S-36 – The Workflow of Oil: Upstream, Midstream, Downstream Technologies in 19th and 20th Century

International Committee for the History of Technology

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Abstract:
The historians and industry professionals invited in this session will discuss the dynamics, people, facts and artifacts that along two centuries forged and improved the three rings of the petroleum production chain: upstream, midstream and downstream. The lectures are framed in a national and transnational contest with global outreach, and developed following multidisciplinary trajectories focused on science, technology, politics, economics, and environment. Industries do not emerge accidentally; the evolution of oil & gas industry – a multi-faceted, energivorous and expensive technological system – can be compared to a small industrial revolution, whose effects have been felt over a long period of time. The development of a complex production system such as petroleum is not a linear process. It has stages of experimentation, trial and error, disappointments and success that requires large investments and the scholarship of skilled practitioners. Oil in the history of the modern society is often sized just in terms of barrels produced, consumed, or spilled, while historical analyses on subjects like oil exploration, production, refining, and logistics has received limited attention from historians. As consequence, it seems that often oil is almost given for granted ‘in the tank’, with little clue on its production and background.
The oil&gas industry may be defined a precise mechanical system composed and assembled by unique and irreplaceable parts, and the studies presented in this panel will show how those parts are organized and coordinated.
The western society is partly defined by the concept of ‘knowledge society’ in which development is deemed to follow the application of new ideas and paradigms. Considering the several roles that oil plays in daily life, the production of new scholarship on the history of oil technology bears scientific relevance in academy and industry.

Keywords: History of technology – Energy history – Oil refining – Oil production – Fossil fuels.

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