Apart from the taboo against mentioning geopolitics there’s another reason the centrality of oil is underplayed. We are in denial about the full extent of our oil addiction and dependence. It’s near impossible to imagine ourselves without oil. So many of the things we think of as us are not us at all, they’re just oil. Suburbs, for example, are a by-product of oil. They didn’t exist before cheap petrol and they will not last a day after it. (Back when oil was cheap the poor got left the inner city blight while everyone else escaped past the ring road. Now at £1 a liter, the rich want the inner cities back and the poor are returned to the rustbelt and the arrondisement).

So long celluloid, imported shoes, hair grease, electricity grid, supermarkets, [and] monocrop agriculture. We barely have time to dig up the Multiplex to see how the soil has survived beneath. ‘Cos that popcorn ain’t gonna feed us for long now that the age of Hydrocarbon Man is over.

So how did we get here?

OIL THE EARLY YEARS

4000 years ago the Hittites from Hit on the Euphrates not far from where Baghdad now is, used bitumen and the rock oil or petroleum which seeped from the perpetually flaming oil fissures in the ground. They worshipped these fires, which so displeased the Lord that in Deuteronomy 16.18 he called for genocide against the people who lived on the site of Baghdad.

‘In the cities of these nations whose lands the Lord your God is giving to you as a patrimony, you shall not leave a creature alive. You shall annihilate ... the Hittites... so that they may not teach you to imitate their abominable practices and so offend the Lord you God.’

1830’s the Europeans imported China’s fifteen-hundred year-old salt-drilling technique. Oil was originally just a by-product of salt-boring, just as natural gas would later be a side-product of oil drilling.

AUDIO: ‘MEDICINE SHOW’ BY BIG AUDIO DYNAMITE

In 1854 the Ploesti oilfields in Rumania lead production with 36,000 barrels of crude a year. At the same time Dr. Abraham Gesner extracted illuminating oil from asphalt and called it kerosene. And the Pennsylvania Rock Oil Company sold petroleum as patent medicine for toothache, rheumatism, fevers, for caulking wounds and stemming cuts and as a general health tonic.

Then, in 1859 drifter Colonel Edwin Drake drilled the first US oil-well in Titusville, Pennsylvania. Until Drake’s oil well, crude had been hand dug from shafts in Eastern Europe.

Rock oil or petroleum could also be converted into kerosene. Kerosene was also refined from crude and mainly - before Rockefeller - by local mom and pop refiners out back or in the pantry. It was not an exact science. In 1870’s there were six thousand deaths a year due to kerosene lamps exploding. People lived dangerously, it was a time when paraffin chewing gum was popular - less so with pipe smokers. Rockefeller called his oil Standard Oil so as you’d know it wasn’t going to blow up in your face. He was planning another way of stealing your eyelashes while you slept.

GENERAL MOTORS’ FIRST RECLAIM-THE-STREETS ACTION

The oil barons’ monopoly concentrated power into few hands; this affected the physical landscape as much as the political one. On the History Channel, however, now’s when you get the slideshow of Norman Rockwell happy motorists to a soundtrack of Chuck Berry singing riding around in his automobile. But there was nothing inevitable about re-tooling of towns and cities, about how streets went from being community cafe and playground, football pitch and washing line to commercial freight route...

In 1921 General Motors lost $65 million. GM’s Alfred P Sloan concluded that the stagnating car market needed the help of that free market superhero: The Invisible Hand.

[In 1920] Americans made 90% of journeys by rail, mainly trolley car. Streetcars and trains carried 15 billion passengers, employed 300,000.

But if you can’t beat ‘em, buy ‘em and scrap ‘em.

General Motors sets up National City Lines, one of several front companies that buy up 90% of the US rail network and roll it up. National City Lines pays $50 million for Chicago and Wisconsin’s North Shore Line, the world’s fastest electric train line and scraps it. With mob help they scrap Minneapolis trolley-cars.

Federal prosecutors indict General Motors for combining with Standard Oil of California, Phillips Petroleum and Firestone to drive the streetcars and trains out of business. In the mid-50’s General Motors admits to the US Dept of Justice that it has asphalted and motorized 900 of 1000 electric rail lines it had bought.

WORLD WAR 2

WAR IN THE PACIFIC

The attack on Pearl Harbor is always represented as being as random and senseless as a mental patient stabbing a lunchtime shopper. But the Japanese had three strategic aims.

1. To escape the US oil and scrap iron embargo.

2. To secure their supply lines to the oil fields of the Dutch East Indies and to Royal Dutch Shell’s Balikpappan refinery against their being cut by the US naval base in Hawaii.

3. To join with the other industrial powers in the Great South-East Asian Land Grab: British Malaya and Singapore, French Indo-China, US Philippines and Dutch East Indies.

So, Japan bombed Pearl Harbor for what a military strategist would call rational reasons, if any military invasion can ever be described as rational, which is of course moot.

Britain and Japan wanted to control Malaya and Singapore for the one thing more important than oil itself; the movement of oil.

Besides the Bosphorous and the Suez Canal there are three major “chokepoints” in the world for getting oil to market: Bab-el-Mandeb, the Straits of Hormuz, and off the coast of what since their 1963 liberation has been Malaysia, the Straits of Malacca.

Archibald Macleish while US Assistant Secretary of State at the end of the war said ‘As things are now going, the peace we will make,... will be a peace of oil, a peace of gold, a peace of shipping, , a peace .. without moral purpose or human interest.’

Britain’s bombing of Malaya in the 1950’s fulfilled this prophesy of moral bankruptcy (as well as showing life imitating ‘Catch 22, that great novel about the institutional psychopathology of war). After dropping 35,000 tons of defoliant and bombs in 4000 bombing raids on Malayans who sought independence from Britain, RAF Strategic Command informed the Joint Intelligence Committee that “offensive airstrikes... in Malaya... probably did more harm than good.”

WORLD WAR 2 IN THE MIDDLE EAST

I used to wonder why tank battles happened in the desert. Had Rommel’s Afrika Korps and Montgomery’s Eighth Army, like rival football firms, arranged to meet where there’d be no-one around who’d alert the law and get the fight stopped? Was that why they were in such a sandy part of the world?

‘It was not for nothing,’ wrote the British Minister Resident in the Middle East, ‘that we sent to Egypt in 1940, when this island was in imminent jeopardy of invasion, the only armored division of which we stood possessed. It was no mere accident that the whole face of the war began to change after our victory, two years later, at Alamein.’

Many different cities around the world including Salt Lake City, Melbourne all put in bids to host the great World War tank battle which finally became known as El Alamein, after the small Egyptian town was able trump its rivals thanks to its proximity to the major oil shipping route the Suez Canal and to the Abadan oil wells and Shatt-al Arab refineries.

In 1945 the US State Department describes the Persian Gulf as a “stupendous source of strategic power and the greatest material prize in world history”. While Lord Altrincham, the British Minister Resident in the Middle East, described the region as ‘an area in which without desiring to dominate ourselves, we cannot allow any other Power to dominate.... The Middle East is no less vital to Britain than Latin America to the United States’.

Here’s the British army in Egypt in 56, Jordan in 58, Kuwait in 61, Oman in 71, Aden, now the Yemen in 73.

What are we doing there? What’s all that about?

Well, as Prime Minister Harold Macmillan wistfully notes in his 1955 diary:

‘It’s rather sad that circumstances compel us to support reactionary and really rather outmoded regimes because we know that the new forces... always seem to drift into strongly anti-Western positions.’

Yes, and for the very fact that we’re supporting these repressive, puppet regimes so that the oil can be taxed at the pump and not the well-head by nationalist governments who want a social democratic welfare state of their own. But the tide of history was with them, not us; with self-determination not colonialism and exploitation. Nasser kicked British butt out of one corner of Africa at least and nationalized the Suez Canal.

Immediately after the war Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin told Cabinet that “without the Middle East and its oil [there is] no hope of our being able to achieve the standard of living at which we are aiming in Britain.” And aside from the energy the country ran on: isn’t the post-war years’ higher standard of living epitomized by oil-derivative products - vinyl LP’s, plastic seats in the Cortina, central heating and Camping Gaz?

But by the beginning of the 70’s there was only enough power for a three day week. Britain became known as the sick man of Europe. We were David Bowie sipping absinthe at the end of The Man Who Fell To Earth. Then, in October 1970, three months after Britain’s third forlorn application to join EEC, the jammiest, least-deserving nation on earth discovered a huge oilfield 110 miles east of Aberdeen in British sector of North Sea. By April 1976 Britain was even exporting oil from the Forties Field!

In the meantime, potential competition from a nascent Germany led Exxon to sign a deal with I.G. Farben in 1926 agreeing to stay out of chemicals if Farben stayed out of oil. ...As a result, Exxon supplied Nazi Germany with aviation fuel and Texaco continue to supply oil to Germany well into World War II. A royalty on kerosene used by our Spitfires during the Battle of Britain was paid via BP and Standard Oil directly to Farben. As each Spifire, Wellington and Lancaster took off from the runway a 2% royalty on its fuel was paid to the Third Reich.

VIETNAM AND OIL

In 1952 the US National Security Council recorded in a memo that ‘Southeast Asia, especially Malaya and Indonesia, is the principal world source of natural rubber... and a producer of petroleum and other strategically important commodities.’

This required two things: the encirclement of China with military bases strung along Okinawa, the Philippines, Korea, Japan, Taiwan, Thailand; and conquest.

In 1963, Kennedy’s Under Secretary of State U. Alexis Johnson told the Economic Club of Detroit that Southeast Asia was ‘desirable and important’ because of its ‘rich natural resources’. ...’The countries of Southeast Asia produce rich exportable surpluses such as rice, rubber, corn, tin... [and] oil..’

The existence of one of the world’s largest off-shore oil fields in the Gulf of Tonkin had been known since the 1920s. In 1947 on Bock 32 eleven miles into the Gulf of Mexico the first offshore oil platform came on-stream. It was now possible to pump the oil from under the Tonkin seabed. Standard Oil began pumping Ho Chi Minh with weapons in the hope of driving out French oil corporation Elf. But after liberation in 1954 Ho Chi Minh, having just offloaded decades of first French, then Japanese then once again French exploitation, wanted Vietnamese oil for the Vietnamese.

In August 1964, President Johnson and Secretary of Defense McNamara, needing a pretext for invasion, lied that US destroyer Maddox was torpedoed in the Gulf of Tonkin by North Vietnamese boats.

Cue napalm death in the villages. But meanwhile back in the Gulf of Tonkin the US Navy and Standard Oil used depth charges to create seismic readings of likely underground oil deposits. After the war when Vietnam sold concessions, Standard Oil bid only on those areas of the Gulf of Tonkin which the US naval survey had shown to be oil rich, while European companies bought nothing but silt and hotel toilet paper, rock lobsters and a ten million dollar octopus garden.

Now I’m not saying in all of this that for a century wars have only been fought for oil. All I’m saying is that we have downplayed the role of this vital strategic commodity in the stories we tell ourselves about where we have been and what we have done. I’m saying that history makes more sense rather than less when you see oil as more rather than less central. This following observation from a US State Department officer writing in 1945 gets the balance just right. ‘A review of the diplomatic history of the last 35 years will show that petroleum has historically played a larger part in the external relations of the United States than any other commodity’.

ARAB OIL EMBARGO

In October 1973, Egyptian jets and Syrian troops invade Israel. The same month OPEC countries followed the previous week’s 70% oil price hike agreed in Sheikh Yamani’s Viennese hotel suite, with a political strike. They agree to keep cutting production by 5% per month every month until a total halt of oil supplies to the United States or an end of US military aid to Israel, whichever comes soonest. But then on October 20th, the day after Nixon announces his 2.2 billion military aid package for Israel, Saudi Arabia and the other Arab states cut production completely. The iron wheel on the pipeline valve is turned all the way clockwise: a total embargo of oil exports to the US mainland.

The Arab Oil Embargo - so called because the Iranians (who are Persian not Arab) weren’t involved - showed that the Middle Eastern oligarchs and not US, British or Dutch corporations controlled the world oil supply and therefore the world economy. The centrality of oil to the economy was made still more explicit by another astonishing and unforeseen development which had come home to roost a few weeks earlier.

In 1970 when the US was still exporting oil it was the world’s banker and number 1 lender nation. By September 1973, by which time the US had been importing oil for three short years, America was now the world’s number 1 debtor nation.