



International Journal of Social Sciences

ISSN:2587-2591

DOI Number:<http://dx.doi.org/10.30830/tobider.sayi.20.12>

Volume 8/4

2024 p. 216-228

POST-PETROLEUM POLITICAL TRANSFORMATION IN JAMES HOWARD
KUNSTLER'S *WORLD MADE BY HAND*

JAMES HOWARD KUNSTLER'İN *WORLD MADE BY HAND* ROMANINDA
PETROL SONRASI POLİTİK DÖNÜŞÜM

İsmail Serdar ALTAÇ*

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the political limits and opportunities of the post-petroleum society in James Howard Kunstler's *World Made by Hand*. This first part of the study outlines the current dependence of modern society on petroleum, the social and political repercussions of this fuel, and the discourses produced as a response to its future. Subsequently, the study demonstrates the disintegration of the U.S. due to absence of oil in the novel, which opens up possibilities of chaos and new political organizations. One of the consequences of the fall of nation-state is the conflicts in urban spaces that are poorly prepared for the post-petroleum era. Another political possibility in the post-petroleum era observed in the novel is refeudalization of some regions. The novel foregrounds that the political vacuum enables certain individuals to seize the political power and become the sole authority. However, the novel also explores the possibility of a more democratic political reconstruction in its depiction of Union Grove. In this regard, the study focuses on political decision-making methods in Union Grove, specifically focusing on the crisis leading to election of the protagonist as the new mayor. In the study, this crisis is evaluated as a natural reaction to the purely representative type of democracy and call for a more participatory type of governance. Within this framework, how the conditions of a world without petroleum pave way for this call is demonstrated. Thus, the paper argues that *World Made by Hand* offers an optimistic view of post-petroleum society despite the estimated pitfalls.

Keywords: *World Made by Hand, Petroleum, Politics, Democracy, Nation-State.*

* Asst. Prof. Dr., Nevşehir Hacı Bektaş Veli University, Faculty of Arts and Sciences, Department of English Language and Literature, E-mail: serdaraltac@nevsehir.edu.tr, ORCID: 0000-0002-6778-8571, Nevşehir, Türkiye.

ÖZ

Bu çalışma, James Howard Kunstler'in *World Made by Hand* adlı romanında petrol sonrası toplumun karşılaşılabileceği politik kısıtları ve fırsatları değerlendirir. Çalışmanın ilk kısmı modern toplumun halihazırdaki petrol bağımlılığı, bu yakıtın toplumsal ve politik etkileri ve bu yakıtın geleceğine dair şekillenmiş söylemleri genel hatlarıyla ifade eder. Ardından, çalışma, romanda petrolün yokluğu nedeniyle Amerika Birleşik Devletleri'nin parçalanmasını ve bu parçalanmanın da kaos ve yeni politik yapılanma ihtimallerini yarattığını gösterir. Ulus-devletin düşüşünün neticelerinden biri petrol sonrası döneme yeterince hazır olmayan kentlerde meydana gelen çatışmalardır. Romanda petrol-sonrası dönem ile ilgili gözlemlenen başka bir politik ihtimal ise bazı bölgelerin yeniden feodalleşmesidir. Roman, politik boşluk sayesinde bazı bireylerin politik gücü ele geçirdiğini ve tek otorite haline geldiklerini vurgular. Ancak roman, Union Grove tasviri ile daha demokratik bir politik yeniden yapılanma ihtimalini değerlendirir. Bu bağlamda, çalışma Union Grove'daki politik karar alma yöntemlerine, özellikle de ana karakterin yeni belediye başkanı olarak seçilmesi ile sonuçlanan politik krize odaklanır. Çalışmada bu kriz tamamen temsili olan demokrasi tipine doğal bir tepki olarak ve aynı zamanda daha katılımcı bir yönetim şekline çağrı olarak değerlendirilir. Bu bağlamda petROLSÜZ bir dünyanın koşullarının bu çağrıya nasıl yol açtığı gösterilir. Bu şekilde, bu çalışma, muhtemel tehlikelere rağmen, *World Made by Hand* romanının iyimser bir petrol sonrası toplum ortaya koyduğunu iddia eder.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *World Made by Hand, Petrol, Politika, Demokrasi, Ulus-Devlet.*

Introduction

Speculative fiction, which has been the field of fantasy, horror, science fiction, utopia, dystopia or *what if* scenarios, diverges from the daily realities of the reader. Marek Oziewicz remarks that "speculative fiction draws its creative sap from the non-mimetic impulse" (2017, p. 2) in that it does not confine itself to the limitations of realist mode of representation. Such topics as interplanetary travels, alien encounters, and alternative histories might be pure fabrications of speculative fiction. However, there are also such topics as those that are relevant today and will probably be on the agenda of humanity in the near or distant future. Narratives of ecological collapse, the threat of oppressive governments, pandemics and bio-technological matters seem to occupy public mind as predicaments belonging to today and future. The narratives focusing on petroleum and its future rather fall into this category. The key role of petroleum in organizing the politics, economics and social life as well as its possible depletion in an unknown yet imminent future make petroleum a rich topic on which an arsenal of fictional narratives has been produced.

James Howard Kunstler's *World Made by Hand* (2008) is one of these narratives that delve into the possibilities in a post-oil world and offer a unique experience to the reader. As it will be emphasized in the following parts, the modern society is notorious for its overdependence and addiction to oil at such a great degree that envisioning a post-oil future might pose a challenge. Imre Szeman puts forward that "[o]il capital seems to

represent a stage that neither capital nor its opponents can think beyond” (2007, p. 806). What makes these narratives so valuable is their explorations into these hard-to-imagine future period that has a wide spectrum of possible consequences ranging from societal breakdown to adjustment of society to the low energy regime.

This paper explores the social and political predicaments in a hypothetical post-oil era in the novel titled *World Made by Hand*. To this end, in the first part, the study attempts to portray the overdependence of the existing societies on petroleum and the cultural imaginings generated by petroleum. Based on this framework, this study, subsequently, demonstrates the challenges brought by the lack of petroleum in the novel. Through an exploration of the reactions and social/political practices of the characters in *World Made by Hand*, this paper argues that despite the expected predicaments in post-petroleum period, *World Made by Hand* provides an optimistic political reconstruction, if not a utopian oil-free world.

Towards the end of oil

The history of fuel, which started with wood and evolved into coal during Industrial Revolution, culminated in oil in the 20th century. Vaclav Smil demonstrates that though oil started to be used in the second half of the 19th century, it became an indispensable component of modern life only after automobiles became widespread in the early 20th century (2008, p. 3). From this period on, oil swiftly replaced the traditional energy sources especially in the field of mobility, and this energy regime is still intact to this day. However, since it is a non-renewable source of energy, the life which oil bestowed upon modern individual becomes an issue of speculation. Oil is both what makes the modern society possible and what threatens its existence at the same time. It has a threatening existence for a reason which Gerry Canavan perfectly summarizes: “either we have peak oil and the entire world suffers a tumultuous transition to post-cheap-oil economics, or else there’s plenty of oil left for us to permanently destroy the global climate through excess carbon emissions” (2014, p. 333). Though they appear to be two distinct scenarios, the latter inherently has societal implications, for politics and economics remain vulnerable to the impact of ecological meltdown.

Peakism is a social movement that is predicated on the scenarios Canavan proposes. The movement is influenced by American geophysicist M. King Hubbert’s theory of peak oil. According to this theory, the global oil production will reach a zenith, after which it will dramatically decline, which, in turn, will lead to a soar in oil prices. Though the exact date of the peak oil production remains a matter of controversy, the new methods of oil extraction such as deep ocean drilling or tar sand extraction testify to the end of easy oil production. The peakists are not uniform in their visions of a post-cheap oil world. While some expect an inevitable apocalyptic scenario in which oil exhaustion will result in famine, epidemics and war on limited resources, the others embrace the inevitable transformation as an opportunity to break away from current modes of living. Schneider-Mayerson shortly exemplifies the precautions taken by this group as follows: “For many, ‘peakism’ transformed the way they lived as well: ‘peakists’ changed occupations, purchased land, retrofitted their homes, stockpiled supplies, and even left their partners as a result of their newfound belief system” (2015, p.1). This need for radical changes in personal lives stems from the acute awareness of the overdependence of the modern society on this finite source.

However, what is at stake in the issue of oil is not only pertinent to personal lifestyles but also highly related to the broader ideological and political structures that enable these lifestyles. One of the earliest propositions that support this claim is made by Leslie A. White (1943) who argues that the development of culture and civilization has been enabled by the growing amount of energy that the societies have been able to harness. In another study, Jean-François Mouhot spots the causal relationship between slavery and the amount of energy that is at the disposal of a given society. In his view, “the human tendency to ‘externalize labor’ and ‘dominate, degrade, humiliate and control’, as evidenced by the almost universal practice of slavery will percolate in any and every system” (2010, p. 349). According to this view, oil replaces slavery as an externalized work force, which implies that the post-oil world might run the risk of renewed forms of slavery. Timothy Mitchell’s *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil* sets forth how fossil fuels both contributed to and undermined democracy. In his view, energy intensive economies enabled an environment where “ordinary people came to form critical, collective components in the new machineries of industrial life” (2011, p. 240). Especially, the dependence of coal economy on the work force enabled the ordinary people to acquire political rights that they had not been able to enjoy in a land-based agricultural economy. Oil, however, undermined this dependence, to some extent, because the complex machinery system that extracts and distributes it made this work force redundant; this system “[was] not as vulnerable to stoppages or sabotage as the carbon energy networks of the coal age” (Mitchell, 2011, 145). Similarly, Frederick Buell states that “[u]nlike coal mining, which was a capital-intensive operation with a large labor force working underground, [...] oil [...] promised immense reward for little investment and less hard labor” (2014, p. 74).

These arguments prove the formative role of fossil fuels in social and political structures with which humanity has experimented so far. However, the overwhelming question is how these structures will be shaped in the absence of such a formative but also finite energy source. Though there can be no straightforward answer to this question, Imre Szeman detects three main narratives “concerning what is to be done about disaster of oil: strategic realism, techno-utopianism, and eco-apocalypse” (2007, p. 808). Strategic realism focuses on ‘now’ and seeks ways to dominate the remaining energy sources; techno-utopianism assumes that either humanity will find ways to extract cheap oil again or will find substitute energy sources. Meanwhile, eco-apocalyptic point of view considers radical social changes as a prerequisite to be prepared for oil disaster.

Speculative fiction which deals with oil futurities roams within and across these discourses, and probes the possible trajectories of transformation, based on the current state of affairs. Mary Manjikian compares the work of speculative fiction authors to that of intelligence analysts and states that

Both groups use [...] demographic trends, and political-military trends to create narratives about possible future threats in the short or long term. Both groups start with a real world concern and then forecast how that event might play out in the future- what its ramifications might be for individuals, a society or the nation. (2014, p. 78)

Those speculative works that deal with future thrive on the uncertainties about issues that occupy public debate or bring the overlooked topics to the forefront for public

recognition. Given that the global oil demand has shown no significant signs of austerity, except for the COVID-19 period, the future environmental and social consequences of overdependence on this finite energy source have become a terrain whose contours have started to be drawn by speculative fiction.

Post-Petroleum Politics in *World Made by Hand*

World Made by Hand is set in a small town called Union Grove during a period when oil is no longer available. The characters in the novel are usually those who experienced the compulsory energy transition in the past. This detail is significant in that the novel depicts characters, whose identities were formerly formed by the oil culture, in an environment where adaptation to the new conditions is not complete, yet. However, depletion of oil is not the only challenge that tested the society in the past; the novel makes lots of references to such disasters as pandemic, terrorist attacks and the meltdown of global financial system that hit the United States in the past. Despite the multiplicity of the reasons of the collapse, each one of the reasons can be said to be somehow related to the depletion of oil, including the terrorist attacks which could be attributed to the overseas geopolitical tensions arising from energy issues. The novel starts with Robert Earle, carpenter, and Loren Holder, the local reverend, returning from fishing to their homes in their idyllic post-industrial world. On their way, they encounter a group of religious order, called New Faith Brotherhood, who are authorized by the mayor to settle in Union Grove. The mayor's decision leads to much dismay among the residents of Union Grove, especially Robert, which eventually results in the election of Robert as the new mayor. Though there seems to be a brewing tension between the newcomers and the residents, no conflict arises. Meanwhile, Robert pays a visit to Wayne Karp, the troublesome head of a scavenger group, to collect some materials for his repair work. During this visit, one of Wayne's employees kills Shawn Watling- Robert's companion. In order to start a legal prosecution, Robert applies Bullock, the reluctant magistrate. Though Bullock does not accept to take any steps, he commissions Robert and several members of brotherhood to search for his lost crew that he sent to Albany. Robert and his companions embark on a successful expedition at the end of which Bullock's men are rescued from a tyrant local governor. Bullock organizes a celebration party; however, during the party Wayne Karp's men burglarize several Union Grove houses. Robert himself and Loren, the new constable, go to detain Wayne Karp, only to be tortured in the end. To help bring justice, the brotherhood organizes a raid to Karpstown and they capture Wayne, though one of their members, Minor, is killed in action. This man turns out to be the son of Brother Jobe, the head of the brotherhood and Wayne is, subsequently, found murdered mysteriously in his cell. The novel finishes with an optimistic scenario in which much of the perceived threats to Union Grove is removed. *World Made by Hand* deals with the consequences of oil use more with respect to the ways in which society is affected by them than its effect on environment and climate. The novel imagines a future in which societal breakdown predates an environmental catastrophe; and it demonstrates that the end of oil marks the end of Anthropocene.

As to the apocalyptic narratives, Nichola Harmer states that “national civil government usually ceases to function almost immediately following the curtailment or restriction of fossil fuel supplies and the concomitant economic collapse” (2017, p.10). In line with this observation, *World Made by Hand* problematizes the idea of nation-state and democracy because these are the notions that have developed, to some extent, owing to growing intensity of energy use. Benedict Anderson explains how print-capitalism along with the developing technologies of transportation facilitated the identification of geographically distinct communities with each other, thus form ‘imagined communities’ (2006, p. 188). In the novel, one can observe a bilateral geographical myopia between the citizens and governance in the U.S. The federal government has neither propensity nor motives to reach the geographical locations supposed to be under its sovereignty. When Robert and Loren return from fishing, they pass across a bridge that the narrator describes as follows: “It had been years since the state of New York repaired any of these things. There were big holes in the deck you could see clear through. Another couple of spring floods and it might be swept away altogether” (2008, p. 3). The derelict condition of the motorways might well be explained by the loss of demand on the automobiles running on oil; however, the unkempt railway networks cannot be explained with the same reasons. Britney, who lives with Robert following her husband’s death, questions this:

‘You’d think they could get trains running again, at least. You don’t need oil to run a train. Even I know that.’ ‘Yeah, you’d think,’ [Robert] said. ‘Except I am not sure there is any ‘they’ left out there to get them running. And I wonder where you’d go if ‘they’ did it. (2008, p. 248)

With the fall of capitalism, no private companies are left to run the railways, because, as Imre Szeman states, “without oil, current configurations of capital are impossible” (2007, p. 817); and the state apparently turns a blind eye to the necessity to reach different locations of the country. Furthermore, Robert’s answer shows that the necessity of transportation has faded into obscurity all together. Even if he does not clearly disclose the reason of this statement, it is obvious that the de facto political decentralization has removed the need to communicate with the localities within ‘national’ boundaries. Under these circumstances, the territorial sovereignty of the central government is compromised. The novel does not eliminate American presidency from the political sphere; however, the president is reduced to a ghostly figure who has lost the territorial sovereignty over the states. The novel uses a powerful strategy by depicting a country with a politically impotent government rather than no government at all. In this way, the fragility of nation-state in such an apocalyptic scenario is more dramatically conveyed to the reader. As to the national crisis, Robert ponders that

We apparently had a president now named Harvey Albright, but I would be damned if I knew how he got elected because they didn’t hold it here. This was well after the short, unhappy reign of General Fellowes, who removed president Sharpe from his office on account of the fiasco in the Holy Land. (2008, p. 15)

This statement is significant for three reasons. First, it foregrounds the fragility of politics and limits of civil government due to oil even before the depletion of oil. It underlines the geopolitical tensions arising from the issue of oil extraction, and the past to which Robert refers exemplifies “strategic realism” that, according to Imre Szeman, a defining characteristic of nation-states (2007, p. 810). Evidently, on the eve of energy transition, the U.S. government sustains its desire to control limited energy resources and ignores the steps necessary for a smooth transition to low energy regime. However, this ignorance eventually leads to the decline of both nation and democracy, for they both are somewhat the product of geographically mobile social structures and energy intensive economies. Secondly, the legitimacy of the president is totally jeopardized, for the answer to the question of who elected the president remains a mystery. Thirdly, the statement suggests that the president no longer has any political power over the country. The lack of authority eventually leads to Hobbesian pre-social contract world in certain regions. Only a limited account of what is happening in the troubled regions is given by Brother Jobe:

From Texas clear to Florida, there's folks shooting each other and trouble between the races and all like that. Seems like the law is on the run everywhere. We were on our way up out of Virginia when the other bomb hit Washington, D.C. Pennsylvania wasn't no picnic after that, I can tell you. We tried it for more than two years, but it wasn't any go for us there. We pulled out the end of April. (2008, p. 8)

The novel does not directly delineate the chaos following the end of oil, nor does it give any specific reasons of the conflicts. However, urban spaces are vulnerable to the shortage of food, and this might be a major reason of these conflicts. Albert Bartlett points out that “[m]odern agriculture is the use of land to convert petroleum into food” (1978, p. 880). The pesticides, fertilizers and the transportation of food are heavily dependent on natural gas and petroleum, and this production system has enabled agriculture to support an overpopulated planet. Though *World Made by Hand* makes reference to the population contraction caused by wars and diseases in the past, food persists to be an issue of scarcity. The common point shared by the troubled locations of the country is that they are usually urban places, which raises questions about the resilience of the cities during a possible transition period. Urban planning, which has been pushing agricultural production into background in its calculations, will be likely to fall short of feeding urban populations. The rise of oil-driven transportation and distribution system brought about the separation of urban spaces from agricultural activities. As a criticism of this alienation, Kunstler remarks that the “[e]cological relationship to the land has been rendered minimal and abstract by technology” (2005, p. 242). The reason why Kunstler blurs the chaos in the cities might be his intention not to overemphasize the importance of oil. He naturally envisages a chaos following the end of oil; however, his interest lies more in the possibilities of social and political reconstruction than a simple end to the social and political history.

This reconstruction, however, might follow distinct paths- one of them being local authoritarian regimes and the other one being local democracies as far as *World Made by*

Hand is concerned. Despite the ecological and social utopian imaginaries, Imre Szeman warns that “there is no guarantee that the new world on the other side of the end of oil will be one made in the image of revolutionary groups and their labors” (2012, p. 439). One possibility expressed in the novel is re-feudalization of the society. The most conspicuous example of this new political formation could be observed in Albany which is governed by Dan Curry- a figure whose image oscillates between a governor and mafia boss. Robert and brotherhood find Bullock’s men imprisoned in Albany for not paying ludicrous and arbitrary taxes imposed by Curry, who has a habit of executing the prisoners for fun if the specified ransom is not paid for them. Robert decides to resort to a nearby government authority at the state capitol building if there is left any. However, Furman -the lieutenant governor- whom Robert finds there replies as follows: “I know exactly what [Dan Curry’s] up to. His operation has nothing to do with us. It’s not authorized. It’s beyond our control. But politics hates a vacuum, if you know what I mean” (2008, p. 170). This confession openly proves the necessity of oil, or energy intensive systems, for the operations of central government or nation-state. As to the modern states, Christopher Pierson states that “technological change made available to the modern state forms of surveillance and control which simply had not existed under more traditional state formations” (2004, p.13), because these technologies encompass several tools that enable the control of the state over a given territory. What technology and oil provide is something akin to Hobbesian political formation that prevents the state of nature in which everyone is at war with each other. The ‘vacuum’ to which Furman refers is exactly this state of nature. Timothy Mitchell states that “scientific modes of understanding enabled us [...] to organise collective life so that the world of nature stood on one side and the human world of passions, beliefs, social forces and political power on the other” (2011, p. 239). In the world presented in the novel, the humanity is vulnerable to the caprices of nature; thus they might pledge allegiance to any authority that offer them a scrap of protection through his/her organization skills, regardless of the level of totalitarianism this authority might have. Curry explains his political success as follows: “This is just a time when nobody seems to know how to do anything, to get things done. A fellow makes a few things happen, and the world falls at his feet” (2008, p. 162), which implies that the current political configurations have deprived multitudes of having political and civic agency. Karptown is just another example of re-feudalization of society. However, what makes Karptown distinct from Albany is that it is only the “misfits, losers and former motorheads” (2008, p. 267) that pledge allegiance to the local authority, Wayne Karp. Stephen Bullock’s farm, on the other hand, occupies a grey zone in the political spectrum offered by post-oil era. Bullock is a typical peakist figure who foresaw the end of oil, took precautions by investing on land in the past, and focused his attention on agricultural production. As such, the system he establishes is akin to manorialism. On the political practices in Bullock’s community, Robert comments that “being a world of its own, there was no way we outsiders knew what his people had to say about how things worked there, except that it pretty obviously wasn’t a democracy” (2008, p. 81). Though Robert is accurate in his observation, Bullock is far from being a

tyrant figure. For instance, when Brother Jobe says that “[your workers] seem well fed”, Bullock simply replies “Well, I’m not running a zoo here. They feed themselves” (2008, p. 83). As a result, the political fragmentation and feudalism observed in *World Made by Hand* resemble the political atmosphere in Europe following the collapse of the Roman Empire. As a response to the perceived danger of instability, as it is observed in the cities, the people submit to the local authorities.

In addition to chaos and feudalization, the novel presents democratic social organization as the third possible political outcome in the post-petroleum period. While Albany, Bullock’s farm and Karpstown exemplify the feudal vein in varying contexts, the town of Union Grove serves as a model for democratic tendencies. The use of the word ‘tendency’ is deliberate in that democracy in the town is not taken for granted, but a concept whose ways of implementation is contested as a result of radical transformations that have taken place in the way people live. It goes without saying that the town still assumes itself politically a part of the U.S., despite the disappearance of central power. However, the lack of central power leads to a de facto decentralized community, which turns Union Grove into a political experiment.

The novel commences with a political crisis when, the mayor, Dale Murray arbitrarily decides to accommodate New Faith Brotherhood at a building in Union Grove, without consulting the residents of the town. This crisis ignites a discussion which has political implications about the types of democratic governance. To clarify it, this crisis implies a limit to representative democracy in the post-petroleum age. Robert describes the governance in Union Grove as follows:

[t]he apparatus of our government had fallen way off, along with the population. It was Dale and a drunken constable for the most part, and a magistrate who said he wouldn’t do the job if elected—before he was elected. Sometimes things just happened and then you heard about. (2008, p. 12)

This description evinces that the local governance is dysfunctional, which echoes the vague existence of the president of the U.S. In fact, if Union Grove is viewed as a symbolic model of the traditional U.S. government, the power balance turns out to be disturbed. Dale, the counterpart of the president (executive branch) takes decisions which, actually, have to be taken by the town board, the counterpart of the Congress (legislative branch); and Dale’s decisions are not subject to judicial review because the magistrate (judicial branch) already announced that he would not fulfil his assigned duties. Having said that, Dale cannot be simply called a usurper of power in that the residents of the town lack civic and political participation. When Robert questions “on whose authority” Dale accepted the brotherhood, Dale reproaches him, stating “You look here. Nobody else in this burg takes an interest in civic affairs, yourself included” (2008, p. 58). Dale is not wrong in his claims. For instance, during the meeting of the town board, no one volunteers to be the new constable. The reluctance of people for active participation in matters regarding the public largely stems from the fact that they are not ‘evolved’ to participate in. Matthew T. Huber explains how oil severs individual from

society, commenting that “[t]he sociospatial patterns of suburban life made possible by automobility and massive oil consumption create crisis narratives of declining social solidarity and community and the individualization of American culture” (2013, p. x). Raised by this culture, the residents of Union Grove delegate power only to evade the burden of decision-making and taking action for the community.

However, it also needs to be remarked that the call for a more direct participation in governance does not emerge as a result of self-conscious, meta-political discussion in Union Grove. The residents, as it were, are forced to revise their political constitution. Though Dale took arbitrary decisions in the past, only after his decision about New Faith Brotherhood, does the community decide to revise the political decision-making praxis. This revision does not result from any suspicions about the brotherhood itself, though the community has reservations about the unexpected arrival of this group into their towns; but it is a culmination of long-standing and unexpressed grievances about the decision-making practices of the mayor. The way in which Dale Murray is removed from the post signifies the revolutionary characteristic of the political transition. Although it was not on the agenda of the town board meeting, Jason LaBountie suddenly puts the substitution of Dale with Robert to the vote. What’s significant at this point is that the proper procedure dictated by *Robert’s Rules*¹ is not observed, which clearly shows a rebellious outrage to the existing order.

Additionally, as the boundaries of political sovereignty shrink back to communitarian size, and more importantly, as the ‘world’ begins to be ‘made by hand’, the political decisions begin to be ‘made by hand’, as well. Jean-Jacques Rousseau advocates that “[i]n a country that is truly free, the citizens do everything with their own arms and nothing by means of money” (1999, p. 126). On the same ground, Rousseau rejects representative democracy, emphasizing that “[s]overeignty [...] cannot be represented. [...] Every law the people has not ratified in person is null and void” (1999, p. 127). In the historical continuum, professionalization of politics and individualization through technology have dissociated governance from labor and material conditions of life. This is not to say that oil was the sole inducer of representative governments; however, the complexity and vastness of societies, which was, to a great extent, enabled by oil, made representative governance seem a more viable type of government. As Nadia Urbinati proposes “[i]ndirect participation solved the problem of communication in large territories in a way face-to-face relations could not do, while freeing society from chance, irrationality, and instability” (2008, p. 145). *World Made by Hand* does not only emphasize the disintegration of this vastness, but also highlights daily labor and interdependence of the individuals in the political units left in the wake of political disintegration of the nation. The decisions taken by the governance in a small-scale society like Union Grove have immediate effects on the daily reality of the community

¹ *Robert’s Rules of Order* is a manual written by Henry Martyn Robert in 1876. The manual provides a guideline for parliamentary procedure. Though it is not officially implemented by the government, it is adopted by ordinary societies and local level boards.

members who cannot indulge in the personal pleasures and ambitions once cherished by petroculture anymore. The offices of the former and new mayors also have figurative significance as to the embeddedness of decision-making and politics in the daily realities. On the one hand, Dale Murray uses “his own private law office” (2008, p. 116) as the mayor’s office, keeping his public identity strictly separated from his private one. On the other hand, though it is the lack of a proper governing building that dictates it, Robert starts to use his own house as the mayor’s office. The public space penetrates into his private space, which is a trade-off between his individual sphere and the community’s interests. This echoes Benjamin Constant’s critique of modern representative democracy in which he contrasts the understanding of liberty between the ancients and moderns. He points out that “the ancients when they sacrificed [individual] independence to their political rights, sacrificed less to obtain more; while in making the same sacrifice, we would give more to obtain less” (2016, p. 109). The day after his election as the new mayor, Robert finds his private space invaded by a public matter. Brother Joseph pays a visit to Robert to inform him that he is expected to lead a search party for Bullock’s missing crew (2008, p. 115). The only limitation of this interpretation (a transition to a more participatory governance) is that the reader does not fully grasp whether the other inhabitants of the town become as civic-minded as Robert, because the narrative focuses too much on Robert as a representative hero of post-petroleum age. However, this representative power of the character itself enables an optimistic interpretation of political future. For this reason, *World Made by Hand* illustrates how political transformation starts, and utopian impulse at work, rather than a complete utopia.

Conclusion

The questions raised in the novel are whether we are ready for a post-oil era and whether we will be able to show a resilience in the face of a societal breakdown caused by an oil crisis. This questioning may also run a risk of overestimating the role of oil and ultimately lead to conceptualize the end of oil as the end of civilization. However, it needs to be recognized that the centuries preceding oil were not periods of pre-social contract. Yet, it also needs to be recognized that the possible predicaments arising from the end of oil cannot be averted through a simple switch back to the pre-oil political and social organizations. After all, the generation that is supposed to witness the transition will be unlikely to have the practical, political and social capabilities, having been evolved in an environment shaped by oil. The challenges of transition might be compared to the possible biological challenges of the living organisms during a case of abrupt environmental transformation. Furthermore, the capability of the existing alternatives to fossil fuels to make up for the absence of oil is highly controversial. As far as Kunstler is concerned, the full replacement of fossil fuels by these alternatives is off the table because “[to some degree], all of the non-fossil fuel energy sources actually depend on an underlying fossil fuel economy” (2005, p. 100). In accordance with this, Kunstler does not include the renewable energy production as an alternative that can somewhat make up for the absence of oil, making his work an experiment in scarcity.

Kunstler envisages a future in which societal breakdown happens prior to environmental apocalypse. This does not mean that he favors the fragmentation of central authority and political decentralization as a necessary preparatory step for post-petroleum age. As he clearly states in *The Long Emergency*, “I do not welcome a crack-up of our nation but I think it is a plausible outcome that we ought to be prepared to face” (2005, p. 1). Chaos, re-feudalization and communitarian democracy are the possibilities offered by post-petroleum society in the novel. Though chaos and re-feudalization, rather, appear to be natural by-products of the fall of nation-state in the absence of oil, democracy and its forms become an issue of discussion. The political and civic consciousness appears to be earned rather than given in the novel. The social circumstances of oil age might have favored the proliferation of representative democracy and even led to acceptance of it as a political orthodoxy. However, the novel suggests that when the decisions start to be taken within a small-scale community where life is based on manual labor of the individuals, the representation begins to be a problematic concept. Political and civic participation turns up as a natural by-product of such communities. As a result, the novel does not only present a kind of world made by hand, but also a hope of a democracy made by hand.

References

- Anderson, B. (2006). *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. Verso.
- Bartlett, A. (1978). Forgotten fundamentals of energy crisis. *American Journal of Physics*, 46(9), 876-888.
- Canavan, G. (2014). Retrofutures, Petrofutures: Oil, Scarcity and Limit. In Ross Barrett and Daniel Worden (Eds.), *Oil Culture*. (pp. 331-349). University of Minnesota Press.
- Constant, B. (2016). The liberty of the ancients compared with that of the moderns. In R. Blaug (Ed.), *Democracy: A reader* (pp. 108-110). Oxford University Press.
- Harmer, N. (2017). Crude geopolitics: territory and governance in post-peak oil imaginaries. *Territory, Politics, Governance*, 6(4), 405–428. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21622671.2017.1297251>
- Kunstler, J. H. (2005). *The long emergency: Surviving the converging catastrophes of the twenty-first century*. Atlantic Monthly Press.
- Kunstler, J. H. (2008). *World made by hand*. Atlantic Monthly Press.
- Manjikian, M. (2014). *Apocalypse and post-politics: The romance of the end*. Lexington.
- Mitchell, T. (2011). *Carbon democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil*. Verso.
- Mouhot, J. (2010). Past connections and present similarities in slave ownership and fossil fuel usage. *Climatic Change*, 105(1–2), 329–355. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10584-010-9982-7>

- Oziewicz, M. (2017). Speculative fiction. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.013.78>
- Pierson, C. (2004). *Modern state*. Routledge.
- Rousseau, J.J. (1999). *Social Contract*. Oxford University Press.
- Schneider-Mayerson, M. (2015). *Peak-oil: Apocalyptic environmentalism and libertarian political culture*. The University of Chicago Press.
- Smil, V. (2008). *Oil: A beginner's guide*. Oneworld.
- Szeman, I. (2007). System failure: Oil futurity, and the anticipation of disaster. *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 106 (4), 805- 823. DOI 10.1215/00382876-2007-047
- Szeman, I. (2012). Crude aesthetics: The politics of oil Documentaries. *Journal of American Studies*, 46(2), 423–439. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0021875812000151>
- Urbinati, N. (2008). *Representative democracy: Principles and genealogy*. University of Chicago Press.
- White, L. A. (1943). Energy and the evolution of culture, *American Anthropologist*, 45(3), 335-256.