

Introduction

Histories of Oil and Urban Modernity in the Middle East

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The grand narrative of oil development in the Middle East has been enacted largely on an urban stage, as exemplified by a glitzy global metropolis like Dubai that now stands as one of the main symbols of late oil urbanism. The collection of essays in this special section of *CSSAAME* explores Middle Eastern oil urbanism from a historical perspective, taking as its point of departure the argument that both at the onset of oil exploitation and in more recent times, cities and urban environments constituted the primary setting where oil modernity unfolded. These articles have been conceived and written in the spirit of retrieving from obscurity forgotten histories of early urban modernity and transformation in three areas that played a crucial role in the history of the Middle Eastern oil industry: the Persian Gulf, Iran, and Iraq. Covering the period from the interwar years to the nationalization of the various petroleum industries in the 1970s and 1980s, they propose an ethnographic reading of oil as the principal agent of urban change in two main contexts: the new company towns and labor camps that proliferated around the oil fields at the onset of oil exploitation, and the old urban settlements that became the central places of oil-producing countries in the following decades.

Adopting a multidisciplinary approach, this collection of essays identifies urban milieus as the critical nodes of the architecture of early oil life. The milieus are explored as the recipients of oil's transformative powers and as part and parcel of the constitutive process of the redefinition of politics and societies under the shadow of this extractive commodity. Gyan Prakash has suggested that the city should be approached "as a spatial form of social life and power relations, not just a site of society and politics."¹ Following this premise, urban environments are here presented as physical sites of political, social, and cultural interaction and exchange and as spaces that framed oil modernity as a new set of practices at the micro level of the urban experience. In parallel, these articles scrutinize the symbolic and ideological value conferred upon urban milieus since the 1950s. In this period cities and towns featured prominently as rhetorical instruments used by oil companies, local governments, and city planners to impose particular visions of oil modernity upon indigenous populations.

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1. Gyan Prakash, introduction to *The Spaces of the Modern City: Imaginaries, Politics, and Everyday Life*, ed. Gyan Prakash and Kevin M. Kruse (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 2.

Retrieving the urban histories of oil also responds to contemporary concerns. It reclaims landscapes that are often no longer in existence as the storehouses of collective memory and serves as an integral part of the public history and culture of the countries concerned. In short, these essays aim to contribute to the restoration of “the power of place” to the oil equation, a power that the literature on oil development in the Middle East has often concealed.² The historical impact of the discovery and exploitation of oil has been underresearched. This is particularly evident when considering the period before the 1973 oil boom, which had the effect of suddenly transforming the oil-producing countries of the Middle East into major players on the international stage.³ Only in the last few years have a handful of studies investigated the first decades of oil development from an urban perspective and with a focus on questions of modernity.⁴ Following the progressive nationalization of oil industries and the emergence of so-called petro-states after the 1970s, oil development has consistently attracted the attention of economists and political scientists. In spite of the general recognition that urban change has been the most tangible (and visible) outcome of oil wealth, these studies have largely approached the city as a mere accessory of state power, as an appendix to the national and global oil economies. The scarce attention devoted to the history of urban spaces, societies, and cultures under the shadow of oil reflects

broader trends in the study of the Persian Gulf, Iran, and Iraq in the twentieth century. With the exception of Iraq, scholarship on the Arab states of the Persian Gulf has tended to display a problematic relationship to scale, giving precedence to tribe, state, and British Empire as the principal analytical tools to understand historical change.⁵ In the case of Iran and Iraq, the historical literature has certainly been richer, but generally unresponsive to the theme of oil and urban change. The petroleum industry has also served as the backdrop to a number of studies dealing with urban-based labor and nationalist movements.⁶

Given the above it is not surprising that the petro-states that emerged after 1973 have informed more or less explicitly, often retrospectively, our understanding of oil as an agent of historical change. More specifically, the paradigm of the rentier state has been central to this understanding. As the analytical underpinning of oil development, it has also had a paramount influence on the study of oil urbanization, particularly in Saudi Arabia and the smaller Arab countries of the Persian Gulf. In conceptualizing oil as rent, this paradigm has illustrated the macro-economic and political aspects of oil modernization. On the one hand, it has highlighted the ways in which oil revenue has been used as a tool of statecraft. On the other, it has drawn attention to the “paradox of plenty” that has resulted from the often unequal distribution of oil wealth.⁷ As perceptively noted

2. For a discussion of urban history as public history embedded in the urban landscape, see Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), 2–13.

3. Most of the literature on the early oil era relates the history of oil companies and oil operations with an emphasis on the relationship between the companies and local governments. For examples see James H. Bamberg, *The History of the British Petroleum Company*, vol. 2, *The Anglo-Iranian Years, 1928–1954* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); David H. Finnie, *Desert Enterprise: The Middle East Oil Industry in its Local Environment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958); and Aileen Keating, *Mirage: Power, Politics, and the Hidden History of Arabian Oil* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2005).

4. See Mark Crinson, “Abadan: Planning and Architecture under the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company,” *Planning Perspectives* 12 (1997): 341–59; Kaveh Ehsani, “Social Engineering and the Contradictions of Modernization in Khuzestan’s Company Towns: A Look at Abadan and Masjed-Soleyman,” *International Review of Social History* 48 (2003): 361–99; Nelida Fuccaro, *Histories of City and State in the Persian Gulf: Manama since 1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); and Farah al-Nakib, “Urbanisation, the Built Environment, and the Urban Experience before and after Oil (1716–1896)” (PhD diss., University of London, 2011). Although not focusing specifically on oil development, Caecilia Pieri’s book is a fascinating study of Baghdad’s modern architecture. See Caecilia Pieri, *Bagdad Arts Déco: Architectures de Brique, 1920–1950* (Montpellier: Archange Minotaure, 2008).

5. See Fuccaro, *Histories of City and State*, 1–2.

6. See, e.g., James A. Bill and William Roger Louis, eds., *Musaddiq, Iranian Nationalism, and Oil* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1998); Stephanie Cronin, “Popular Politics, the New State, and the Birth of the Iranian Working Class: The 1929 Abadan Oil Refinery Strike,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 46 (2010): 699–732; Hanna Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq: A Study of Iraq’s Old Landed and Commercial Classes and of its Communists, Ba’thists, and Free Officers* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978); and Marion Farouk-Sluglett and Peter Sluglett, “Labour and National Liberation: The Trade Union Movement in Iraq, 1920–1958,” *Arab Studies Quarterly* 5 (1983): 139–54.

7. See Terry Lynn Karl, *The Paradox of Plenty: Oil Booms and Petro-States* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

by Eric Davis in the early 1990s, two interrelated trends prevailed at that time in the analysis of the oil-producing countries in the Arab World. The first was a tendency to fetishize the state at the expense of indigenous sociopolitical forces, the second a propensity to overlook historical traditions and trajectories of state making.⁸ Although in the last decade scholars have focused increasingly on different facets of the rentier state as a historical formation, this new trend has not been generally reflected in the study of oil urbanization.⁹ In the smaller Arab states of the Persian Gulf the city that emerges as the brainchild of this paradigm is an oil city whose history generally does not go further back than the 1970s. Its growth is generally framed in the context of the oil economy and of the international markets that have supported it. Urban environments—both physical and social—appear to have been engineered as state enterprises with little consideration for alternative patterns of city formation. As I indicated a little over a decade ago, “It is the city of technical, rather than cultural and moral, orders where the oil economy is dictating patterns of political consensus and social integration.”¹⁰ This type of urbanism evokes particular images of oil as a substance with no intrinsic life and agency of its own, whose properties are activated only by impersonal and heavy-handed petroregimes. The ability of these regimes to manipulate oil revenue has been often directly linked to the exercise of authoritarian government.¹¹

The logic and teleology of such regimes have also been instrumental in popularizing particular historical interpretations of oil development as an unstoppable march toward progress, civilization, and happiness, with the state in the driving seat. One of the implications of these interpretations has been the creation of a dualist paradigm

of urban change that has pitted the “traditional” town against the “oil/modern” city, with the latter usually identified more or less explicitly with the lifespan of the rentier state. This is clearly a reductionist view of urban modernization as a historical process, which encapsulates the realities and experiences of what has been called with reference to nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Europe as the “shock of the new.”¹² First, the modern city in countries like Kuwait and Bahrain was born before the consolidation of the rentier state, as some of the articles in this issue suggest. In the case of Iraq, elements of urban modernization had already become apparent before the discovery of oil as a result of the reformist efforts undertaken by the Ottoman Empire in the late nineteenth century. In Iran, the early beginnings of oil exploitation transformed the oil town of Abadan into the prototype of the modern/industrial city in the interwar period. Second, urban environments are complex, impermanent, and multiform aggregations in time and space, as suggested by the vast literature on urban networks and systems focusing on cities across the world.¹³ Those that started to be transformed by oil before and after World War II are no exception. In fact, it can be argued that the early oil cities were more multifaceted and less permanent than others, given the generally fast pace of urbanization triggered by oil development in the particular Middle Eastern contexts analyzed in this collection of essays. The multiplicity of actors and of economic, political, and social forces at play rendered the process of oil modernization much more complex and fragmented than that implicit in teleological narratives of modernization and approaches based on ideal types. In a recent book on the experience of Oman’s oil “renaissance” after 1970, Mandana Limbert argues convincingly that

8. See Eric Davis, “Theorizing Statecraft and Social Change in Arab Oil-Producing Countries,” in *Statecraft in The Middle East: Oil, Historical Memory, and Popular Culture*, ed. Eric Davis and Nicolas Gavrielides (Miami: Florida International University Press, 1991), 8–12.

9. For a recent example of a historical study of the rentier state that links pre-oil institutions to oil development, see Steffen Hertog, *Princes, Brokers, and Bureaucrats: Oil and the State in Saudi Arabia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010). For a very original interpre-

tation of state making in Saudi Arabia from the perspective of the control of natural resources, see Toby Craig Jones, *Desert Kingdom: How Oil and Water Forged Modern Saudi Arabia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

10. Nelida Fuccaro, “Urban Studies of the Gulf: Visions of the City,” *Middle East Studies Association Bulletin* 35 (2001): 180.

11. I am indebted to Kaveh Ehsani for having drawn my attention to these issues. See Kaveh Ehsani, “Abadan and the Making of the Working Class and Oil Industry in Iran” (paper pre-

sented at the 44th Annual Meeting of the Middle East Studies Association of North America, San Diego, CA, 18–21 November 2010), 3–4.

12. See Richard Dennis, *Cities in Modernity: Representations and Productions of Metropolitan Space, 1840–1930* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 1–3.

13. For a discussion of this literature with a focus on the contemporary city, see Prakash, introduction to *The Spaces of the Modern City*, 3–7.

the “historical time” of oil has been perceived as an affluent interval rather than “a step along a trajectory of infinite progress.”¹⁴

Drawing attention to the multifaceted properties and eclectic powers of oil as an extractive commodity helps us move beyond the state and focus on the city as a specific historical, political, social, and cultural context of oil. As Michael Watts and Fernando Coronil show in their seminal works on Nigeria and Venezuela, respectively, a contextual understanding of oil is crucial to disentangle the complex “riddle” of oil development.¹⁵ As already noted, it is simplistic to understand oil merely as money and rent, that is, as a commodity that has generated wealth and hence enabled the coercive power of modern and contemporary petro-regimes. As a substance oil has had a much broader sphere of action. At the point of extraction it has upset delicate environmental and ecological balances. The almost supernatural properties attributed to the black gold have also been able to generate competing myths and realities of the modern world and urban living, often contributing to the popularization of different discourses about states, nations, and progress. In other words, the far-reaching effects of oil and its very persuasive discursive qualities have mobilized a multitude of actors at different historical junctures.¹⁶ This is the spell cast by the “oil magic,” as Coronil calls it in his incisive analysis of the evolution of modernity and the petro-state in twentieth-century Venezuela.¹⁷

The early oil era in the Middle East, as elsewhere across the world, brings into sharp focus the agency of the foreign companies that controlled the industry. As corporations representing the interests of foreign capital, they operated in tandem

with the local regimes and the old colonial powers. The history of the Anglo Iranian Oil Company and of the Iraq Petroleum Company is indicative of how British informal empire functioned in the context of concessionary economies driven by private capital.¹⁸ Before the age of the petro-state, oil companies constituted veritable enclaves of corporate power and privilege, in some cases exerting almost absolute control over entire regions where the oil fields were located. As in Venezuela, oil exploitation in Iran and Saudi Arabia created states within states, as Robert Vitalis has eloquently argued in his study of the oil frontier in the eastern province of the Saudi Kingdom.¹⁹ The remarkable reach of the early oil industry can be readily illustrated by its power to transform sociopolitical, cultural, ideological, and physical space beyond the confines of its operational settings—oil wells, pumping stations, refineries, and pipelines.

The cumulative effects of the magic touch of oil were nowhere more apparent than in the urban settlements that entered the orbit of this extractive commodity or, in Watts’s words, oil’s “different circles of reach.”²⁰ Brand-new company and native towns and laborers’ camps were the central places of the early petroleum industry. As the administrative, political, and economic headquarters of oil operations, they represented the spatialization of the capitalist/corporate outlook of oil companies. In this respect they can be compared with the mining towns and plantation settlements that mushroomed in colonial Asia and Africa under the control of European enterprises.²¹

As elaborated in some of the articles, company and native towns bring the paradigm of colonial urbanism into the discussion of oil modernity. The contributions on Abadan in Iran, Ahmadi

14. Mandana Limbert, *In the Time of Oil: Piety, Memory, and Social Life in an Omani Town* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), 9.

15. See Fernando Coronil, *The Magical State: Nature, Money, and Modernity in Venezuela* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1997); and Michael Watts, “Petro-Violence: Community, Extraction and the Political Ecology of a Mythic Commodity,” in *Violent Environments*, ed. Nancy Lee Peluso and Michael Watts (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), 189–212.

16. See Watts, “Petro-Violence,” 202–6.

17. See Coronil, *The Magical State*, esp. 388–92.

18. See Marian Kent, *Moguls and Mandarins: Oil, Imperialism, and the Middle East in British Foreign Policy, 1900–1940* (London: Frank Cass, 1993), 34–59, 152–53. For an analysis of the relationship between Middle Eastern oil trade and the strength of sterling as the leading international currency after WWII, see Steven G. Galpern, *Money, Oil, and Empire in the Middle East: Sterling and Postwar Imperialism, 1944–1971* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

19. See Robert Vitalis, *America’s Kingdom: Mythmaking on the Saudi Oil Frontier* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007).

20. Watts, “Petro-Violence,” 190.

21. For an excellent ethnography of modern urban lives in the copper mining towns of Zambia, see James Ferguson, *Expectations of Modernity: Myths and Meanings of Urban Life on the Zambian Copperbelt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

in Kuwait, and Awali in Bahrain (Mona Damluji, Reem Alissa, and Nelida Fuccaro) flesh out some of the elements that have characterized the production of space in colonial cities: the creation of gated communities as a result of spatial segregation along ethnic lines and planning and architectural practices that mirrored both racist ideologies and hierarchies of economic and political domination. These articles also hint at some of the features that characterized these oil settlements as industrial towns operating in a late colonial context, particularly the enforcement of corporate hierarchies through urban spatial and social organization. Yet, as Henri Lefebvre and Michel de Certeau have famously advocated, urban space is not only engineered and static geography but also human practice.²² Crucially, the same articles demonstrate how company towns and labor camps cannot be interpreted solely as colonial/corporate creations that have served as models of modern urban planning and architecture. In different ways, they can be read as representing new life-worlds: Ahmadi as a catalyst of collective memory and nostalgia (Alissa); Awali and *Hayy al-Ummal* as harbingers of new leisure and consumer cultures (Fuccaro); and the native township of Bawarda in Abadan as a visual narrative portraying indigenous modern life through film (Damluji).

Undoubtedly company and native towns came to symbolize the newness brought about by the oil industry, and as such contributed to popularizing the benefits and evils of oil modernity as a Western import.²³ Yet the impact of oil as the “shock of the new” did not stop there, but trickled down to developing oil “conurbations” that came to include local towns and cities. It is here that indigenous modernity was played out on a larger scale, both in terms of the number of people affected and the actors involved. The effects of early oil modernization in these indigenous settlements were predictably uneven, ambivalent, and contradictory. They have to be understood in the context of the political, social, and cultural tensions

created in the urban arena by powerful actors: oil companies, local governments, and British imperial regimes.

In her analysis of Kuwait City from 1950 to the Iraqi invasion of 1990, Farah al-Nakib identifies the paradox of the urban spectacle produced by state-led projects in terms of the unusable public spaces they generated for residents, particularly in the city center. Here, the contradiction is between the day-to-day urban experience of Kuwaitis and the new ideal of urban development vigorously pursued by the Kuwaiti government as an evolving petro-regime with the complicity of the urban planners and architects on its payroll. Arbella Bet-Shlimon’s discussion of Kirkuk in Iraq before the 1958 revolution approaches the question of urban change from a different standpoint. She sees Kirkuk’s urban affairs as being closely intertwined with the political and ideological tensions resulting from the interplay among the oil company, the British government, Kirkuk’s municipal administration, and labor activists. Her reading of urban modernity follows the trajectories of key development projects in the fields of housing, education, and water supply, emphasizing the provision of public utilities as a strategic device to defuse urban discontent.

As key elements in (and instruments of) the domestication and appeasement of early oil societies, planning, architecture, and infrastructural development are central themes in the history of the new and old urban settlements considered in this collection. However, these aspects of the macropolitics of oil development cannot be understood fully without considering them as part of the relational processes that created new social and cultural realities for oil on the ground. Focusing on leisure and consumption, my article on Bahrain highlights the vibrancy of the new urban and suburban cultures that emerged in the 1950s. The transformation of Manama into a modern commercial hub, the influence of the company town of Awali, and the popularity of cinemas, youth clubs, and air travel

22. See Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 68–168; and Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

23. Ferguson provides an instructive discussion of this process as it unfolded in Zambia’s mining towns. See Ferguson, *Expectations of Modernity*, 4–5.

are singled out as the key developments underscoring the emergence of Bahrain's new *homo urbanus*. In her discussion of Ahmadi's late colonial modernity, Alissa follows a similar trajectory. She explains how the town's urban, architectural, and social scales combined to provide new models of family and neighborhood life for the Kuwaiti employees of the oil company. She also draws attention to the new role assumed by the Ahmadi wife as the icon of the modern suburban female in Kuwait.

All the essays point to the relevance of representation, reception, and communication as contexts in which to understand the production of different facets of oil's urban worlds that emerged in the Middle East. The rhetoric of oil companies and state administrations since the early 1950s presented towns and urban life across the region as the embodiment of a new and unprecedented wave of civilization and progress unleashed by the black gold. The ideology of development enshrined in the urban and architectural revival promoted by the Kuwaiti government through *al-nahdah al-'umraniyyah* (the architectural awakening) is a powerful illustration of this trend (al-Nakib). From Kuwait City to Abadan, the success of oil propaganda depended on the deployment of a variety of modern media, from the press to the cinema. A new culture of public communication was born, supported by magazines, newspapers, and films that articulated modern public relations markets as sites for the negotiation of political opinions and modern urban lifestyles. Not only did this culture bind different audiences together, but it also made available to them the symbols, signs, and models of oil modernity, ready to be adopted, rejected, or contested. As attested by the progressive popularization of an independent Arab press in Kuwait and Bahrain, this new communication field was not simply the preserve of the oil propagandists who populated foreign companies and government offices. Thus the histories of oil exploitation and propaganda, and that of modern media and their publics, are intrinsically connected.

This connection is evocatively elaborated in the visible and invisible cinematic spaces of Abadan produced by the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company in the film *Persian Story*. These spaces are evidence of the unequal power relations embedded in the urban project of oil modernity as it unfolded

in Iran and of the key role played by foreign audiences in legitimizing it (Damluji). The case of Bahrain is also emblematic of how advertising in the independent and government-controlled press and the propaganda by the oil company created influential models of urban and suburban life, in some cases shared by both locals and expatriates (Fuccaro). In a similar fashion, the publications of the Kuwait Oil Company were instrumental in instructing Kuwaitis in the art of modern urban living (Alissa).

These essays have only just started to uncover the rich and textured urban experience of early oil development in the Middle East, an experience that deserves further attention. We hope that this collection will provide some momentum in this direction as a contribution to what is now a fast-developing interdisciplinary field of urban studies on Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. As to oil, it seems vital to expose its nexus with the city in order to understand how people, institutions, and states learned to live with this substance and commodity that has so profoundly influenced their histories. □□□□