



## Interdisciplinary Conference Lausanne, 27-28 September 2019

# “Narratives of (Un)sustainability: Assessing U.S. Oil Culture”

Until newly-elected Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez propelled the “Green New Deal” into the public discourse following the 2018 midterm elections, ecological issues had remained largely absent in American political debate and agenda. Unsurprisingly, the US emerges as a longstanding contributor to the rising concentration of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, one of the leading causes of climate change. The holder of one of the most important carbon footprints, the US ranks among the most unsustainable states. If the “American way of life” were to be replicated on a worldwide scale, its rate of resource consumption and waste production would require close to five planets to sustain itself. Since the end of WWII, the US has accumulated a colossal ecological debt at the expense of future generations, whose access to natural wealth is substantially jeopardized, and developing economies, which rely on a much lower resource supply.

Climate disruption is a symptom of this socio-economic matrix of unsustainability and of the unclaimed “check” or hidden cost of the US and other countries’ dysfunctional modes of existence. Specifically, unsustainability results from the harmful triad consisting of fossil fuels (coal, oil and natural gas), a high-energy society, and economic growth. As Nathaniel Rich explains, “historically, energy use had correlated to economic growth” and Americans had grown accustomed to the idea that “the more fossil fuels [they] burned, the better [their] lives became.”<sup>1</sup> The refusal to address pressing environmental issues by engaging the country in broad, systemic changes (for instance through a national plan for a fossil fuel phase-out) attests to the pervasiveness of oil culture and its coterminous ideology of perpetual growth in American society. That being said, counter-narratives that seek other ways of relating to the environment and of living on earth’s rhythms have emerged in the past years (from the US itself and from elsewhere), and they offer an avenue for moving past the oil predicament.

With Prof. Stephanie LeMenager (University of Oregon, author of *Living Oil: Petroleum in the American Century*), an expert on America’s petroleum culture, as our keynote speaker, we would like to invite scholars from various disciplines to reflect on the narratives surrounding the US oil culture. We conceive of this study day as an opportunity to explore both ends of the spectrum: from narratives of how unsustainability fuels the oil culture by disseminating ideas such as the existence of inexhaustible abundance or the possibility of a technological “fix” to all environmental ailments, to narratives of sustainability that demonstrate how American culture could be changed through an awareness of the fundamental incompatibility between a politics of infinite growth and a finite biosphere.

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<sup>1</sup> Nathaniel Rich, “Losing Earth: The Decade We Almost Stopped Climate Change.” *The New York Times*, 1 August, 2018.

Possible topics could include, but are not restricted to:

- (un)sustainability in American literature / popular culture / public discourse
- the relationship between the oil culture and prevailing US national narratives or myths
- the impact on American culture of rapid technological development based on a seemingly limitless supply of fossil fuels throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century
- the effect of the oil peak or the 1973 oil crisis on American cultural imagination and literary production
- the role of ecological writing (petro-fiction, cli-fi, eco-gothic, the naturalist essay, nature poetry, ...) in helping US citizens imagine a different future
- narrating the transition: towards a post-carbon America
- Native American perspectives on resource exploitation and on sustainability
- gender and ecology: masculine extractive, exploitive systems vs. feminine regenerative, cyclic approaches
- the public and political role of writers and scholars in helping the US envision a more sustainable culture

Please send a paper abstract of 200-300 words and a short biographical note of 100-150 words by May 30, 2019 to [audrey.loetscher@unil.ch](mailto:audrey.loetscher@unil.ch) and [agnieszka.soltysikmonnet@unil.ch](mailto:agnieszka.soltysikmonnet@unil.ch).