Review by Sara Lorenzini, University of Trento

Christopher Dietrich's *Oil Revolution: Anticolonial Elites, Sovereign Rights, and the Economic Culture of Decolonization* recounts the history of decolonization as a story of transforming political revindication into economic entitlement. The narration starts in 1949 with Argentinian economist Raul Prebisch, who sketched the doctrine of unequal exchange in the United Nations. Throughout the first chapter, the author sets the stage for the unraveling of economic decolonization. In a vivid tapestry of the available literature, Dietrich describes the panoply of theories that have built the new field of development economics. He then relates the history of economic decolonization with emphasis on the interplay of political and economic self-determination. Ideas on postcolonial economic development discussed at the 1955 Bandung Conference traveled around and became collective knowledge of the oil elites. The next chapter tells the tale of how OPEC (the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries) members became conscious of their power and their rights (103 and 105). International organizations were places where persistent international economic inequality was addressed, and chapter four tackles how the UN system handled the 'inexorable process of decolonization.' From this point, the book focuses on oil countries, and on which ones were more effective in extracting the best deal for their oil. 'Nationalist heroes' such as conservative elites in Iran and Saudi Arabia were pitted against 'the insurrectionists' like Libya, Iraq, and Algeria. The oil regimes were not working collectively, claims Dietrich, but together they put sufficient pressure on companies and the West in general that the traditional powers found themselves under the constant threat of nationalist blackmail. After describing how the Third World finally reached unity of action with the New International Economic Order (NIEO) project, the book ends with the disruptive consequences of the energy crisis on the sovereign rights program.

Dietrich's book is an outstanding piece of scholarship, which engages the entangled histories of economic decolonization and international law. It does not focus on the economics of development or on the ideas of society, but instead focuses on the rise of sovereign rights as a legitimate force in international politics. Written in very dense prose, and abundant in details, the book is utterly fascinating. It can be challenging at times, as the reader needs to absorb a great deal of information. Rich literature and copious archival sources shed new light on the thinking of anticolonial oil elites. The ideas held by personalities such as the Saudi official Abdullah al-Tariki, the Algerian jurist Mohammed Bedjaoui, OPEC Secretary General Francisco Parra, or the Libyan diplomat Mahmood Suleiman Maghribi, illustrate the complexity of the global political economy from the late 1950s until the end of the 1970s. *Oil Revolution* is essential reading for understanding the intellectual history of the Global South. It is a book on transnational elites, claims the author in the introduction. What the oil elites in this research have in common is the study of law: they were legal experts. By adopting this fascinating perspective of intellectual history, where the intellectual biographies of lesser known protagonists capture the readers' attention just as much as their ideas, the book offers a multi-layered portrayal that is not to be found elsewhere, apart from in the similar "*Toward a History of the New International Economic Order*," a special issue of the journal *Humanity*.[1]

Dietrich's work challenges traditional accounts of decolonization in the second half of the twentieth century by adopting the perspective of the Global South, while the Global North is in the background, except for the

[1] "Special Issue: Toward a History of the New International Economic Order," *Humanity* 6:1 (Spring 2015).

United States[2]. It is indeed quite unusual to read a history of decolonization involving the Middle East where France is mentioned just three times, in passing, and the European Economic Community is not mentioned at all. Contrary to Nathan J. Citino's work on Arab modernizers, where Arab political elites "appropriated the ideas of Cold War modernization and used the promise of development for their political advantage" in a way that stresses Cold War dynamics, Dietrich's elites are not concerned with Cold War politics.[3] The Cold War rarely enters the stage. When it does make an appearance, it is but a sideshow to the broader debate about decolonization and international capitalism (260). Indeed, Dietrich is successful in taking off the Cold War lens.[4] His history of decolonization, as seen from the vantage point of the oil experts claiming sovereign rights, is a tale of the West and Western ideas. There is no room in this book for ideas or policies inspired by 'the Second World.' The oil elites described in this book may have been radical, but they were definitely not socialist. They were a considerable distance from the Socialist bloc, and unfortunately the book makes no mention of the analysis that Socialist countries provided on the political and social situation in the states described. In some cases—like Iraq and the United Arab Republic—ideology entered the stage, but just as a Cold War gimmick. The underlying idea is that theorists and elites cared little for ideological debates between communism and capitalism, and even less for the Cold War (46).

One of the great merits of Dietrich's book is its focus on international organizations as the ideal setting where the oil revolution took place. Economic self-determination emerged as an issue in the UN system more than anywhere else. International organizations were where persistent global economic inequality was addressed, where distributive justice was on the agenda and the "new zones of entitlement and demand" that were created with decolonization found a new intellectual space.[5] Among the international organizations that come to the fore in the book, OPEC attracts the most attention, with its elites and its journals. OPEC personalities mainly questioned the morality of law: the regime of concessions was radically denied its rightfulness because it stemmed from the colonial order. Local governments could not accept roles as "mere collectors of royalties" that were typical of gatekeeper states (109).[6] In the view of several members, OPEC's

---

[2] The reference here is to standard works such as Bernard Droz, *Histoire de la décolonisation au XXe siècle* (Paris: Seuil, 2006) Charles-Robert Ageron, *La décolonisation française* (Paris: A. Colin 1991), John Darwin, *Britain and Decolonization. The Retreat from Empire in the Post-War World* (London: Macmillan, 1988), Ronald Hyam, *Britain's Declining Empire: The Road to Decolonisation, 1918-1968* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), Bob Moore, Lawrence A. S. Butler, and Martin Thomas, *Crises of Empire. Decolonization and Europe's Imperial States* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015) but also Giuliano Garavini, *After Empires. European Integration, Decolonization, and the Challenge from the Global South 1957-1986* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

[3] Nathan J. Citino, *Envisioning the Arab Future: Modernization in U.S.-Arab Relations, 1945-1967* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 10.

[4] The reference is to Matthew Connelly, "Taking off the Cold War Lens: Visions of North-South Conflict during the Algerian War of Independence", *The American Historical Review* 105:3 (June 2000): 739-769.

[5] Samuel Moyn, *Not Enough. Human Rights in an Unequal World* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2018), 98.

[6] For the concept of gatekeeper state see Frederick Cooper, *Africa since 1940. The Past of the Present* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 156-159.

mission was to reverse power relations and correct the terms of trade. However, just like the NIEO, OPEC was "not so new" in the end, wanting to correct the system, rather than bring it down. It thus accepted the epistemology of the colonizers.[7] Rich oil producers aimed at joining the club, not at subverting the existing structure.

Oil Revolution is masterfully designed to reveal the interplay between internationalism, regionalism, and nationalism. In this story, everything played in the international arena but ended up having clear national goals. The new system of law emerging from decolonization showed that nationalism and internationalism were complementary—claimed Mohammed Bedjaoui from within the UN International Law Commission in 1958 (153). His view resonates with Glenda Sluga's point on the "intimate, conceptual past shared by the national and the international as entangled ways of thinking about modernity."[8] Dietrich's analysis clearly shows that although the culture of decolonization provided a lingua franca, significant political differences troubled the relations within the supposedly cohesive group of the newly independent countries. Conflicting interests were often hidden under cover of Third World unity. Conservative powers, such as Saudi Arabia, clearly opposed radical states under the influence of Nasserism, and the contrast between the two groups permeates the narrative of the book. While describing the success of the oil revolution as emancipation from old colonial structures, Dietrich's account points to the limits of this revolution. If the primary mission of sovereign rights was to replace the unjust trade order with a new, more equitable one, as the president of Chile Salvador Allende claimed in UNCTAD II (Santiago 1972), then it failed. The unification of oil producers ended up as a blight for the other developing nations, which were severely damaged by price increases—OPEC ended up being a collective strategy that harmed the Third World. The oil revolution exposed the limits of a discourse on national sovereignty. The author does not touch upon the domestic dimension of the whole project of national emancipation envisaged by the oil elites, and this leaves the reader with a large, open question. Oil elites filled their speeches and writings with discourses on international morality and humanity, but they did not strive to change social structures domestically. While accusing the international system of being oligarchic, they showed hardly any concern for domestic oligarchies. Therefore, Dietrich's final claim could probably be spelled out differently: not only was the idea of a more moral economy "just an idea" (316)—it was 'just a conservative idea.'

[7] The expression is borrowed from Gilbert Rist, "The Not-So-New International Order", *Development* (SID), 20:3-4 (1978),: 48-51. See Sundhya Pahuja, *Decolonising International Law. Development, Economic Growth and the Politics of Universality* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 105.

[8] Glenda Sluga, *Internationalism in the Age of Nationalism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 3.