

**WTE column of May 16, 2015. Editor's headline: "Wyo.'s oil curse is at work." CST of May 17: "Oil wealth chokes off opportunities."**

Is Wyoming afflicted with the oil curse? One can't help but wonder on perusing "The Oil Curse" by Michael Ross, which examines the adverse consequences of mineral extraction.

Because of the enormous revenues it generates for governments, hydrocarbon production is politically harmful, argues Dr. Ross. Its revenues are massive, volatile, and easily kept secret, which inoculates rulers against give-and-take between the state and its citizens. Oil autocrats routinely sequester revenues for themselves, impoverishing their constituents; eventually, the people rise up in revolt. By contrast, governments that depend on tax revenues feel obligated to provide for residents' basic needs.

Moreover, the benefits of oil booms usually go to men. The author's statistics show that "Petroleum Perpetuates Patriarchy." Whenever countries develop economically, women typically gain opportunities in workplace and government, but not so in countries that get rich by selling petroleum. This is bad for developing countries: not generating jobs for women, which would lower fertility rates, means expanding populations that are impoverished in spite of—actually, because of—their country's oil wealth.

The author's statistical analysis demonstrates that significantly fewer women work in oil-producing countries than in non-oil ones. This is true of both rich and poor states, but is stronger in rich states like Saudi Arabia. Oil-wealthy countries reflect "the most glaring shortages in democracy and gender equality." Large gaps exist between Middle Eastern countries that grew through industrialization and those that grew wealthy by selling off their hydrocarbon assets.

Let's see how Wyoming's legislative and gubernatorial decisions stack up by comparison.

Our gender gap continues in its sorry state. Legislators nixed a bill to raise the state's minimum wages, which means that service jobs, primarily staffed by women, remain below poverty wages. Add to that the refusal to extend Medicaid to Wyoming's poorest workers, and you can see the oil curse at work. Governor Mead vetoed a bill to tighten Wyoming's asset-forfeiture law, a legal injustice that often targets low-income residents.

The current oil and coal bust has not prompted legislators to diversify Wyoming's economy; it's "business as usual" at the Capitol. Yes, construction in Wyoming continues apace, but mineral-severance taxes are falling and jobs in the mining industry have plummeted by four percent.

Rather than lower the state's carbon-dioxide footprint which, per capita, is the nation's highest, the state is suing the EPA over its proposed emissions regulations. On the climate-change front, though a \$13 million research project proved inconclusive, lawmakers allotted 1.4 million for cloud seeding. That'll clean up the atmosphere!

Instead of allotting funds to upgrade the state's crumbling bridges and roads, legislators "save" our state's surplus for "rainy days."

Dr. Ross shows that since the 1970s large-scale nationalizations of oil fields, the problems of oil states have worsened. Today, oil-producing countries have less democracy, less economic stability, and more frequent civil wars than they did earlier. Political influence is denied women as lawmakers refuse to enact and enforce gender-equality reforms. Sudan is a case in point.

The low status of Middle Eastern women is often blamed on Islamic or Arabic heritage; however, the author shows oil's influence to be a considerable factor. For example, Algeria has lots of oil and low female participation in politics and workforce, whereas in Morocco, which holds more conservative Islamic views than Algeria but is without oil, the opposite prevails. Where Algeria has had a series of socialist governments, Morocco's monarchy has tribal roots; still, industrialization has drawn Moroccan women into the workforce. When parents believe their daughters will contribute to the family income, they are more likely to keep them in school and invest in their health.

Because oil wealth chokes off opportunities for women, these countries' faster population growth and slower economic development puts them at increased risk. Oil production tends to crowd out industries like agriculture and textiles that would produce jobs for women; hence, "extraordinary oil wealth upholds extraordinary gender discrimination." Additionally, oil-wealth governments are loath to invest in education and health care, since oil brings in plenty of money. We've seen this happening in Wyoming.

Oil-based violence manifests in civil unrest. Since the 1980s, observes Ross, civil war has been "the fastest and most calamitous way" a country transforms its oil into "the devil's excrement." Compared to non-oil producers, such countries are 50 percent more likely to spawn these conflicts. Between 1945 and 1999, over 16 million people perished in civil wars. Two of the book's segments cover oil-based unrest in Soviet Russia and "Russia Revisited."

Regarding environmental impacts, the author mentions only that hydrocarbon extraction will continue despite "overwhelming evidence that the burning of fossil fuel destabilizes the climate." He is silent on its worst effects, of which Wyoming has its share: long-term damage to residents' health; permanently ruined waters, forests, soils, farmland—not to mention property values.