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Review: Blowout in the Gulf: The BP Oil Spill Disaster and the Future of Energy in America

By William R. Freudenburg and Robert Gramling

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Freudenburg, William R. and Gramling, Robert. *Blowout in the Gulf. The BP Oil Spill Disaster and the Future of Energy in America*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2011. 240 pp., 5 graphs. ISBN: 9780262015837. US\$18.95, cloth.

On April 20th 2010, eleven oil workers died as the Deepwater Horizon, a gigantic offshore plant rented by BP to drill deep in the Gulf of Mexico, exploded and, after burning for 36 hours, sank, causing an uncontrolled eruption of oil one mile below the sea level. Oil poured out at a rate of 56,000 barrels per day, until July 15th, causing one of the largest marine disasters in the history – second only to Saddam Hussein's intentional opening the oil spigots as his forces retreated from Kuwait in 1991 – and frustrating the hopes of the Gulf residents, reassured in vain by BP and the government of a quick solution of the spill. Just like the complexity of its assessment, the magnitude and duration of the Gulf disaster were distinctive, due to its wide-reaching and prolonged impact in the region associated with the extensive use of dispersants.

The roots of the Gulf disaster and its aftermath have been thoroughly analysed by William R. Freudenburg and Robert Gramling, professors of environmental studies and sociology, respectively, who shared a long-time collaboration as observers of the oil industry. In a previous work, *Oil in Troubled Waters: Perceptions, Politics, and the Battle Over Offshore Drilling* (State University of New York Press, 1994), they put the clash over offshore drilling in appropriate sociological and historical contexts, investigating the attitudes welcoming or opposing it, and forecasting that the argument would continue. In the case of *Blowout in the Gulf*, the focus is on the BP accident, but the discourse is set into a broader perspective, which includes the carbon economy, the fading energy independence of the USA, and the ever more risky actions associated with oil and gas recovery, e.g. from deeper wells, beneath the arctic ices, or fracturing shale deposits.

First, the book tackles technical details-- how an oil reserve was formed, how it can be discovered, and, more difficult, how can the oil get out of it – which, though essential to know what's going on, are usually skipped by news reports. The central chapters offer an account of the current rush to exploit offshore digging along with the inventory of accidents – including the Exxon Valdez spill in Alaska – and violations, due to the self-rule in which oil companies are allowed to operate, where underestimation of risks, missteps, and lies are ordinary affairs. Regarding the quantification of the Gulf spill, the authors note: “BP's original estimate, to put it kindly, was a bit on the optimistic side. It was about 2 percent of the actual volume, which was around sixty times higher” (p. 13). Also, the income American taxpayers receive is only a fraction of the percentage gained from oil extraction by most other nations on earth.

For a century America has been the world's biggest producer and user of petroleum; actually it consumes 20 million barrels of oil every day– which is more than 25 percent of the world's total, with a population less than 5 percent of the entirety – and scarcely supplying 7 percent of the world demand. Although we have grown confident of oil as a limitless resource, we have to realize that its age is approaching the end. Otherwise we are forced to accept higher endangerments in economy, environment, and health too: since the BP spill began, there have been concerns about the extent to which related hazards can affect humans, with increased risk of long-term health damage. In the conclusive chapter, “Today and Tomorrow”, Freudenburg and Gramling argue that, certainly, emphasis needs to be set on prevention and risk-management policies, but it is time for an approach

different from what politicians and oil companies have long favoured, pointing in other, sustainable, directions.

Sadly, professor Freudenburg died soon after the publication of this book, the last achievement of a career-long effort to use science in society's service.

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