

# THE STATE OF THE NORTH SEA

## THATCHERISM AND THE FOSSIL ECONOMY

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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis is a historical study concerned with the impact of North Sea oil on British politics during the 1970's and 80's. Vast quantities of oil sedimented beneath the waves within the UK continental shelf - hundreds of miles of the north-east coast of Scotland - attracted oil barons and transnational majors to the hostile waters of the North Sea in the early 1970's. It was Margaret Thatcher's government - from 1979 until 1990 - that benefitted most from this boon. The billions in tax revenues bankrolled her radical political experiment, transforming the economy, confronting labour unions and recalibrating the political trajectory for Britain. Despite being foundational for the Thatcher project, engagements with the energetic dimensions of this era are scant, both within academia and broader political and popular culture; Thatcher herself failed to even acknowledge the importance of oil in her autobiography. What is missed by such a disconnect? This work intends to foreground the role of oil in a political and social history, to highlight a less-known environmental history in relation to an extensively documented chapter in British politics. Grounded in critical realism and engaging with a range of theorists that grapple variously with state-capital-energy relations, I will inquire into the ways that North Sea oil shaped British politics. The result intends to serve as a contribution to a critical history of the fossil economy that will inform interventions and strategies for contemporary climate politics.

**Keywords:** North Sea oil, Thatcherism, fossil economy, accumulation, environmental history, economic history

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# 1. INTRODUCTION AND RESEARCH QUESTION

## 1.1 INTRODUCTION

In 1965, the chairman of Exxon committed \$500 million to the task of oil exploration in novel regions, mobilising teams of geophysicists and seismologists to explore Alaska, north Canada and the North Sea. Attention was given to the UK continental shelf after large discoveries of natural gas were discovered some years prior in Dutch waters, signalling further hydrocarbon potential in these politically sound waters. Other companies would follow suit. Gas was soon tapped in the shallow southerly waters and oil discovered a few years later at more treacherous depths further north. The environment that stood between oil and ignition, however, was savage: the storm surges and plummeting depths demanded bespoke technology, costing untold fortunes. The capital raised to develop the province came from both sides of the Atlantic, reflecting the Anglo-American composition of oil majors that secured the bulk of exploration licenses. As global oil prices shot up in the early 1970's so did the significance of this province and the mammoth costs of its development became increasingly negotiable. Over the course of the next decade exploration and drilling offshore proceeded at speed, dependent on the hard labour of non-unionised workers, incorporated into an industrial relations model imported into Scottish waters by many of the American firms operating there. By 1975, the first drops of oil came on-stream and within a few years Britain stood side-by-side with Saudi Arabia, Russia, USA and the like as one of the world's major oil producers (Yergin 1991). To become an oil producer at a moment of unprecedentedly high prices was regarded as "quite exceptionally fortunate" (Edgerton 2018, 296), but under the arrangements agreed in the late sixties and early seventies, the British government would only begin to receive income from its fossil-fuel reserves under the condition of their exploitation. So, for who exactly did this fortune fall?

A few months before the tap was turned and North Sea oil arrived on British shores, Margaret Thatcher became the new leader of the Conservative Party. Thatcher and her inner circle represented a body of economic ideas that considered the market to be the foremost model for economic and social organisation. Unlike her predecessor, who was ousted following industrial action that resulted in power-shortages, the new leadership were prepared to confront what they recognised to be at the core of the converging crises of the seventies. Thatcher would be elected to power in 1979 and remain so until 1990, winning four consecutive elections.

'Thatcherism' was the term given to this right-ward turn in British politics, a turn that would transform the country economically and ideologically (Hall 1979; Edgerton 2018). The restructuring produced enduring changes and it is quite telling that Thatcher considered New Labour and Tony Blair, the traditional opposition and its leader, to have been her greatest achievement (Gallas 2016, 280). At the core of Thatcherism were political and economic principles, with the distribution of power in society and the place of the capitalist and free trade in the global order at stake (Edgerton 2018). Thatcherism is here regarded as the British variant of, and crucial transition to, neoliberalism; a body of economic and social ideas forged around the market (Mirowski 2013). The events traced below should be seen as significant in the development of this global economic movement (Harvey 2007). But where does North Sea oil feature? In 1994, Christopher Harvie commented that much "remains obscure" about the Thatcher government's relationship with the mineral wealth from its continental shelf (Harvie 1994, 287). Whilst Terry Brotherstone and Hugo Manson believe the story of North Sea oil "features in the mainstream historical literature mainly as an absence" (Brotherstone and Manson 2007, 28). In a popular account of modern Britain, Andrew Marr went as far as suggesting that the influence of North Sea oil on the "harsh economic policy of Thatcherism" has been "airbrushed out of our national history" (cited in Brotherstone and Manson 2007, 29). Margaret Thatcher herself barely gave attention to oil in her weighty tome that is *The Downing Street Years*, a surprising omission considering one of the worst industrial disasters of the century occurred offshore whilst she was leader (ibid.).

This open historical inquiry seeks to address the relationship between Thatcherism and North Sea oil. By foregrounding the role of oil in a political and cultural history, the work aims to consider this less-known environmental history and draw attention to the materiality behind a decisive chapter in British politics. This task is undertaken from the standpoint of resistance. The continuous burning of fossil fuels is leading to increasingly unstable climatic conditions and this work endeavours to bring some historical context to our present moment. In stressing the crucial role of the state and the need to contend global patterns of accumulation, this historical work hopes to inform interventions and strategies for contemporary climate politics. In this pursuit, the work accommodates an analysis of oil as not only a commodity but also as source of energy, emphasising in this period how fossil fuels related to politics, the economy and society. I propose these to be vital dynamics with which to comprehend our warming world.

## 1.2 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The two research questions of the following work are thus:

- 1) How was Thatcherism influenced by North Sea oil?
- 2) Did the North Sea province and Thatcherism change the trajectory fossil economy?

The thesis will be structured as follows. The first section will introduce the methodological approach of the work, considering its ontological position, clarifying the parameters of the study, the method of narrative writing and the sources this work has drawn from. Next, theoretical concepts relating to accumulation, the fossil economy and the state are addressed. The body of this work will then follow in six steps: the first will consider the nascent North Sea province, tracking the power relations and the alliance it encouraged; the second looks at the climate of crisis during the seventies and how powerful groups regarded North Sea oil in their interpretation and propagation of crisis; the third zooms in on the policies of the early Thatcher government and posits oil as an invisible catalyst; the influence of oil on the Great Miners' Strike is the concern of the fourth; the fifth will be spent offshore inspecting the rhythms of labour at sea; the sixth returns to land, querying to social and cultural changes. With these insights affirmed we will move to consider the development of the fossil economy more broadly, analysing economic, political and ideological changes in relation to global carbon emissions. Conclusions to finish.



## **2. METHODOLOGY AND THEORETICAL APPROACH**

### **2.1 HISTORY IN CLIMATE**

On a warming planet, a new research agenda has been called for: to trace the development of the fossil economy in its totality, event by event, and to study *history in climate* (Malm 2016). This agenda forms the backdrop of this work, recognising the development of the North Sea oil province and its relationship to the British state as appropriate phenomena for this purpose. As well as addressing the fossil-fuel infrastructures locked in, the relations of power that installed them and the distribution of the spoils from their use, this work also considers the strategic possibilities North Sea oil afforded, with these then evaluated for their impact on the fossil economy. This section considers the ontological position of the work, the methods employed and sources studied.

### **2.2 STRUCTURES, REALISM AND POLITICAL ECOLOGY**

This study is done in the tradition of critical realism. It regards social structures to be substantial and thus ontologically "real" social entities with causal powers that are not necessarily observable but evident in what they do (Jones et al. 2011, 157; Elder-Vass 2012). Structure and agency have a two-way relationship: whilst social structure is shaped by agency, at the same time it constrains and facilitates agency (Jones et al. 2011, 162). Structures are not necessarily fixed or unified, though they are patterns of relations that may have material and ideational components that "tend to be reproduced with considerable consistency over relatively extended periods of time" (Sewell Jr. 2005, 226). We can consider these components as "emergent properties" which are "irreducible to people, generate causal powers and relatively long-lasting" (Jones et al. 2011, 161). Structures do not emerge on their own accord, they come into being as a result of any number of events (Elder-Vass 2012).

Within the tradition of critical realism, then, this work is positioned within a political ecology framework, which incorporates "biophysical science into the political analysis of the environment" (Forsyth 2001, 2). A realist political ecology looks to the global economic system for its explanations of local environmental relations as this it is this political economy "which ultimately conditions local life" (Hornborg 2016b, 68). A realist ontology is also a prerequisite to accept the existence of climate change: CO<sub>2</sub> is accumulating in the atmosphere and posing

an existential threat to life as it is on this planet. This trend toward gaseous accumulation is not, however, a property of the biosphere, but is overwhelmingly the result of the combustion of fossil fuels for economic growth (Malm 2015). Much political ecology tends to focus on resources at the expense of energy (Huber 2015). This work endeavours to accommodate the energetic dimension, recognising energy to be vital for the accumulation and reproduction of capital: "without a continuous import of energy, a machine is as inanimate as an organism that has starved to death" (Hornborg 2016b, 67).

In its treatment of the material and energetic dimensions, this work does not fall into the deterministic trap that suggests that the resources themselves, here the power of oil, *cause* social relations. This line of thinking is readily apparent in much of the literature that falls under the 'rentier state' or 'resource curse' rubric, whereby such "commodity determinism" ignores the activities of the transnational oil companies, the inevitable state-partnerships and the specific types of capitalism that oil fosters (Watts 2004, 53). In a similar critique, it has been suggested that this scholarship narrowly focuses on "only one set of the networks through which oil flows and is converted into energy, profits and political power" often at the expense of considering the ways oil "is extracted, processed, shipped and consumed" (Mitchell 2009, 400). This work, then, moves from the assumption that oil, diamonds, coal, rubber, tin or otherwise have "no inherent power outside the social and political relations that produce them" (Huber 2013, 3) and instead suggests the *causal efficacy* of nature. Oil tycoons from around the world would be unlikely to relocate to Aberdeen, driving up property prices and forming the densest community of millionaires in the country, if the strata beneath the seabed were perpetual rock.

### **2.3 CHRONOLOGY AND CAUSATION**

The question at hand requires an interrogation of the connections between Thatcherism and North Sea oil. With both phenomena running parallel in time, this research employs the narrative of technique of combining chronology and causation. A chronological form is intuitive: time is used to give structure to the past (Storey et al. 2009, 90). Individual sections will resemble this narrative form, with the narrative moving through time linked by causal dependencies: the relations of power that gave birth to the North Sea as an oil producing region before turning to the consequences such relations entrenched. Quite simply: "early

events cause subsequent events to happen” (Storey 2009, 90). Throughout, this combination of chronology and causation shall be the basis of argumentation, helping to understand change over time and drawing attention to moments where things could have gone differently (ibid., 91). But causation is no straight forward process: causes always have antecedents and events always multiple causes (Gaddis 2004, 65). Opposed to hunting for isolated causes, the focus in this work has remained on the intersection, embracing multiplicity to illuminate the connections between the environmental and the political. This is to say that this work does not propose to be an exhaustive account of the phenomena, but instead deals with a limited set of events that are causally relevant to the question at hand.

Historical methods are chosen to suitably build an argument (Storey et al. 2009, 69), And to satisfactorily argue for my interpretation of how Thatcherism was shaped by North Sea oil, narrative alone will not suffice. An explanation of why such events occurred as they did is also required. Political scientists have employed the term “process tracing” to describe the conversion “of a historical narrative into an *analytical* causal explanation” (Gaddis 2004, 81, emphasis in original). Something similar applies here, where analysis is used to present my interpretation of the evidence. Thus, analytical methods are indispensable and ideally to be employed and integrated in synthesis with the narrative. Furthermore, the analysis here is enriched with social theory and in this usage exceeding the remit of an orthodox historical work (Sewell Jr. 2005). I consider theory necessary to contend with the political, economic and ideological dimensions of the question at hand; theory is after all “ultimately generalisation” and in pursuit of explanation this work will draw upon whatever theories will assist with the task (Gaddis 2004, 62).

The evidence is of both a qualitative and quantitative nature. The narrative intends to be delivered in a manner that is accessible and engaging, developing a story of sorts, with actors and scenes (Storey 2009, 8). The narrative will thus be mostly qualitative in nature, though to support the argument, there will necessarily be deviations away from this form. This work will draw on quantitative data concerning the economy, society and the environment. A large part of the answer falls in the economic sphere and with this a necessary engagement with the associated arithmetic. In other words, it may sometimes be difficult to put every point across sufficiently using interpretative methods alone and, in such cases, quantitative data support (Sewell Jr 2005, 350).

## 2.4 GOLD STANDARD SOURCES

This historical enquiry sets out to primarily answer how Thatcherism was shaped by North Sea oil. To do so, the research has focused on an extensive range of sources to develop an understanding of both the emergence of North Sea oil and the emergence of Thatcherism. The selection of sources clearly influences the writing of history (Storey et al. 2009, 30). The aim of this research - and a general rule for all historical research (Howell and Prevenier 2001, 69) - has been to use as broad a combination of sources, collecting a wide array of voices and information for interpretation and comparison. Both phenomena are spatially and temporally confined and documented in myriad forms. Some examples are now given whilst considering their strengths and weaknesses of their inclusion in the work as evidence.

This work makes use of a broad range of government documents including speeches, correspondences, meeting minutes, election manifestos, commons debates and strategy reports. They come from both sides of the political spectrum and gathered from a range of locations. The 'Margaret Thatcher Foundation' (MTF for in-text citations) has been a particularly valuable repository, with an exhaustive archive based on the entirety of the namesake's political career. Though more than a biography, the resource also provides material on the issues and events that surrounded Thatcher. The keyword summaries and search function make refined trawls through the fifty plus thousand documents possible, narrowing down sources relevant to the subject at hand. Leopold van Ranke recognized government documents to be the "gold standard" of primary sources, though as with all sources, they are still subjective, revealing some things but ignoring others (Storey et al. 2009, 26). The analysis of the texts must be sensitive to this and this text will do so, their context, content and circumstance to be introduced in-text and dealt with accordingly.

Electoral support, public opinion and the role of the media are important aspects of the phenomena at hand. Mass-media outputs such as newspapers, magazines, television programmes and films have been treated as sources for analysis (Bryman 2012, 552). This work has made use of the archived collections available from *Sunday Times*, *The Telegraph* and *Spectator* whilst also considering the financial dailies *The Financial Times* and *The Economist*. Of the tabloids *The Daily Mail* and *The Daily Mirror* have been consulted. The political stance for each newspaper has been considered (broadly speaking, the British

mainstream media has a firm right-wing bias) whilst the anticipated readership clearly impacts the content. Inferences can be made by checking these sources against one another, whilst comparing primary sources to secondary material may either ratify or refute convictions (Storey 2009, 57); this work does both. There has been a tremendous deal of reflection on the phenomenon of Thatcherism. Much of what follows has been contextualized by such scholarship and builds directly on it. The same criticism and scrutiny of primary sources applies for secondary ones (Storey 2009, 55). In some parts of the work, limitations of time and space have made it necessary to rely extensively on such secondary sources, which will be introduced and treated in the text when applicable.

This work's engaged with an archived oral history collection undertaken by The British Library and the University of Aberdeen. 'Lives in the Oil Industry' (LOI for in-text citations) has collected interviews "from the people who had been the industry, had made it happen, and from people whose lives had been materially affected by the industry" (LOI 2010). The scale of the project is vast, with hundreds of participants contributing many hundreds of hours of recordings. All recordings are available in cassette form by request at the British Library. The collection was compiled in the conviction that "historical discourse" should be enriched by the "stories and views of less well-known participants" (Brotherstone and Manson 2007, 36). It is precisely this that distinguishes oral documentation (Ritchie 2014): it is a record that "often includes subaltern experiences other sources marginalise or omit" (Brotherstone and Manson 2007, 16). The engagement with the project, relative to its size, has been predictably very limited: in total listening to eight interviews over the course of three days, selected from the summaries available online and attempting to gather a range of voices throughout the industry hierarchy. The result included workers offshore and onshore, civil servants, journalists and executives. Oral documentation, however, should hold no more weight than any other source and should be treated like any other piece of historical evidence: with caution. Sources may lie, embellish, omit or exaggerate; an agenda may guide them, or their memory might fail them (Ritchie 2014, 110). To strengthen the authority of oral evidence it must therefore be supplemented with additional material (*ibid.*). Whilst much of the evidence is not directly included in this text, the oral evidence provided the foundation for this research, bringing my attention to influential events and actors.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The archive collection was intended to feature more prominently in this research project but my time in the carrel was cut short due to the closure of the British Library as a result of covid-19.

### 3. THEORETICAL CONCEPTS

#### 3.1 THE FOSSIL ECONOMY AND CAPITAL ACCUMULATION

Global heating is the historical fact commenced by the large-scale consumption of fossil fuels in the industrial heartlands of Britain in the early nineteenth century. The fossil economy marks the period from this moment forth, where self-sustained economic growth came to be "predicated on the growing combustion of fossil fuels" (Malm 2016, 222). This "qualitatively novel type of economy" has extended its reach to all corners of the globe and generated "sustained growth in CO2 emissions" (ibid.) that threatens the very basis of life on this planet. The fossil economy therefore has "real causal powers - most notably the power to alter the climatic conditions on Earth" (Malm 2015, 12).

Marx's classic formulation of the economic logic of commodity production ( $M - C - M'$ ) reveals how, under the capitalist mode of production, commodity exchange leads to the accumulation of capital. It states that capital ( $M$ ) can be used to purchase a commodity ( $C$ ) which can be transformed and rewarded with more capital ( $M'$ ) or profit. On the next round, the capitalist - now with profit - can afford more commodities, and in turn be rewarded with more profit and so on and so forth (...  $M' - C' - M''$ ...). This equation simplifies the systematic outcome of market exchange and captures the tendency toward accumulation under certain property relations. However, as the commodity denotes a physical substratum, resource or otherwise, the equation also reveals how the gradual acquisition of capital is dependent on material throughput (Hornborg 2013). The more that is accumulated, the more can then be accumulated: the greater the quantity of biophysical resources, the more resources shall become available. In sum, the formula prescribes a logic to the material consequences of accumulation or economic growth and since it "can be extrapolated in perpetuity", it is a logic best described as the "ecological curse of growth" (Malm 2015, 284-5).

Of course, a lot more might be going on. Resources have productive potential or use value. Raw materials can be transformed into commercial goods. Cotton: a t-shirt. Sand: cement. Fossil fuels came to be a vital source of energy to achieve this conversion, energy for the *means of production*. Coal for the furnace. Diesel for the generator. Gas for the stove. Indeed, for capitalists to realise profits under competitive circumstances, the combustion of fossil fuels came to be a "material requirement for value creation" (Malm 2015, 289). So, as well as the ever-accumulating material

throughput and dissipating resources, when "fossil energy now fuels the perpetuum mobile of capital accumulation" carbon dioxide also accumulates in the atmosphere. This is what Malm (2015) identifies as fossil capital: "self-sustaining growth in general welded to the combustion of fossil fuels", which is at the very core of the fossil economy.

But where do the fossil fuels come from? Here the term primitive fossil capital can be deployed to speak of those who are responsible for the drilling, digging and fracking of fossil fuels at their source. This fraction operates at the very base of the fossil economy, bringing to market the oil, coal and gas which fuels the self-sustaining growth and emissions that keep the whole thing ticking over. Indeed, it prefigures fossil capital. Agents operating at this level are still engaged in an accumulative pursuit, their domain "the circuit of primitive accumulation of fossil capital" (Malm 2015, 291). So, within the fossil economy at large, we have fossil capital as well as primitive fossil capital, both subject to the dynamic and logic of capital accumulation. But where does the state feature in relation to capital and the fossil economy? We turn there now for our final theoretical preparation.

### **3.2 THE STATE AND ACCUMULATION STRATEGIES**

Marxist theorists have often struggled arriving at a coherent theory that captures the complex relations between the rule of capital and the modern state in a capitalist society (Jessop 1982; Jessop 1983; Barrow 1993). This work regards the state to be a "relation of power" and is informed by components from both structuralist *and* instrumentalist approaches (Jessop 1983, 143). Whilst both these schools have been treated separately, their convergence and compatibility is evinced in the ideas of the respective fields' key theorists (Das 1996, 52-4).

Structuralist approaches are chiefly concerned with "the effects of state power on the reproduction of capital at the economic level" (Jessop 1982, 25). The British state is a capitalist state, dependent on the health of the economy to ensure tax revenues and its general legitimacy (Barrow 1993, 58). Since the policies and performance of the state are subject to evaluation according to economic logic, the state is thus structurally constrained to enable the conditions for capital accumulation so as to reproduce capitalism as a whole. The state is regarded as distinct from particular 'fractions' of capital, that is primitive fossil, financial, manufacturing, agricultural or so on. In this situation, the state's capacity to establish the conditions to reproduce capital are "constrained" by the socio-economic structure it finds itself (Das 1996, 32). The state must, for example, ensure an adequate

supply of energy for fossil capital to operate. Structuralist accounts emphasise the state's autonomy from the dominant class, leaving the approach subject to criticism for its apparent economic determinism (Barrow 1993). Instrumentalist approaches, on the other hand, mainly focus on class struggle over control of the state apparatus. The basic premise of the instrumentalist approach is that capitalists are able to formulate public policy "which represent their long-term class interests and to secure the adoption, implementation, and enforcement of those policies through state institutions" (Barrow 1993, 13). This, significantly, is an admission of agency. Individuals and institutions within the state apparatus play a key role what follows and the class dynamic is evidently important, even whilst structurally constrained.

A key concept which brings both approaches together is *accumulation strategy*. Accumulation strategies define a "specific economic growth model with its various extra-economic preconditions and outlines the general strategy appropriate to its realization" (Jessop 1991, 160). Accumulation strategies must advance the immediate interests of the different fractions of capital and secure the long-term interest of the dominant fraction of capital, with perhaps the sacrifice of short-term economic interests for some (Das 1996). And since capitalist class domination is a pre-condition for capital accumulation (Gallas 2016, 48), accumulation strategies might serve the purpose of capital accumulation whilst at the same time ensuring class domination. By giving more "weight to the restructuring of the state apparatus" and demonstrating the "reorganisation of the circuit of capital" (Jessop 1991, 166-7), accumulation strategies enable us to nuance structural change whilst accommodating the class dynamic and the agency of state managers and capitalists. Thus, here we can speak of an overarching *free market accumulation strategy*, requiring 'extra-economic preconditions' - i.e. statist and ideological preparations - and specific objectives premised on specific strategies, for example, the control of inflation, the privatisation of state industries or the curtailing of trade union power.

## **4. FUEL FOR THATCHERISM**

### **4.1 THE NASCENT PROVINCE**

From the offset, the development of the North Sea province was conceived by powerful interests. There was a growing urgency for the Anglo-American oil majors to secure a reliable source of oil outside the turbulent Middle East, where the emergent oil petroleum



exporting countries (OPEC) organisation was showing signs of challenging the Anglo-American dominance of the twentieth century (Woolfson et al. 1996). Two of these oil majors who controlled the global market had intimate ties to the British government and the City of London. British Petroleum, headquartered in London with the British government the majority shareholder, and Royal Dutch Shell, though headquartered in the Netherlands firmly under British control at director and shareholder level (Yergin 1991). In the post-war years, oil provided the foreign currency that was foundational for the restoration of the City as a banking centre. Whilst oil once served the City of London and the pound sterling by propelling ships around the world, in the post-war years it would come to serve primarily as a traded commodity. Now, in the North Sea, the Treasury saw an opportunity to address the poor health of its balance of payments whilst financial capital saw a strong and stable pound as the route to further the City of London's global banking position. The oil majors had solidified control over the North Sea as early as the mid 1960's, having "effectively colonised" the British government department tasked with the development of the province (Woolfson et al. 1996, 28).

The significance of this nascent province grew more pertinent in the early seventies after a wave of nationalisations further restricted control over Middle Eastern fields. Particularly badly affected were the two 'Anglo' firms, BP and Shell, adding economic compulsion to the strategic desire of a reliable source of oil outside OPEC. North Sea oil was the membrane that formed the "long-term strategic partnership" between the oil majors, the City, Treasury and the US energy sector (Woolfson et al. 1996, 28). Herein lies the defining character of the province: from its inception the North Sea was marked by an Anglo-American alliance, the agenda to get oil on-stream as briskly as possible, anchoring a counterpoint to the Middle Eastern exporters and ultimately restore established order in international oil affairs (Yergin 1991; Woolfson et al. 1996).

The alliance was forged by capital from both sides of the Atlantic, as shown by the composition of funding to build the infrastructure to bring the crude to market. Sixty per cent of the funding for the platforms and pipe network for BP's Forties field came from US banks whilst the US government itself pitched in twenty (Woolfson et al. 1996, 21). The requisite for these loans was already fulfilled: the British government played a crucial role in parcelling up the continental shelf and distributing licenses for exploratory rights to oil corporations. The critical exchanges went ahead in the two licensing rounds between 1969 and 1972 where the bulk of the most lucrative region was divided (ibid.). Well over half of all licenses went to American corporations, whilst British firms picked up a third. The licenses would lock-in a "production regime" skewed in favour

of the corporations, restricting government intervention and placing ownership of recovered reserves entirely in the pockets of the companies and their financiers (Woolfson et al. 1996, 21). And the cost of such privilege: next to nothing. As the American oil baron T.Boone Pickens recalled:

I couldn't help thinking about the great possibilities across the Atlantic, especially when I learned that 50,000-acre tracts were being given free to oil companies willing to explore them. To oilmen used to paying millions just for the privilege of drilling, that was a real incentive (cited in Harvie 1994, 101).

The character of the North Sea industry was established in the sixties and its trajectory cemented in the early seventies. The government played a crucial role in upholding these arrangements. Conservative politicians would defend the extremely generous terms that these first licenses were awarded, arguing that the government shouldn't receive a penny from the royalties, auctions or concessions and should impose no depletion controls, so as to appease the companies desire for rapid exploitation (Wright and Boué 2018). Though an incoming Labour government elected in 1974, replacing Edward Heath's Tory government, seemed less than pleased with the status quo, promising in their manifesto:

[T]o take majority participation in all future oil licences and negotiate to achieve majority state participation in existing licences. Set up a British National Oil Corporation to enable the Government to exercise participation rights. To play an active role in the future development, exploration and exploitation of offshore oil. Impose a substantial extra tax on the oil companies' profits from the North Sea. Take new powers to control the pace of depletion, pipelines, exploration and development - and to protect the environment; and nationalise the land needed for the oil platform construction sites (Wilson 1974).

It was a narrowly winning manifesto (that also spoke of an "irreversible shift in the balance of wealth and power in favour of working people") and the following year oil would arrive on-stream, the tap ceremoniously turned on by Tony Benn, the incoming Secretary of State for Energy, who would spearhead efforts to impose the manifesto pledges. This prompted the new leader of the Conservatives - Margaret Thatcher - to describe him as the "only known example of pouring trouble on oily waters" (MTF 1975). Benn would address the issue of rent telling the chairman of Exxon: "you're just tenant farmers. You can harvest it - and for a profit - but we'll tell you how much the profit will be" (LOI 2000a). Ground rent, according to Labban (2008) is the "primary

tension" between the host of resources and those with the ability to take the oil out of the ground, and the Pipeline and Submarines Act of 1975 was an attempt to renegotiate this tension on more favourable terms for government. The state oil company BNOC was set up too.

Round	Year	Blocks Offered	Blocks Awarded	Licenses
1	1964	960	348	53
2	1965	1102	127	37
3	1970	157	106	37
4	1971-2	436	282	118
5	1976-7	71	44	28
6	1978-9	46	42	26
7	1980-1	395	90	91
8	1982-3	184	70	55
9	1984-5	195	93	89
10	1986-7	127	51	51
11	1988-9	212	115	105
12	1990-1	161	107	74

**Figure 1:** Licensing rounds for North Sea oil and gas. Source: National Archives. Department of Energy and Climate Change (2012).

The oil companies perceived themselves to be on the "back-foot" during the latter part of the seventies (LOI 2000a), their opportunities for production limited by the governments licensing (fig.1). The sustained presence of a state body in the province was alarming to the oil majors, akin to having the "Camp Commandment on the Escape Committee", according to one oil executive (MTF 1979b). "I don't see any difference any more between those OPEC countries and Britain" lamented another oil boss (cited in Yergin 1991, 670). Conversations about depletion controls in parliament and the press were at their loudest toward the end of the seventies (Wright and Boué 2018), whilst concerns about inflationary pressures from oil exports mounted (Woolfson et al. 1996). In practice, however, very little changed for the established industry. The Varley Assurances, committed by Bem's predecessor at the Energy Department, guaranteed oil corporations no delays to development or production on fields discovered before 1975 until 1982 at the very earliest. Despite the discussions of depletion, efforts made to modify the assurances were stalled by the overarching object of investor confidence (Chick 2018). BNOC turned out to be a watered-down deal too, providing the appearance of government control but in reality providing very little (Rawsthorne 2018). Thus, exploration, drilling and construction continued apace practically unchanged through the 1970's.

The 'oil shock', orchestrated by the OPEC producing countries, led to the quadrupling of oil prices between October 1973 and June 1974. A world recession followed where prices rocketed and investments withheld (Schmidt 2012, 352). The economic turmoil in the UK was the backdrop for the resignation of Harold Wilson, the leader of the Labour Party, and one of the first tasks for his replacement, James Callaghan, was to request an international bailout. The cabinet agreed to cut public spending by two-and-a-half billion pounds and sell 500 million pounds worth of BP shares in exchange for a loan from the IMF (Gallas 2016, 78). Denis Healey, the Chancellor of the Exchequer who oversaw the procedure would later claim that the figures the Treasury had provided, the foundation for the loan, were falsified. But this did not matter. The events proved the government was not prepared to fulfil its manifesto promises and showed themselves willing to side with financial capital instead (ibid.). The 'oil shock' would also see the economic incentive for those with vested interests in the North Sea increase fourfold.

## 4.2 POLITICS ON OILY WATERS

THIS ELECTION is about the future of Britain - a great country which seems to have lost its way. It is a country rich in natural resources, in coal, oil, gas and fertile farmlands

Conservative manifesto 1979

In Britain, the emergence of neo-liberal ideas were shaped by oil. The launch in 1955 of the think-tank the Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA), was triggered by a domestic currency devaluation in the wake of Britain losing control of Iranian oilfields (Mitchell 2009). The British government attempted desperately to preserve the value of the pound despite losing the mechanism which assured its strength. This "crisis in the oil-currency system" was the vulnerability which the "neoliberal movement first aimed its weapons" (Mitchell 2009, 417). The neoliberals considered the market to be the best model for economic and social organisation, or in other words, the market was regarded as the "arbiter of truth" (Mirowski 2013, 175). The crisis of the seventies became a new target for the movement.

The 1970's marked a major crisis in the international oil system (Podobnik 2005, 114). The Yom Kippur war proved to be the catalyst for already flared tensions in the Middle East which led to the quadrupling of the oil prices between October 1973 and June 1974 (ibid.). This pushed up inflation and "dented the profitability of capital on a global scale" (Gallas 2016, 79). This external

shock followed hot on the heels of the abandonment of the Bretton Woods gold standard and with it the dollar's convertibility to gold at a fixed exchange rate (Graeber 2011, 361). This added the instability of domestic currencies to other economic woes. That, rather than gold stashed away in a fantastical fort, it was perhaps oil that was the physical standard the dollar was pegged to (Mitchell 2009), suggests that the currency crisis too was tied up in part to the global energy network. Countries globally struggled with high unemployment and inflation and this discontent was plain to see in the increasingly combative labour movements. There was, in short, a "crisis of capital accumulation" (Harvey 2007, 27).

In Britain, the crisis was revealed by high inflation, high unemployment, stagnant growth and the instability of the pound and Balance of Payments (Edgerton 2018). The emergent North Sea oil industry had further skewed the Treasury's books. During the developmental phase of the offshore province, the predominately US companies typically purchased materials and equipment from companies back home, or in France, where some had found a hardware niche. Sometimes there was no choice: the loan provided by the US government to develop the Forties field was agreed on condition of all-American firms being used in the construction (Woolfson et al. 1996). Orders were typically placed through a holding company renting a unit in Aberdeen, for example. Thus, the orders for gargantuan technologies, priced by the many million and rarely, if ever, produced in the UK, would thus be chalked up as imports on the balance of payments register. It was estimated by *The Economist* that oil infrastructures amounted to half the balance of payment deficit in 1975 (The Economist 1976). The deficit suggested the country's productive decline: our "awful" trade deficit is "growing because the volume of exports is going down" reported the *Daily Mail*, blaming a declining manufacturing industry for a "City sunk deeper in inspissated gloom" (Sergeant 1976). Whilst *The Telegraph* recognised the "very large payments deficit's" as the *raison d'être* for the IMF loan requested by Labour. The parameters of crisis in the seventies were determined in large part by oil and the dynamics of global capital, whilst exposed further in Britain by the structure of its offshore industry.

The 'new right' were an increasingly influential group bound by neo-liberal ideas and huddled around the IEA, the oldest of its intellectual institutions (Desai 1994). The new right sought to exploit this crisis to undermine the legitimacy of post-war institutional arrangements - trade unions and nationalised industry - and proposed market doctrine as the solution (Leys 1985; Kus 2006). They diagnosed the crisis of the seventies as squarely one of Keynesianism and took aim at the trade unions, who were the force of a labour movement at its most radical (Gamble 1979; Kus

2006; Gallas 2016). With apparent success, at the "mainstream ideological level" the crisis of the seventies was diagnosed as the crisis of the welfare state and social democratic corporatism (Edgerton 2018; Gallas 2016).



**Figure 2:** Global oil prices (adjusted for inflation)

The IEA had influenced the structure of the industry, successively "agitating" the government to drop the discretionary licensing method and have North Sea blocks put up for auction (Harvie 1994, 87). This was in 1971-2, the "crucial" rounds that largely determined the structure of the industry (Woolfson et al. 1996). Some years before this, the think-tank became a recipient of an annual paycheque from British Petroleum, which they have continued to receive (Carter and Ross 2018). The IEA, regarded as the most "dedicated, far-sighted, even mole-grubbing intellectual and ideological preparation for Thatcherism" (Desai 1994, 28), had North Sea oil firmly on their horizon. This should come as no surprise. The London think-tanks, of which the IEA was just (an albeit influential) one, were positioned in close proximity to the principal circuits of political, journalistic and financial knowledge of the City of London (ibid.). During the seventies, the City had profited from oil in a new way: petro-dollars. Lacking a globally oriented financial system, newly nationalised Middle Eastern oil producing states, recycled their surpluses through London or New York. This, and the quadrupling of oil prices, served to restore the dominance of the financial sector; the servitude reflected by the fact that key figures from fourteen major banks sat on the boards of the BP and Shell, three of whom were present or future directors of the Bank of England (Woolfson et al. 1996, 19).

The new right found political expression within the Conservative party through Margaret Thatcher who became the party leader in 1975. With Sir Keith Joseph, Thatcher's economic mentor, the Centre for Policy Studies (CPS) was established to bring the new right's ideas to the heart of government (Frost 2002). It would, with the IEA, form the ideological backbone of Thatcherism (Desai 1994). The CPS would commission two businessmen, John Hoskyns and Norman Strauss, to produce a strategy report for the new leadership, it would be known as the Stepping Stones report:

The real question is whether we are using North Sea oil simply to repair, by means of direct financial subvention, the damage done by thirty years of misguided political economy; or whether we are using it to change that political economy itself (Hoskyns and Strauss 1977, 15).

The sixty-nine-page report saw the present as a moment of "discontinuity", the trade unions had brought the economy to its knees, the decline it measured was almost beyond repair, though there remained one slight opportunity: North Sea oil (ibid., 28). With an effective communications programme to incite "a sea-change in political attitudes" it may be possible "to rebuild the moribund economy before North Sea oil runs out" (ibid.). It insisted on a discursive strategy, drawing on techniques from marketing, to "link the Labour Party and the union leadership in the public mind" and "show that partnership has corrupted and damaged Britain". Though the number one message that the authors demanded be put across was the disavowal of the mechanism of change: "dismiss North Sea oil as a painless solution to our problems" (ibid., 2). The revenues that oil would produce were clearly identified as essential for the project that would come to be known as Thatcherism. Despite the global dynamics, their perception of crisis, or "discontinuity", was a local one: the "one major obstacle" preventing something "morally and economically better" was the trade unions (ibid., 1).

On the 4<sup>th</sup> May 1979, Margaret Thatcher was elected Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. She would give the Stepping Stones report to each of her senior colleagues and appointed its authors to head her new policy unit at Downing Street. Two days after her victory she would write to Hoskyns and praise him for his "invaluable" work in changing how "the party thinks and operates" (MTF 1979c).

### 4.3 A SPECULATIVE DISEASE

The Varley Assurances were swiftly reaffirmed by the incoming Thatcher government (House of Commons Debate 1980, C3) and, with the appointment of Nigel Lawson at the Department of Energy in 1981, any residual concerns over state-led depletion controls were essentially squashed (Wright and Boué 2018). The discourse had shifted from depletion to repletion - that is how to accelerate production - moving the government's position in line with that of the oil producers. To achieve the manifesto promises, the government would depend on the incoming tax revenues to address the chronic balance of payment deficit, keep commitments on reduced public spending and cut taxes: the more oil flowing out the continental shelf, the more pounds flowing in the coffers. It would prove to be most vital for the number one task on the manifesto: "to restore the health of our economy and the society, by controlling inflation and striking a fair balance between the rights and duties of the trade union movement" (CM 1979).

In the build up to the 1979 election these two seemingly disparate targets - inflation, trade unions - had been united by the right-wing press. The quadrupling of oil prices had led to inflation across large parts of the world, Britain no exception - the increased costs of production slapped on price tags (Schmidt 2012, 352). The trade-union movement, who the Labour party were seen to represent, was also at its most radical. In the months before the election, swathes of unions carried out industrial action as pleas for a wage rise relative to inflation to maintain bare existences (Jones 2012). The so-called 'winter of discontent' was portrayed by much of the right-wing press as unions run amok and a government's abject attempts to reign them in.<sup>2</sup> The excessive wage claims orchestrated by the excessively powerful trade unions were a cause of the inflation - or so it was pedalled; that perhaps the direction of causation went the other way round was overlooked (Jones 2012). The chosen mechanism for deflation, true to the market doctrine, was to abolish exchange rate controls that had priorly been suppressed at low levels to preserve the competitiveness of British manufacturing, vital for exports and employment. The effect of North Sea oil on such an approach would have a transformative impact on the economy.

As the productivity of the North Sea province got going and the prospect of Britain becoming an oil exporting nation loomed, the question of how to accommodate its effect on the exchange rate were asked. Some voiced concern of how the incomes from North Sea oil would push up the

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<sup>2</sup> Never mind that there were far more strikes under the Heath government (Edgerton 2018).



exchange rate and inflict serious damage to the manufacturing industries. In 1977, an economic adviser in the Treasury had suggested that, with oil, the market "would certainly produce an exchange rate over the next twelve months which would imply a serious loss of competitiveness" (cited in Chick 2018, 230). The fears resonated with a phenomenon known as the 'Dutch Disease', first seen across the North Sea, when the natural gas boom off Groningen pushed up prices domestically. The higher incomes boosted trade for restaurants, hairdressers and other industries in the service sector but damaged the competitiveness of traded goods whose price was determined on the world market. This led to a collapse of manufacturing industries and employment, with those laid off drawn toward work in the booming industries (ibid., 230). There was some concern that a similar pattern of events would occur in the Britain.

Others, however, did not agree, believing all these fears to be contingent on inflation. If inflation could be tamed, then the economy would be able to accommodate the incomes from North Sea oil, at the same time stimulating consumption and investment. This could all be achieved by allowing the exchange rate to rise. And if inflation was to blame, then so were the trade unions. Malcolm Crawford, economics editor of the *Sunday Times*, offered an alternative diagnosis of the Dutch's ill-fortune: "too easy welfare benefits sapped the incentive to work; the exchange rate was allowed to rise without cutting inflation; so the industry's profit and investment collapsed" (Crawford 1977). This was the point of view held by the so-called 'monetarists' and was propagated in the national newspapers and stockbroker's papers in the build up to the '79 election (Chick 2018, 231).

The production of North Sea oil jumped by twenty-five million barrels the year Thatcher came to power, the same year the Iranian revolution had pushed global oil prices to historic heights (Chick 2020; fig.2). The tax revenues from the North Sea now began to make a significant impression in the Treasury's books (fig.3). The subsequent loosening of currency controls saw the real exchange rate against the dollar spike (Chick 2018), revealing stresses on the economy that resembled those seen in the Netherlands, but more acute. The Treasury already offered "the highest interest rates in the developed world to buyers of the world's newest petro-currency" (The Economist 1979), but permissive policies that encouraged financial speculation in international currency markets "reinforced and magnified" the British strain of the disease (Alt 1987, 187). Nigel Lawson in a letter to the Chancellor saw a radical change to our depletion policy as a way to bring down the exchange rate, but advised against it since the strong pound was the "biggest thing going for us" (MTF 1979a).

Tax year	Revenue (million)	Tax year	Revenue (million)
1968-69	1	1981-82	6492
1969-70	2	1982-83	7822
1970-71	5	1983-84	8798
1971-72	10	1984-85	12035
1972-73	15	1985-86	11348
1973-74	15	1986-87	4783
1974-75	20	1987-88	4618
1975-76	25	1988-89	3168
1976-77	81	1989-90	2368
1977-78	238	1990-91	2312
1978-79	565	1991-92	979
1979-80	2313	1992-93	1305
1980-81	3743	1993-94	1223

**Figure 3:** Government revenues from UK oil and gas production. Source: National Statistics; gov.uk. (figures adjusted to 2016 prices).

By 1981, now self-sufficient in energy, Britain had become an exporter of energy for the first time since 1939 (Edgerton 2018). The exchange rate had peaked after an "unparalleled increase" (Chick 2018, 232), that contributed to a "sharp fall in manufacturing employment" by a margin that was "extraordinarily large by European standards" (Alt 1987, 189). The effect of this hastened the de-industrialisation of the northern manufacturing heartlands. There was a common argument that British manufacturing had been in decline (Edgerton 2018): "we raised our own pay far more, and our output far less" determined the Conservative manifesto (CM 1983). Though this narrative missed the fact that exports from manufacturing were stable, but country imported more from a broadening global manufacturing base, meaning it was Britain's share of global exports that were in decline (Edgerton 2018, 335-8).

Coming to power with unemployment on the rise, the number of those out of work would continue to spiral, peaking, by some estimates, at four million (Jones 2012). For all the talk of tightening the strings of the public purse, social security pay-outs were considerable, 12 percent of GDP (Edgerton 2018), the tax revenues from oil were the life support for the absolute poor and the government's credibility. "Without the oil" wrote economist Sidney Pollard, "the Thatcher experiment would almost certainly have been cut short as early as 1981 or 1982 after the unmitigated disasters of the first year or so of the new dispensation" (cited in Harvie 1994, 286).

The PM's economic adviser, Alan Budd, who advocated for the abolishment of exchange rate controls, clear in his own conscience, queried as to whether the intentions of the "those making the actual policy decisions" was so innocent. The chosen inflation controls were admittedly:

a very, very good way to raise unemployment, and raising unemployment was an extremely desirable way of reducing the strength of the working classes – if you like, that what was engineered there in Marxist terms was a crisis of capitalism which re-created a reserve army of labour and has allowed the capitalist to make high profits ever since (cited in Curtis 2011).

The production and management of North Sea oil caused structural changes to the British economy that greased the slope for the terminal decline of British manufacturing. Unemployment fragmented the Labour Party's political base whilst union membership had declined fastest in this sector (Alt 1987). As Colin Leys proclaimed, the market doctrine was an "ideology and strategy for *destroying* a previously established regime of accumulation" (1985, 25, emphasis added). Fossil-fuels from the North Sea should be recognised as the materiality of this ideology that made it strategically feasible. But the oil would prove to be strategically versatile too. "There has been a rapid shift of jobs from the old industries to the new, concentrated on services and the new technologies" as commented the 1983 Tory manifesto, but "tragically, trade unions have often obstructed these changes" (CM 1983).

#### **4.4 A TALE OF TWO FUELS**

In 1974, the National Union of Mineworkers went on strike in protest of an unresolved pay dispute. It was the second time in two years that they would go on strike. The resultant energy shortages led to power cuts that forced the government to impose a three-day working week nationwide to conserve electricity across industry. The credibility of Edward Heath's Conservative government was seriously undermined by the strikes and shortages and he called a snap election beneath the banner 'Who governs Britain?'. The blackouts proved to be ammunition for Labour who would return to power that year and confirm the answer to Heath's question: not you. For any government, the political imperative was now to keep the lights on. Thatcher and her inner circle, stepping in from the fringes to replace Heath at the helm of the party, held union activity in different esteem. The bargaining power of the trade unions was deemed excessive and largely responsible for stagflation, whilst full-employment - the post-war norm - was regarded as a

negative manifestation of state overreach into economic affairs that diminished the fear of bankruptcy or unemployment (Rawsthorne 2018). In short, Thatcher and her inner circle believed labour to hold too much power over capital, which was both an inefficient and immoral model for society to operate. The permissiveness toward the unions shown by Heath was considered unacceptable, the next government would seek to dismantle the powers that could plunge a country into darkness.

In the subsequent years out of office, the inspired rebel Tories devised a strategy. In 1977 a report authored by "radical" MP Nicholas Ridley delivered his vision of a privatised industrial landscape, cleansed of trade unions and laid out the strategic means to achieve it (The Economist 1978). The bulk of the document set out intentions to denationalise industries, from shipbuilding to buses, airports to docks, each evaluated for their potential boon. Though the most controversial aspect of the report was its confidential annex. Anticipating the unruly reception the privatization programme would receive, the report outlined strategies to "counter the political threat" (Ridley et al. 1977, 24). The threat, that would ostensibly arise from a wage claim, redundancy or closure, was predicted to emerge in one particularly volatile industry - the coal industry. As the Tories had recently learnt, nothing was as undesirable as an energy shortage and, to prepare, the group recommended that "every precaution possible" should be taken: maximum quantity of coal stockpiled, overseas supply chains secured and power stations converted to accommodate "dual coal/oil firing" (ibid. 25). In 1978 it was reported that pivotal figures seemed to have accepted the reports general thinking (The Economist 1978), but the operation against "the enemies of the next Tory government" would take time (Ridley et al. 1977, 24). As Nigel Lawson recounted, "it was just like arming to face Hitler in the late 1930's. One had to prepare" (cited in Klein 2007, 139).

Preparations were made as per Ridley's requests: coal was stock-piled and power stations converted to run on oil (Edgerton 2019, 436). However, a confrontation almost caught the government off-guard, when, in 1981, intended pit closures mistakenly announced led to miner led industrial action that forced Thatcher to back-track. The withdrawal of the closure programme suggests the measures weren't at this point finalised, though broad support for the miners and her deeply unpopular government must have had some bearing on the decision. The government was re-elected in 1983, facilitated by a fractured opposition and a brisk war with Argentina over the Falkland Islands led to a resurgence in the polls, and Thatcher's second term in government proved to be the opportunity for offensive:

In the next parliament, the interests of the whole country require Britain's massive coal industry, on which we depend for the overwhelming bulk of our electricity generation, to return to economic viability (CM 1983).

There would be a reshuffle within the new government. Ridley would receive a ministerial position, Ian MacGregor, "infamous in the United States as a hard-right, reactionary strike breaker", was appointed head of the National Coal Board and John Wybrew and David Pascall were brought aboard the Downing Street policy unit as 'special advisers' (Rawsthorne 2018, 172). Both were able to keep their other job on the side: Wybrew as an employee of Royal Dutch Shell and Pascall an executive for BP (ibid.).

In the Spring of 1984, the news broke that the government had planned to close 70 pits deemed 'uneconomic'. The National Union of Miners agreed to industrial action, beginning an episode that would come to be known as 'The Great Miners' Strike'. The strike was policed by on average 4,000 men each day, it frequently turned violent with picketers crushed by officers in visors with batons, only the second time riot gear was used on British turf. The secret police were also involved in an operation to overthrow the union leadership (Edgerton 2018, 455). The strikers held the picket for nearly a year, but the lights never went off. The oil industry played a direct role in the crushing of the coal miners, pumping fuel to power the grid. In the year of the strike, 38 per cent of electricity was generated from oil fired power stations, the previous year the figure stood at just 3 per cent - the strike single-handedly pushed petroleum consumption up almost a third (The Economist 1985a). Keeping the lights on came at a cost: an estimated £2 billion, which would line the pockets of Wybrew and Pascall's other employers (ibid.). Blatant conflict of interest notwithstanding, the two oil men found success in increasing back-up supplies beyond what was necessary (Rawsthorne 2018).

Eleven months into the strike, Margaret Thatcher gave an after-dinner speech given to the Institute of Petroleum:

And, may I say a word of thanks to those who, quietly and without fuss, have responded to the electricity industry's need for additional oil over the past year. You have paid a vital part in helping to resist a determined but unprincipled challenge to democratic values and the rule of law (MTF 1985).

The next month the miners backed down, the most organised and militant labour force had been defeated, bookending an era of trade-union strength. Thatcher and her policy unit had followed the report closely and adhered to one of its central tenets throughout, "the repeated instruction that stealth be deployed at all times" (Rawsthorne 2018, 194) – the sensitivity of the oil executives to which alluded by Thatcher in her after-dinner talk. Both 'special advisers' would remain at the core of the state-energy nexus and both would receive Order of the British Empire (OBE) honorary titles (ibid., 193). The energy from North Sea oil was vital to stave off the miners resistance whilst providing the means of production across the rest of the economy. The Ridley Report had recognised the government's exposure to threats to energy at the hands of "vulnerable industries" – coal, electricity, docks – so should be "careful to avoid provoking the workforce in these industries" (Ridley et al. 1977, 25). But unlike the dock workers or the "coke-works mob", it is telling the oil industry was never considered a threat (ibid).

#### **4.5 KEEPING THE DRILLS ON**

In 1972, a short news feature describes a newcomer to Aberdeen, Peter Blakeley who "sniffed out the possibilities of oil" and organized a welding crew to "work anytime, anywhere, for as long as it took to finish a job" (COI 1972). He took contracts that "large and established firms could only dream of" and it was "the 'Peter Blakeley's' that are going to grow and prosper, it's an oil attitude and it's paid off" (ibid.). The film was produced by Edward Heath's government's marketing and communications department, the appraisal of a union-free entrepreneurial attitude, suggested to be an 'oil attitude', at the expense of a corporatist model. Heath had introduced the 1971 Industrial Relation Act, heavily protested by the unions and repealed by an incoming Labour government, after his government was toppled by the miner's. The film however suggests the novelty of such a flexible labour arrangement. The reporter concludes "it's a whole new way of life and these oil men may be the first people to experience the change of attitudes and expectation which may sweep Aberdeen and even the whole of Scotland" (COI 1972). The following year, as energy shortages forced the government to impose a three-day week on businesses nationwide, the distinctive character of the oil industry was confirmed. Whilst the miners remained on strike and the lights remained off, the government made one single exception to the blanket darkness, ensuring that all companies working directly or indirectly in the emergent oil industry be guaranteed power seven days a week; failing to keep the lights on but ensuring the drilling never stopped. The decade after oil was first discovered was mostly of exploration, drilling and building

the foundations for production, the compulsive rhythm with which it operated, according to one governmental official, resembled a "war footing" (cited in Muttit et al. 2019, 39).<sup>3</sup>

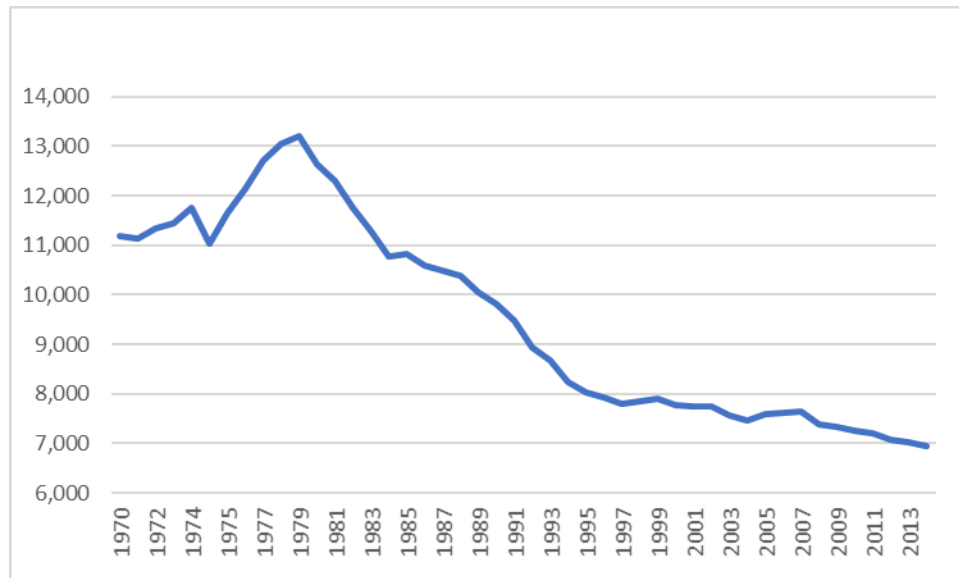
Despite its preferential treatment, the oil industry was not, however, immune to the tensions between capital and labour felt across society. Brown & Root, the US industrialists who pioneered the development of the Scottish province through the seventies admitted they "understood profitability, but not politics" and had to lean on "a man of considerable standing" to learn to "coexist with the British trade unions" (although "Norway proved less hospitable") (Pratt et al. 1997, 204, 225). The man of considerable standing was an oil executive who'd overseen oil exploration for the government during the second world war, directed the Kuwaiti Oil Company and held posts with Burmah and BP. Tasked with developing the infrastructure for the Forties field, the mandatory American firm conditioned by the loan from the US government, Brown & Root struggled with walk-outs and strikes in their production yards (ibid.) They weren't alone. *The Economist* reported how the estimated 7,000 "immigrant workers from Clydeside, England and beyond" that descended on the production yards in the Scottish highlands lived on "ships and in caravans" as the workforce "fluctuated constantly" (The Economist 1975). Two years later, a fabrication yard nearby was gripped by strikes, with the union leaders holding out for higher wages knowing that "Chevron cannot afford to miss the calm waters of the summer for installing the platform" (The Economist 1977). Fortunately for Chevron and co., operations offshore moved to a tighter schedule.

Production offshore continued round the clock, with a stream of workers arriving by helicopter to fortnightly stints punctuated by twelve-hour shifts. Work offshore was "unrelentingly hard", according to roustabout Maurice White, "everything was made of steel, it was always cold, always windy, the conditions suited people who'd been in the fishing industry, or the forces, or prison" (LOI 2004). Staff turnover was high and anti-union sentiment strong, whole crews had been known to be sacked for merely showing interest in union activity (Rawsthorne 2018). This ferocity was custom to a new breed of industrial relations emerging from the sunbelt states of America that were imported directly to Scottish waters (Woolfson et al. 1996). The logistics offshore posed different challenges to labour organisation. As workers dispersed across the country after a shift offshore, an immediate working-class culture never formed around the industry. As the colliery

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<sup>3</sup> Prime Minister Edward Heath invited the CEO's of BP and Shell to persuade favourable rates for energy to assist with the crisis. Both refused on the pretence that preferential treatment to Britain would make them liable to demands from other European governments (Yergin 1991, 624).

would be flanked by an aptly named pub, *The Roughneck Arms* never emerged (Harvie 1994, 144). There was too, however, a very conscious implantation of a deregulated and non-unionized "production regime" that served the specific purpose of rapid exploitation (Woolfson et al. 1996). The threat of a strike that may paralyse production was strategically unwise when the imperative of production was speed.



**Figure 4** Trade union membership (millions). Source: Department of Employment Statistics Division (1892 - 1974). Certification Office (1974-2015)

Whilst the tycoons or their governmental associates had vested reasons for rapidity, the union hostility for the shift workers might have more to do with nationalism; there was a pervasive and disdainful prejudice toward unions that emanated from parts of the US. There was also the issue of racism. In an almost exclusively white industry, black people were known to have been sent back on the helicopter they arrived on (Mackie 2004). The lowest rungs of the ladder, positions filled largely by Scottish or English workers, were castigated as "white coolies" or "white niggers" by their North American superiors (LOI 2000b). From the perspective of Neil Rothnie, a labourer on the receiving end, the slurs were made "openly and abusively" and represented a widespread "anti-Scottish" sentiment from the "red hot racists from the deep South" (ibid.). Many drillers arrived in the North Sea from the Niger Delta or elsewhere in West Africa where racism was an evidently integrated practice (Mackie 2004, 75). We must regard the "inferiorisation" of workers offshore as a continuation and tendency associated with appropriation by extraction, rather than an ugly aberration (Malm et al. forthcoming). With this new emphasis came new staff and sensibilities, the drillers left, perhaps to the next frontier (Pratt et al. 1997), to be replaced by a "different breed,



academically qualified and cultured family men" (Mackie 2004, 73).<sup>4</sup> Though the dial remained set to maximum exploitation.

The North Sea oil industry chimed with the principles of Thatcherism, ideologically and materially. "I saw no reason to start BNOC," Thatcher told *The Sun* in 1978 "the oil was discovered by private enterprise, the technology brought in by private enterprise, and the oil brought ashore by private enterprise, in almost record time". The hostility to nationalisation and unions were the contours of the free market accumulation strategy. It is unsurprising that representatives of BP and Shell were brought on board for to assist with the strike, both representing companies and an industry of sound ideological compatibility. There was also the material consonance of rapid exploitation: speedy production was encouraged by government policy, which precarious labour conditions offshore could only have suited. Nigel Lawson in the Department of Energy scrapped royalty payments on fields developed after 1982 that were due to begin as the Varley Assurances ceased. That same year 126 wells were being drilled in Scottish waters, the highest number since 1975, when the Labour government began agitating for more control in the province (Harvie 1994, 311). In 1986 in response to the falling global oil prices and waning production, the government allowed exploration and development anywhere in province to be written off against tax, meaning oil firms could claim costs back from government and search for oil "virtually free of charge" (Woolfson et al. 1996, 38). At this point a handful of oil majors dominated almost all the production in the province (Harvie 1994, 311). Thatcher would offer her guarantees to these select few:

In the North Sea, oil and gas have to be won in a harsh and unpredictable climate. There is little I can do to help there. But industry has to cope with another climate-  
-the business climate, where Government does have an important role (MTF 1985).

On July 6th 1988, "inevitable outcome" of a laissez-faire regulatory regime built on the systematic neglect of "workers' rights and matters of safety" occurred (Woolfson et al. 1996, xx). The Piper Alpha rig, nearly three times the height of the Eiffel tower and one of the most established and productive in the province, exploded in flames. The accident that was blamed squarely on human error claimed the lives of 167 men. The rig was owned by Occidental though of the 228 working

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<sup>4</sup> Sometimes Brits took over the top jobs offshore and the term 'Yarmouth Yank' was sometimes reserved for those who adopted the habits and behaviours of their predecessors (LOI 2004).

offshore at the moment of explosion were supplied by 27 different firms - a figure not atypical for the industry (Woolfson et al. 1996). Charles Woolfson and his colleagues criticised the "anachronistic industrial relations system" that left managers with "arbitrary and uncontrolled exercise of power" as the source of the disaster (ibid.). Indeed, this was the biggest industrial catastrophe since 1934 when hundreds of men perished in a coal mine in Wales (Edgerton 2018, 298).

Leys encourages us to view Thatcherism as a development of Heath's policies from 1970-2, identifying attempts to restrict trade union power and the encouragement of entrepreneurial activity as specific aspects of both accumulation strategies (Leys 1985, 9). Noticing "the economic weather coming across the Atlantic", editor of *The Times* from 1967 to 1981, William Rees-Mogg believed if he "covered what was happening in America, we might get right what was going to happen next in Britain" (BBC 2006). The right-wing press had long denounced union power but, as Peter Blakely's can-do work ethic was endorsed as an 'oil attitude', perhaps the labour regime imported to the North Sea by American industrialists exerted more influence on the changing climate. With Thatcherism, the deregulated, non-unionised and "flexible" labour model was increasingly acceptable and the tension between capital and labour decisively loosened in favour of the former.

#### 4.6 COMMODITY VALUES

In an appraisal of industry impacts undertaken by the University of Aberdeen, locals described themselves more "as a commodity than a community" (Harvie 1994, 166). This theme was at the core of the film *Local Hero* (1983) directed by Bill Forsyth. Macintyre, an oil broker from Houston sent to a sedate Scottish fishing village to secure the land to build a refinery. The untrammelled oil industry represented the epitome of liberal capitalism, with the market portrayed as the mediator of social and ecological relations, no pub, church or beach remaining beyond its reach. Forsyth presents the villagers as willing to play the part of commodity: the community astute and willing in their negotiations meet eagerly to negotiate their side of the deal. Others openly embrace what luxury goods they'll spend their petro-dollars on. This, for one critic, is the ironic twist of the film. Despite Scotland being the "bastion of resistance to Thatcherite values" and oil the springboard for a resurgent Scottish nationalism, figures of the village rush toward the "crowded commodified world of advanced capitalism" represented by oil (Wayne 2002, 150-1).

A central tenet of the accumulation strategy of Thatcherism was to change ways of thinking (Leys 1985). Even before Thatcher came to power the need for a "sea-change in political attitudes" was recognised, according to the Stepping Stones authors (Hoskyns and Strauss 1977, 41). This would require a "long and energetic" war to erode the residual attachments to "collectivism" at the ideological level (Wayne 2018, 105). At the same time, economic liberalism needed to be "unleashed at a cultural level" to become a "normative political culture in its own right" (ibid., 106). This project would have to break rank with the cultural style of conservatism, including the "clear separation between the moral worlds of culture and economics" in order to "more directly express the virtues of the economic" (ibid., 105). Figures in the emergent oil industry readily did so. Flora Macdonald, an estate agent in Aberdeen, found herself under pressure to bump up the rents the properties she managed, urged, not by the landlord or estate agent, but by the clients themselves: "£450 is not acceptable, tell me £540!" (LOI 2001). In an atmosphere where "money was spent like water", distinctions were important and the wetter the better, so it seemed (ibid.). Indeed, the hallmark of free-market capitalism is a "moral economy created as a mirror image of laissez form economics" (Castree 2009, 193). For Thatcherism to take hold would require far-reaching changes.

Some efforts were purely ideological. To promote the merits of the market economy was the goal of the London think-tanks and their highly leveraged allies in industry and the press who were poised to target the "strategic policy making elite" (Desai 1994, 33). Thatcher would thank the IEA for shaping the "climate of opinion" that made her 1979 victory possible. The ring-wing media played a substantial role in creating the necessary climate, particularly influential in their attacks on the institutions of social democracy were *The Telegraph* and *The Spectator* (Woolfson et al. 1996). Those out of work were lambasted as feckless, whilst the poor and disadvantaged were now portrayed in a way unimaginable before (Jones 2012), and since impoverishment, inequality and unemployment all spiked after 1979 (Edgerton 2018), there were plenty of new targets for the press. Whilst coining the Thatcher phenomena, Stuart Hall wrote:

In the doctrines and discourses of "social market values" - the restoration of competition and personal responsibility for effort and reward, the image of the over-taxed individual, enervated by welfare coddling, his initiative sapped by handouts by the state - 'Thatcherism' has found a powerful means of popularising the principles of a Monetarist philosophy: and in the image of the welfare 'scavenger' a well designed folk-devil (Hall 1979, 17).

The material redistribution of wealth was also part of this ideological crusade to alter attitudes and political affiliation. "I am determined to see that our new revenues from oil are used, not to grease the slide to collectivism, but to open the door to personal opportunity and enterprise" resolved Thatcher (MTF 1978b). The revenues coming in through taxation on oil were then passed on as tax cuts. Cuts to income tax had an "unambiguously upward redistributive effect" where the income of managers, directors and particularly the already wealthy ballooned (Leys 1985, 10). There was an uneven distribution of the effects, with the booming financial and service sectors of London and the southeast a counterpoint to the declining manufacturing regions elsewhere. Since a majority government only required the backing of section of the electorate, and the individualistic cultural energies - by the mid-eighties - were seen to have gripped the "bulk of the working class" in the southeast regarded to vote in their own material "self-interest" (Massey 1987, 18-20). Even without tax cuts, the increasing value of the pound from the oil boom - the force of which guaranteed through the insecure labour of those working offshore during the seventies - created a real-wage increase for those in work in the eighties (Harvie 1994).

From the early eighties the country had become a major exporter in oil, the fifth in the world, with total oil production exceeding that of Algeria, Libya and Nigeria combined (Yergin 1991). The now in surplus Balance of Payments encouraged the consumption of imported goods, which was sustained by spiralling consumer debt (Alt 1987; Blair 1987). Interest rates had been pushed down from 17 to 8 and a half per cent between 1979 and 1984, discouraging saving and encouraging spending (ONS 2019a). By 1987, the surplus had turned again to deficit: "And too much buying had been paid for by too much borrowing" lectured the Prime Minister (MTF 1988b). Nunn and Biressi argued that many jumped on the "bandwagon of consumption" believing it to be leading up the social ladder (2010, 138). Comedian Henry Enfield created the character 'Loadsamoney', inspired after seeing football fans from London waving notes at supporters of the away side travelled down from work-stricken North. The promotion of greed and selfishness were accusations that Thatcher had to defend her government against: "We are told that all we care about is 'Loadsamoney'... What nonsense... the truth is that we are actually encouraging the best in human nature" (MTF 1988b).

In 1977 Nicholas Ridley, in the pages before the dramatic confidential annex, had suggested how selling BNOB in discount shares to the public would be the "*coup de theatre*" that would turn "every man a capitalist" (Ridley et al. 1997). Ridley's advice here was not heeded quite so closely. BNOB, the effort of Benn and the preceding Labour party, was re-named Britoil before being sold

to BP in 1982. This was the first state asset to be sold off. The following year a chunk of BP shares owned by the government were sold off before Enterprise Oil, an offshoot of British Gas, was flogged the year after that (Edgerton 2018). Soon after, BP would be free from the British government for the first time since Winston Churchill pocketed shares in 1915 (Yergin 1991). The shares, however, would be purchased by the Kuwaiti government instead and the sale would be facilitated by newly appointed director, David Pascall (Rawsthorne 2018). Together, these assets brought in 7 billion for the treasury, but like the fossil-fuels at the programme's foundation, the revenues from privatisation would not replenish. "Nothing but gas in Lawson's piggy bank" reported *The Economist* in 1985, as it projected dire economic forecasts. Nigel Lawson, the former Energy Minister now the Chancellor of the Exchequer, promised in his most recent budget further tax cuts, but with a downturn in the price of oil and social security pay-outs overshooting, the gesture was in jeopardy (The Economist 1985b). "If Mr Lawson wants to look generous he will have to sell more of the furniture" - but there wasn't much left to sell (ibid.). The journalist had correctly anticipated the next sale to be British Gas, but he hadn't anticipated this would be this would be the biggest event of them all; adapting the Ridley strategy, gas would fill in for oil, and the discount shares were heavily publicised across society with the stated intention to create a "shareholder democracy" (Rawsthorne 2018).

In 1986, the 'Big Bang' happened. The deregulation of the stock market was the "centre-piece of liberalisation" that led to the expansion of finance as the leading fraction of capital (Gallas 2016, 165). The deregulation of private capital, like the privatisation programme, was a central pillar of the free market accumulation strategy, and as similarly had a normative, ideological dimension. The City was steeped in tradition, the privileges of gentlemanly capitalists, some with feudal roots, had remained throughout the twentieth century - the internationalisation of the stock market introduced competition to the City and cemented the image of a level playing field for a hard-working nation of entrepreneurs and aspiring workers (ibid.). The 'big bang' was the final step in a process of financial liberalisation, which saw the expansion of credit money for private consumption and home ownership.

As Thatcher herself put it: "economics are the method; the object is to change the heart and soul" (MTF 1981). But economics wasn't the only way. The war with Argentina over the Falkland Islands was a decisive moment in Thatcher's first term that saw her personal and government's popularity rocket out from the abyss (Jessop et al. 1985, 99). The armada of airline carriers, destroyers and frigates would be propelled to the South Atlantic on bunker fuel, accompanied with

tankers to re-fill the machines. The victory - "a triumph of British arms" - aroused a latent patriotism (Edgerton 2018, 431-2). Thatcher addressed her party after the victory: "We have ceased to be a nation in retreat. Britain has re-kindled that spirit which has fired her for generations past and which today has begun to burn as brightly as before. Britain found herself again in the South Atlantic" (MTF 1982). Oil metabolised a military and a nationalistic fervour that would prop-up a government on way to winning the second of four consecutive elections. Patriotism, not just economics, could change hearts and souls.

## 5. FUEL FOR THE FOSSIL ECONOMY

### 5.1 THE STATE OF DEVELOPMENT

From the perspective of 1990, Bob Jessop, Kevin Bonnett and Simon Bromley, critical voices throughout the Thatcher era, offered their latest reflections in *Farewell to Thatcherism?* They fragmented the phenomenon they'd closely monitored into four parts: a) 1975-79 Thatcherism as social movement; b) 1979 - 82 consolidating Thatcherism; c) 1982 - 86 consolidated Thatcherism and; d) 1986 - onwards radical, neoliberal Thatcherism. Even as they recognised Thatcher's days to be numbered, the authors warned that the "structural legacy of Thatcherism will remain as a poisoned chalice" (Jessop et al. 1990, 102). At the point of writing, the free market accumulation strategy was solidified and opposition to neoliberalism had ceased at both the level of production and politics (Gallas 2016, 236). The 'poisoned chalice' would sustain in the guise of opposition: the neoliberal regime was normalised with New Labour and the accumulation strategy sustained broadly unchanged, even if embedded in more socially liberal political culture (Wayne 2018). The dominance of the City remained unchallenged and the liberal approach to consumer credit retained (Gallas 2016, 284).

The restructuring of British economy was done through a free market accumulation strategy premised on fossil fuels from the North Sea. The will of primitive fossil capital dovetailed with the political, economic and ideological principles of the British state under Thatcher. So whilst the exploitation of the North Sea province enabled the agents of primitive fossil capital to deliver more fuel to the fire and re-assert global dominance, it would also alter the orientation of a state at the core of the fossil economy. We will inspect some of the emergent properties resulting from this accumulation strategy and consider their broader ecological impact. First,

we'll consider the place of the capitalist in the global order, next the distribution of power in society and finally touch on the strength of a belief system built around the market.

## **5.2 DIVISIONS AND PATTERNS**

From the 1970's the economy had become increasingly international - capital accumulation was evolving on a truly global scale. Seeking surplus value, this implied industrial production relocating from high-wage countries, marked by inflation and combative labour forces, to those with cheaper and more disciplined labour (Malm 2012). Consumers, subject to transportation infrastructure, can be located anywhere, but workers must remain close to the means of production. This new orientation of capital accumulation was based now on the "massive consumption of fossil energy" in two senses: "mass production of commodities by means of machines, and transportation of commodities by means of various vehicles" (ibid., 154). So, within the aforementioned formula of fossil capital, we can imagine the circuits of production extending across continents, chained together by container ships and cargo flights. As modern transport systems are reliant almost entirely on oil, the relocation of production overseas thus tends to imply an increase in carbon dioxide emissions per product (ibid., 157).

Thatcherism marked a commitment to the global economy. The driving purpose of production was no longer consumption but accumulation (Gamble 1979). In its quest to build a new economic base around finance (at the expense of other fractions of capital, particularly manufacturing (Leys 1985)) Thatcherism also implied the decline of Britain's productive industrial base (ONS 2019a). The decline of manufacturing didn't correspond with a decline in the consumption of manufacturing goods, rather their relocation overseas. The outflow of British capital was actively encouraged by the state through deregulation, abolishing exchange rate controls, for example, to provide the conditions for the "free and profitable outflow of British investment bringing with it an invaluable transfer of skills and technologies" (CM 1983). In 1984, 39 per cent of those employed by the top fifty British multinational firms were located abroad, whilst almost half of the sales of the same companies were attributed to production overseas (Jessop et al. 1985, 97). Moreover, the state pumped the surpluses from the North Sea, realised through privatisation and tax revenues, into assets abroad. "What, those pessimists will say, 'have we to show for the past ten years of North Sea Oil?' Thatcher addressed her critics to a room full of oil executives: "Well, Britain has increased the value of its overseas assets from £13 billion in 1979 to £70 billion in 1984. As a nation, we will enjoy a stream of income from these assets for years to come" (MTF 1985). And a stream of emissions.

Beyond the restructuring of the domestic economy, then, and as part of the broader free market accumulation strategy, the state supported a specific accumulation strategy premised on the deregulation of private capital (Jessop et al. 1985, 97). This transnational strategy had a domestic impact too. The City of London, as a prime benefactor of the deregulation of private capital and privatisation programme, became increasingly integrated into the world economy (Jessop et al. 1985; Brenner 1999). With productivity and income uncoupled from national economic growth, Thatcherism was as much a "declaration of independence by the south of England, the community dependent on London as a world city" (Taylor 1995, 59 cited in Brenner 1999). As well as the outward flows, British and foreign capital would be flowing into the economy grouping around the areas of growth: the oil and service industries (Jessop et al. 1985, 98). With the development of a "financial superstructure that boosted expected profit rates" (Schmidt 2012, 354), the value of Brent crude - the parlance for oil extracted from the North Sea - would increase eight-fold on the financial markets of the City of London through trading and speculation (Harvie 1994). The era that has been focused on has revealed the alliance of primitive fossil and financial capital, a power which has only consolidated. Today, London holds disproportionate influence over the British economy (Hazeldine 2017) and remains home to fossil fuels giants and mining polluters and is "one of the main global hubs of ecocidal capitalism" (CW 2020).

Many social theorists recognised the changes in industrial society to have been deeply rooted and even irreversible (Leys 1985; Amin 1994). Others saw parallels in these economic changes to social and cultural shifts (Amin 1994). The "phenomenon of mass consumption" for Stuart Hall was related to the fragmentation and internationalisation of the economy, who identified the emergence of corresponding identities based on "greater worker flexibility" and "the maximisation of individual choices through personal consumption" (Hall 1988, 24-5). The debt-fuelled consumption boom was of course embedded in global patterns of production. The saturation of lifestyles with oil makes it near impossible for an individual to live in a market society and abstain from purchasing them, even if they attempt to (Huber 2013). Oil, for example, may enter a petrochemical complex as a feedstock to be dispersed as fertiliser, polymer, paint or pharmaceutical. Or perhaps its destined for the national grid, to power steelworks, stadiums or ceramicists. Or for the tank of a container ship, chugging as its cargo a dizzying range of commodities derived from oil, from garden furniture and games consoles to nylon tights and nicotine patches. Oil (and other fossil fuels) are the indispensable energy for the means of production, the lifeblood of mass consumption, vital for the reproduction of the economic system.



The payment deficit, after a brief spell in surplus at the point of peak oil production, has sustained rather consistently for the past four decades (ONS 2019a). With no resurgent manufacturing industry and ever-increasing consumption, there is accordingly a significant difference between carbon emissions produced within the UK, those exported, and those produced beyond national boundaries, those imported. The difference leaves the UK a net importer of carbon emissions. Once the net trade of carbon emissions is adjusted to account for the contribution per person, the UK has one of the largest imports of carbon dioxide emissions, higher than the United States (ONS 2019b).

### **5.3 WHO'S IN CHARGE HERE?**

At the twilight of British coal, union leader Arthur Scargill demanded that no mine should be closed until the coal runs out. Suppose events unfolded differently and this arrangement stood, would there have been a different direction for the fossil economy?

One angle of approach is to consider the work of Timothy Mitchell and the properties of coal and oil. During the late 19th and early 20th century, Mitchell (2009) argues, the properties of coal encouraged new ideas and alliances amongst workers. The railways and canals used to transport coal in industrial Britain were networks that "connected chambers beneath the ground to every factory, office, home or means of transportation that depended on steam or electricity power" (ibid., 404). The "position and concentration" of labour at certain points along the network - mines, junctions, ports, stations - afforded workers a "new kind of political power" (ibid., 404). In the late 19th and early 20th century, the strike had become a political weapon used by militant miners across Europe that impelled industry and political heads to accept "welfare democracy and universal suffrage" (ibid., 406). Coal, and the manner in which it was "extracted, processed, shipped and consumed", engendered a particular democratic political form. Mitchell's analysis then turns to the Middle East, where he traces other political forms corresponding to the different properties of oil, namely its lightness and fluidity. Unlike the "dendritic" coal networks mired with "choke points", the transport networks of oil offered multiple possible paths to "avoid blockages or overcome breakdowns" thereby making the energy network "less vulnerable to the political claims of those whose labour kept them running" (Mitchell 2009, 408).

It would be too simplistic to directly apply Mitchell's findings onto the British case, though there are some insights that relate to the case at hand, specifically to the preparation for the miners' strike. In the climate of contestation between capital and labour, the Ridley Report was a strategy to make the government less vulnerable to the claims of those opposed to their policies. It identified the choke points across the UK's energy network, coal as the "most likely area" and the probable demands of labour: "unreasonable wage claim", "redundancies or closure" or "some other political issue" (Ridley et al. 1977, 24). Unlike coal which was handled and transported by its workers, oil would remain out of sight, extracted from many thousands of metres away and transported through pipes on the seabed. Mitchell's work urges us to consider the properties of oil as encouraging the privatised and non-democratic political form and it also draws attention to perhaps the crux of the issue, the distribution of power in society.

The structure of the North Sea province was shaped by the perceived threat of socialism. A minister in the late sixties explained how he rushed through the third round of licenses before a general election as he was "afraid a socialist government would get in and refuse licenses to private enterprise" (cited in Harvie 1994, 85). Thatcher, before elected Prime Minister, insisted that it was "providence and not socialism" that put the oil in the North Sea, and would bemoan BNOC and the "socialist" government for pinning their faith on the oil (MTF 1978a). Seemingly out of this threat, the Thatcherites would sell any state assets in the North Sea and pin their faith on private enterprises of the most global, untrammelled kind. The determined opposition to workers control exercised on platforms offshore was shared as an objective of Thatcherism. The privatised and liberalised energy production that arrived in Scottish waters would be upheld, not only as a model for domestic power networks (Edgerton 2018, 298), but also as a blueprint for society. This harmony contributed to the defeat of the miners, a bastion of socialist principles, that announced the victory of the market and a "general cultural atmosphere" that fulfilled Thatcher's dictum: "there is no alternative" (Fisher 2009, 8). The repercussions from this event extended far beyond the pits of Yorkshire, it was a "crucial moment in the global turn toward neoliberalism" (Harvey 2007, 29), yet it was a moment that can't be separated from the oil in the North Sea.

As David Harvey insists, neoliberalism, of which Thatcherism is a British variant, is best understood as a project to "restore class power within global capitalism" (2007, 29). In Britain, the privatization of state assets further exemplifies this process. The extent of privatisation under the Conservatives was uniquely rapacious: from 1980-96 the UK accounted for forty per cent of total global proceeds of privatization (Albertson and Stepney 2020, 10). Coal, gas, oil, steel, planes and

trains: the commanding heights of the economy were handed over to the market. To take but one voice on the effects of privatisation, here is the perspective of Adrian Hamilton, an associate of the Institute of Economic Affairs:

Whatever else privatisation has done, it has done little for the customer, at least in the case of the electricity and resource industries. The City had done well out of the sales of shares. The users have been bribed with the offer of cut-price shares. The management has been bought off with huge pay rises and substantial share options (the present chairman of British Gas earns as much in a year as his predecessor did in his entire career of building up the industry). Privatisation of British Gas has been a scandal. As a nationalised industry, it had converted the entire country to natural gas and revolutionised the energy scene. As a privatised company, it has done little more than sit back and reward itself and its advisers from the benefits of former investments and its dominant position (cited in Harvie 1994, 298).

Like the fossil-fuels that formed the project's foundation, the fortunes from privatisation would not replenish. The creation of a "shareholder democracy" was the stated intention of the privatisation programme, yet the number of shares in foreign pockets increased fourfold under Thatcher's watch and the number would quadruple again since (Albertson and Stepney 2020, 12). Global capitalist's took control of the productive powers in the British economy. Hamilton's point of view, associated with pre-eminent neoliberal think-tank is revealing; his perspective may be synthesised in the words of Huber, with the assistance of Marx:

The incredible powers of fossil-fuel industrialism and the immense amounts of wealth generated have been narrowly appropriated by capital not for the purpose of serving human needs but for profit and "accumulation for the sake of accumulation" (Huber 2013, 158).

As the fossil economy leads humanity increasingly closer to the cliff-edge, some have called for the necessary "democratic social control over the production and distribution of energy resources" (Huber 2013, xvii). Others have insisted that an effective climate mass movement is only possible through worker organisation and, if necessary, "liberal use of the strike weapon" (Sica 2019, 11). The events traced above have only piled urgency on to this paramount task.

## 5.4 THE SEEDS OF DENIAL

Are we waking up at last, or has North Sea oil put us to sleep again? Are we going to leave the problem to our children and grandchildren? Will they forgive us?

Hoskyns and Strauss 1977, 31

In 1988, Margaret Thatcher gave a speech to the Royal Society. She raised concern that "the five warmest years in a century of records have all been in the 1980's" and accepted that our use of fossil fuels has "unwittingly begun a massive experiment with the system of this planet itself" (MTF 1988c). This information wasn't new, especially for someone in Thatcher's position: state leader, trained scientist and wife of an oil man. In 1965, a White House report had indicated that "fossil fuels are the only source of CO<sub>2</sub>" being added to the atmosphere "at a rate that may well be accelerating" (PSAC 1965, 119). Three days after this reports publication, Frank Ikard, the president of the American Petroleum Institute (API), soberly addressed industry leaders on the ramifications of the report: "there is still time to save the world's people from the catastrophic consequences of pollution, but time is running out" (Franta 2018). Twenty-three years later in her Royal Society speech, the Prime Minister had intended to say "we may need to take major steps, perhaps including a world levy on fuel prices". But in response to a circulated draft, Nigel Lawson would insist that this section "must be deleted. These bizarre ideas are contrary to Government policy, and political dynamite". Needless to say, the fuel levy line was never uttered.

1988 was also the year that some of the agents of primitive fossil capital, confronted with the knowledge that the direction of their business model proved to amount to no less than disaster, began systematic efforts to "deny, diminish or discount the reality and significance of climate change as a problem" (Frumhoff et al. 2015, 159). The mechanism to downplay was often right-wing think tanks, with nearly 80% of literature on climate science denial published by the like in the UK (Jacques et al. 2008). Indeed, much of the institutional weight that did the heavy lifting for Thatcherism adopted a similar stance on the climate. The Institute of Economic Affairs were particularly prolific. Lawson synthesised his stance to pronounce that "green is the new red" and climate change "a new license to intrude, to interfere, to regulate" (cited in Klein 2015, 42). So he established and chaired the Global Warming Policy Foundation, Britain's pre-eminent organ for the dissemination of climate science misinformation. After being influenced by much of the literature published by institutions financed by fossil-fuels, Thatcher too would come to change her mind (Montague 2018). By 2002, it was now unclear whether "human economic activity" was

"responsible for the production of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere" but it was clear to reject the Kyoto protocol as "an anti-growth, anti-capitalist, anti-American project" (Thatcher 2002, 452-5). She could now assert that climate change "must not mean the end of free-enterprise capitalism" (ibid., 457). The zeal that would exploit the North Sea must know no bounds.

And since 1988 - and counting from the beginning of the industrial revolution - the amount of carbon dioxide accumulated in the atmosphere has more than doubled (Frumhoff et al. 2015). Whilst Thatcherism nor neoliberalism is the origin of unstable quantities of carbon emissions in the atmosphere, the associated structural shifts have been anything but innocuous. The free-market accumulation strategy has expanded, intensified, and integrated the fossil economy (Malm 2012). Yet the real problem is the inability to confront that accumulation itself is the problem. Journalist Boris Johnson spent a good chunk of his career penning in *The Telegraph* or *The Spectator* similar arguments against climate change as those laid out by Thatcher in her time of disavowal, preferring to explain away the basis of climate change "not on concentrations of CO<sub>2</sub> but on the mood of our celestial orb" (Johnson 2013). Prime Minister Johnson was elected on the only manifesto of the main parties that didn't call time on the North Sea province and upon election filled his cabinet with from the roster of MP's associated with the IEA, many with very patchy understandings of climate science (Collett-White and Hope 2020). If climate breakdown is the structural crisis of the fossil economy, the inability to admit it is so is the crisis of liberal ideology.

## **5.5 THE STATE OF THE NORTH SEA**

The North Sea province remains productive, with over two-hundred offshore oilfields and over half as many gas fields in operation (Wright and Boué 2018). The most recent estimates predict that 83% of "proven and probable" oil reserves and 86% gas reserves have been produced (ibid., 329). Indeed, an enduring feature of the province is its anticipated expiry but as technology develops, accessing oil in treacherous and remote fields becomes more feasible. The Atlantic margin is the next frontier. In 2018, the BP's Claire Ridge platform came onstream, the first west of Shetland, aiming to bring to market the expected 640 million barrels and operate until least 2050; a clear lock-in of infrastructures that belies any serious commitments to "net-zero" ((BP 2020a; BP 2020b). Royalty payments on production were cut incrementally, first in 1983, then again in 1989 before completely abolished in 2002. This benevolence toward these mass polluters led to the stark statistic that in 2015-16 the German state of Schleswig-Holstein received more in

royalties on 25,000 barrels than the UK producing 1.6 million (Wright and Boué 2018, 343). And the government continue to play their part: the latest round of licenses for North Sea exploration were recently issues with industry and government united on ambitions to increase total extraction from the current 6 billion to 20 billion barrels (Muttitt et al. 2009, 6).

## 6. CONCLUSION

This research aimed to reveal how Thatcherism was shaped by North Sea oil. Through a combination of narrative and analytic techniques, this work has argued that fossil fuels were foundational for Thatcherism, with its defining free-market strategy from the start to have been premised on North Sea oil. The revenues from the North Sea greased the way toward political-economic objectives otherwise deemed implausible - affording tax-cuts, commitments to public borrowing pledges and earning foreign exchange. The windfalls from the one-off privatization of fossil-fuel assets afforded Thatcher the opportunity to deliver more prosperity upwardly domestically and internationally. The same accumulation strategy, I have argued, sought to restructure the economy in a way that would undermine the power of organised labour. The management of exchange rates led to an oil bloated pound which hastened deindustrialisation, with the heavily unionised manufacturing industry badly damaged. The unemployed often forced to find work in the booming private, service, non-unionised sector. Whilst in the confrontation with the miners, domestic oil provided the vital back-up to keep the power on, there was doubtlessly an ideological harmony between the Thatcher project and the deregulated production regime that was geared to pumping oil fast out the ground. This all suggests that the material dimensions of Thatcherism have been overlooked.

The fossil economy, of course, predates Thatcherism and North Sea oil. The principles that guided the post-war political economy in Britain were too reliant on the combustion of fossil fuels. Thatcherism, however, led to the increasing globalisation of capital accumulation and accelerating domestic consumption. This intensified and consolidated the fossil economy. The free market accumulation strategy thereby fuels the fossil economy and delivers ever quantity of carbon in the atmosphere. This work has argued that this logic has not only solidified, but alternative models have faded, diminishing democratic control over the productive potential of the fossil economy. The alliance of finance and primitive fossil capital, as at the inception of the North Sea province, is united today in cities integrated into the global economy. A thorough analysis of the present situation was, however, beyond this work.

Primitive fossil capital, as this work endeavoured to show, was never a sole operative. As well as through finance capital, the exploitation beneath the UK continental shelf was made possible by the British state, the acting landlord who provided unusually generous terms for the privilege to do so. The state would reject the prospect of charging rent and instead, by way of tax, hold out for the profitability of their tenants, a bizarre prospect were it to be the property market (Wright and Boué 2018). Practically all power was ceded to the relatively small number of corporations that controlled the Scottish province; the very same corporations that have contributed the overwhelming quantity of the total historic emissions that drive climate change (Frumhoff et al. 2015). With the unequivocal admission that the continued combustion of fossil fuels spells catastrophe, modern states continue to sustain the fossil economy and the conditions of global accumulation. Strong state action is presently required, but unlike the forceful interventions into the economy and industry through Thatcherism, even the prospect of action is clearly antithetical to the neoliberal paradigm and the orthodoxy of the free market accumulation strategy.

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