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*MuseLetter #355 / October 2022 by Richard Heinberg*

*This month's Museletter consists of two essays. The first, "Oil, War and the Fate of Industrial Societies," looks at parallels between today's energy/economy crisis and my 2003 book [The Party's Over](#). The second, "Blues for America," was inspired by a concert I attended recently and discusses Wynton Marsalis's suggestion that the blues should be America's national anthem. Please also check out my limited-run podcast, "[Power: Limits and Prospects for Human Survival](#)."*

## **Oil, war and the fate of industrial societies**

The world teeters on the brink of economic disaster due to energy shortages caused by war. The main oil-producing nations are unable and unwilling to increase output, even though prices are high and threatening to go much higher. The solutions being proposed—electric cars and renewable energy technologies—are coming on line, but not fast enough. Building them to the scale required to maintain current levels of economic activity and societal complexity would require enormous amounts of minerals and metals that are also becoming scarce. We appear to be hurtling toward geopolitical and economic turmoil.

Does anything about this scenario sound familiar? It might. It happens to be almost exactly what I discussed in my book [The Party's Over: Oil, War and the Fate of Industrial Societies](#), published in 2003. I have no interest in rubbing salt in society's worsening wounds by saying "I told you so," but it would be a dereliction of duty for me not to point out the facts.

My book was one of the first to discuss peak oil—the point when supplies of the world's most economically pivotal resource start to dwindle. Of course, the most pessimistic predictions for the timing of the peak were wrong. Many analysts thought that petroleum production would start to decline in the years between 2005 and 2010. Instead, the rate of global conventional oil extraction flatlined during that period, and is just now beginning to descend from its long plateau. Meanwhile, unconventional oil (tar sands and tight oil produced by fracking and horizontal drilling) enabled new heights of production starting around 2010. The general consensus thereafter was that oil supplies can easily continue to increase for the foreseeable future; all it takes is more investment.

My organization, Post Carbon Institute, documented in [great technical detail](#) that the new unconventional oil sources were a flash-in-the-pan, and that

world oil production was still set to enter its inevitable long-term decline phase quite soon. But very few listened. Where peak oil was still mentioned, it was framed in terms of peak demand resulting from the universal electrification of transport modes.

Today oil supplies are tight once again, as they were in 2008, before the fracking boom. But now there is no fracking cavalry waiting on the horizon to swoop down and rescue the global economy. Indeed, the only factors keeping oil prices from going stratospheric today are depressed Chinese demand (due to Covid restrictions) and fears of a global recession (triggered by high energy prices).

In July, President Biden went hat-in-hand to the Saudis, begging for more oil output. Instead, as of mid-October, OPEC+ (a loose affiliation of the 13 OPEC members and 10 of the world's major non-OPEC oil-exporting nations) is planning to cut its production by two million barrels per day. Political elites in Washington read this as the Saudis trying to interfere in the upcoming US midterm elections by causing gasoline prices to rise, thus nudging voters toward Republican candidates. While that interpretation may ring true, the fact is that OPEC and Russia cannot produce much more oil in any case. If their tired old oilfields were forced to yield more oil over the short term, the result would be less production potential over the longer term.

On October 11, Saudi Aramco CEO [Amin Nasser told a conference](#) in London, “Today there is spare capacity that is extremely low. If China opens up, [the] economy starts improving or the aviation industry starts asking for more jet fuel, you will erode this spare capacity.”

Is Nasser exaggerating for political effect? If anything, the Saudis have been hiding their production capacity constraints for years in order to garner more investment cash and world influence by maintaining the common belief that they are sitting on limitless oceans of oil.

Production prospects are not much better in US, even though fracking has propelled the nation back to the forefront of petroleum producers. The Permian play in Texas and New Mexico, where tight oil resources are most plentiful, can still grow its production somewhat, but other fracking plays (the Bakken, Eagle Ford, and Niobrara) are all past peak. Growth potential in the Permian is now struggling to overcome declines everywhere else in the US—from Alaska to California to North Dakota.

World oil production stopped growing in 2019, just before the Covid pandemic. Even if a new peak of production occurs before 2030, it will likely exceed the 2019 level by only a tiny fraction, and only for a short time. There is simply no breathing room left for petroleum-powered world economic growth.

If the diagnosis I offered in 2003 is turning out to be true (though delayed), my prescription should also be revisited. Learn to get by with less. Cooperate more with your neighbors. Find ways to exit the monetary economy. Replace oil with renewable-based electricity where you can, but otherwise simply lower your expectations. And please let's not fight over what's left.

## **Blues for America**

Recently my wife Janet and I splurged on tickets to a spellbinding concert by the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra. The music was memorable, but a comment by orchestra leader and trumpet virtuoso Wynton Marsalis proved even more so. Marsalis introduced a blues number with the seemingly off-hand suggestion that the blues should be America's national anthem. [\*]

The audience laughed. But I, for one, took this as a serious and brilliant suggestion. It's worth some discussion.

The blues is a uniquely American (at first solely African-American) musical form. Unlike minstrel tunes and cakewalks, it wasn't easily hijacked by the dominant culture in order to parody and demean African Americans; nor was it, like ragtime, adapted by Blacks from popular Euro-American dance forms like the march or the two-step. Instead, it erupted directly as a raw response to degrading conditions forced upon resilient, creative people by the deeply racist society that had kidnapped and enslaved their ancestors. In both form and expression, the blues was startlingly original. And, in its first iterations, there was almost nothing commercial about it.

The blues began to emerge in the South, probably at around the time of the Civil War. However, an exact year or place is impossible to pin down. In 1909, W.C. Handy copyrighted what is often cited as the first blues composition, "[The Memphis Blues](#)," but it was not written strictly in the form of a blues. Further, it was preceded by Jelly Roll Morton's "[New Orleans Blues](#)," composed in 1902 though not copyrighted until 1925, which was a true and iconic blues that still sounds thoroughly hip 120 years later.

There is early testimony in recorded comments by Morton and his contemporaries that, at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the blues had already been around for a while, maybe even a couple of generations. Since the first blues singers would not have been musically literate, and since recording technology was nonexistent at the time, there is no documentation of "The Birth of the Blues" (the title of a 1926 non-blues song by Ray Henderson).

We do know that blues started as a rural, improvised vocal music that invited simple instrumental accompaniment. It quickly caught hold and flourished, persisting alongside spirituals and, later, ragtime. During the 1920s, blues singer-composers like Bessie Smith, Mamie Smith, and Ma Rainey were so popular that the New York-based commercial tunesmiths of Tin Pan Alley churned out dozens of songs with the word "blues" in their titles—songs that, in form and spirit, had little to do with real blues.

The musical form of the blues is simplicity itself: three chords spread over 12 bars in 4/4 time, with lots of repetitions (there are also 8- and 16-bar blues forms, and extra chords can be judiciously added to provide more musical variety). In its essence, the blues is so uncomplicated that any teenage kid with a guitar can get in on the action, as three British lads named Clapton, Page, and Richards did in the early 1960s, going on to make fortunes that eluded the Black American blues artists they were imitating.

Despite or because of its formal starkness, the blues is infinitely variable. It provides a universal framework within which instrumentalists and singers with little else in common can carry on an extended musical conversation. Without artful improvisation and microtonal note bending (the latter cannot

be executed on the piano, one of the least blues-friendly instruments), blues sometimes seems monotonous. But in the hands of master musicians, including pianists like Jelly Roll Morton, it is endlessly captivating.

Why would the blues make a great national anthem?

An easy place to begin that argument is with the observation that almost anything would be better than our current anthem, “The Star-Spangled Banner,” which is hard to sing and has lyrics that only a historian can relate to. Hardly anyone really likes it, though most Americans, when asked, say they’d [prefer to stick with it](#) rather than change to a different song.

Many of the oft-suggested alternatives are characterized by corny triumphalism or smarmy patriotism (“America the Beautiful,” “My Country ’Tis of Thee,” or “Columbia the Gem of the Ocean”). The best of the front-runners is undoubtedly Woody Guthrie’s folksy [“This Land Is Your Land.”](#)

The blues, however, has a lot going for it as a long-shot candidate. Blues may be America’s greatest cultural gift to the world; if not, it’s certainly on the short list. It was the key contributor to the origins of jazz, rock and roll, funk, soul, R&B, and hip hop, and it deeply influenced country and western and bluegrass music as well. Without blues, it’s fair to say, there might be little recognizably American music. Blues embodies human resilience in the face of adversity and suffering. It’s therefore the perfect musical tonic for a nation founded on slavery and genocide (Native Americans have the incentive to play the blues with genuine feeling; check out Cecil Gray’s [“Native Blues”](#)), and a country of extreme economic inequality whose fossil-fueled luck is starting to run out.

Indeed, Americans will have plenty of reasons to sing the blues as this century wears on—as their nation’s oil and gas production inevitably declines; as climate change worsens droughts, wildfires, and megastorms; as decades of unsustainable economic growth turn to decades of contraction; as mountains of government, corporate, and consumer debt come due; and as festering resentments (urban/rural, racial, and regional) further erode an already fraying set of norms that enable political and legal systems to function. The key to national survival will be a collective willingness to share the pain (instead of blaming scapegoats), celebrate our common humanity, and build a new culture that’s both ecological and humane. I can think of no music more fitting as a soundtrack for that enterprise than the blues.

One argument against the blues as America’s national anthem is simply that blues is more of a musical genre than a specific composition. Should a particular blues song be proposed to Congress?

If so, then first consideration should go to the works of Bessie Smith, who wrote and performed many of the most popular blues ballads of the last century; my personal pick (an admittedly idiosyncratic one) would be her [“Dirty No-Gooder’s Blues.”](#) Then there’s B.B. King’s [“Every Day I Have the Blues”](#) and Robert Johnson’s [“Hellhound on My Trail.”](#) For boomers and rockers, a top choice might be Jimi Hendrix’s [“Voodoo Child.”](#)

The possibilities are nearly endless. But why should we be required to choose? Maybe each official occasion could open with a different blues song.

Of course, the chances of Marsalis's suggestion being taken up by officials in Washington are virtually zip. But I still dream of a World Series game kicking off with a rousing, full-throated chorus of Willie Dixon's "[Wang Dang Doodle](#)." In that fantasy future America might actually redeem itself.

[\*] Marsalis made the same suggestion on page 50 of his book *Moving to Higher Ground* (2008).