Emerging as a uniquely valuable commodity in World War One, oil has become one of the world’s most sought after resources, with the global struggles for control of oil reserves widely researched and debated. In these discussions, both within and beyond academic circles, the notion of a new, contemporary form of imperialism, that of ‘oil imperialism’, is frequently invoked. However, scholars have yet to offer a clear definition or theoretical framework for research discussing this conceptualisation. This conference sought to address this ambiguity, exploring a range of historical episodes in which the apparent operation of ‘oil imperialism’ has been identified, attempting to both define the term and interrogate whether the concept could be employed as a useful category of analysis.

Panel One examined oil in the context of empire and international relations. GUILLEMETTE CROUZET (Geneva) presented on the British oil concession in Bakhtiaristan in the early twentieth century, arguing that oil companies operated as ‘agents of imperialism’. The paper illustrated how the policies of these companies created an area that was governed by capitalism and oil technopolitics, transforming local people from ‘dangerous’ tribes into colonial subjects through their employment within the oil labour force. BENJAMIN BENGObEYI’s (University Paris I-Panthéon Sorbonne) paper, in contrast, elucidated how oil exporting countries have been able to use their oil reserves to counter perceived imperialist projects, through an examination of Iraq’s approach to the implementation of the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries’ (OPEC) oil embargo against Israel and its allies in response to the Yom Kippur War. VICTOR McFARLAND (University of Missouri), likewise examined international politics in the Middle East, examining the U.S. role in the Persian Gulf in the 1970s, exploring the motivations for and limitations of the American military presence in the region, particularly highlighting the dependence on local partners acting as hosts for the American military. The final paper of the panel, presented by EMILY MEIRDING (U.S. Naval Postgraduate School), returned to British oil interests, interrogating the prevailing premise that the British involvement in the Falklands War was motivated by an attempt to control the Falklands oil reserves. In elucidating the lack of evidence to support this supposition, and highlighting that, conversely, Britain had no interest in this oil, the paper both countered the conception of the conflict as an ‘oil war’ and highlighted the significant influence of ‘oil imperialism’, as a presumed ubiquity, both among contemporary actors as well as in historical accounts.

The second panel focused on the operation of national and multinational oil companies. MARTA MUSSO’s (European University Institute) paper illuminated the divergent policies pursued by French and Italian oil companies, faced with British and American domination of the industry. The work highlighted a rhetoric that posited these companies outside of and in opposition to Anglo-Saxon ‘imperial’ projects to gain access to oil. TOURAJ ATABAKI (Leiden University) then examined the labour policies in the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, arguing that the crucial role of oil workers to the British war effort, as well as the chronic scarcity of labour in the area, facilitated an entry into the political sphere through trade unions and strikes in oil refineries, ultimately developing political citizens whose actions could affect world politics. KEVIN WUNSTHORN (University Paris I-Panthéon Sorbonne) closed the panel with an examination of the tensions between French and Anglo-Saxon oil companies within the context of the Iraq Petroleum Company, examining the divergent aims of the Compagnie Française des Pétroles and its Anglo-Saxon counterparts, and the counter measures taken by the French government to promote its interests in
Day one ended with a keynote address from MYRNA SANTIAGO (Saint Mary’s College), which tracked the development of critiques of oil companies operating in South America, evolving from labour force action and nationalist claims to include wider environmentalist concerns, questioning the notion of oil extraction itself. The argument highlighted that anti-imperialist discourse was a central platform of these movements, noting as one example, that industrial action by oil workers lost much of its status and influence following nationalisation.

The second day of the conference opened with a panel on oil, anti-imperialism and decolonisation. GIULIANO GARAVINI’s (New York University Abu Dhabi) paper examined the formation, aims and actions of OPEC, arguing that in its opposition to former colonisers attempting to protect their interests within oil exporting countries, the organisation embodied the international dimension of anti-colonialism. ELISABETTI BINI (University of Trieste) adopted a different approach, focusing on the oil workers of Libya from 1960-1980, outlining how the industrial action of these workers challenged the discriminatory policies of American oil companies. PHILIPPE TRISTANI (Agrégé d’histoire, Sorbonne University) then traced how the Iraqi government, despite western opposition, nationalised its oil, arguing that this played a key role in a global ‘décolonisation pétrolière’, mobilising other oil producing countries to nationalise their own industries. KATAYOUN SHAFIE (UCL London, Centre for Advanced Studies), in contrast, explored strategies employed by oil importers to manage nationalisation, through an examination of the British appeal to international law against the nationalisation of the Iranian oil industry. The presentation argued that, despite the final verdict linking permanent sovereignty to control over natural resources, the strategy of temporisation enabled the British government resolve the crisis to its own advantage.

The final panel of the conference looked at oil companies, the state, and the future of oil imperialism, opening with DUCCIO BASOSSI’s (Ca’ Foscari University, Venice) paper, which argued that the 1970s ‘petrodollar recycling’ (investment by oil exporters, primarily Saudi Arabia, directly in the U.S. Treasury), constituted a form of imperialism, due to its direct relationship with the development of an ‘imperial’, globally used, dollar in the 1970s and 1980s. FRANCESCO PETRINI (University of Padua) examined the history of agreements and compromises between oil companies and the U.S. government, arguing that by conflating public interest with the success of their companies, oil businesses were able to leverage deals that tended to favour their interests over those of the state. In the final paper of the day, SIMONE SELVA (University „L’Orientale”, Naples), illuminated how Iranian oil revenues reshaped international capital markets, changing the role of American banks into intermediaries for Iranian international investments.

VICTOR McFARLAND (University of Missouri) concluded the conference, outlining that although the range of papers had elucidated the development of ‘oil imperialism’ as a powerful concept in contemporary and historical discourse, the conference had not produced a clear definition of the term, primarily due to its more empirical focus. The geographic delimitation of the conference was discussed, noting that papers had primarily concentrated on oil producers in the Middle East and South America, as well as foregrounding the relationships between western (primarily America and Britain) and producing countries, with less consideration of the broader range of international connections. Finally, the current lack of ‘histories from below’ in this field was discussed, underlining the focus, both at the conference and in wider literature on high politics and economics of the oil industry, highlighting the need to build on and expand the limited studies concerned with individuals and communities directly affected by the industry.

Conference Overview:
Barthélémy Jobert, (Sorbonne University), President of the Sorbonne University. Welcome Address
Eric Bussière (Sorbonne University, Director of the Labex EHNE), Opening Address
Alain Beltran (CNRS, UMR Sirice 8138), In-
Introduction to the Theme „Oil Imperialism“

Panel 1: Oil, Empire, and International Relations
Chaired by Youssef Cassis, (European University Institute)
Guillemette Crouzet (Graduate Institute, Geneva), ‘British Oil Imperialism in Bakhtiaristan at the Beginning of the 20th Century’
Benjamin Bengobeyi (University Paris 1-Panthéon Sorbonne), ‘Le Pétrole une arme? L’Irak et la libération de la Nation arabe: l’exemple de la guerre du Kippour’
Francesco Petrini (University of Padua), ‘„Jumped on the Boat of a Territorialist Organization”: Oil Multinationals and State Power in the XXth Century’
Emily Meierding (U.S. Naval Postgraduate School), ‘Disentangling the Causes of the Falklands Islands Conflict’

Panel 2: State and Corporate Power: National and Multinational Oil Companies
Chaired by Jean-Pierre Dormois (Institut d’Études Politiques de Bordeaux)
Marta Musso (European University Institute), ‘Hunting grounds for their monopoly: France, Italy and the State oilmen’
Touraj Atabaki (Leiden University), ‘From the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company to the Consortium of Iranian Oil Participants – Expanding US Oil Capitalism: Regional Challenges and Social Transformation’
Kevin Wunsthorn (University Paris 1-Panthéon Sorbonne), ‘Entre rivalité et coopération : la Compagnie française des pétroles face à l’impérialisme pétrolier anglo-saxon dans le golfe Arabo-Persique’

Keynote Address
Chaired by Barbara Curli (University of Turin)
Myrna Santiago (Saint Mary’s College), ‘Oil Imperialism and Its Discontents’

Panel 3: Oil, Anti-Imperialism, and Decolonization
Chaired by Phillippe Chassaigne (University Bordeaux Montaigne)
Giuliano Garavini (New York University Abu Dhabi), ‘OPEC: The Making of an Anti-Imperial Organisation’
Katayoun Shafie (UCL London, Centre for Advanced Studies), ‘Long-Distance Machinery of Oil: Managing Nationalism, Combating Nationalization in Iran’

Panel 4: Oil Companies, the State, and the Future of Oil Imperialism in a Postcolonial World
Chaired by Alain Beltran (CNRS, UMR Sirice 8138)
Duccio Basosi (Ca’ Foscari University, Venice), ‘Oil, Dollars, and Power: Petrodollar Recycling Revisited’
Victor McFarland (University of Missouri), ‘Oil, Empire, and the U.S. Role in the Gulf’
Victor McFarland (University of Missouri), Concluding Remarks


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