few who managed to hold onto their jobs saw their wages fall by over 42 percent between 1929 and 1933. Fdrlibrary.org, "Great Depression Facts," *Franklin D. Roosevelt: Presidential Library and Museum*, accessed 10 October 2024, https://www.fdrlibrary.org/great-depression-facts.

set of policies known as the New Deal which attempted to reconfigure the means of everyday life and living through higher wages, material abundance, and automobility for a specific stratum of workers. To create the material conditions for this specific vision of life, Americans required unprecedented amounts of energy. Roosevelt's New Deal introduced labor, economic, and infrastructure policies that, Donald Pease argues, "created irreversible changes in the distribution and consumption of energy", and which imbricated oil in all forms of social and economic life.[67] The predominant form of this consumption was the combustion of refined oil – gasoline – in the engines of automobiles, creating the imagined correlation between freedom and automobility that transformed the normative cultural geography of American life.[68] Free from their dependence on animals and unrestricted by railroads, American automobile owners could now materialize their fantasies of freedom, self-made and self-propelled modernity, and social distinction through oil-fueled mobility. Ad agencies understood only too well that the demand for oil was predicated on this wider social demand for personal automobiles, an industry which vitally affected the consumption of oil.

By focusing on oil energy in relation to these historical and representational developments, this thesis opens new insights into the forces of power and cultural politics that have shaped modernity and critically explores the methods of concealment and objectification within American petroculture. In that sense, this thesis tells a story of how and why oil came to be a tool of social belonging and regulation: a substance that pervaded everyday American life, indeed framed how certain segments of society related to each other through its accumulation and use, and a material

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[67] Pease, "America," 32.

[68] LeMenager, *Living Oil*, 81-9. For more insight into the connection between automobility, energy, and the cultural geography of the United States, see Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumer's Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (NY: Vintage Books, 2004); Robert A. Beauregard, *When American Became Suburban* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006); Paul L. Knox, *Metrourbia, USA* (New Brunswick, NJ.: Rutgers University Press, 2008).

used to enforce gender and racial codes. Even though it would be reductive to see in the expanded use of oil consumption an explanation for every aspect of modernity, it is equally problematic, Szeman contends, "*not* to include oil in our narratives of historical change and development, including social and cultural shifts and transitions."[69] There are no grand conclusions to this story, neither are dreams of salvation reinforced nor mysteries solved in the following pages. There is only an attempt to draw our attention to the urgent need to interrogate the broader relationship between oil, representation, and American culture.

[69] Szeman, Wilson, and Carlson, *Petrocultures*, 5.

"It Will Change You": The "Sacred Acquisition" of Oil Capital

Between 1936 and 1937, the Ford Motor Company commissioned ads for the new Lincoln-Zephyr with N W Ayer & Son, targeting a broad audience throughout the United States.[70] Purchasing an automobile, as Figures 2 and 3 imply, was almost never simply about rational choices, but was as much about aesthetic, emotional and sensory responses to driving, as well as building an intimate relationship between cars and people. Within these ads we can begin to see how personal automobiles both functioned as a register for what it meant to be a twentieth-century consumer – "modern", distinguished, fashionable, and, most importantly, mobile through the combustion of oil's potential chemical energy – and aestheticized the centrality of automobility in human life. These forms of popular representations, argues Daniel Miller, not only depicted what people were able to achieve through automobile use but illustrated the degree to which the automobile had "become an integral part of the cultural environment within which we [saw] ourselves as human."[71]

Figure 2. "Travel the Modern Way!" Advertisement by N W Ayers & Son (1936/37). Courtesy of Smithsonian, National Museum of American History.

[70] Broad in terms of scope, not necessarily in terms of social composition.
[71] Daniel Miller, ed., *Materializing Culture: Car Cultures* (New York: Berg, 2001), 2.

Something more than just an automobile is being sold within these ads. Images and words work together to evoke, provoke, and emote particular reactions beyond the obvious purchase of an automobile. Each ad is a sign, both in the physical and Saussurean sense, reflecting the cultural dimensions embedded within an oil economy, wherein the symbolization and use of material goods

Figure 3. "A Changed Car ... It Will Change You." Advertisement by N W Ayers & Son (1936/37). Courtesy of Smithsonian, National Museum of American History.

are not only quotidian but also communicators of lifestyle and forms of cultural capital that transcend the automobile's use-value.[72] As such, we can see that Figure 2 uses language and images which suggest that certain modes of travel – that is, luxury ships and automobiles – hold the implicit promise of modernity for those who consumed the product advertised. After all, Figure 2 does not state that the Lincoln-Zephyr is an exciting new automotive product but rather makes a larger ideological claim that the Lincoln provides potential owners with social respectability by travelling "the modern way." In a similar fashion, the advertisement shown in Figure 3 is not so much trying to sell a tool of transportation but the possibility of personal transformation. In so doing, Figure 3 attempts to blur the line between human consumer and consumable thing by making the claim that ownership of the latter becomes a necessary precondition for the former to change. The power of the Lincoln-Zephyr, as Figure 3 illustrates, is not its horsepower or the number of cylinders it has (though these

[72] Ferdinand de Saussure, a Swiss linguistics professor, is commonly known as the founding father of "semiology" (now commonly referred to as "semiotics"), or the study of signs and their meaning. According to Saussure, each sign has two parts: the person generating meaning, or the signifier, and the concept (or meaning) being generated by the signifier, what he called the signified. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Wade Baskin, eds. Perry Meisel and Haun Saussy (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959).

technologies may be exciting), but rather how speed and a V12 engine allowed consumers to be dynamic, to redefine themselves and find personal redemption through the purchase and display of particular objects. For consumers to change and become modern, as Figures 2 and 3 suggest, they need only conform to a fashion and change what they owned.

In other words, the Lincoln-Zephyr is both a useful product – an automobile, made of various assembled parts to transport its owner from place to place – and a purveyor of style. It had mid-century-modern design, replete with sumptuous leather seating, an ergonomic steering-wheel, and decadent metallic highlights, *and* was an expression of lifestyle, of the kind of self the buyer wished to be and project. The semiotic and textual qualities found within both Zephyr ads highlight how the aesthetics of oil consumerism must be understood in terms of the cultural dynamics, structuring principles, and processes which operate within a particular society if we want to understand how and why the automobile, a product that is not only reliant on the use of oil for transportation energy but also dependent on "mobile" oil for its construction, became a sign of self-identity – a personalized extension of ourselves – and a form of social appropriation – that is, a machine that was integrated into the everyday lives of Americans, who in turn actively produced personal and social meaning through automotive technologies.[73] The (re)production of automobile advertisements (and representations of consumer culture more broadly), therefore, would seem to be a useful lens through which to examine and ask questions about the American economy of cultural goods, the market principles of supply, demand, capital accumulation, competition and monopolization which operated *within* a sphere of lifestyle, cultural capital and commodities that

[73] For more information on the aesthetics of consumption, or what Mike Featherstone terms the "aestheticization of consumer reality", see Featherstone, *Consumer Culture*, 80-2. Another interesting interpretation of consumer reality is Baudrillard's notion of "aesthetic hallucination", a form of reality produced by the triumph of signifying culture that leads to a simulational world in which the proliferation of signs and images has effaced the distinction between the real and the imagined. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, trans. Phil Beitchman, Paul Foss, and Paul Patton (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983).

were contingent on the access to and supply of cheap oil energy. In short, a uniquely American, consumer petroculture.

Consumer culture, rather crudely defined, is a lifestyle focused on the purchase of material goods, thus completing the process of production. Until recently, scholars examining the United States have largely focused on production and treated it as the site where the most significant social processes took place. As Karl Marx famously expressed in his preface to *A Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy*, it was the "relations of production" – the "economic structure of society" – where he argued the bedrock of society was formed.[74] Even economic historians mostly unsympathetic to Marx's views tended to focus on production as the most important characteristic of American society, and defined consumption as mere exchange – that is, the instant that money and goods changed hands.[75] However, it became progressively clear beginning in the late twentieth century that the cultural and social dynamics of consumption extended well before and beyond the moment of exchange.[76] Moreover, as production of American goods and services increasingly moved overseas through multinational corporate mergers and outsourcing schemes, scholars took greater notice of and interest in the culture of consumption, and began to consider the ways in

[74] Karl Marx, Preface to *A Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy*, in *A Critical and Cultural Theory Reader*, eds. Anthony Easthope and Kate McGowan (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 45-6.
[75] See, for instance, Arthur Stanley Link, *American Epoch: A History of the United States since the 1890's* (New York: Knopf, 1965); Louis C. Hunter and Lynwood Bryant, *A History of Industrial Power in the United States, 1780 – 1930* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1991); Harry W Laidler, *Concentration of Control in American Industry* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, Publishers, 1931).
[76] As Jeff Hearn and Sasha Roseneil have argued, "consumption [in America] is one of the basic ways in which society is structured and organized, usually unequally, sometimes incredibly so." Jeff Hearn and Sasha Roseneil, *Consuming Cultures: Power and Resistance* (New York: St. Martin's, 1999), 1. Any history of consumption, particularly in the United States, therefore, needs to take into account important disparities separating the rich and the poor, cultural codes that shaped normative gendered behavior, and the politics of race, all of which influenced the production and the ability to accumulate certain goods. Furthermore, the United States in its industrial era was confronted, Martin Melosi argues, "with huge amounts of refuse" linked to "the rising affluence of the middle class, an abundance of resources, and consumerism, which continued into America's post-industrial era." Martin Melosi, *Fresh Kills: A History of Consumering and Discarding in New York City* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020), 6.

which consumption, including how Western values and economic practices shifted to both reinforce consumptive habits and reproduce cultural images with new meanings, was not only important but central to the understanding of contemporary society.[77]

Not every society, however, was or is characterized by its culture of consumption. Human beings have long exchanged goods that they have produced for other goods, as it is rare that a person, a family, or community can produce everything that they need (and certainly not everything that they want). What has changed, then, is less the fact of exchange than the multitude of available commodities, the ability of more and more people to engage in wider and wider forms of consumption, and the fashioning of new wants and desires through advertising and display. The American consumer, of course, did not just materialize suddenly during the twentieth century, neither was the shift to consumer culture a natural process nor an inexorable historical development. Indeed, as anthropologist Richard Robbins argues, before the twentieth century, "America emphasized not unlimited consumption but moderation and self-denial … people were

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[77] For multinational industries and outsourcing, see Lazaro Mederos, *The Outsourcing Manifesto: The History, Rise, and Potential Fall of the Outsourcing Industry* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021); for culture, see Richard Robbins, who argues that the rise in consumerism can best be understood, not as the natural and inevitable consequence of a burgeoning economy but rather as a largely manufactured response to a specific (and continuing) crisis in the capitalist system of (over)production that threatened to topple the economy. Richard Robbins, *Global Problems and the Culture of Capitalism, 2nd ed.* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2002); for shifts in Western values, see Max Weber, who argued that the materialist "spirit of capitalism" could be located (rather paradoxically) in Protestant asceticism, whereby the ceaseless labor carried out to increase the glory of God became increasingly disassociated from its religious roots that led to a situation in which "material goods gained an increasing and finally inexorable power over the lives of men as at no other previous period in history." Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. & eds. Peter Baehr and Gordon C. Wells (New York: Penguin Classics, 2002), 181; for economic practices, see James Twitchell, who states that at the point where industrialism made secular comfort seem not only possible but also morally good, "the culture of consumption replaced the culture of contrition", that is, the redemption of materialism was accompanied by a shift away from the ideas of humility and subordination of the self to a higher power to an emphasis on the possibility of changing and enhancing one life through individual will. James Twitchell, *AdCult USA: The Triumph of Advertising in American Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 230. For cultural images, see Stuart Hall, who argues that culture is not so much a set of things – "novels and paintings or TV programmes and comics" – as it is a process, "a set of practices", wherein the participants of a culture "give meaning to people, objects and events" through the "production and exchange of ideas and images/signs. Stuart Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: Sage, 1997), 2-3.

expected to be frugal and save their money; spending, particularly on luxuries, was seen as 'wasteful'."[78] Nevertheless, by the early twentieth century politicians and industry leaders began to advocate for institutional and industrial reforms that would create a "steady stream of enticements", William Leach argues, incentivizing Americans to consume.[79]

While traditional American religious doctrines, combined with the sheer difficulty in living, tended to emphasize the glories of heaven rather than the prospect of secular happiness, the Enlightenment belief in progress, as well as alterations in people's material circumstances associated with the Industrial Revolution during the nineteenth century, replaced a culture of contrition with a culture of consumption. What was less noticeable in the 1890s, but patently obvious by the 1920s, was that a new society had come to life in America, a society that according to journalist Samuel Strauss was defined by:

> a philosophy of life that committed human beings to the production of more and more things – "more this year than last year, more next year than this" – and that emphasized the "standard of living" above all other values…. It is obvious that Americans have come to consider their standard of living as a somewhat *sacred acquisition*, which they will defend at any price. This means that they would be ready to make many an intellectual or even moral concession in order to maintain that standard.[80]

Americans, as Strauss presciently observed in 1925, and those who conflated earthly "happiness" with the possession of material goods, were no longer defined by the things they made but by *what* they consumed. Luxury items, such as the automobile, became the "epitome of possessions", posits Clay McShane in *Down the Asphalt Path*, that by the twentieth century symbolized American myths of psychic and physical liberation, progress, and the dominance

[78] Robbins, *Global Problems*, 22.
[79] William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York: Pantheon, 1993), 16.
[80] As cited by Leach, *Land of Desire*, 266, emphasis added.

of masculine courage and physical prowess.[81] As such, it was not the quantity, *per se*, as much as it was the quality (or at least how quality was culturally understood) of what Americans consumed that increasingly became signs, connoting ideological and mythological significance, and which reproduced or legitimated particular social relationships.

In his book *Mythologies*, French cultural theorist Roland Barthes, argues that the mythological significance attached to representations of commodities – say, advertisements of automobiles and the latest clothing fashions – expressed and justified the dominant values of a culture. It is, therefore, up to the person evaluating representations of culture, as Barthes and this thesis suggest, to critically interpret the mechanisms behind the myth, "to track down, in the decorative display of *what-goes-without-saying*, the ideological abuse which … is hidden there" – to show how representations are not natural but historical, the products of relations of power.[82] The "sacred acquisition" of living standards, built upon the consumption of abundant oil, premised on the unequal distribution of its energy, but represented by specific social groups to be the special dispensation of divine providence, constituted a form of shared knowledge, and thus became constitutive of American consumer culture.[83]

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[81] Clay McShane, *Down the Asphalt Path: The Automobile and the American City* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 125-31.
[82] Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 2013), 11.
[83] For instance, the myths of American Adam, Virgin Land, and Errand into the Wilderness, out of which Americans struggle to shape or find a consensus about their collective duties to each other, have long been used to justify social and economic inequality. Historically, Americans have been enchanted by the ideal of democracy and have "seized on the wisps of fact and fancy and odd sayings taken out of context to assert the myth that the American colonies were settled to ensure political and religious liberty." Leland D. Baldwin, "The American Quest for the City of God: Errand into the Wilderness," *The Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine* 59, no. 2 (1976): 187.

By the 1930s, what had previously been the prerogative of wealthy society – the automobile and the oil energy that fueled it – became, John Urry argues, "commodities for the middle class."[84] The rapid acceptance and growth of automotive technology by middle-class America was not just because the automobile was mechanically superior to the horse-drawn carriage or streetcar, but also because of the motorcar's application as a trophy: a status symbol, that in exchange for money, could be acquired as an instant corrective to social malaise; an indulgence that could be enjoyed in this world, not in the next; and, as Figure 4 conveys, a dream that can literally come true.[85] The increased consumption of automobiles by middle-class Americans in their attempts to achieve and project excellence, what James Twitchell terms "luxury creep", indicated a shift in cultural currency, where individuals "exchanged the knowledge of history and science (a knowledge of production) for knowledge of products and how such products interlock to form coherent social patterns (a knowledge of consumption)."[86] Americans' ability to relate with others through similar patterns of consumption and lifestyle choices, therefore, developed a bond of shared history, mythology, social status, and living standards based upon the acquisition of oil-based commodities.

Figure 4. "Right Here Your Dream Ride Comes True!" Advertisement by N W Ayers & Son (1938). Courtesy of Smithsonian, National Museum of American History.

[84] John Urry, *Societies beyond Oil*, 43.
[85] McShane, *Down the Asphalt Path*, *x*.
[86] James Twitchell, *Living It Up: Our Love Affair with Luxury* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 6, 21.

Within this specific construction of life, American consumer culture was reconfigured from an "ought" culture, where previously held values demeaned consuming too much, to a "want" culture, where contemporaneous values belittled the inability to consume or the consumption of the wrong products.[87] This sociocultural transformation was largely premised on the objects of oil, or at least the wherewithal to buy such objects. As more and more middle-class Americans believed that the consumption of oil and its energies mirrored the cultural logic of *what* constituted an appropriate form of consumption, and therefore a reflection of "taste" and "successful" lifestyle choices within a social class, the more divisive their entitlement to oil became. The relations between the "haves" and the "have-nots", the (in)ability to afford and consume oil and its technologies regarded as status symbols, became a competitive striving in which struggles for economic position and for status reorganized and reproduced social orders. These orders, Pierre Bourdieu argues in *Distinction*, were closely interconnected through the role that class-based principles of "taste", in addition to the educational requirements that reinforced such "tastes", played in organizing the cultural values and patterns of consumption, through which classes organized, symbolized and enacted their differences from one another.[88]

To put it mildly, the twentieth century witnessed a profound sociocultural shift within the United States, wherein a theological shame of consuming too much was replaced by the secular opprobrium of not consuming the proper thing. It was in this way that economic capital – the immediately calculable, exchangeable, and realizable products of production – was converted into forms of cultural capital – the often unrecognizable power and processes of accumulation based on culture – and it was the latter that came to saturate, delineate, and punctuate nearly

[87] Ibid., 8.
[88] For more on cultural capital and inequality, see Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Havard University Press, 1984); Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, *Reproduction in Education, Society, and Culture* (London: Sage, 1990).

every aspect of middle-class American life.[89] If we are to understand how and why cultural capital began to be concentrated in middle-class households at this time, then we must, Bourdieu contends, focus on the ways social classes reproduced themselves through consumption, or how and why American social reproduction became mediated by the commodity form, including the techniques by which middle-class America began to moralize their privileged access to automobile ownership and prodigious oil energy.[90] A disruption to either, threatened to destabilize the "American way of life", the standards of middle-class living that had become increasingly reliant on, defined by, entitled to, and only made comprehensible through oil. The American middle class, as a result, began to familiarize themselves and their children with the "correct" ways of maintaining their social position within petroculture: buy oil products. Not just any products, the "right" ones, the items of

[89] There are three principal forms of economic capital recognized within the field of economics. The first, physical capital, consists of the stock of productive goods such as machines, buildings, factories, etc. which contribute to the production of more goods. John Hicks, "Capital Controversies: Ancient and Modern," *The American Economic Review* 64, no. 2 (1974): 307 – 316. The second type of capital is human capital, or the embodiment of skills and experience in people that is considered by economists to be just as important as physical capital in producing output. Gary Becker, *Human Capital* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994). More recently, following the awareness of environmental problems on economic activity, economists have come to accept a third type of capital, natural capital, meaning the stock of renewable and nonrenewable resource provided by nature, including the ecological processes governing their existence and use. A. Jansson, et al., *Investing in Natural Capital: The Ecological Economics Approach to Sustainability* (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1994). Cultural capital is generally regarded within the economic discipline as part of one or the other of the conventional forms of economic capital. David Thornsby, "Cultural Capital," *Journal of Cultural Economics* 23, no. 1-2 (1999): 3-12.

[90] While not a driving approach to this paper, the theory of social reproduction is an informative and incredibly insightful means through which to deconstruct some of the abovementioned topics on American families and material culture, identity politics, education, race, and many others I have not discussed. For more information, see Liz Bondi, "Locating Identity Politics," in *Place and the Politics of Identity*, eds. Michael Keith and Steven Pile (London: Routledge, 1993); Stuart Hall, "Gramsci's Relevance for the Study of Race and Ethnicity," *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 10, no. 2 (1986): 5–27; Tithi Bhattacharya, ed. *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression* (London: Pluto Press, 2017); Jodie Collins, "Women, the Family, and Sexuality in U.S. Communist Party Publications: Refashioning Marxism for the Popular Front Era," in *Marxism and America: New Appraisals*, eds. Christopher Phelps and Robin Vandome (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2021); Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, eds., trans., Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1992); and Cindi Katz, "Vagabond Capitalism and the Necessity of Social Reproduction," *Antipode* 3, no. 4 (2001): 709–28.

luxury that projected individual success and which differentiated the "we" from "them" by embodying socially recognized and desired tastes.[91] Such a "philosophy of life", one that committed middle-class American society to the purchase, use, and waste of oil commodities as a form of self-expression and social belonging, and that marked a major cultural transition in the rate and level of material abundance – that is, abundant life – was the unambiguous result of modern petro-capitalism in the 1930s and its marketing. The result of such a transition was the formation of a new kind of economic subject: the neoliberal individual. Through the embodied practices and daily rituals of consuming oil, Americans were able to produce their own lives, or at the very least project a vision of life that they wished to achieve. Within this realm of social and cultural reproduction, life was expressed through the accumulation of oil products and seen, Huber contends, by the American middle class "as an individualized product of hard work, investment, competitive tenacity and entrepreneurial 'life choices.'"[92] The suburban household, the consumption of red meat, the familiarity with and discussion of countless mechanized household appliances, and the acceleration of an automobile, therefore, all became products of individual efforts and expressions of life.

[91] For Bourdieu, the embodied state of cultural capital – that is, the knowledge, "proper" perception, and ability to use goods that are inherited over time, primarily through the family unit – is the most important. Pierre Bourdieu, "Forms of Capital," in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. John Richardson (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1986), 243-44.
[92] Huber, *Lifeblood*, 19.

"Something to Live For": Rescuing and Reforming Oil Capitalism

By 1932, in the midst of the Great Depression, politics within the United States began to center on the notion of an "American way of life". In a campaign address to the Commonwealth Club in San Francisco, then governor of New York and presidential hopeful, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, voiced an understanding that to restore faith in American capitalism a new category of life and standard of living needed to be developed: "Every man has a right to life and this means that he has also a right to make a comfortable living."[93] Re-elected for a second term in 1936, and faced by the threats of fascism and communism overseas, President Roosevelt ardently defended his policies toward developing American living standards, claiming that his policies would lead the nation toward "a rendezvous with destiny" and "restore to the people a wider freedom … an American way of life."[94] Such a project to revitalize American living conditions, Roosevelt argued, required the public's "allegiance to American institutions" through which their "opportunity to make a living – a living decent according to the standards of the time, a living which gives man not only enough to live by, but something to live for" – would be enshrined.[95] Though US politics had been guided by notions of what it meant to be uniquely American before the Great Depression, it was in the midst of a crisis that the "American way" became enmeshed with life, conjuring up a set of lived practices and conceptions of freedom. What changed then during the crisis of the 1930s was the idea that the state had to become involved in providing Americans not only with a decent living but also

[93] Franklin Roosevelt, "Campaign on Progressive Government at the Commonwealth Club, San Francisco, CA," *The American Presidency Project*, UC Santa Barbara, accessed 12 January 2024, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/campaign-address-progressive-government-the-commonwealth-club-san-francisco-california.
[94] "Text of Roosevelt Address," *New York Times*, 28 June 1936.
[95] Ibid.

with the material conditions necessary to create a uniquely "American way of life".[96] Yet, it was only through oil energy "cheap and plentiful", Roosevelt admitted, that the material foundation for decent living, what he termed "abundant life", could be established. [97] In America, this was largely accomplished in two ways: a restructuring of major societal institutions during the Great Depression and a revolution in marketing and advertisements.

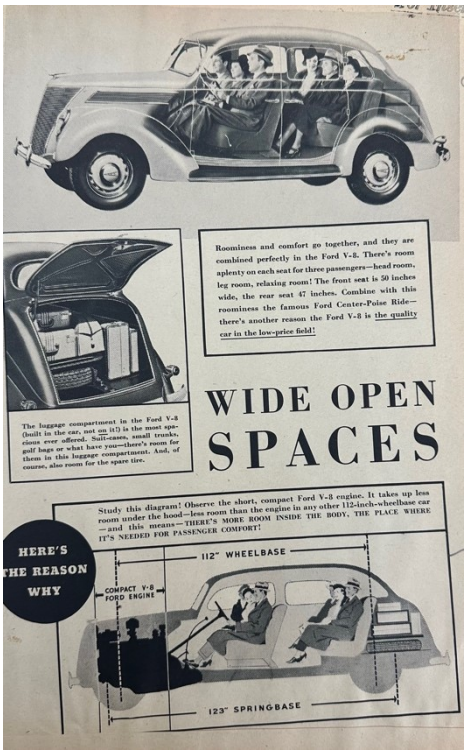

Figure 5. "Wide Open Space: Roominess and Comfort Go Together." Advertisement by N W Ayer & Son (1937). Courtesy of Smithsonian, National Museum of American History.

During the 1930s the challenge for the US federal government was to construct political institutions, social conventions, and cultural significations that did not go so far as socializing the means of production but would create enough centralized management and oversight to prevent overproduction and regulate industry.[98] Concepts, such as a the "American way of life", standards of living, and "the abundant life", were mobilized by politicians, businessmen, scientists, and ad agencies to systematize individual entitlement to commodities and energy, both of which were considered critical to the public's, indeed the republic's, well-being. Energy in general, and oil specifically, during this time would become foundational to American life and

[96] Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991).
[97] Waldemar Kaempffert, "Power for the Abundant Life," *New York Times*, August 23, 1936.
[98] Cultural signification, in this case, is defined by the fundamental process of capitalist expansion that has arisen around oil, creating a vast assemblage of interlinked technological, commercial, financial and political structures. Oil was instrumental in establishing a new phase of capitalism – neoliberalism – defined by the hyperproduction of commodities and the signs of commodified value. Barrett and Worden, *Oil Culture*, xxiv-xxv.

lifestyles that in turn would both elevate American living standards through auto-centric suburban geographies – the spaces of middle-class consumption – and reverse the economic downturn caused by the Great Depression by absorbing excess supply through consumption. In short, oil would help create extensive industrial and transport infrastructures and develop a mobile consumerist society "addicted" to its energy. The spaces of automobility, Sudhir Chella Rajan argues, or the complex of highways, freeways, public and private roads, driveways and garages, and the legroom within the automobile itself, became the concrete "articulation of liberal [American] society's promise to its citizens."[99]

Figure 6. "There's Lots of Room in the Ford V8." Advertisement by N W Ayers & Son (1934/35). Courtesy of Smithsonian, National Museum of American History.

The paradox of the Great Depression was that while scarcity was experienced by the masses of unemployed and uprooted American families, the problem in natural resources markets and in the economy as a whole was one of overabundance, glut, and lack of demand.[100] The New Deal, therefore, was not only a project for economic recovery but also a wider cultural project to restore faith in capitalism through commodity consumption that would absorb excess production, starting

[99] Sudhir Chella Rajan, "Automobility and the Liberal Disposition," in *Against Automobility*, ed. Steffen Böhm, et al. (New York: Wiley, 2006), 113.

[100] Also known as the "paradox of want amid plenty", the "paradox of scarcity and abundance", or as Walter Lippman stated in his address to the 1932 National Conference of Social Work, "the sensational and intolerable paradox of want in the midst of abundance, of poverty in the midst of plenty." Janet Poppendiek, *Breadlines Knee-Deep in Wheat: Food Assistance in the Great Depression* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2014), xvi; Iain Boal, et al., *Afflicted Powers: Capital and Spectacle in a New Age of War* (San Francisco: Verso, 2005), 5; Lea Winter, "Fueling Oil Scarcity: Produced Scarcity and the Sociopolitical Fate of Renewable Energy," *Journal of International Affairs* 69, no. 1 (2015): 195.

with consumers themselves. It was not so much that the Great Depression threatened the productive capacity of petro-capital, but rather that it threw into question the reproduction of life under this new energy system. While overall industrial production suffered during this time, falling by as much as 33 percent between 1929 and 1933, this decline was aggravated by American consumers, whose average income declined by more than 50 percent during the same period, being unable to purchase commodities beyond what was necessary to sustain bare life.[101]

More likely to evoke images of the Dust Bowl, breadlines, and Hoovervilles, the Great Depression also marked the beginning of a national doctrine of perpetual growth premised on the consumption of greater and greater amounts of commodities and energy, and rigorously examined through national statistics (such as Gross National Product, now known as Gross Domestic Product) designed to measure the "health" of both American exchange and civic life.[102] The presumption by politicians that American economic and social life could be measured, made metrics such as GNP, according to Richard Robbins, "the most important statistics of our time … they meant that to have any worth, something had to have a [stable] price."[103] However, the stock market crash of 1929 which heralded the beginning of the Great Depression caused prices to fall precipitously across the US economy, prices that were already low due to overproduction. What

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[101] For statistics, see Rosemary Marcuss and Richard Kane, "Born of the Great Depression and World War II," *U.S. National Income and Product Statistics: Bureau of Economic Analysis* (February 2007): 34. Though the term is used differently here, bare existence is in reference to Agamben's "bare life" or "zoe". Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

[102] GNP was renamed GDP in 1991. Originally developed by Simon Kuznets, a young economist who worked for the U.S. Commerce Department, in 1932, GNP measures the total of money spent or invested in goods and services by households, governments, and businesses. It did not calculate things such as family, community activities and the natural habitat, as they were outside the price system and, therefore, had no "economic" value. Clifford Cobb, et al., "If the GDP is Up, Why is America Down?" *Atlantic Monthly* (October 1995).

[103] Robbins, *Global Problems*, 366. Interestingly, oil energy only accounted for a mere 5 percent of national income as its "real" contribution to the economy. Economists presumed that it was so abundant and plentiful that did not appear to be directly responsible for economic growth. Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy*, 139-42.

resulted were drastic measures taken by producers to either cut wages or lay off substantial portions of the labor force to keep costs low and profits stable. As a result, more and more Americans had less and less income to buy goods, exacerbating the economic conditions within markets that already had excess supply and diminishing demand. To make matters even worse, small-scale producers, particularly in the agricultural and oil sectors, continued to flood the market during this time of production overcapacity.[104] Due to price deflation and inter-producer competition, many farmers and oilmen felt compelled to sell more of their products to recoup costs, maintain market share, and prevent insolvency.[105] Thus, a negative feedback loop emerged within the US economy that caused markets to flounder and entire communities to collapse. Suddenly, millions of Americans were homeless and jobless. And in their immiseration the political slogans for the preservation of life, and liberty, and the pursuit of happiness rang hollow, tarnishing the great American experiment with democracy and calling into question the viability of the capitalist mode of commodity production for profit. "Americans … of the Great Depression," historian Albert Romasco has written, "were a people perplexed by plenty … America's poverty was not cut in the familiar pattern of the past; it was … the poverty of abundance."[106] To combat this dire situation, the federal government introduced measures through New Deal policies to either limit supply or create demand, which is to say, scarcity was produced.

Rather than dread the prospects of a famine or lack of commodities of any sort, American politicians now feared nature's bounty as exploited by their country's too efficient methods of production. The culprit was seen by many politicians as the numerous, small-scale producers

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[104] For farmers, see Janet Poppendieck, *Breadlines Knee-Deep in Wheat: Food Assistance in the Great Depression* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), ch. 2; for oilmen, see Huber, *Lifeblood*, ch. 1; for overproduction, see Robbins, *Global Problems*, ch. 7.
[105] Poppendieck, *Breadlines*, 18.
[106] Albert Romasco, *The Poverty of Abundance: Hoover, the Nation, the Depression* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 3.

throughout the nation who competed with each other, causing commodity prices to plummet.[107] Indeed, President Roosevelt began to accept the notion that production had to be constrained in line with reasonable market demand when the nation in the early years of the Great Depression was faced with a crisis in agricultural prices.[108] In essence, reasonable market demand meant rational federal management of private lands as a single unit to both alleviate inter-producer pressures and allow for the maximum possible recovery of resources. At stake in the collapse of resource markets was a contradiction between who had the right to manage resources extracted from private lands, on the one hand, and the competitive principles of free market capitalism, on the other. National narratives, therefore, began to frame local production practices as a haphazard and wasteful squandering of essential resources that required government intervention.[109] Yet any effort to consolidate federal control over the management of production was seen by many small-scale producers as an unconstitutional violation of individual property and state's rights.[110]

It was in this context that the Roosevelt government began to implement policies to create federally regulated markets which paradoxically stunted the competitive forces of capital in order

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[107] Jonathan Coppess, *The Fault Lines of Farm Policy: A History of the Farm Bill* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2018), 50.

[108] At the stroke of FDR's pen, the bill, now known as the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA), was ratified in May 1933. Borne from the act was the Agricultural Adjustment Administration, whose responsibilities were to "rationally" manage farm production in line with reasonable market demand, granting it unprecedented authority and marking a turning point in the philosophy of the American government. The bill was ostensibly to "rescue [American] agriculture" and embark the nation on a "new and untrod path" that would rectify the "existing national economic emergency by increasing agricultural purchasing power." The National Agricultural Law Center, *Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933* (Fayetteville, AR: University of Arkansas Press in conjunction with the United States Department of Agriculture, National Agricultural Library, 2017). However, as Jonathan Coppess contends, the price-support aspect of the bill was political fluff; the real power of the bill came from production-controls. These controls would reduce the total available acreage of farmland, thereby increasing the price of crops, and institute a system of centralized command over the acreage that remained. Coppess, *Fault Lines*, 25-6.

[109] For instance, see, "Huge Waste by Soil Erosion: The Nation Begins a Survey," *New York Times*, 14 May 1933; "Custodian of Our Vast Public Domain: Harold L. Ickes, Secretary of the Interior, Sees His Task as One of Conserving Resources to Serve the People," *New York Times*, 4 June 1933; "The Crisis in Oil: A Huge National Problem," *The New York Times*, 11 June 1933; "Wallace Pleads for Conservation: Soil Program to Be Extended to Stop Waste of All Natural Resources, He Intimates," *New York Times*, 11 March 1936;

[110] Coppess, *Fault Lines*, 94-6.

for American consumers to have access to and be able to afford the material conditions of the "American way of life". The political battle over prices, therefore, was fought not over whether the forces of production would be artificially controlled but at what scale control would be exercised by the government. In this new era of mass production, juxtaposed by individual want and underconsumption, American civilization was challenged by its own ingenuity: factories, wells, and fields were producing more than the economic system permitted Americans to consume. By using federal powers to constrain production in line with reasonable market demand, the state set the reproduction of American life on "a new and untrod" path, according to Secretary of Agriculture Henry Wallace, wherein statistical tools measured prices, supply and demand as indicators of the life of a population.[111] As Timothy Mitchell argues, it was through these forms of statistical aggregation that the "economy", in addition to the associated life of the American population, was discovered.[112]

Though these statistics give some indication of the economic breakdown in monetary systems and labor markets and may even be regarded as a kind of epistemic violence to the real conditions of suffering experienced by over twelve million unemployed and transient workers, they fail to reveal in any way that the Depression was also an ideological challenge to the legitimacy of oil capitalism itself. As one *New York Times* opinion article from March 1934 stated, many Americans were actively discussing "whether communism or fascism [was] preferable in the United States as the new social order to supplant capitalism."[113] Indeed, such opinions proliferated during this time, reflecting a widely held belief amongst Americans that liberal democracies throughout the world

[111] Secretary of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), Henry Wallace, used the phrase "a new and untrod path" in 1933 to highlight the extreme measures the federal government would have to take during the Great Depression to combat overproduction by both reducing inter-producer competition and increasing the purchasing power of individual Americans. Coppess, *Fault Lines*, 24-6.
[112] Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy*, 140-3.
[113] New York Times, "Capitalism Doomed, Say Fascist and Red," *New York Times*, 5 March 1934.

were collapsing or had already collapsed.[114] It was in this context that senator Robert Wagner of New York stated, "We [Americans] are in a life and death struggle with the forces of social and economic dissolution."[115] To combat America's ideological digression from liberal democracy and help ameliorate the negative economic effects of the crisis on working- and middle-class Americans, Wagner proposed legislation to make the federal government responsible for ensuring the right of workers to collectively bargain for higher wages and thus attain better standards of living. Moreover, Wagner believed that the federal government should expand and protect such standards by "throw[ing] all the resources of our people and our government into the fray on the side of … the 15,000,000 existing only with the help of charity."[116] By enforcing the rights of labor to collectively bargain and join labor unions through federal legislation, Senator Wagner's proposal meant that no longer were standards of living to be solely provided by individual efforts, philanthropic organizations, or corporate paternalism, but also guaranteed by the state.

The key to Wagner's labor bill, Michel Aglietta contends, was to create federal institutions that provided labor with the capacity to collectively bargain for wages that were conducive to the development of a "social consumption norm."[117] Before the Great Depression many industry leaders realized that it would be necessary to pay their workers higher wages to provide both a demand for their products and to retain their work force. The most esteemed of these leaders, was no other than Henry Ford, who in 1914 offered higher wages to retain workers who had begun to leave in droves after developing a distaste for the drudgery of assembling the same automobile

[114] For instance, a Times article which suggested that capitalism was "doomed, dying or dead." New York Times, "Life in It Yet," *New York Times*, 16 December 1934.
[115] Robert Wagner, quoted in "Senate Broadens R.F.C.", *New York Times*, 18 February 1933, 4.
[116] Wagner, "Senate Broadens R.F.C.", 4.
[117] Michel Aglietta, *A Theory of Capitalist Regulation: The US Experience*, trans. David Fernbach (London: NLB, 1979), 71.

part *ad nauseum* within the new machine system of mass production.[118] But Ford was not alone. By the early twentieth century many American industrialists came to the same realization as Ford: that not only did higher wages allow them to retain labor, reducing the cost of recruitment and training, but also gave laborers the necessary income to buy the very same products they helped manufacture.[119] However, when the Great Depression hit the United States, wages were cut and workers laid off, underscoring that the well-being of the work force could not be left to the "benevolence" of paternalistic industrialists. Indeed, many federal politicians saw state intervention into wage disputes as a means to prevent labor strife, strikes, and work stoppages that had increased to a frightening degree during the Depression, and which had affected the pace of capitalist production and growth.[120]

Wagner's bill, as a result, was passed by both houses of Congress in July 1935.[121] Renamed the Wagner Act, one central tenant of the bill was to erect the National Relations Labor Board, a federal body that would monitor labor practices and enshrine the right of workers to organize. The full force of the federal government was mobilized, Wagner claimed, to ensure that "a bulwark of industrial peace" be maintained between labor and industry, "underlying the principles of democracy and fair dealing", and that an American "national life" be preserved "and embodied in an act of Congress."[122] No more was corporate paternalism to be the primary arbiter of wage relations and the source of workers' standards of living. Indeed, the Wagner Act was justified in these terms, as policy makers identified the lack of consumer purchasing power as the root cause of the Depression which threatened the "American way of life" and to deprive Americans of the

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[118] Keith Sward, *The Legend of Henry Ford* (New York: Reinhart, 1948), 32.
[119] Cohen, *Making a New Deal*, 159.
[120] Ibid., 156
[121] It took two more years for the Supreme Court to judge that the Wagner Act was constitutional.
[122] Robert Wagner in "Supreme Court Findings Hailed by Wagner as Most Significant Since Marshall," *New York Times*, 13 April 1937, p. 20.

material conditions necessary to achieve a decent standard of living.[123] Thus, the Wagner Act attempted to institutionalize the "American way of life" based on higher wages and the increased consumption of manufactured goods outside the workplace. Within this "bulwark of industrial peace", a specific ideology of American life was therefore constructed, whereby the means to consume (higher wages) was not only fine-tuned to be in line with production but took on increased social and cultural significance as the critical mode through which freedom and self-improvement was imagined and performed.

While the consumption of food was necessary to maintain bare life, it was the consumption of oil that provided the material conditions necessary for the "American *way* of life". Indeed, advertisements, like Figure 7, equated the progress of American society – that is, the "health" of its consumers – to the degree by which individuals were able to consume and benefit from the material comforts provided by oil energy. Yet, like agriculture, the oil sector by 1930 was besieged by price volatility and glut. Tendencies toward overproduction were rooted in a unique system of property rights in the United States which determined who was able to extract subsurface oil. While most oil-producing nations considered petroleum deposits as the

Figure 7. "Comfort that rests on VALUE." Advertisement by N W Ayer & Son for *Fortune* (1939/41). Courtesy of Smithsonian, National Museum of American History.

[123] Alan Brinkley, *The End of Reform: New Deal Liberalism in Recession and War* (New York: Vintage, 1996), 65.

de facto property of the state, in the United States the situation was completely different as federal and state governments based domestic oil production on the legal precedent of the "rule of capture".[124] Under this common-law doctrine, the right to drill subsurface oil in the US was granted either to those who owned the land above each deposit or those who developed the means to "capture" oil. Yet, oil deposits rarely, if ever, corresponded to the neat, parceled geography of private property. As a result, above each deposit existed countless oilmen – both the landowners who "owned" the oil underneath and the independent producers who leased the land to develop the means of production – all with legitimate claims to the oil underneath them and who were all incentivized to pump, in fear that any hesitation would mean someone else would beat them to the punch.[125]

Thus, an oil discovery automatically created a chaotic rush to extract as much oil as possible which often had disastrous consequences on the price of oil and industries related to its production. However, as endemic as overproduction was within the oil sector, its effects on the prices remained mostly regional until 1930 when an independent wildcatter named Columbus "Dad" Joiner struck the single largest oil field in the history of United States: the Black Giant, or East Texas Oil Field.[126] Spanning forty-two miles in length and four to eight miles in width, the Black Giant was producing over 350,000 barrels of oil a day, or nearly 15 percent of total domestic oil consumption by 1931.[127] Causing chaos in both Texas and neighboring Oklahoma, this sudden deluge of oil

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[124] The 'rule of capture' claimed "that the first person to 'capture' a natural resource owns that resource." Bruce M. Kramer and Owen L. Anderson, "The Rule of Capture – An Oil and Gas Perspective," *Environmental Law* 35, no. 4 (Fall 2005): 899. For an equally insightful discussion on the rule of capture, see Erich Zimmermann, *Conservation in the Production of Petroleum: A Study in Industrial Control* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1957).

[125] See, Bernard Mommer, *Global Oil and the Nation State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

[126] Roger Olien and Diana Davids Hinton, *Wildcatters: Texas Independent Oil Men* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2007), 43.

[127] Roger Olien and Diana Olien, *Oil in Texas: The Gusher Age, 1895-1945* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), 170-1.

caused thousands of independent producers, whose wells were no longer economically viable due to the sudden drop in prices, to threaten revolt.[128] Additionally, attempts by state governments in Texas or Oklahoma that sought to implement production quotas in order to stabilize price and mitigate violent grumblings within the oil industry were often circumvented by smugglers selling "hot" oil, causing prices to fall even more.[129] Altogether, between the discovery of the East Texas Oil Field and the illegal sales of oil, prices within the United States dropped from seventy-five to ten cents a barrel during the spring of 1933.[130]

Facing ruin from overproduction, the presidents and executives of large, capital-intensive oil companies saw little alternative than to constrain production in line with consumer demand.[131] Oil firms advocated for the centralized, yet privately negotiated, management of oil pools as a natural unit where conservation – preservation of oil well integrity, prevention of oil loss through spills, and limiting supply to align with demand – was achieved.[132] Though individual and national demand for oil since the end World War I had increased significantly, consumers were either unable or unwilling during the Great Depression to spend their much needed and significantly depleted

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[128] Olien and Hinton, *Wildcatters*, 58; Warner Mills, *Martial Law in East Texas* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama, 1960), 7. For a popular history of the East Texas oil field, see James Clark and Michael Halbouty, *The Last Boom* (New York: Random House, 1972).

[129] Yergin, *The Prize*, 331.

[130] So glutted was the oil market that some "hot" oil runners reported having to slash the prices of their illegal merchandise to two cents. Ibid., 332.

[131] See, for example, the Achnacarry Agreement (As-Is Agreement), signed by the leaders of the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (later known as British Petroleum or BP), Royal Dutch/Shell, and Standard Oil of New Jersey (later Exxon) in 1928. Designed by its co-signatories to limit excessive competition that led to overproduction, the As-Is Agreement aimed to divide markets, fix prices, and limit the expansion of production capacity. In the same year, the Group Agreement (better known as the "Red Line" Agreement) was struck between the Seven Sisters – Standard Oil of New Jersey, Standard Oil of New York (Socony, later Mobil), the Standard Oil Company of California (Socal, later renamed Chevron), the Texas Oil Company (later Texaco), Gulf Oil (now merged with Chevron), Anglo-Persian, and Royal Dutch/Shell – and Compagnie Française des Pétroles (CFP, later Total) to equally divide the oil resources within the territories that formerly comprised the Ottoman Empire. Anthony Sampson, *The Seven Sisters: The Great Oil Companies and the World They Shaped* (New York: Bantam, 1991).

[132] Not to be confused with environmental conservation and protection. For multiple meanings of this term in the context of oil economics, see Wallace Lovejoy and Paul Homan, *Economics Aspects of Oil Conservation Regulation* (Paolo Alto, CA: RFF, 2013), 130. Also see, Zimmerman, *Conservation*.

incomes on oil products, causing a supply glut in the oil market.[133] Adding to this problem, were the thousands of independent oil producers who could not afford to stop production, even if they were adding fuel to the fire of price instability. Such unrestrained competition, oil executives reasoned, not only threatened to bankrupt independent oilmen themselves but imperiled the whole energy market. Many politicians, therefore, began to view independent wildcatters as an obstacle to economic stability and national vitality. Just as mass unemployment illustrated the dramatic breakdown of society on a national scale, an industry-wide collapse in oil production threatened access to petroleum products that were to become the basis of the "American way of life", and more frighteningly, the entire economic system itself. Committed to reviving the economy and maintaining the health of American consumerism, the federal government became, Yergin argues, "keenly attentive to what was happening in Texas … it was willing to do whatever was necessary."[134] As a result, the United States government would introduce legislation that premised American living standards on a system of oil constraint, whereby competition and oversupply amongst oil companies were eliminated, and oil products acted as objects of social and economic regulation.

The key for the federal government was to erect forms of intervention that provided a barrier to competition, while simultaneously incentivizing individual consumption to absorb excess production. It was in this context that FDR selected Secretary of the Interior, Harold Ickes, in 1933 to take charge of the oil crisis without violating the ultimate principles of capitalism. Soon after

[133] In the immediate aftermath of World War I, the US Navy and the director of the United States Geological Survey, Dr. George Otis Smith, increasingly saw petroleum as a critical resource toward developing a modern – that is, mobile – American military and nation. Peter Shulman, ""Science Can Never Demobilize": The United States Navy and Petroleum Geology, 1898-1924," *History and Technology* 19, no. 4 (2003): 365–95. Furthermore, a jump from 1.8 million cars in 1914 to over 9.2 million by 1920, suggests that individual Americans' love affair with fuel-powered mobility was becoming ever more amorous. Yergin, *The Prize*, 260.
[134] Yergin, *The Prize*, 332.

his appointment, however, it became clear to Ickes that in order for oil prices to stabilize the government had to intervene and curtail competition within the market. In a memo addressed to FDR in May, Ickes argued:

> It is obvious that oil cannot be sold at ten cents a barrel without grave results to the oil industry and the general economic situation in the country… To meet this situation groups of oil interests, mainly major ones, have drafted and presented to me a bill which they hope will be enacted into law. This bill, declaring that an emergency exists, provides that the Secretary of Interior, for the period of two years, shall in effect be an oil dictator.[135]

By plunging to ten cents, the cost of a barrel of oil, Ickes argued, was well below the profitable and industry-established threshold of one dollar per barrel.[136] It was heedless overproduction, Ickes claimed, that both highlighted the nonrenewable character of oil and necessitated federally enforced oil conservation. Addressing the public in June, Ickes warned that unless overproduction and waste were checked by the federal government, American oil, an "indispensable natural resource" upon which American "national defense and general welfare so vitally depend", would "inevitably soon reach practical exhaustion."[137]

FDR agreed, and Ickes was given unheard of power to govern the oil industry. On August 27, 1935, the bill to create the Interstate Oil Compact Commission (IOCC) was ratified with the full support of Congress and President Roosevelt. Critically, the bill introduced a scalar fix to production that would tackle the "chaotic situation" arising out of the East Texas oil fields by both stabilizing and eventually increasing the price of oil.[138] As was the case with the Agricultural Adjustment Administration, a federal body, in this case the Department of the Interior's Bureau of Mines, would publish monthly projections of national consumer demand that would serve as

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[135] "Memo to FDR from Harold Ickes, May 1, 1933," as cited by Huber, *Lifeblood*, 51.
[136] Roger Olien and Diana Davids Olien, *Oil and Ideology: The Cultural Creation of the American Petroleum Industry* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 120.
[137] "The Crisis in Oil: A Huge National Problem," *New York Times*, 11 June 1933.
[138] "Roosevelt Names Icke 'Oil Dictator'," *New York Times,* August 30, 1933; Olien and Olien, *Oil and Ideology*, 185.

recommendations for the IOCC on not only how much they should produce yearly but also the measures each member should take to keep the price of oil at industry-accepted levels.

Key to this system, according to Yergin, were two working assumptions. One was that the consumption of oil would not be overly responsive to price movements. That is, whether oil was at ten cents or one dollar a barrel, the demand for oil would remain relatively unchanged. The second assumption was that each state had its "natural" share of the market, meaning that any new entrant into the IOCC would result in pre-existing members cutting back production to ensure price stability.[139] Thus, the Bureau of Mines did not so much measure demand at variable prices in "real" neoclassical terms, but rather projected the probable consumption of oil *a priori*. Critically, the measurement of oil demand was couched by statisticians in terms of the needs and improvements for the American population as a whole, or by the amount of crude oil required to sustain the economy and keep the American people comfortable.[140] The supply of oil, therefore, became a balancing act of keeping oil prices high enough for producers but low enough for consumers in order for the former to profit and for the latter to afford the material conditions of the "American way of life".

By artificially keeping the price of a barrel of oil at the industry-accepted standard of one dollar, that on paper was to ensure economic stability and reasonable competition amongst oilmen big and small, the IOCC in reality served to protect multiple preestablished, capital-intensive

[139] By the late 1930s, Illinois discovered massive oil deposits, making it the fourth largest producer in the United States. When Illinois joined the IOCC, both Texas and Oklahoma, as a result, had to reluctantly cut back production. Yergin, *The Prize*, 341.

[140] For instance, the Bureau of Mines calculated the total amount for motor gasoline by multiplying the average fuel use per vehicle by the total number of registered vehicles in operation. Similar data was produced for oil-burning furnaces. The amount of crude needed for specific oil products was then estimated via a yield factor – that is, the average amount of crude it takes to yield a given amount of gasoline. "Proration of Petroleum Production," *The Yale Law Journal* 51, no. 4 (1942): 608-628. For more information on how demand was calculated, see U.S. House of Representatives, "Hearings before a Subcommittee of the Committee on Interstate and Foreign Commerce on H.R. 290 and H.R. 7372, 76th Cong., 3rd Sess. (1939)," 167-94.

producers from the perils of unrestrained competition. As Gary Libecap argues, "the underlying political concern was the devastation to local economies and the careers of politicians if thousands of high-cost oil firms, refineries, and well service and supply companies were to fail."[141] The result was a regularization of a system of constrained petroleum production for unrestricted mass petroleum consumption where the price of oil was not attached to decentralized capitalist mechanisms but literally fixed at the federal level to create fine-tuned stability. Indeed, such a pro-rationing system was a kind of regional cartel (which later inspired the creation of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries [OPEC]) that promulgated the notion of conservation regulation, not to increase competition, protect small-scale oil businesses, or safeguard the principles of supply and demand, but to create the appearance of all three.[142] Central to this arrangement was the construction of an oil market where price stability through federal oversight was maintained. But, as Wallace Lovejoy and Paul Homan state, "the whole system of conservation regulation [was] designed to prevent market competition" through the displacement of enough small-scale producers in favor of larger, high-cost oil firms.[143]

By creating the institutional and material conditions for a particular way of American life, the federal government actively sustained the production of "cheap-enough" oil energy in line with their calculations of demand, a demand that was projected and which wed American society to a system of oil energy.[144] What is important to note here, is that such a marriage did not occur organically. As Huber states:

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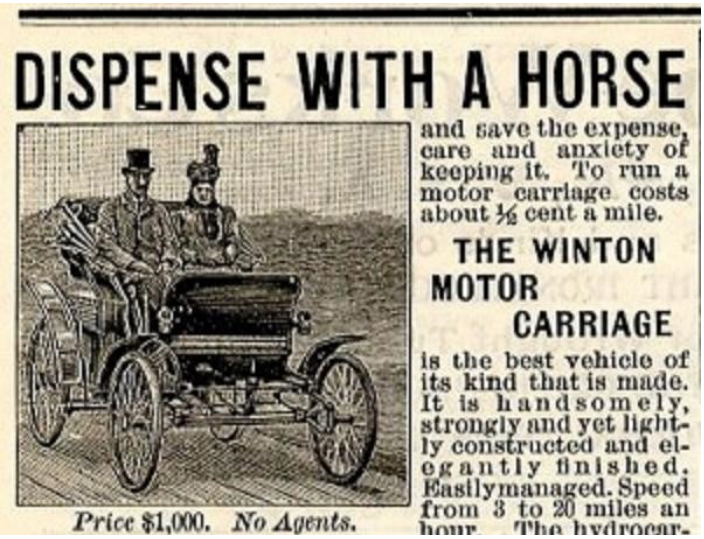
[141] Gary Libecap, "The Political Economy of Crude Oil Cartelization in the United States, 1933-1972," *The Journal of Economic History* 49, no. 4 (1989): 837.
[142] Yergin, *The Prize*, 259; U.S. Senate, Select Committee on Small Business, Subcommittee on Monopoly, 82nd Cong., 2nd Sess., *The International Petroleum Cartel: Staff Report to the Federal Trade Commission* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1952).
[143] Lovejoy and Homan, *Oil Conservation*, 282.
[144] Huber, *Lifeblood*, 59.

> The idea that energy in general and oil specifically was foundational to a way of life did not emerge naturally. It was *produced* out of a wider set of struggles and crises of capitalism. New Deal policies did not declare a new national energy policy; rather, they proposed new imaginaries … based around high wages, home ownership, and auto-centric suburban geographies predicated upon the provision of cheap and abundant oil. These imaginaries encompassed a whole set of practices and geographies that locked in ways of consuming energy – energy that was assumed to be available.[145]

Thus, the centrality and indispensability of oil within American life, often used as the definitive, though rather derivative, justification for the continuation of modern life "as-is" no matter the cost, was *created*.

Oil's promise was to make good on the shift from muscle to mechanical work that had begun during the Industrial Revolution.[146] Yet the transition from muscular to fossil-fuel labor required a drastic reconfiguration of Americans' conception of self in relation to others, in addition to their "access to work and the modern body's relationship to its material world", argues Bob Johnson in *Carbon Nation*.[147] What Johnson is alluding to is that the imaginaries of oil which began to permeate the American consciousness in the 1930s, though the ground for their


DISPENSE WITH A HORSE

and save the expense, care and anxiety of keeping it. To run a motor carriage costs about ½ cent a mile.

THE WINTON MOTOR CARRIAGE

is the best vehicle of its kind that is made. It is handsomely, strongly and yet lightly constructed and elegantly finished. Easily managed. Speed from 3 to 20 miles an hour. The hydrocar-

Price $1,000. No Agents.

Figure 8. "Dispense with a Horse." Advertisement by The Wintor Motor Carriage Company. First published in *Scientific American*, 30 July 1898.

[145] Huber, *Lifeblood*, 58, emphasis added.

[146] By 1955, the inputs of animal and human work to US industry were dwarfed by those of fossil fuels: 0.7 and 0.9 percent, respectively, compared to 90.8 percent for coal and oil. Bob Johnson, *Carbon Nation: Fossil Fuels in the Making of American Culture* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2014), 41. Since the early twentieth century, many attempts have been made to quantify oil energy in terms human or animal capacity to work, often with statistically problematic or ideologically troubling conclusions: "'Three billion hard-working slaves, or the service equivalent of thirty servants'" for every American, was the calculation Smithsonian mineral specialists Chester Gilbert and Joseph Gilbert arrived at in *Power: Its Significance and Needs*. As quoted in Johnson, *Carbon Nation*, 41.

[147] Johnson, *Carbon Nation*, 41-2 and "Coal, Trauma, and the Origins of the Modern Self," *Journal of Americans Culture* 33, no. 4 (2010): 265-79.

reception was laid much earlier, was not just a matter of the public accepting new technologies but also a profound rearrangement between humans and how they viewed the worlds in which they lived, worked and socialized. As the American economy dispensed with traditional forms of labor and transitioned to petrocapitalism (Figure 8), consumers became sensitized to the benefits of a resource that simultaneously compressed time and expanded space; a form of mineral energy that "liquefied" civilization and modernity.[148] Oil, once systematized – that is, when both the physical structures of oil and the social ideas organizing those structures are joined seamlessly – allowed Americans to develop novel and sophisticated means of moving themselves and the products they consumed.[149] Advertisements, like Figure 9, conveyed how the systemization of oil technologies would greatly improve Americans' social reproduction – the possibility to save on groceries – or production – the ability to keep costs down and remain competitive. However, federal institutions and infrastructures alone could not incentivize Americans to buy oil commodities or to adopt the

Figure 9. "Down Come Grocery Delivery Costs." Advertisement by N W Ayer & Son (1937). Courtesy of Smithsonian, National Museum of American History.

[148] According to urbanist David Owen, twentieth-century development is best described as "liquid civilization", or a mobile civilization based on the access to and use of liquid oil, to which, he claims, there are no significant alternatives. David Owen, *Green Metropolis* (London: Penguin, 2011), ch. 2. Similarly, social analyst Zygmunt Bauman described twentieth-century development as "liquid modernity", but what he did not examine was how there was in fact a literal liquid – oil – that made this modernity possible. Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000).

[149] Such a process is best described as socio-technical, or both the various technologies to extract, transport, and refine crude oil into useable commodities, and the management, specialized knowledge, human capital, and finance to construct, maintain, improve, and consolidate these technologies. For an edifying read on the socio-technical relationships of oil, see Katayoun Shafiee, *Machineries of Oil: An Infrastructural History of BP in Iran* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2018) and Tere Vadén, "Ethics, Nafthism, and the Fossil Fuel Subject," *Relations* 6, no. 1 (2018): 33-48.

material conditions of an "American way of life". Though the public's needs were partially adjudicated by political modifications of capital, Americans' perceptions of oil, or their conceptual and aesthetic capacity to know the daily function and effects of oil energy, also needed mediation.

When oil was first "discovered" in Titusville, Pennsylvania in the late nineteenth century, public perceptions of it were often shot through with the negative aspects of industrial excess.[150] Popular representations of the oil industry during this time emphasized the danger, social chaos, and environmental ruin that inevitably resulted from a discovery.[151] With little to no incentive for traditional land stewardship and compelled to drain oil pools as quickly as possible due to the rule of capture, the oil industry was often thought of as a despoiler of the land, taking advantage of and corrupting communities that were unfortunate enough to sit atop an oil deposit.[152] Yet within this "culture of extraction", where ruinous speculation, pollution, and boom-bust cycles occurred, there nonetheless existed the triumph of human industry personified by the independent wildcatter, individual enrichment, and, perhaps more importantly, exuberance.[153]

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[150] Oil was in fact known about and used by indigenous civilizations for everything, from caulking and mortar to medicine and chewing gum, thousands of years prior to its "discovery" in Titusville. Auzanneau, *Oil Power*, 16-19. The "discovery" narrative of oil, Mitchell argues, is thus part of the myth of Western exceptionalism that minimizes or completely obfuscates its cultural value outside of Euro-American industry. Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy*, 65.

[151] Brian Black, *Petrolia: The Landscape of America's First Oil Boom* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 1-59.

[152] Ibid., 26.

[153] Frederick Buell, "A Short History of Oil Cultures; or, The Marriage of Catastrophe and Exuberance," in *Oil Culture*, 130.

It was the very abundance of oil and the relative ease of extracting it that made oil such an enticing source of personal wealth and self-reliance. Compared to the labor required to extract coal, oil was just beneath the surface and already pressurized to boot; all that was required to bring it to the surface was some drilling and the enterprise of a few daring and lucky men. Indeed, it was this more exuberant notion of oil as lubricant to personal wealth that was espoused in Upton Sinclair's *Oil!*, first published in 1926. Unlike his previous novel, *The Jungle*, which dramatized the insidious underworld of coal capitalism, Sinclair frames the protagonists of *Oil!* as energetic, self-styled and -made, highly mobile and modern, and always (em)powered by the energies of oil. In this new era of the self-made and mobile man, American exceptionalism, Sinclair seems to suggest, had left the frontier and reinvested itself in the machineries of petro-modernity, creating an ideological and geographical gap between the people who had embraced oil energy to advance and those who had not. This exuberant depiction of oil in popular discourse not only reimagined the social geographies of a new, automotive energy system, but also portrayed, through new mimetics, aesthetics, and poetics, the American body and psyche as an extension of that system (Figure 10).[154]

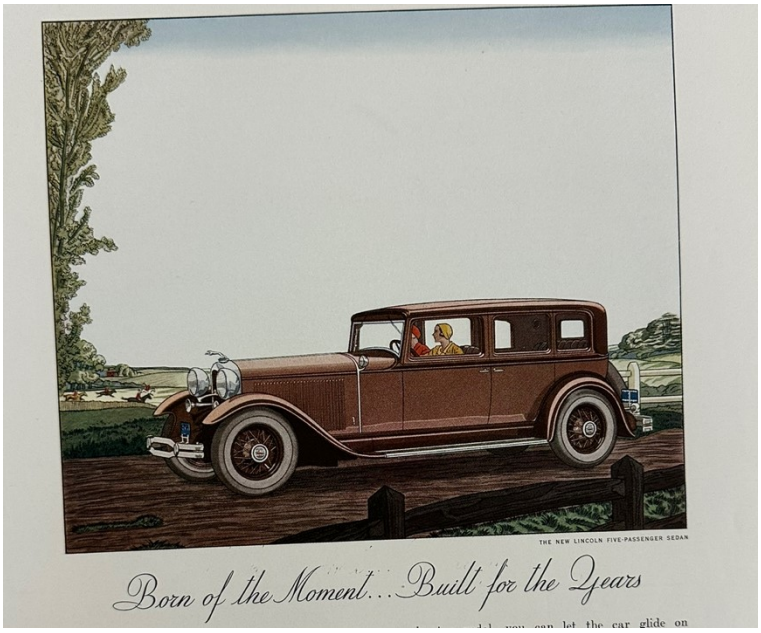

Figure 10. "Born of the Moment ... Built for the Years." Advertisement by N W Ayer & Son (1930/31). Courtesy of Smithsonian, National Museum of American History.

[154] Paul Gilmore, *Aesthetic Materialism: Electricity and American Romanticism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 143-76.

Representations of the automobile within popular culture by the late-1920s thus began to construe mobility not only with a new notion of successful individualism, a form of self-reliance achieved through oil consumption, but also with the dynamic, forward motion of modern life produced through oil combustion (Figure 11). Modern man and machine were now intertwined, with the automobile becoming both material expression of a new cultural life and extension of self. Describing this interrelationship between modern life and automobile, author Virginia Woolf, after buying an automobile in 1927, stated: "Yes, the motor car is turning out to be the joy of our lives, an additional life, free and mobile and airy … Soon we shall look back at our pre-motor days as we do now our days in the caves."[155] It was within the automobile, where human dreams of unfettered mobility and the accelerative potential of the automobile met, that Americans could now bodily and metaphorically "rev up", "put the pedal to the metal", and think of their exhilarating modern worlds through a sense of self in which driving and roads were integral to who they were and what they were able to accomplish each day. Within this world (em)powered by oil energy, a world reproduced through popular

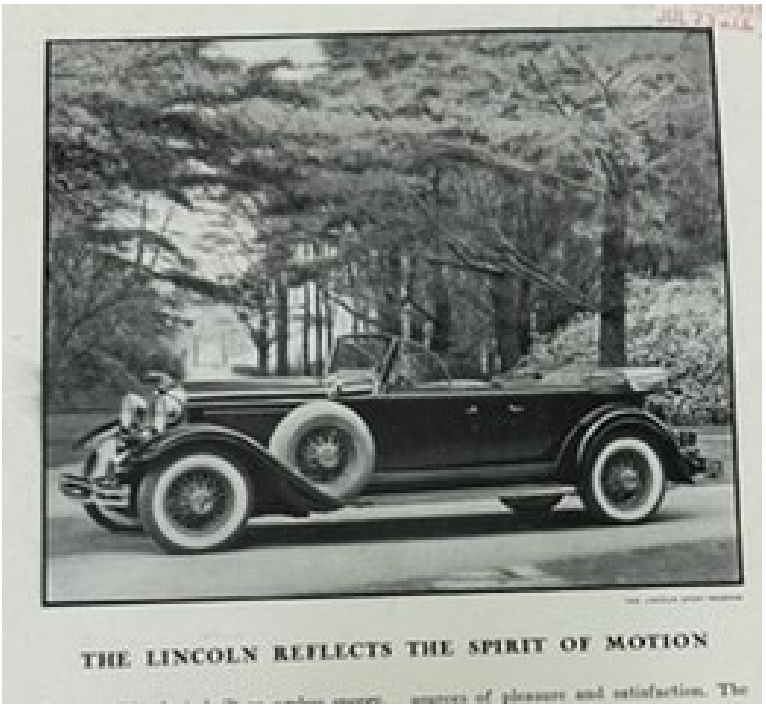

Figure 11. "The Lincoln Reflects the Spirit of Motion." Advertisement by N W Ayer & Son (1930/31). Courtesy of Smithsonian, National Museum of American History.

[155] Quoted in Blake Morrison, "It was the cathedral of modern times, but the car is now a menace," *Guardian*, 26 July 2008.

representations of modernity, mobility, and self-made prosperity, the new notion of American individualism became a discursive and energetic space of reinvention.

"There's No Way Like the American Way": Mobilizing Middle-Class Respectability and Segregation

Perhaps the most significant factors in boosting the consumption of oil in the United States during the twentieth century were innovations in advertising that marshalled the forces of psychology to help advertisers create a sense of insufficiency within the consumer while simultaneously providing them with a simple corrective: consumerism. The critical function of ads during this time became not to convince the consumer that the object being sold was valuable in and of itself, but to create deeper and more intangible associations between the commodity and consumer that highlighted the latter's insufficiencies and evoked their desires – for love, autonomy, modernity, self-development, distinction, and freedom. By the early 1930s, these subtle and unconscious forms of persuasion had largely been standardized within ads that increasingly used straightforward images with complex emotional resonances. This development of ad standardization, Raymond Williams contends, became "the official art of modern capitalist society: it is what 'we' put up in 'our' streets and used to fill up to half of 'our' newspapers and magazines: and it commanded the services of perhaps the largest organized body of writers and artists, with their attendant managers and advisers, in the whole of history."[156] As such, advertising became both barometer and vital producer of dominant values and tastes; both of which appeared to be expressed individually through the act of consumption, but were in fact determined socially, in addition to being sites at which cultural power is produced and maintained.

In other words, by the 1930s, advertisements in the United States made it appear that a significant measure of respect and recognition capable of mediating or reversing the effects of

[156] Raymond Williams, "Advertising: The Magic System," in *The Cultural Studies* Reader, ed. Simon During (London: Routledge, 1993), 336.

social discontent could now be simply bought through the process of exchange. Beyond the functionality, use value, and the metaphysical aspects of utility, commodities became points of branded visibility in which the consumer bought (and bought into) objects as a means to seem wealthier, more successful, and thus more respectable, consciously or not, accepting the link between commodities, identities, and socio-economic status.[157] Advertisements, therefore, did not only try to persuade the consumer to buy a particular item but also, through flamboyant acts of consumption, sell themselves and their lifestyle choices that allowed them to assert their position in social space; that through their overt display of consumption, consumers could become both subjects of exuberant living *and* marketable objects of desire. Juliet Schor writes:

> class status is gained, lost, and reproduced in part through everyday acts of consumer behaviour. Being dressed incorrectly or displaying "vulgar" manners can cost a person a management or professional job. Conversely, one can gain entry into social circles, or build lucrative business contracts, by revealing appropriate tastes, manners, and culture. Thus, consumption practices become important in maintaining the basic structures of power and inequality which characterize our world.[158]

In short, advertisements reinforced the primary meaning of a consumer culture: social distinction and differentiation. By virtue of their socio-economic status, groups in power, or those who at the very least had the wherewithal to conspicuously consume objects of power, were able to transform their material tastes and lifestyles into the legitimate ones by which others were measured.[159] The consumption of oil by the 1930s, due to its abundance and ability to conjure up imaginaries of modernity, mobility, and self-reliance – the "American way of life" – became the perfect articulation of taste and lifestyle: from lavishly oil-heated homes and glitzy, gas-guzzling V8-automobiles to the grain-fed cattle that were eaten, themselves

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[157] See, Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, trans. C. Levin (St. Louis: Telos Press, 1981), ch. 7.
[158] Juliet Schor, "Towards a New Politics of Consumption," in *The Consumer Society Reader*, eds. Juliet Schor and Douglas Holt (New York: The New Press, 2000), 457.
[159] See, Thorstein Verblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1994).

Figure 12. "Red Crown Gasoline: Standard Home Necessities." (1931). Courtesy of Smithsonian, National Museum of American History.

fattened on cereals grown with petroleum-derived fertilizers and protected by oil-based pesticides. Such products, like those in Figure 12, were represented through advertising not only as necessities for everyday life, but requisite objects that reflected the consumer's spiritual, intellectual, national, and social values – that is, the form of self the consumer wished to express and maintain. It was the individual, therefore, in addition to the means by which they communicated their social status, who played a vital role in shaping the dimensions of petroculture and how, and importantly what, commodities were represented through different forms of media.

It would be easy to dismiss consumption as meaningless and to characterize American consumers as passive automatons who, as Richard Ohmann posits, only consumed "to fill the vacancies in [their] lives through commodities, because advertisers had long since inscribed that nexus on [their] minds."[160] Yet, not only does this view portray consumer society as mindlessly drab and reflexive, depriving the consumer of agency, but it also misconstrues the dynamics of power between producers – of commodities and of advertisements vending those commodities – and consumers, ignoring the fact that consumption provides an enormous

[160] Richard Ohmann, *Selling Culture: Magazines, Markets and Class* (New York: Verso, 1996), 12.

amount of personal pleasure and meaning.[161] Put another way, Paul Du Gay asks, "If consumption was simply a reflex of production, what need would there be for design, advertising, or marketing expertise?"[162] Advertisements, as Du Gay suggests, did not exist within a smoothly operating system of consumerism. In fact, more often than not they failed to appeal to consumers, forcing advertisers to constantly reevaluate their audiences and reconsider the ways in which they might reach them.[163]

Advertisements, Arthur Berger argues, are always trying to tell, or at the very least sell, a story, and in advertising, much as it is in historical writing, that story is more complicated and more interesting than we might imagine.[164] Critically, advertisements by the early twentieth century became a form of communication, a discursive space where social reality was produced by commercial speech found throughout pages of glossy magazines and newspapers.[165] While it is easy to describe what we are able to see within advertisements produced at the literal level, it is far harder to articulate the interrelationship between language and image in each ad, and how and why both work together to produce not only value for the product being sold but meaning for the potential consumer who regarded the ad. In this sense, there is more than meets the eye when we evaluate the semiotic qualities of advertisements: they are multimodal, in that they have multiple ways of communicating a message, and multivalent, in that there are multiple levels at which to interpolate meaning from each visual

[161] Studies have also overstated the importance of individual agency within the practices of consumption, envisioning "consumption practices as inherently democratic and implicitly subversive." Paul Du Gay, ed., *Production of Culture/Cultures of Production* (London: Sage, 1997), 120.
[162] Ibid., 85.
[163] The landscape of consumer society is littered with failed ad campaigns: it is estimated that 80 percent of products and services – consumer items – introduced each year fail. WARC Research Group, "Over 80% of ads fail to reach 'attention threshold'," WARC, 21 June 2022, https://www.warc.com/content/feed/over-80-of-ads-fail-to-reach-attention-threshold/en-GB/6899.
[164] See, Berger, *Ads, Fads, and Consumer Culture*.
[165] Nelson Phillips and Cynthia Hardy, *Discourse Analysis: Investigating Processes of Social Construction* (London: Sage, 2002), 3.

or linguistic cue that compose a message. Yet, if advertisements are to have any meaning for the consumer, and similarly for scholars using advertisements as a methodology, then both must have a basic understanding of what the linguistic and visual cues within each ad are trying to communicate.

To make sense of the multiple modes of communication within an advertisement, we must have background knowledge of what the image(s) and particular construction of words mean to us in relation to our historical and social context.[166] Put another way, an advertisement of an automobile from the 1930s, say a V12 Lincoln-Zephyr, has multiple meanings for the person viewing it, meanings which can change over time and across space. Considering its vintage and lack of anything we associate with automobility today – touch screens, Bluetooth technology, sound systems, onboard computers, passenger safety and motion detection, battery-powered technology, and so on – the image of the Lincoln-Zephyr, including the style and composition of the text communicating its qualities, would not resonate on the same textual and ideological level with a twenty-first-century consumer as it would with someone living in the twentieth. Furthermore, the same advertisement might be interpreted differently by someone living during the 1930s but outside the cultural orbit of American consumer society where a considerable amount of ideological and mythic significance was attached to automobility and the combustion of oil. Which is to say that the messages being communicated within advertisements, in addition to how advertisements themselves were composed, are historically contingent: their comprehensibility depends to a large degree on the time and the social landscape, with its many rhythms and discontinuities, in which they were produced. What we can learn, therefore, through the discursive analysis of advertisements is how and

[166] Also known as "common knowledge", or the knowledge shared with other people in society. Rodney Jones, *Discourse Analysis: A Resource Book for Students*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2012), 2.

why people, at a specific time and place, shaped and were shaped by certain linguistic and visual forms that not only made sense of their human and natural worlds but induced them to consume as a form of self-expression and indicator of social status.

By bridging the gap between an ongoing cycle of commodification – where producers made new products or attempted to ascribe new meanings to products based on consumers' activities – and appropriation – where consumers made those products socially meaningful – oil advertisements by the 1930s served to sell Americans not just individual products but lifestyle brands that were defined by broad patterns of selective consumption. It was Americans' individual "participation in consumption", Celia Lury states, "or their practical freedom to exercise choice", that was targeted by advertisers, encouraging the public through petroculture to enact their desires, develop new ones, and refashion themselves and their place in society.[167] It was in the domain of advertising, therefore, where life and the consumption of oil were visualized and narrated as one and the same. Out of these embodied representations, oil did not only appear to improve life but was woven into the very fabric of modern existence.

In the 1930s, automobile advertisements became particularly attuned to the racial and social dimensions of middle-class American consumer culture. As was discussed above, it was not so much the objects of oil themselves that were sought after, but rather the meaning of such objects and how those meanings allowed the consumer to express their ideal selves through

[167] Celia Lury, *Consumer Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 6.

ownership. The effectiveness of advertisements, therefore, depended to a large degree on how well they visualized and communicated particular normative visions of what constituted "modern standards" and the ideal life; a life constructed through the material comforts provided by oil (Figure 13). Yet the construction of an ideal life implies that such relations were exclusionary and not universally available. Much like capital accumulation that is reproduced through the uneven relations between labor and capital, the accumulation of cultural capital necessarily posits an uneven relationship between those who are in a position to know, afford, and amass products considered socially desirable and those who are not. In the United States, consumer society by the 1930s was already divided along racial, social, and gendered lines of white, middle-class privilege and male chauvinism. Indeed, the Wagner Act which created the institutional conditions for the material transformation of American life through wages, completely ignored agricultural workers, women, and African Americans.[168]

Figure 13. "By Every Modern Standard the Ford is a Big Car." Advertisement by N W Ayer & Sons for *Better Homes and Gardens* (1937). Courtesy of Smithsonian, National Museum of American History.

Additionally, although wage work created social disparities within the middle class itself, by the end of the Great Depression work became a means to a new end – the production and

[168] Irving Bernstein, *The Turbulent Years: A History of the American Worker, 1933–1940* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2010), 189-90, 326.

reproduction of the "American Dream" of home and automobile ownership.[169] During the post-World War II period it was within and through the unrelenting development of auto-centric geographies that the middle class began to entrench its cultural hegemony through their accumulation of oil products.[170] As Mike Davis argues, "the ballast of capital's hegemony in American history has been the repeated autonomous mobilization of the mass middle strata in defense of petty accumulation and entrepreneurial opportunity."[171] Much of these entrepreneurial efforts centered on the relations of consumption within middle-class households – gas bills, automobile payments, and home mortgages – that mediated life through oil's many commodity forms.

However, it was the automobile – principally in its driving of white American imaginaries of freedom, social distinction, modernity, and mobility – that became the dominant expression and representation of the "American way of life". While Europeans had invented the oil-powered automobile in the late nineteenth century, by as early as 1908 automotive technologies had become overwhelmingly American.[172] As historian David Nye reminds us, it was automobile production during the twentieth century that became the very "engine of the

[169] Thus, mass consumption, argues Michel Aglietta, became a function of capital accumulation, as federal institutions that were developed during the Great Depression created modes of regulation that attempted to regularize practices like Fordism. Higher wages together with an intensification of work allowed rapid accumulation to coexist with an increasing standard of living. Aglietta, *A Theory of Capitalist Regulation*. The development of an American consumerist society in which commoditized oil became the predominant form of sociotechnical life, therefore, was constituted by a "historically developed, relatively integrated network of institutions that reproduced the fundamental capitalist property relationships and guided the *prevailing* regime of accumulation." Robert Brenner and Mark Glick, "The Regulation Approach: Theory and History," *The New Left Review* 1, no. 188 (1991): 46.

[170] Huber, *Lifeblood*, 41. Davis estimates that as much as one-quarter of the American population – mostly white, semiskilled workers – were raised to middle class levels of home and automobile ownership by the late 1940s, another quarter to one-third of the population, "including most Blacks and all agricultural laborers, remained outside the boom, constituting the 'other America' which rebelled in the 1960s." Davis, *Prisoners*, 92.

[171] Ibid., viii.

[172] McShane, *Down the Asphalt Path*, ch. 6.

American economy, stimulating a wide range of subsidiary industries and suppliers."[173] So much so, that by 1930 three-quarters of the world's automobiles and 90 percent of its oil were produced in the US.[174] What was initially editorialized in many newspapers throughout the US during this time as "car madness", the explosive growth of automobile ownership among the middle class and subsequent traffic-related fatalities in densely populated cities like Los Angeles or New York, was most likely, according to Ashleigh Brilliant, the result of middle-class Americans struggling to make the intensive use and reliance upon the automobile livable and socially acceptable.[175] Critically, Brilliant's work highlights an important issue within the history of technology, namely that the social acceptance of new technologies is not inevitable, often being preceded by public resistance. Even in the United States, where mechanical innovation held mythic significance and successful innovators were often worshiped, Americans expressed deep concerns about how increasing levels of motorcar use would affect social cohesion and the environment.[176] As automobile use drastically increased during the 1930s, so too did public anxieties over reckless and disorderly driving.[177] Therefore, if we are to better understand the history of petroleum and automobility in the United States we should not just examine how oil technologies directly substituted steam-engines and muscle-powered travel but also analyze how these technologies changed the overall "ecology" of machines and energy that organized economic and social life.

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[173] David Nye, *Consuming Power: A Social History of Americans Energies* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), 178.
[174] Urry, *Societies beyond Oil*, 42.
[175] Ashleigh Brilliant, *Great Car Craze: How Southern California Collided with the Automobile in the 1920s* (Santa Barbara: Woodbridge Press, 1989).
[176] Considered a public nuisance and threat to public health, the gas-powered automobile was banned in Pittsburgh in 1878. McShane, *Down the Asphalt Path*, 99.
[177] Take for instance, one editorial, "At the Wheel", in which author James Spearing insisted that the only thing left to do with the automobile, due to the high amount of traffic fatalities caused by "murderous" and cavalier "speed demons", was to abolish "the motor car as a fifth horseman in the Apocalyptic Cavalry." James Spearing, "At the Wheel," *New York Times*, Sunday, 26 July 1931.

Mass public acceptance and use of automobiles in the United States was not so much a product of how these machines and their oil-based technologies improved the rate and pace of travel, which they of course did. Rather both were attractive because they seemed to promise a way for middle-class Americans to achieve specific social, gender, and racial goals. James Flink summarizes this group's self-serving beliefs about the automobile when he states: "In a culture that invariably preferred technological to political solutions of its problems, automobility appeared to be a panacea for many of the social ills of the day … The ultimate answer to the tenement house slum was that everyone should buy a motorcar and commute to suburbia."[178] Such rapid integration and acceptance of the automobile into middle-class American life made automobility a critical element in their fantasies of metropolitan order and commercial and economic reform. Indeed, by the 1930s automobility had become so intertwined with middle-class American notions of freedom and liberation – the physical ability to go where one wanted when one wanted thereby allowing them to escape undesirable urban and social spaces – that driving conferred dimensions of citizenship and status that were jealously guarded by automobile owners, the majority of whom were men.[179]

It was during the early twentieth century, a time of massive social and economic change, that men defined the cultural implications of the automobile in a way that both served to reaffirm their masculinity and exclude women from controlling automotive technology.[180] As more and more American women entered the workforce, attended college, and agitated for women's suffrage, men not only tried to reassert their authority in the workforce but redefine

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[178] James Flink, "Three Stages of American Automobile Consciousness," *American Quarterly* 24, no. 4 (1972): 455.

[179] The "miracle" of Fordist production, that began in 1908 with the mass production of the affordably-priced Model T, meant that what had previously been the prerogative of wealthy society – the automobile – "became a commodity for the middle class." Urry, *Societies beyond Oil*, 42.

[180] McShane, *Down the Asphalt Path*, ch. 8.

masculinity through automobile consumption. Owning an automobile, therefore, became a register of male "aggressiveness", "strength", and "mechanical abilities", attributes thought to be essential for good driving and automotive maintenance. Clay McShane states:

> Purchasing cars was one area where men dominated the culture of consumption. The car became a masculine status object, driving a masculine skill, one of the few skills that fathers passed directly to their sons. Maintaining and operating cars required, in the early days, considerable physical strength, and always required some mechanical ability. … Driving skill was like athletic ability. Supposedly, both were innately male traits requiring strength, steady nerves and good coordination. Driving also meant power. The driver controlled the car and the destiny of those in it. … Men controlled their machines, a reversal of what happened in many new factory and office jobs, where machines set the pace for workers.[181]

In this sense, the automobile was clearly more than a form of conveyance for white, middle-class men. They granted their owners an ersatz sense of economic and gender status, in a nation where both were becoming increasingly harder to define. Automobiles were a technological phenomenon, wholly American, that created an imagined correlation between oil-powered mobility and freedom: the freedom of the road, the freedom to choose, and the freedom to enact and affirm male subjectivity at the expense of female automobility. The important issue here, McShane posits, "is not whether or not automobiles actually did these things, but that male motorists believed they did."[182] In the imaginations of middle-class American men, the automobile was an exhilarating machine that embodied their notions of masculine prowess, and driving evoked, James Spearing wrote in 1933, an exalting sense of unfettered movement, "as if you, at the wheel, embodied within yourself the power of pure motion and the glory of free will."[183]

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[181] McShane, *Down the Asphalt Path*, 155.
[182] Ibid., 147.
[183] James Spearing, "At the Wheel," *New York Times*, 1 October 1933.

It was precisely due to automobiles becoming "a US phenomenon," Paul Gilroy argues, that they were "comprehensively entangled in that fractured nation's politics of racial hierarchy … with some [automobile] companies expressly stipulated that their machines should not be sold even to those few blacks who could afford them."[184] The automobile, as Figure 14 demonstrates, both embodied the politics of American segregation by being denied to non-white people, thus preventing them from living the "American way", and provided means for white Americans to liberate themselves from racially diverse urban environments.[185] Driving, accordingly, became *the* tactic employed by white Americans to perpetuate and compound the issues of segregation through forms of privatized transportation between houses within racially homogenous neighborhoods and places of work. Without the ability to move through and access these spaces of everyday life, white Americans feared being confined to the socially depriving material conditions of rural poverty, on the one hand, or inner city immiseration, on

Figure 14. Margaret Bourke-White, "The Louisville Flood," photograph. First published in *Life* magazine (1937). "World's Highest Standard of Living: There's no way like the American Way," billboard for the National Association of Manufacturers, Louisville, Kentucky.

[184] Paul Gilroy, "Driving While Black," in *Car Cultures*, ed. Danny Miller (Oxford: Berg, 2001), 93.
[185] Automobiles were considered by many city-dwelling Americans during the early twentieth century as a boon to public health as they would reduce the pollution caused by horses. McShane, *Down the Asphalt Path*, 122.

the other.[186] Additionally, while wages and lines of credit helped workers afford suburban housing, it took oil, specifically the ignition of gasoline within the internal combustion engine, to propel white, middle-class men to and from jobs that increasingly made the automobile a necessity for employment.[187] It was the automobile, architect Richard Rogers writes, "which has played a critical role in undermining the cohesive social structure of the city … they have eroded the quality of public spaces and have encouraged suburban sprawl … the car has made viable the whole concept of dividing everyday activities into compartments, segregating offices, shops and homes."[188] Before American suburbanization was even expressed as "white flight" during the 1950s and 60s, race had become infused in the very (infra)structures of automobility. The segregation of white and non-white living spaces, therefore, was not just accomplished by means of the automobile, they were predicated on it.

It was in this way that automobiles by the 1930s became a commodity of and for white, middle-class American men, allowing them to not only physically and psychically "liberate" themselves from their depressed and depressing urban environments but reimagine mobility.[189] Once heralded

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[186] For some case studies, see Kruse, *White Flight* and Davis, *City of Quartz*.

[187] New Deal policies like the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) provided banks with a pool of state-backed capital and insurance to create mortgages that lasted thirty years at interest rates no higher than 5 percent. Prior to the 1930s, those who wanted to purchase a home were forced to pay no less than 50 percent of the value of the home. Any mortgage provided to new home buyers had an interest rate of 20 percent or more and needed to be paid in five years or less. By the mid-1960's, less than three percent of FHA loans were made for housing in the inner city. Katz, *Our Lot*, 5-7.

[188] Richard Rogers, *Cities for a Small Planet* (London: Faber & Faber, 1997), 35.

[189] Julia Leyda uses the term "negative mobility" to describe how the geographic movements of millions of Americans during the Great Depression reconfigured the notion of movement within American imaginaries. Up until the 1930s, the imaginaries of movement – think Westward expansion or Manifest Destiny – typically implied progress, development, and opportunity, and were thus linked to upward social mobility. However, it was during the Great Depression, "when massive migrations resulted not from the push of expansion, urbanization, or immigration, but out of economic crisis," that "negative mobility preoccupied the nation." Julia Leyda, *American Mobilities: Geographies of Class, Race, and Gender in US Culture* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2016), 12. By the end of the 1930s, however, white middle-class men and their families began to take advantage of automobility to extend the geographies of the "American way of life" outside the city by commuting to and from their suburban homes and work. Howard Preston, *Automobile Age Atlanta: The Making of a Southern Metropolis, 1900-1935* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1979), 111.

as the zenith of capitalist modernity worldwide, American cities by the late-1920s were increasingly seen by white Americans as spaces of moral, racial and economic decay that threatened to destabilize the most intimate of social institutions: the middle-class family.[190] The automobile thus gave white Americans a novel advantage over Black communities by affording them greater opportunities to act out their racist views by moving away to suburbs outside city limits in order to preserve middle-class domestic life. In this sense, there was as much a social demand for automobiles as there was an economic one. White, middle-class American men wanted an object to reflect their rising social and economic status within a nation that had begun to equate success with the accumulation of oil commodities, and desired a vehicle, both in the literal and metaphorical sense, with which to distance themselves and their families from what had become known as the racialized nightmares of urban life.[191] It was during the Great Depression, Daniel Matlin contends, that public discourse within urban centers began to negatively portray minority, principally African American, neighborhoods – neighborhoods already segregated from white communities on the precondition of race – as "centers" or "ghettos" of criminality and vice.[192] Thus, the automobile not only represented a new form of middle-class luxury, with its promise of suburban respectability, but also reflected an elaborate symbolic system designed to keep class, gender, and racial demarcations in place.

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[190] For instance, one study conducted by sociologist William Ogburn (University of Chicago) suggested that middle-income, primarily white families were in a state of decline due to a loss of patriarchal functions within families living in urban environments. "There is no doubt," Ogburn writes in a *New York Times* article, "that the [American] family, as a social institution, is declining." William Ogburn, "The Decline of the American Family," *New York Times*, 17 February 1929.

[191] In 1933, nearly 40 million Americans, mostly located in city environments, lived without a dependable source of income and 10 percent of the white population lived on relief, compared to 18 percent of Africans Americans. Ronald Takaki, *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America* (Boston: Back Bay-Little, Brown, 1993), 367.

[192] Daniel Matlin, "The Making of a Ghetto Discourse," in *Race Capital?: Harlem as Setting and Symbol*, eds. Andrew Fearnley and Daniel Matlin (New York: Columbia University Press), 71–90.

By focusing on two sociocultural problems – the racial segregation of mobility and the commodification of women's bodies – and how they were represented in print advertisements, we can begin to see how an American cultural economy surrounding the consumption of oil interpellated both as "ordinary". While these representations were "ordinary", Cecily Devereux contends, they were "far from neutral" and functioned as affirmations of a contractual relationship between white, middle-class men and their automobiles: what was promised through their purchase and ability to control who had privileged access to them.[193] This thesis argues that while automobile advertisements shaped the discursive environment of petroculture they were also a reflection of and shaped by petroculture's mobilization of what constituted acceptable social behavior (consumption), forms of expression (freedom/self-autonomy, masculinity/femininity), and consumers (white men of means). In other words, the business of selling automobiles depended on the affirmation of ideas surrounding middle-class respectability, gender normativity and race that were then representationally and symbolically aligned with automobiles. Advertisements indexed these cultural codes and thus operated to normalize a symbolic economy that depended on women and people of color not having the capacity to be self-determining, not to be the agential subjects of society but its objects.[194]

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[193] Cecily Devereux, "Made for Mankind: Cars, Cosmetics, and the Petrocultural Feminine," in *Petrocultures: Oil, Politics, Culture*, eds. Sheena Wilson, Adam Carlson, and Imre Szeman (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017), 181.

[194] See, Ruth S. Cowan, *More Work for Mother: The Ironies of Household Technology from the Open Hearth to the Microwave* (NY: Basic Books, 1983), Dolores Hayden, *Redesigning the American Dream: The Future of Housing, Work, and Family Life* (NY: W.W. Norton, 1984); and Judy Wajcman, *Feminism Confronts Technology* (University Park, PA.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991).

The automobile and its representations provided new mediums to communicate the racial, social, and gendered qualities of the American "Automobile Age", whereby racism, middle-class status, and male chauvinism could be measured by the miles and minutes of one's daily commute.[195] Indeed, the automobile was not just any object, or one object amongst many, it was what Paul Gilroy describes as the "*ur*-commodity" of "capitalism as it moved into and leaves its industrial phase", simultaneously being an object of desire and tool of objectification that crucially "politicize[d] and moralize[d] everyday life in unprecedented configurations."[196] Automobile advertisements like Figures 15 and 16, therefore, stood as indexes of the operation of the petrocultural system as a whole and conveyed symbolism and imagery that reinforced women's and racialized groups' subordinated status precisely by affirming their function as objects in a white, male-dominated market. The commodification of women was not just a pervasive problem within petroculture: through the daily barrage of reductive gendered representations of women and automobiles found within advertisements, petroculture actively produced the interchangeability of women and automobiles, endorsing an ideology of femininity

Figure 15. "Talk about Beauty ... Eye it, Try it, Buy it." Advertisement by N W Ayers & Sons for *Time Herald* (1940). Courtesy of Smithsonian, National Museum of American History.

[195] See, James Flink, *The Automobile Age* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), ch. 8.
[196] Gilroy, "Driving While Black," 81.

subdued in the fashioning of middle-class masculinity. Furthermore, such advertisements legitimated and articulated a racialized hierarchy within the United States through the representational erasure of non-white drivers and automobile owners. Employed in this manner, the few automobile advertisements that did depict Black Americans, represented them as bystanders; mere witnesses to the supremacy of automotive technology that had begun to define and mobilize white American life. Advertisements thus rendered the racial politics of America in black and white, particularly the latter's abhorrence toward any suggestion that Black Americans possessed the same material conditions and technical know-how thought to confer prized citizenship and social status.[197] "Nothing infuriated whites," Clay McShane writes, "concerned with limiting status symbols more than black drivers."[198] Black America's subordinated status was thus

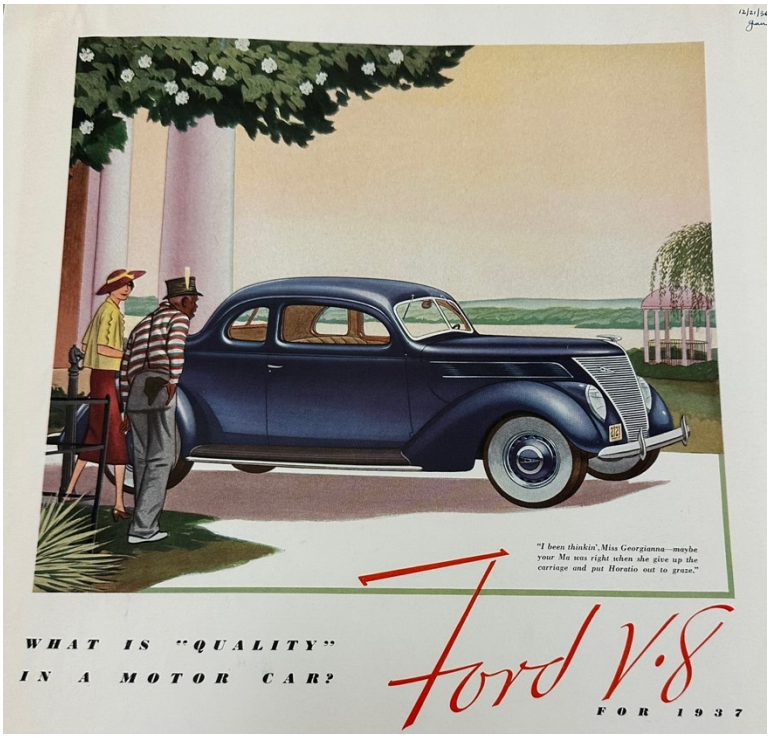

Figure 16. "What is 'Quality' in a Motor Car?" Advertisement by N W Ayer & Son for *Collier's Magazine* (1937/38). Courtesy of Smithsonian, National Museum of American History.

[197] Gilroy, "Driving While Black," 99.

[198] McShane, *Down the Asphalt Path*, 134. Referring to a *New York Sun* article titled "White Race Saved", McShane illustrates how white America breathed a collective sigh of relief when Barney Oldfield, a white race car driver, beat Jack Johnson, the controversial black heavyweight champion, in a 1910 match race. It was not so much that Johnson was a celebrated athlete that bothered whites, but rather the very idea of him being behind the wheel. Indeed, Henry Ford, the "father" of the American automotive industry and the industrialist largely responsible for integrating the automobile into "American ways of life", was a white supremacist and antisemite. Ken Silverstein, "Ford and the Fuhrer – New Documents Reveal the Close Ties between Dearborn and the Nazis," *The Nation* 270, no. 3 (2000): 11-18.

commercialized, either through their representational absence in automobile advertisements or through the visualization of racial tropes that largely conformed to prevailing racial codes.

Conclusion

"South Belridge Oil Field, Kern Country, California Landscape." Belridge, California, Photograph (2009). Commissioned by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA). https://collections.lacma.org/node/220119.

This thesis ends where it began, in California. Not the California of endless, white beaches and coastal beauty accessible by automobiles, but the California of petrocapital and decay. As the photograph of the California Incline in Santa Monica shows, the *idea* of automobility is a far more appealing concept than the *reality* of automobility we are forced to confront when we take the time to consider, if only for a moment, what it means to be modern. When I was sixteen, driving seemed to be a necessary way of life in a hypermobile world built by and upon oil technologies. My oil-powered mobility was second nature, a natural(ized) part of my human world, and my automobile, a vehicle which moved me through physical and phenomenological space, shaped my sense of self. Ecological histories of modern life and conversely prehistoric death were being played out beneath my tires and along the distances I alone could travel. I moved my automobile, and my automobile moved me, not only in response to abstract motor vehicle regulations but in a way that

was in relation to the historical development of the concepts of life, modernity and freedom within a nation that had attached profound significance to the consumption of oil. What Americans had achieved with this substance since the 1930s framed my present and became a source of exciting future possibilities. Yet, as this thesis has argued, not all these achievements were positive, let alone advertised.

About 145 miles northwest of Los Angeles is the Belridge Oil Field. Discovered in 1911, the Belridge Oil Field was the deepest drilling operation in North America by 1934 and is presently the third largest California oilfield by productive capacity.[199] On one hand, Belridge represents the ultimate achievement of petromodernity; a landscape where man-made machines extract and transform carbonized energy that makes modern man. On the other hand, Belridge (re)presents a future scenario of petrocapital life; a world wherein nature no longer clashes with modern machines but is consumed by them. It is a microcosm of both the unimaginable lengths and depths humans are willing to go to achieve the "American Dream" of abundance and a regional environmental catastrophe hidden in plain sight that could become a planetary possibility.[200] Day after day, year after year, the oil wells at Belridge, and the millions more just like them throughout the United States, work relentlessly to maintain what Szeman calls an ideological "fiction of surplus": the misguided "belief that there is always plenty of energy to go around" that fails to confront how nearly every aspect of what defines modern life "is premised upon access to cheap and easy energy."[201] Or as Graeme Mcdonald aptly states: "Oil endures and we endure it. The fictional nature of this endurance, and its incompatibility with petroleum's finitude, is the ultimate

[199] Malcolm Allan and Joseph Lalicata, "The Belridge Giant Oil Field – 100 Years of History and a Look to a Bright Future," *American Association of Petroleum Geologists Search and Discovery* (2012): 1.
[200] Gabrielle Canon, "'Kern runs on oil': as California confronts climate crisis, one county is ready to drill," *The Guardian*, 12 March 2021.
[201] Imre Szeman, "Literature and Energy Futures," *PMLA* 126, no. 2 (2011): 323–25.

challenge facing our super-energized world. Perhaps our criticism, like our technology and terminology, is insufficiently refined."[202]

Once considered the lifeblood of a nation, oil is now judged as an addictive substance and Americans pathologized as its most fervent addicts; their dreams of freedom inextricable from machines that dig up a dead prehistoric substance that ironically both materializes modern life and foreshadows its undoing.[203] At the heart of this irony is the simultaneous awareness of oil's indispensability to American society and recognition that over the next century Americans will have to find a way to live without it. While it is without question that a transition to alternative and renewable energy is imperative, and in fact constitutes the single largest political and technological struggle of our time, any proponent of fossil fuel asceticism would do well to remember that oil is more than an unpleasant addiction or unfortunate necessity but is what structures our ability to live in and conceptualize modernity. As Vaclav Smil points out, "lessons of the past energy transitions may not be particularly useful for appraising and handicapping the coming energy transition, because it will be exceedingly difficult to restructure the modern high-energy industrial and post-industrial civilization on the basis of non-fossil – that is, overwhelmingly renewable – fuels and flows."[204]

Much of the literature that describes the catastrophic possibilities resulting from humanity's oil addiction or documentaries that represent oil as a social problem that could be easily resolved

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[202] Graeme Mcdonald, "Fiction," in *Fueling Culture*, 164.

[203] In 2023 alone, the United States consumed 7.3 billion barrels of oil, or 20.01 million barrels of oil per day. Accounting for only 4.24 percent of the world's population, the United States consumes 20 percent and produces 22 percent of the world's crude oil, making it by far the largest consumer and producer of oil on the planet. An important consideration to make, is that these statistics only account for crude oil and not commodities made from oil: petrochemicals, plastics, synthetic fibers, and the like. "Frequently Asked Questions," U.S. Energy Information Administration, last updated 11 April 2024, https://www.eia.gov/tools/faqs/faq.php?id=709&t=6.

[204] Vaclav Smil, *Energy Transitions* (New York: Praeger, 2010), 105.

if it were not for a lack of political will, tend to equate this black, oozing substance as an exotic element in disharmony with the natural world.[205] Within these works, nature is treated as the ultimate form of order there to protect human life, and consequently, their arguments tend to cast oil as unnatural, as something other than an ancient collection of dead aquatic creatures transformed, belying the fact that the geological processes and organic inputs that produced it are incredibly *natural*.[206] Thus, "the ultimate obstacle to protecting nature", Slavoj Žižek suggests, "is the very notion of nature we rely on."[207] The issue then is not transitioning away from oil to renewables, though of course this will take considerable time and effort, but rather how to redefine our cultural, social, and political understandings of energy and nature. While most of us are not committed to the environmental ruin and social injustices resulting from our continued reliance on oil, we hardly give a thought to our enduring loyalty to oil, to the ways it has shaped and intimately

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[205] See for example, *A Crude Awakening* (2006); *Fuel* (2021); *The End of Suburbia* (2004); *Peak Oil: Imposed by Nature* (2005); *The Curse of Oil* (2006); *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006); *Who Killed the Electric Car?* (2006); and *Blood and Oil* (2008).

[206] In the case of oil (itself inorganic and thus constituting the quintessential dead metaphor), any amount extracted today is the result of entire ecosystems found within lakes and oceans, equivalent to many trillions, if not quadrillions, of tons of organic solid matter, that died, were buried under gradual sedimentation, and then transformed through pressure and heat into a liquid called kerogen over the course of at least 50 million years. And then, with more heat, it turned into liquid and gaseous hydrocarbons, oil and gas. Matthew Auzanneau, *Oil Power and War: A Dark History*, trans. John F Reynolds (White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2018), 12-3. Timothy Mitchell offers some more insight into the astounding equivalences associated with the human consumption of fossil fuels: "a single litre of petrol used today needed about twenty-five metric tons of ancient marine life as precursor material, … [and] organic matter the equivalent to all of the plant and animal life produced over the entire earth for four hundred years [which then fossilized over millions of years] was required to produce fossil fuels we burn today in a single year." Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy*, 15. Additionally, M. King Herbert, who coined the term "Herbert's Peak", writes: "When these fuels are burned, their precious energy, after undergoing a sequence of degradations, finally leaves the earth as spent, low-wavelength, low-temperature radiation. Hence, we deal with an essentially fixed storehouse of energy which we are drawing upon at a phenomenal rate … The release of this energy is a unidirectional and irreversible process. It can happen only once, and the historical events associated with this release are necessarily without precedent and are intrinsically incapable of repetition." As quoted by William Marsden, *Stupid to the Last Drop* (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2008), 49.

[207] Žižek argues that we must begin to accept an "ecology without nature", starting with the affirmation of the fact that "nature … the domain of balanced reproduction, of organic deployment into which humanity intervenes with its hubris, brutally throwing its circular motion off the rails, is man's fantasy; nature is already in itself 'second nature', its balance is always secondary, an attempt to bring into existence a 'habit' that would restore some order after catastrophic interruptions." Slavoj Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes* (New York: Verso, 2009), 439-45.

attached itself to our social spaces, how it has generated a violent national and global politics organized around privileged access to and control over the flows of mineral energy. If climate change has provoked utopian desires for a world beyond oil, an Earth where it does not and cannot centrally drive economic and social activity, or has envisioned apocalyptic scenarios that would arise when nature, as we define it, has ended before oil capital, then the present challenges facing us must include a stronger understanding of oil's otherwise obscure narrative of modernity and the very ways it has fictively come to define so much of being.

It just so happens, oil fulfills two key requirements for its use by capital: it is easily transported and stored, and each unit of fuel generates a significant amount of light and heat energy.[208] The combustion of oil and its transformation by human industry into countless commodities, that poison our air, pollute our oceans and waterways, strip the soil of its naturally occurring nutrients, that literally change the chemical and physical characteristics of our climate, are seen, and rightfully so, as the hubris of humanity in its desire for progress. Yet oil, or rather its mass consumption and mediation, has also become a way of life, a way of living in, interacting with, and moving through modernity, a concept itself fuelled by the imagined possibilities and

[208] Coal provides about 8kWh of energy per kilogram, and oil 12kWh; a 50 percent increase. Of course, the comparison between coal and oil seems insignificant to the possible energy (2 million times that of oil) provided by Uranium-235. European Nuclear Society, "Fuel Comparison," https://www.euronuclear.org/glossary/fuel-comparison/. However, when compared to the liquidity of oil, allowing it to be piped across land and stored in relatively low-cost containers, uranium's solidity, like coal's, makes it more difficult to transport and store. It is the burdensomeness of coal and uranium that make them political materials, the extraction, transportation, and use of which requires a vast array of human laborers – captains, excavators, miners, engineers, disposal experts, etc. – all of whom could collectivize or become sick. On Barak, *Powering Empire: How Coal Made the Middle East and Sparked Global Carbonization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2020), 8-11. The fluidity of oil, on the other hand, and its ability to be transported along pipelines, presented energy companies with a novel way to circumvent human labor altogether. Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy*, 39-40. Additionally, the oil currently used each year is equivalent to the energy that would have to be annually produced by 2,500 nuclear power stations or 5,200 coal-fired power stations. Tere Vadén, "Oil and the Regime of Capitalism," *CTheory*, 23 (2010): 1–11. Yet there are only 440 reactors worldwide, producing 2602 TWh of electricity, or about 9 percent of world's energy demand. "Plans for New Reactors Worldwide," World Nuclear Association, updated 14 November 2024, https://world-nuclear.org/information-library/current-and-future-generation/plans-for-new-reactors-worldwide.

capabilities of oil energy, that was *created* in the United States during the 1930s. It was during this time that oil commodities, as status symbols, as expressions and embodiments of personal freedom, and tools of social regulation, became foundational to life and living. Though it is present in thousands of products and represented in countless visual forms that we buy and see today, oil has paradoxically become a difficult thing to grasp and concept to represent historically; it is as Ghosh notes a slippery substance and material that has defied adequate materialization in American scholarship. In other words, it is hard to narrate what oil is and what it means to modern life. The attempt to express the embodiment of oil, as Stephanie LeMenager states:

> requires not only a conviction that bodies matter in social history and in the production of culture but also a willingness to accept that bodies can be made to *seem* to appear – in relation to other bodies, in partial view – but not made to appear fully in language. Metaphor and metonymy, substitution and deferral, plague the materialization of bodies, in any kind of writing. The problem of representing oil … is also a problem of representing bodies that matter generally. Oil in its multiform liquidity and imbrication in networks of power, brilliantly brings the representational problem that *is* narrative to crisis. Yet the effort to materialize a modern ecology, always disappearing into the charismatic term "energy," need not be denigrated as mere stagecraft. That is, if the process of investigation is valued over the more elusive goal of making things appear, finished and whole.[209]

What Ghosh and LeMenager allude to, and what continues to plague much of the history of oil in the United States, is that no single narrative has properly examined how oil consumption became the fundamental social relation governing the development and pace of modern, twentieth-century American life, and why this way of life persists to this day.[210] American relations, gendered and racial relationships to oil commodities, and the identity tropes these commodities embody have largely been explained (or explained away) by scholars as the natural outcome of capitalist

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[209] LeMenager, *Living Oil*, 185.

[210] In a similar vein, Timothy Mitchell argues that we must consider petro-states not only as countries whose political economy and political ecology have been primarily and constitutively shaped by their status as oil producers (e.g. Nigeria, Venezuela, Saudi Arabia) but also the industrial democracies that have been major oil consumers: "Without the energy they derive from oil their current forms of political and economic life would not exist." Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy*, 5-6.

"progress", when in fact they form a far more complex matrix of sociocultural entanglements with energy in the United States over the past 90 years.

Published in 1929, *The Life of the Automobile* describes the specific and paradoxical ways that different historical subjects experienced automobility in a world that was increasingly linked and segregated by oil technologies and their uneven distribution. Importantly, this semi-fictional work, written by Ilya Ehrenburg, both chronicles the rise of the automobile and highlights the contrast between the thrill of driving in metropolitan centers and the material destitution experienced in the peripheries that were mined to enable modern petro-mobility. By addressing the combined pleasure and violence inherent within an energy system that valued mechanized over muscle-powered mobility and life, *The Life of the Automobile* is an insightful observation into ways of life made possible through oil consumption.[211] A key takeaway from this book is that if the development and integration of oil into modern politics, society, and culture did not happen naturally but was rather naturalized, then it is not only possible but necessary to understand oil energy dialectically within the context of modern United States history: in terms of scarcity and abundance, freedom and constraint, desire and disillusionment, entitlement and exclusion. In this sense, oil in America is something more than a fetishized commodity in need of demystification. It has become a conception of life itself (indeed the basis of existence, supported by popular representations and aesthetic form, on the one hand, and the material aspects of cultural production and circulation, on the other) and conversely death, that without it, life as we know it would cease to exist.[212] Which

[211] Ilya Ehrenburg, *The Life of the Automobile*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (London: Serpent's Tail, 1999).
[212] For more on the interrelationship between oil, capitalism, and death, see Jason Moore, "The Capitalocene, Part I: On the Nature and Origins of Our Ecological Crisis," *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 44, no. 3 (2017): 594-630; Justin McBrien, "Accumulating Extinction," in *Anthropocene or Capitalocene?: Nature, History and the Crisis of Capitalism*, ed. Jason Moore (Oakland: PM Press, 2016); Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011); J.R. McNeill and Peter Engelke, *The Great Acceleration: An Environmental History of the Anthropocene* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).

is to say, that to make oil energy central within historical analysis requires novel ways of interpreting the materialist dimensions of American life and its attendant contradictions that have become intertwined with ideas of positive social development (petro-mobility), economic success (petro-capitalism), national prosperity (petro-modernity), and a system of values and shared knowledge (petro-culture) all produced through unparalleled access to oil. While mobility, capitalism, modernity and consumer culture certainly pre-existed oil's introduction into nearly every facet of material and technical life in the United Sates, it was the rate at which Americans accepted and quickly became addicted to oil – the phenomenal extension of the abundant life to millions of middle-class Americans – that makes it a particularly evocative substance *and* form of social relation.

To be "American" was and is to live the "American way", a series of consumptive tasks and daily rituals that revolve around the flows of excess energy. This vision of life and living was premised on having access to cheap and abundant oil and began during the 1930s as government institutions sought to save American democracy and capitalism through the material transformation of sociocultural life. As the infrastructures and machineries of oil began to dominate the economic landscape, so too did they reconfigure American imaginaries of freedom, mobility, and modernity. The use of oil promised liberation from labor, expressed and entrenched social and racial differences, and assured limitless movement and growth. No longer the primary means of differentiation, work became a means of consuming and accumulating the cultural capital of oil to regulate power. Society, as a result, was transformed. Americans were now often "on the move", a way of life organized around automotive travel and a standard of living that unshackled

Americans from their reliance on muscle power.[213] Indeed, driving became the primary activity of existence, an oil-fueled enterprise of onward and upward progress that developed and naturalized a new metabolic relationship between Americans and nature: petro-modernity.[214] It was in this way that oil became alchemic, turning mineral energy into black gold and promising freedom through consumption, wealth without work, progress without the passage of time, and abundance everywhere, always.[215] "The mansion of modern freedoms," freedoms introduced with coal but entrenched by oil and natural gas, Dipesh Chakrabarty states, "stands on an ever-expanding foundation of fossil-fuel use."[216] Though tempered by the observation that some products were more socially legitimate than others, the principal value within American petroculture was to consume prodigious amounts of oil; not only as a form of self-expression, but also as an obligation,

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[213] The irony being that what allowed us to "unshackle" ourselves from animal or human labor has been the discovery of cheap energy in the form of fossil fuels and their profligate use, now considered a threat to human futures due to climate change. Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Anthropocene I," in *Fueling Culture*, 41.

[214] Central to historical processes of change and development, Marx argues, is a socio-natural metabolism, or the ways that humans are part of the natural world but in working on nature they also transform themselves and that world. The speeding up of the conditions of exchange through the mechanized movement of goods and people, according to Marx, represented a massive upwards shift for the process of capitalist production. Karl Marx, *Capital,* Vol. I, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1990), 283.

[215] Jennifer Wenzel, "Petro-Magic-Realism Revisited: Un-imagining and Re-imagining the Niger Delta," *Postcolonial Studies* 9, no. 4 (2006): 449.

[216] Dipesh Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021), 32. Here I also refer to authors Avner Offer, Barry Smart, Shane Hamilton, and Michael Pollan and their work concerning the practices of consumption in modern, affluent societies. Offer demonstrates how the flow of novelty under affluence undermines existing commitments and conventions, producing the "freedom to be addicted". This, of course, includes the shopping addiction itself, which today is especially common not in shops but online where there is little to no personal accountability or collective pressure to moderate desire. Every new consumer experience and commoditized product is just one click away! Avner Offer, *The Challenge of Affluence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006). Similarly, Smart shows a direct correlation between consumerism and climate change, expounding on the more nefarious aspect to the freedom of choice: the risk of addiction. The rise in eating disorders, for instance, coincides with the development of food standardization practices and the advent of the mobile refrigeration and supermarkets in the 1960s. Barry Smart, *Consumer Society* (London: Sage, 2010),149-51. Thanks largely to oil in the form of fertilizers and petrochemicals, the modes of eating and buying commoditized food, to which Americans today have become accustomed, began in the 1960s with standardization – that is, uniform "standards" for the grade and pack of food – refrigerated transportation, and inventory simplification. Shane Hamilton, *Supermarket USA: Food and Power in the Cold War Farms Race* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013). As a result, the American food chain, Michael Pollan argues, "turn[ed] from the logic of biology and embrace[d] the logic of industry … instead of eating exclusively from the sun, humanity now began to sip petroleum." Pollan, *Omnivore's Dilemma*, 45.

a civic duty to enjoy modern capitalist life (Figure 17). As a result, wages, commodity prices, and the "health" of consumers were obsessively indexed by federal institutions to ensure that a specific stratum of Americans secured the material conditions to a decent standard of living – that is, a form of life expressed through and characterized by the mass consumption, and consequently the self-serving abuse, of oil. The single largest factor promoting this form of petro-capital life was the automobile advertisement. In so doing, they re-envisioned life through representations of mobility, freedom, distinction, and modernity; the most prominent fantasies within white, middle-class consumer society mediated and enabled by oil energy. That which did not conform to middle-class notions of consumptive respectability was rendered valueless, objectified, or censored. In this sense, the success of automobile advertisements (and petro-capital more generally) in the United States can be measured by how effectively they had sold a version of life that was accepted as natural, a given, inevitable.

Figure 17. "12 Cylinders to Make Driving Fun Again." Advertisement by N W Ayer & Son for the *Detroit Police Field Day Program* (1938). Courtesy of Smithsonian, National Museum of American History.

By questioning the power of accepted historical narratives on race, class, and gender in the United States, this thesis does not presume to undermine them or their explanations for modernity. Indeed, it attempts to "refine" them by providing nuance and underscoring the methodologies that help us to recognize that American modernity, for better or for worse, is a petro-modernity. To critically analyze the centrality of oil within any modern society is to recognize how and why

energy complicates our definitions of what it means to be human; to exist and to have existed in worlds we fashioned for ourselves; to be "subjects to the stochastic forces of nature," Dipesh Chakrabarty argues, while being "one such force collectively; belonging at once to differently-scaled histories of the planet, of life, and of human societies."[217] Attaching petro- as a prefix, therefore, is tacitly a periodizing move, an attempt to confront oil's "slipperiness", that according to Szeman "involves thinking simultaneously the disjunctive timescales and discrepant speeds of gradual sedimentation and fossilization in the prehistoric past, near-instant combustion and the fetish of acceleration in the hypermodern present, and environmental effects persisting into the distant future."[218] Any attempt to examine modern American society, its culture, and the daily rituals of its people, therefore, would do well to not only understand when the dictates and confines of oil capitalism began, but also how American freedoms continue to be represented, expressed and restricted today through the consumption of massive amounts of oil energy. Although the imagined correlation between freedom and oil consumption was naturalized during the 1930s, such ways of life continue to endure today because they were, and continue to be, depicted as far from ordinary. Oil, composed of death and time, is both the substance *par excellence* of modern, petrocapital life and extraordinary material that allows Americans to act out and understand the symbolism of social structures. To grasp oil's manifold influences on American consumer culture and the aesthetics of everyday life means to acknowledge its ubiquity and how white middle-class racism and chauvinism were imposed through cultural production during the past century of unprecedented cheap energy. Only then can we begin to realize that the American middle class *is*

[217] Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Postcolonial Studies and the Challenge of Climate Change," *New Literary History* 43, no. 1 (2012): 14.
[218] Szeman, et al., *Fueling Cultures*, 10.

oil: that not only are their freedoms secured through privileged access to oil, but that they are also products of what they have done with oil to make their modernity.

Analyzing advertisements of the "American way of life" provides unique insight into how the symbolic discourse of commercialism, in addition to the use of culture, continues to legitimate social, gendered, and racial division via acts of consumption and the exercise of class power. It is a method that considers the ways in which Americans create meaning and envision change through the consumption of oil – however problematic, however incomplete, and however complicated – within a larger context of an energy system that imagines, produces, and advertises ever more wasteful uses for it. If anything, the current political acrimony within the United States, wherein national politics and the politics of white supremacy are now daily elided, in addition to the devastation experienced by Americans due to worsening natural disasters, asks us to comprehend the history of American modernity anew. The "discovery" of oil and the reorienting of social and cultural life around its consumption played a crucial role in legitimizing liberal democracy in the United States and its attendant imaginaries of "improving", and thus modernizing, society through perpetual growth and mobility.[219] Yet such imaginaries often end up obscuring the reoccurring struggles to reassert a particular capitalist hegemony – in the case of the United States, via cultural performances of racial and gendered division. By reconsidering the untidiness and unevenness inherent to narratives and representations of oil, this thesis acknowledges the value of nuanced histories that reveal the agency of the Other in appropriating the tools of American petroculture as vehicles of resistance but has chosen to highlight how oil and automobiles are inextricably intertwined with a symbolic and material economy that continually reaffirms white, middle-class

[219] The dominant form of politics during the Petroleum Age, Szeman argues, has been liberalism, "a theory of society that functions by misrecognizing our temporary push beyond Malthusian constraints as a function of social struggle and Enlightenment maturity rather than the unrepeatable good fortune of stumbling upon non-renewable resource plentitude." Szeman, et al., *Fueling Cultures*, 391-2.

male supremacy. Focusing on the construction of an exclusionary white, middle-class cultural imaginary centered on oil and automobility, therefore, is a re-evaluation of American narratives of social progress in light of the urgency of the political present to do so, when agency and resistance are being subverted on a daily basis to make the "American way of life" great again.

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