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Chelsea Schields's book offers an elegant, extremely well-researched, and insightful analysis of the deep, long-lasting sociopolitical impact that oil companies have had in the circum-Caribbean space. Focusing on the cases of Aruba and Curacao, two islands that have been historical constituents of the Dutch Empire and are still formally embedded into the Kingdom of the Netherlands, Schields's work further illuminates the intricate webs spun by the oil industry throughout the twentieth century.[1] Schields's volume sheds light on how the persistence of huge petrochemical conglomerates in these territories has affected not only local economies and labor relations but also transnational and domestic mobility, urban developments, and, most importantly, sexual encounters and politics. At its core, Schields's argument posits that the establishment of oil refineries in Aruba and Curacao ushered in a new epoch, promising economic prosperity and job opportunities yet ultimately subverting preexisting sexual habits, entrenched cultural paradigms, and communal bonds. In other words, Schields contends that the arrival of oil refineries on these Caribbean shores indelibly intertwined the public and private realms together, binding sexual desires, behaviors, and politics to the cycle of fossil fuel. The most innovative element of such an interpretation lies in its dissection of petrosexual politics and in the emphasis it places on local agency.[2] In Schields's analysis, indeed, the “petrosexual relations” unleashed by the presence of oil facilities in the Caribbean set in motion a series of transformative changes that, through migration and transnational crossings, ended up undermining traditional settings and norms while empowering local calls for representation and reforms.[3]

The story of the book unfolds against the background of so-called petromodernity, which is explored here mainly through its regional rather than its planetary reverberations.[4] The presence of the Lago refinery in Aruba, owned by American
Standard Oil, and the Isla refinery in Curaçao, controlled by Dutch Shell, was all but coincidental. Their construction and progressive expansion followed the increase in global demand of oil derivatives and petrochemical products that marked the decades after World War II.[5] The refineries transformed the two Caribbean islands into pivotal nodes within the intricate machinery of modern industrial capitalism. European and American investments in technology and manpower made sure that the crude oil that was extracted in Venezuela could be processed in Aruba and Curaçao and, from there, shipped and consumed worldwide. At the local level, while attracting a foreign workforce—including a sexual one—the refineries impinged on the islands’ social structures, forcing a reinvention of public as well as domestic spaces and relations.

The book has many merits. First, it is grounded in impressive, multi-archival, and multilingual research showcasing a wide range of primary sources that include local publications, personal recollections, oral interviews, governmental papers, and private companies’ studies and reports. Secondly, the volume represents a thought-provoking example of interdisciplinary scholarship, insofar as it provides original interventions into social, cultural, and diplomatic history. Through the book, indeed, it is possible to better understand the postwar oil-driven transformation of people’s everyday lives in the context of such structural changes as the advent of mass consumption, decolonization, and cyclical economic crises. Furthermore, the book moves easily across several scales and levels of analysis, thus perfectly mirroring the transboundary fluidity of petroleum, while convincingly providing an explanation of the many sociopolitical consequences of the rise and fall of the oil industry in the Caribbean.

The book starts with an introduction that positions it within the different literature strands to which it speaks. Social, cultural, political, and diplomatic history are interwoven neatly so as to provide a critical overview of the intersectional nature of contemporary oil relations.[6] The first chapter shows how the establishment of the refinery in Curaçao brought to the island modern—and substantially foreign and highly racialized too—ideas of domesticity that the corporation supported with the aim to both maximize profits and minimize dissent. Chapter 2 further elaborates on this dynamic by explaining how such a model of development was largely adopted in Aruba too, where the oil company succeeded in imposing on its workers a lifestyle largely based on white visions of family and sexuality, through a totalizing effort to regulate individual choices that up until the 1960s was only marginally contested. The third chapter is perhaps the one that engages most directly with sexual politics as it largely revolves around the challenges that modernization—and its crises—introduced from the 1960s onward, especially in terms of population growth and demographic control. This chapter clarifies how, fearing the instability stemming from the combination of population growth—a phenomenon that was largely perceived as the result of unrestrained sexuality in the Global South—with a rise in unemployment, which was connected to the large-scale implementation of industrial automation, both local administrators in the Caribbean and national policymakers in Europe promoted a model of “responsible parenthood” that mixed religious tropes with socio-democratic welfare programs.[7] The failure of such attempts in the wake of the sexual revolution of the late 1960s and the emergence of transnational networks of black solidarity that from the Caribbean eventually hit the metropole are at the center of the fourth chapter, which explains in detail how discourses of sexual liberation intersected with calls for racial equality and black empowerment. These protests further radicalized from the late 1970s onward, when, following a wave of migration from the Caribbean to the Netherlands as a consequence of the oil shocks and the reorganization of the petroleum industry,
the debate about family planning and sexual politics activated a series of racialized reactions formally legitimized by the tools and methods of the social sciences.[8] The quantitative approach that the Dutch government employed to regulate its welfare instruments de facto targeted the petro-diasporic Caribbean community, laying the groundwork for many of the socioeconomic differences that are still at play within Dutch society.[9]

The emphasis on the evolving relations between the Dutch metropole and the Caribbean periphery vis-à-vis the development of the oil industry and its reverberations into sexual politics is one of the most convincing narrative devices of the book. While exploring such relations, Schields pays particular attention to the hierarchical distribution of power and both the forms of settler colonialism it entailed and the patterns of structural dependence it created. In so doing, Schields enables the reader to understand how the oil industry—with its influence and pervasiveness extending over family and intimacy—contributed to politicizing (and radicalizing) infra-imperial relations, while providing, at the same time, a revealing cautionary tale of the many consequences of the twentieth-century rise of neoliberalism.[10]

The book elucidates how petromodernity shaped geopolitics and intimacy alike, yet it fails to fully embrace environmental hybridity. The cultural, social, and political consequences of what was a necessary rethinking of sexual policies and relations brought about by the presence of the two refineries in Aruba and Curaçao are not complemented with an in-depth discussion of the overall, uneven, ecological costs of these installations. While reinventing the demographics and geographies of these islands, the oil industry also modified their biogeochemical nature, leaving behind a legacy of toxicity and environmental injustice that the book addresses only marginally. [11] Another missing point is a reflection on the outreach of the debate about petrosexual politics both within and beyond the circum-Caribbean area. Finally, the book could have better framed the story of how oil-bound Aruba and Curaçao challenged the Dutch welfare state, its policies, and its labor relations, within the broader context of the Dutch petro-empire, comparing and contrasting the practices at play in the Caribbean with the ones characterizing the management of oil reserves and relations in southeast Asia too. [12]

Besides these points, however, the book remains a milestone for those who are interested in exploring Dutch global and imperial history, the role of oil in its domestic and transnational entanglements, and the influence of the oil industry in shaping our modern times.

Notes


[3]. Sheena Wilson, “Gendering Oil: Tracing Western Petrosexual Relations,” in Oil Culture, ed. Ross Barrett and Daniel Worden (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 244-64.


[12]. One of the few and most recent pieces on the role of oil relations in the Dutch Empire is Ger-
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