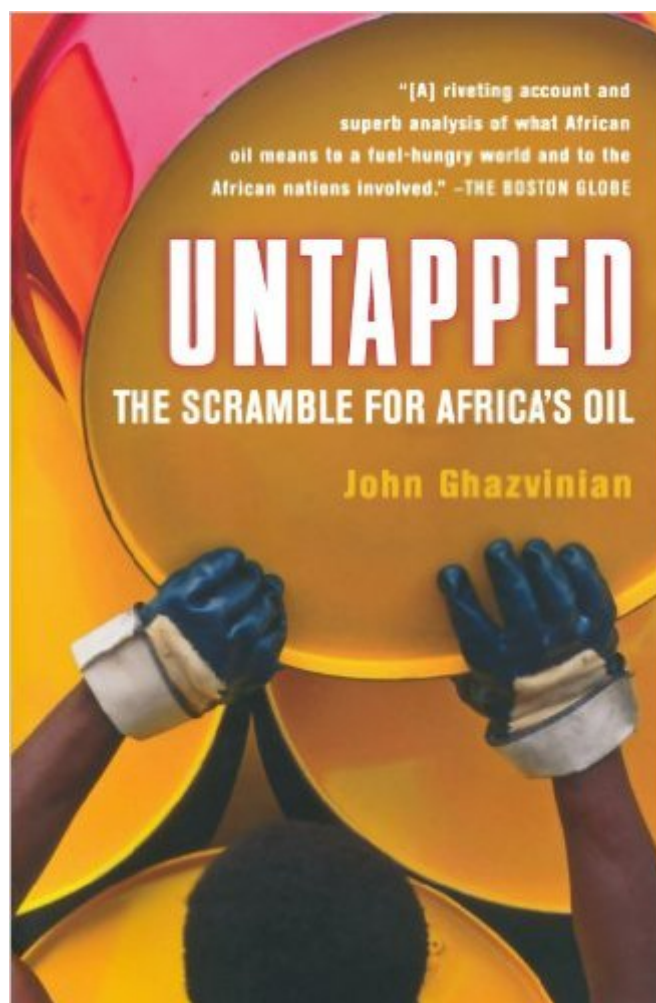


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Untapped: The Scramble For Africa's Oil



Synopsis

Although Africa has long been known to be rich in oil, extracting it hadn't seemed worth the effort and risk until recently. But with the price of Middle Eastern crude oil skyrocketing and advancing technology making reserves easier to tap, the region has become the scene of a competition between major powers that recalls the nineteenth-century scramble for colonization there. But what does this giddy new oil boom mean for America, for the world, for Africans themselves? John Ghazvinian traveled through twelve African countries from Sudan to Congo to Angola talking to warlords, industry executives, bandits, activists, priests, missionaries, oil-rig workers, scientists, and ordinary people whose lives have been transformed not necessarily for the better by the riches beneath their feet. The result is a high-octane narrative that reveals the challenges, obstacles, reasons for despair, and reasons for hope emerging from the world's newest energy hot spot.

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Customer Reviews

I regret having to say this at the outset. I suspect most readers browsing a bookstore's shelves will look at the title of this book and simply pass it by. And this is unfortunate for two reasons. First, because, like it or not, the production of oil is of utmost concern to the world and especially the United States and Europe. Second, the book itself, "Untapped: The Scramble for Africa's Oil," by John Ghazvinian, is extremely well written, as well as vitally informative. Anyone who keeps up on current events knows that the situation in the Middle East is growing increasingly unstable and

violent. For a long time, this area has also been the most significant source of oil for the Western world. And the West, after all, literally runs on oil. We may not like our dependence on foreign oil, but we do have a very personal attachment to all the goodies that petroleum products bring into our lives. Short of a concerted conservation effort on the part of the public, or a relaxation on the part of committed environmentalists to their anti-drilling policies, or (heaven help us!) an extremely large tax on gasoline and other petro-products to discourage consumers, little will probably be or can be done to resolve the current crisis. So, for the most part, we will remain dependent on foreign oil for the foreseeable future. Ghazvinian, in his book, takes our focus off of the Middle East and forces us to look at Africa as a source of oil. (Africa, in this context, is the area south of the Sahara Desert.) It has been known for a long time, according to Ghazvinian, that Africa is rich in oil. The problem has been the cost of tapping it and bringing it into production.

This racy yet rather trite book joins a growing genre of volumes about the oil industry and its global influence. The overall tone is reminiscent of Michael Klare or Thomas Friedman's work, though with less literary or academic polish. The narrative reads like a series of capers by the author as he traveled across Africa's oil countries that convinced him that the oil industry is a menace and not a messiah. Even though the author has a doctorate in history from Oxford, this book has little analysis or guidance for Africa's oil economies and joins a sorry list of itinerant gloom-mongering polemics. If there is any doubt about the author's strong normative positions on the matter, consider the following quotations from the introduction (p. 6): "By the end of the five-day congress, only a red-assed baboon could have failed to appreciate the take-home message to the international oil industry: Africa: come get it!" Such rhetoric is likely to generate more heat than light on the matter. Clearly Africa's oil economies have serious challenges but they deserve careful analysis and solutions. Ghazvanian book does not consider for example, that Equatorial Guinea was a basket case of poor governance and corruption even before oil was found. If anything, there is now greater scrutiny over what is going on in Malabo. The author's brief sojourn in Gabon does not consider the fact that the country has more preserved forests per unit area than any other central African country because the oil sector reduced the need for large-scale timber harvesting. The oil industry certainly needs to be held accountable for its past follies but we need to consider development for communities in its entirety and approach the matter with nuance and care. Narratives such as this throw the baby out with the bathwater.

The first thing that struck me about this book is that Ghazvinian has a gift for writing. In a market

swamped with books that exemplify poor writing, that's saying a lot. But it's not the only reason to read this book. Oil is one of those topics that is frequently abused with misdirection, misinformation, and misconceptions. So, I grudgingly agreed to read and review this book. After reading it, I thought of a new twist on an old adage. Don't judge a book by its topic. I have to give this book high marks, all the way around. One of the common misconceptions about oil is that most of it is in the Middle East and Central America. The truth is that Africa has vast amounts of oil that we are only beginning to discover. Ghazvinian provides some startling statistics on the offshore reserves alone. Another common misconception is that any country with large oil reserves will also have great wealth. Actually, oil can--and often does--impoverish a country. Ghazvinian explains why, and provides detailed accounts of how this actually happened in case after case. The devastating effects of mismanagement following the discovery of oil, are unfortunately, the lead story of every country on the west coast of Africa. The United States now imports most of its oil. Most people do not realize that if Americans made a few minor adjustments, the United States could be a net exporter of oil. Instead, Americans drive gas guzzlers and take unnecessary trips. This boosts the international demand for oil, and that demand is now escalating even faster as China and India ramp up their economies. Even fewer people realize that the cost of extracting the oil to meet the demand goes far beyond the cost of equipment and oil company salaries.

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