



The Energy Crises of the 1970s as Challenges to the Industrialized World. Frank Bösch,
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Bochum, 26.09.2013-28.09.2013.

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Published on H-Soz-u-Kult (October, 2013)

The Energy Crises of the 1970s as Challenges to the Industrialized World

The first oil crisis emerged in October 1973 when the Arab oil producing countries decided to embargo the United States and others in order to protest their Pro-Israel policy during the beginning Yom-Kippur War and cut oil production and deliveries to several other industrial countries. Meanwhile OPEC pushed through massive price increases on crude oil that aggravated the situation. Forty years after this first oil crisis of 1973/74, the conference, held at the Centre for Contemporary History in Potsdam, attempted to reconsider and deconstruct its birthday child as hosts Frank Bösch and Rüdiger Graf put it in their introductory remarks. Was this first oil crisis really the turning point that separates the three decades of unprecedented economic growth following World War II from the pessimistic age after the boom? Anselm Doering-Manteuffel / Lutz Raphael, *Nach dem Boom. Perspektiven auf die Zeitgeschichte seit 1970*, 3. Aufl. Göttingen 2012 (1. Aufl. 2008). as most historians today see it? To answer this old question The turning-point-question lies at the heart of Fiona Venn's study on the oil crisis: Fiona Venn, *The Oil Crisis*, Edinburgh 2002. , the organizers argued, the oil crisis had to be analyzed in the broader context of the energy crises of the 1970s – taking other forms of energy and the often forgotten second oil crisis of 1979 into the picture.

How fruitful this broader perspective can be was demonstrated in the first paper given by ROBERT D. LIFSET (Oklahoma). He argued convincingly that the U.S. energy crisis in the 1970s was really the product of three interrelated crises concerning oil, natural gas and the

electrical utility sector and had started well before October 1973. When Arab oil producers then started to embargo the United States and OPEC managed to quadruple oil prices in the weeks to come, this merely aggravated an already existing energy crisis. Similar observations were made by many other participants, who frequently stressed that the first oil crisis was not a turning point – especially concerning national energy policies – but rather accelerated existing trends. ALAIN BELTRAN (Paris) for instance explained that the French reaction to the oil shock was primarily to intensify their nuclear program. But this simply meant the acceleration of a program that had already been in place for a few years and therefore did not constitute a turnaround in energy policy. ANNA VERONIKA WENDLAND (Marburg), whose paper was presented by Klaus Gestwa due to her absence, saw a similar connection between the 1973 oil crisis and the planning of nuclear power plants in Eastern Europe. And even the planning and construction of pipelines linking Russian energy sources to Western Europe had begun in the 1960s and was rather getting a new stimulus in the 1970s as FRANK BÄSCH (Potsdam) observed. MOGENS RÄDIGER (Aalborg), on the other hand, was among the few who took an opposing position. Analyzing shifts in Danish energy policy he interpreted the oil crisis as a genuine *game changer* fundamentally affecting Danish energy strategies and leading towards the diversification of energy sources.

Placing the oil crisis in a broader context temporarily led to a second finding. By giving proper attention to

the years preceding 1973, the oil shock seems to lose a lot of the suddenness affected governments ascribed to it. In the United States the energy crises had already begun years before the alleged shock set in as Robert Lifset pointed out. And RÄDIGER GRAF (Bochum) argued that Western European governments were very alive to the danger of possible supply emergencies after U.S. delegates had warned them in January 1970 that they would be no longer able to help them with American oil in the case of supply cuts due to rising domestic consumption. NUNO MADUREIRA (Lisbon), however, disagreed with regard to Great Britain, France and the United States. In his opinion no one was really able to foresee the mix of measures and devastating impact of the upcoming OPEC statement.

A second emphasis of the conference – besides the broader contextualization of the 1973 oil crisis – in the 1970s history of energy – was to widen the regional scope of research on the energy crises and to better account for its transnational dimensions. The most important achievement in this respect was the consequent inclusion of the Eastern Bloc into the analysis – something that even so-called global histories of energy in the 1970s and beyond, often ignore (Graf). Panels three and four exclusively focused on the Eastern respectively Cold War side of the story, with DAVID PAINTER (Washington) arguing that one cannot understand the history of the Cold War without taking oil into account. In addition – in section IV – ANDRÄ STEINER (Potsdam) elaborated on the economic reactions to both oil shocks in the GDR and VALENTINA ROXO (Munich) analyzed the transformations of the natural and cultural environment in the Western Siberian oil region since the late 1960s. Particularly worth mentioning in this context were the several deals between Western and Eastern Bloc countries to cooperate in energy matters – mentioned among others in the paper by JERONIM PEROVIÄ and DUNJA KREMPIN (both Zurich) – as they illustrate that even energy histories of the West must remain incomplete if they totally ignore Eastern Europe. On the other hand there remained a regional blind spot. The Global South was completely left out of the picture so that – as Frank Reichherzer put it in the Final Discussion – the OPEC countries figured as a black box. Both oil crises also had a particularly devastating effect on non-oil-producing countries in the so called Third World that should be taken into account when assessing the historical significance of the 1970s energy crises.

While the whole first section was reserved for National Reactions to the Oil Crises the transnational di-

mensions of the energy crises were primarily addressed in the shorter second section on Changes within the International Order. A lively debate ensued after FRANK REICHHERZER (Berlin), talking about the framing of international energy policies through the Trilateral Commission, emphasized the notion of contemporaries to live in a world characterized by complex interdependence. RÄdiger Graf and HENNING TÄRK (Duisburg/Essen) stressed that statements about interdependency should not be taken at face value, but were often rather a rhetorical cover than a genuine expression of contemporaries' world perception. It would be a fault – Graf had argued in his paper – to assume that, due to rising interdependence, unilateral, sovereign power politics became impossible, as some contemporary observers maintained. The different ways of interpreting the oil crisis could rather substantiate varying claims concerning national sovereignty – including those arguing for more independence.

While the majority of contributions concentrated on national politicians as their main actors and some on international organizations, surprisingly few papers dealt with consumer reactions to the energy crises. It was mainly BRIAN BLACK (Penn State Altoona), in a Panel on Energy, Policy and Consumption sponsored by the Rachel Carson Center (Munich), who focused on this particularly important part of the story. For him the 1970s oil crisis was indeed a hinge event in energy consumption helping to set a transition into motion that is – for example – visible in the U.S. consumer's greening taste on the automotive marketplace. Better represented than consumers were companies and their management: JONATHAN KUIKEN (Boston College) asked about the relationship between the British oil companies (BP and Shell) and the British government, while HENDRIK EHRHARDT (Jena) and CHRISTIAN MARX (Trier) reflected on the impact of the energy crises of the 1970s on German utility companies and the chemical industry respectively. What both Ehrhardt and Marx found was an increased willingness to substitute coal and nuclear energy for oil – a tendency that was also highlighted in many other presentations (e.g. Beltran, RÄdiger, Steiner). This indicates that the energy crises of the 1970s were not only making environmental concerns more popular as has often been argued, but that they were – at the same time – helping to legitimize environmentally damaging actions. The energy crises really had an ambiguous effect environmentally.

Reconsidering the first oil crisis in the broader context of energy crises of the 1970s and within a wider ge-

ographical scope than the West turned out to add important facets to the picture of the 1973 oil shock while calling others that have long been taken for granted into question. Especially the novel attempt to bridge the East-West gap in energy history proved most revealing. Hopefully a future conference will achieve the same for North-South relations and the energy crises of the 1970s.

Conference Overview:

Section I: National Reactions to the Oil Crises

Panel 1: Energy and the State in the USA and Western Europe

Robert D. Lifset (Oklahoma): A New Understanding of the American Energy Crisis of the 1970s

Rüdiger Graf (Bochum): Periodization, Petro-knowledge, and Sovereignty. The Oil Crisis of 1973/74 in Contemporary History

Panel 2: Alternative Energy Paths in Western Europe

Nuno Madureira (Lisbon): Planning in the Midst of the Storm: The First Oil Shock in Britain and France

Alain Beltran (Paris): France and the Oil Question: The Grand Projet without Europe?

Mogens Rüdiger (Aalborg): The Oil Crisis as a Game Changer in Danish Energy Policy

Panel 3: A Different Energy Crisis in the East?

Anna Veronika Wendland (Marburg): Oil Crisis and Nuclear Response in Eastern Europe

Jeronim Perovič/Dunja Krempin (Zurich): The Soviet Union and the Energy Crises of the 1970s

Section II: Changes within the International Order

Panel 4: Energy and the Cold War

David Painter (Washington): Oil and Geopolitics: The Oil Crises of the 1970s and the Cold War

Frank Böhmer (Potsdam): Energy Diplomacy. Eastern and Western Europe after the Oil Crises

Elisabetta Bini (Rome): Oil and the Reshaping of International Relations in the Mediterranean during the Cold War, 1956-1979

Panel 5: Reshaping International Organizations

Henning Tork (Duisburg/Essen) Anti-OPEC or Neutral Consumer Organization? The Establishment of

the International Energy Agency 1973/74

Frank Reichherzer (Berlin): Making Energy International. The Trilateral Commission and the Framing of an International Energy Policy

Section III: Energy Consumption and National and International Patterns

Panel 6: Energy, Policy and Consumption

Marina Fischer-Kowalski (Vienna): Learning from the Seventies? Assessing the Impact of Energy Policy on the Marked Stabilization of per Capita Energy Consumption in the Early 1970s

Mathias Mutz (Aachen): Daylight Saving = Energy Saving. Time Politics as Crisis Strategy in Germany, France, and the U.S.

Brian Black (Penn State Altoona): Struggling to Green the American Ride: Consumer Culture Meets Petroleum Scarcity in the 1970s

Section IV: Economic and Ecological Reactions

Panel 7: Economic Reactions

Christopher Kopper (Bielefeld): Primary and Secondary Consequences of the Oil Crisis for Capital Markets and State Debts

Andreas Steiner (Potsdam): Economic Reactions to the Oil Crises of the 1970s in the GDR

Panel 8: Companies and the Oil Crisis

Jonathan Kuiken (Boston): "We are fully aware of the industry's problems." The Deterioration of the British Government's Relations with British Petroleum and Shell prior to the 1973 Oil Crisis

Hendrik Ehrhardt (Jena): Utility Companies and the Oil Crisis. Electricity Industries in West Germany between Coal and Immission Control

Christian Marx (Trier): "Conflict over the Energy Gap" - Atomic Power and Coal as Solutions to the Crisis? Resources of the German Chemical Industry after the Boom

Panel 9: Shaping Spaces: Aftermaths of Exploitation

Valentina Roxo (Munich): Competing Visions: West Siberian Oil, Russian Modernity and Environment

Rania Ghosn (Ann Arbor): The Ends of Tapline: Frictions of Oil Circulation in Arabia and the Middle East

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

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Citation: Jonas Kreienbaum. Review of , *The Energy Crises of the 1970s as Challenges to the Industrialized World*. H-Soz-u-Kult, H-Net Reviews. October, 2013.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=40449>

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