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Book Review: *Peak Oil: Apocalyptic Environmentalism and Libertarian Political Culture*, Matthew Schneider-Mayerson, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London (2015)

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Matthew Schneider-Mayerson’s *Peak Oil* (2015) is a compelling and nuanced account of the peak oil movement in the era of climate crisis. Organized online between 2004 and 2011, the peak oil movement, Schneider-Mayerson argues, can also be thought of as a phenomenon or community of individuals sharing information, but mostly acting alone. In this timely, engaging, well-written, and accessible book, Schneider-Mayerson argues that a libertarian shift in culture within the context of environmental crisis explains the individualistic behavior of peakists even as they, in line with their overwhelmingly liberal political ideologies, recognize the need for collective action. *Peak Oil* pushes readers to recognize the urgent need for political action on climate change while simultaneously providing a thoughtful and sympathetic explanation for why so many people respond to environmental crisis in individualistic ways. Readers alarmed by climate crisis will connect with peakist impulses toward self-sufficiency while gaining a deeper understanding of the political and cultural milieu that informs political inaction on climate change.

Peak Oil offers an in-depth portrait of peakists—who they are, how they compare to the general population, how they became “peak aware,” and what they do with their knowledge. Yet, it also does much more. Through detailed analysis of the history of beliefs about abundance and scarcity, oil production and prices, the libertarian shift, the development of the internet, and American apocalyptic thought, it uses a story about peakists to shed light on broad trends at the intersection of energy, technology, cultural imaginations, masculinity, and political economy.

For this reason, it is a useful text for readers in these diverse fields and for those interested in how historical and contemporary trends inform collective capacity for imagining a future within and beyond climate crisis.

The book begins with a detailed account of peakists that draws on rich data from open ended survey questions and interviews. Peakists' individual beliefs, actions, and experiences trying to share their views with the people around them is situated within the broader history of oil in America. In succinct chapter sections that would be very useful for teaching, Schneider-Mayerson reminds the reader of oil's unique qualities as an energy source while linking oil to growth paradigms and literature on American optimism. He traces perspectives on growth from Malthus through the rise of 1960s environmentalism in the United States. The links between hegemonic growthmanship (see 60-61) and the power of conservative and libertarian ideologies ascendant since WWII help account for individualism in ways that previous authors have glossed over (82).

Vitaly, Schneider-Mayerson also demonstrates the libertarian foundations of the internet, which, when combined with the broader political swing toward libertarianism, has had tremendous individualizing effects on the internet based movement he writes about. Peakists' virtual movement, or community space, exacerbates political economic pushes toward individualism because peakists significantly underestimate their numbers. This insight, relevant for other twenty-first century social movements, points to how important collective face to face mobilization is for giving movement participants an accurate sense of their combined power.

Shifting to engaging analyses of popular peakist literature and cultural representations of apocalyptic futures, *Peak Oil* then considers how disaster and lack of trust in government shape imaginations of a post-peak world. Schneider-Mayerson finds that peakists, in the words of one

member of the website Peak Oil News, “find it easier to believe in the complete disintegration of America and its culture than in the possibility of an American society which has adapted to changed circumstances and innovated new solutions” (127). His argument illustrates how unsurprising this is “[g]iven the preponderance of apocalyptic narratives in American culture and the absence of alternate visions of environmental and social change” (127). Again, this insight is extremely relevant beyond the peakist community. Developing imaginations capable of envisioning a world beyond oil and beyond capitalism is the first step to taking justice-oriented action on climate change. Peakists’ imaginations mirror the individualizing political and virtual context in which peakists have become a community, even though a majority see themselves as liberal and very liberal, with substantial numbers identifying as anarchists, socialists, and progressives—all political ideologies that the reader might assume would enable more communal imaginations of the future. As Schneider-Mayerson states, “[c]laims that eco-apocalyptic attitudes lead to political passivity may be true, but we might also view the peak oil movement as the sublimation of a political vision into a prophecy or a new configuration of radical political beliefs that reflects our privatized, neoliberal age” (128).

The final analytic chapter of the book unpacks the finding—generated by Schneider-Mayerson’s surveys—that a majority of peakists are white men. This chapter is a culmination of the author’s skill in weaving historical and current trends and media together to enhance understanding of the crossroads of American environmental action today. Schneider-Mayerson chronicles the influence of earlier dystopian masculinities, rendered in films like *Mad Max*, and twenty-first century changes in men’s labor market participation to show why so many peakist imaginations aspire to “hard” and frontier masculinities. The peak oil movement provides men a “means of reinscribing ‘traditional’ (read 1950s) gender roles and revitalizing [a] white

masculinity” (130) threatened by the huge cuts to manufacturing jobs in the mid 2000s, mechanization of existing manufacturing jobs, and the increasing racial diversity of the United States. Many male peakist imaginations then, were informed by a desire for what one peakist described as “more meaningful, though likely physically harder, work that will help support families and communities” (139). To shed light on this phenomenon, Schneider-Mayerson again draws the reader’s attention to the dearth of imaginations—in this case, of alternate masculinities. Rather than imagining a different future, many peakists looked to forms of retrosexuality—traditional gender roles where tough men survive and physically weak men, even if brilliant (think the tech wizards of our era), do not. In sum, this chapter offers a justice oriented and appropriately critical analysis of how some peakist views on race, gender, and economy align with socially conservative individualism. This not only illustrates the power of conservative social beliefs, even among people who identify as liberals, but also explains the demographics of the peakist community.

I have no real critique of this book. For the sake of offering ideas for how it might deepen reader’s satisfaction, I highlight two points. For readers interested in methodologies, *Peak Oil’s* short explanation of methods in the introduction will leave questions. While more details on how the surveys and interviews fit together are described in the conclusion, little information is provided up front. The author employs insightful excerpts from open-ended survey questions throughout the book, yet does not provide these questions in the appendix. Secondly, despite the impressive survey reach—from only two website links in January 2011, Schneider-Mayerson received 1128 surveys from respondents who lived in every region of the world—the analysis is U.S. centric. The reasons for this are obvious—the scope of the book and the important role the

U.S. plays in the history and politics of oil—yet it would be exciting to explore place based variation in the data to learn about global diversities in peakist beliefs and actions.

To conclude, *Peak Oil* is an impressive example of using analysis of a little-known movement to shed light on broader social trends in the United States that inform imaginaries of the future in response to climate change. It contributes understanding of how a group of people manage the “urgent yet bearable shadow” (Amsler quoted on 157) of peak-oil and climate crisis through individualized action. With appropriate push for more collective action, the book nonetheless facilitates empathy for peakists and other people taking climate science seriously, people who are often marginalized when trying to share the troubling reality of climate crisis with others. While their actions are individual, the examples they set—on how to reduce and optimize energy use and value skills necessary for localized economies—are important. They can have a “tangible effect on the environmental crisis of the will” and environmental communication while destabilizing the socially organized denial that prevents climate action (158).

This short book explores big themes that should be on the minds of more people today. By clarifying how politics and cultural currents shape responses to environmental crisis, it makes space for more informed and creative conversation about, and collaborative imagining of, a just future. In a context of restricted imagination, peakists’ efforts to imagine and act on their imaginations is a refreshing first step to a different future. As Schneider-Mayerson writes:

Life after oil—whether the transition is pushed by climate change, energy depletion, or (likely) both—will, thus, require not only an economic, technological, and infrastructural but also a social and cultural transformation that is beyond most of our imaginations. If some peakists’ visions were biased by anxieties, fears, and hopes that were surprisingly

common in the early twenty-first-century United States, they might be pardoned for the intimidating scale of their endeavor: imagining and cultivating a post-carbon world that does not merely replicate the injustices of the past. (149)

References:

Schneider-Mayerson, Matthew. 2015. *Peak Oil: Apocalyptic Environmentalism and Libertarian Political Culture*. The University of Chicago Press: Chicago and London.