

**An Inconvenient Image of Nigeria’s Environment – A Commentary on Peter Maass’s *Crude World: The Violent Twilight of Oil* (2009). Place of Publication: London. Publisher: Allen Lane. Number of Pages: 276. Price: £20.00. ISBN: 978-1-846-14246-8.**

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The American industrialist and oil dealer Paul J. Getty’s statement that “the meek shall inherit the earth, but not the mineral rights” reverberates with the message of *Crude World: The Violent Twilight of Oil* (2009). In this masterfully written and provocative piece on the blessings and curses of oil, global oil politics and mineral-induced conflicts as well as socio-economic disequilibrium following oil exploration, Peter Maass, brings once more to light the contradictions inherent in oil deposits. In the words of the Venezuelan oil minister, Juan Pablo Perez Alfonzo, oil is “the devil’s excrement”, a metonymy for gold, which is the reason for wealthy and powerful countries’ unbridled assault on poor nations that are technologically backward to tap into natural resources given to them by nature as well as defend themselves from the onslaught of mighty nations. Man’s ravenous need for oil has fuelled global warming, environmental despoliation, ecological quandary, Islamic fundamentalism, ethnic cleansing and blood-curdling wars as well as unsolicited violence on regional and global scales. Vice President Al Gore’s seminal piece *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006) mediates the harrowing twilight of oil; the martyred Nigerian eco-activist, Ken Saro-Wiwa, called this “ecological war”; others have seen this as the coming of environmental apocalypse. Oil has made the United States and other powerful nations of the world enemies of the people; it has also accentuated the dynamics of core-periphery paradigm. With a few exceptions, like Norway and United Arab Emirates, oil (the black gold), is rather a curse rather than blessing for nations from which it is being extracted for world’s consumption.

*Crude Oil: The Violent Twilight of Oil* is a 276-page fascinating, insightful book about oil and its accompanying twin devils in nations where it is being extracted: poverty and conflict; this is in sync with Maass’s dialectics of “the collateral damage of warfare” (p.4). The book has ten chapters excluding the chapter on conclusion as well as paratextual pages such as dedication, introduction and prefatory note. Each of the chapters focuses on oil drama in places where it is deposited: Africa, the Middle East and Latin America. The chapters, which include “Fear”, “Greed”, “Rot”, “Contamination”, “Plunder”, “Scarcity” and “Alienation” among others echo similar perspective: environmental destruction, multinationals’ social irresponsibility agenda and unsustainable oil exploration as well as underdevelopment and pauperisation of the people, whose lands harbour the black gold.

As evident in Nigeria’s Niger delta, oil fuels Richard Auty’s “resource curse” (paradox of plenty) thesis, a paradigm that resonates with living on the bank of the river and washing one’s face with spittle, as the Nigerian journalist, Ray Ekpu, puts it. It is common knowledge that the reason for this despicable landscape in Nigeria is the unsustainable and anti-environmental politics in Nigeria instituted by Nigerian political class in cahoots with their compradors (the multinationals). Thus, postcolonial Nigerian oil politics is the main reason for her national malaise. The nationalist

clamour, sustainability impasse, identity issues, socio-economic problems and political strife stem from this grim practice. These are part of what Maass identified in the book:

Communities in the Niger delta, where most of Nigeria's oil was found, received little more than token payments after significant extraction got under way in the 1960's, and this accelerated a process of national breakdown. ... Foreign companies fed the conflict by providing funds to both sides: the military was paid to protect wells; the militias were paid not to attack them. The combatants were incentivised for combat. I visited Nigeria to learn how oil had turned a once healthy country, and the people who lived there, into a specimen of rot (pp.53-4).

The inequality, violence and decay on the heels of oil exploration in Nigeria, which are direct fall-out of mismanagement of oil wealth by the Nigerian government have put the nation into serious environmental rot. This has made Nigeria's environment and ecology unsustainable.

As Peter Maass contends, why Nigeria's environment is unsustainable as well as backward and undeveloped is a consequence of the knock-on effects of greedy oil exploration by the multinationals as well as her one-dimensional economic base. This is essentially why most nations that have oil are poor as manufacturing decline as candle before increase in oil exploration. Development economists have identified this phenomenon as "the Dutch Disease". In substantiating this, Maas stated that

Across the world, oil is invoked as a machine of destiny. Oil will make you rich, oil will make you poor, oil will bring war, oil will deliver peace, oil will define our world as much as the glaciers in the Ice Age... Here's is one of them: I lived in Asia for several years and wondered, if oil was such a blessing to countries possessing it, how South Korea, which has no oil, became an economic tiger, as well as Japan, whose oil reserves are minuscule. Their prosperity in the past fifty years was in contrast to oil exporters like Iraq, Iran and Nigeria, which did not have the profiles of winners (p.5).

However, irrespective of much debate, violence and wars in the world today following oil exploration, Maass maintains that if humanity fails to move beyond oil-based global economy, we are headed for destruction – a kind of economic *cul-de-sac*. This is typically Nigeria as she is characterised by concentrating on uniaxial economy. In endorsing this argument, Maass agrees with the predictions of industry sceptics like Matthew Simmons, who reasons that the earth is about to surpass "peak oil" supplies. Even with the recent fall-back in oil prices, the petroleum that's left to discover will be harder and more costly to extract. In 2008, the \$147-a-barrel oil was just a "foretaste of what awaits us," as Maass writes. And in the wake of military tension and threats going on in the Middle East as well as drama unfolding following the Arab Spring and the Niger delta conundrum, our earth hangs in the balance.

Though a well-researched and presented book, *Crude Oil: The Violent Twilight of Oil* suffers from failure of detail and statistics. Particularly, Maass's subtitle – “the violent twilight of oil” – does not seem to offer a convincing picture of the decline of black gold's value as humanity is still being completely drenched in the allure and gunk of oil! In addition, Maass's sporadic intimations on alternative history that might be – that's alternative source of energy and oil – is not quite convincing and logical. In the author's contention, “you cannot navigate the violent Orient region without thinking that everything would be better if oil had not been found” (p. 222). So what's the alternative to oil, and how do we move beyond one-dimensional approach to source of energy on the planet? Also, how do we envision a more sustainable future? Maass's response to these questions is rather begging the question as well as more of desk analysis. Maass rather drops names of people and programmes that have been instituted to tackle climate change such as efforts by Princeton University scientist Robert Socolow and his colleague Stephen Pacala, “stabilisation wages”, America's reluctance in investing in solar panels, China's reliance on coal, global strategies for reduction of greenhouse effects, carbon trading, and changing light bulbs, as well as a rehash of his melodramatically stated anatomy of places where oil is deposited. This is short on detail! However, the book is a bold move to deepen literature on oil and its grisly effects on our fragile environment that desperately needs sustainable paradigm to save it from man's greed as it is nearing its twilight!

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