Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil by Timothy Mitchell. Verso, November 2011, 288 pages. ISBN: 978-1844677450, Hardcover, £16.99

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The modern world was built and shaped by the consumption of fossil fuels as sources of energy; today our global systems of agriculture, transport and industry all presuppose a constant supply of crude oil. Concerns over 'peak oil' are thus increasingly prevalent, as a seemingly inevitable decline in the rate of petroleum extraction implies drastic changes for contemporary technological society and global human culture[1].

Timothy Mitchell's latest book is therefore a timely contribution. Mitchell offers an alternative history of modern democracy which directly links the production of energy to the emergence of democratic politics, arguing that the two have been 'interwoven from the start' (p.8). The increasing concentration of coal from the nineteenth century onwards made mass politics possible, as the threat or act of interrupting energy flows (through large-scale strikes and widespread mobilisations of labour) could be used to advance democratic claims (p.27).

Mitchell emphasises that it was the socio-technical systems erected around carbon (rather than simply the resource itself) which permitted this agency (p.42). He thus contributes to a growing literature on 'technopolitics' - recently defined as 'the strategic practice of designing or using technology to enact political goals'[2] - which examines how power can be derived from the control of technical knowledge and practices[3].

Despite opening with the case of coal, *Carbon Democracy* is primarily concerned with the construction and development of a global energy order based on oil during the twentieth century. To do so involves complex interdisciplinary scholarship, drawing heavily from postcolonial studies and science and technology studies (STS), with a thoroughly historical approach - as a succession of familiar narratives are revised with the production and distribution of oil located as a central actor.

The First World War is presented as a struggle for resources. The 'liberal internationalism' which followed the conflict (embodied in Wilsonian ideals of self-

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[1] Such concerns have become more populist during the last decade, see for instance: R. Heinberg, *Party's Over: Oil, War and the Fate of Industrial Societies* (Forest Row: Clairview, 2005); P. Roberts, *The End of Oil: The Decline of the Petroleum Economy and the Rise of a New Energy Order* (London: Bloomsbury, 2004); D. Strahan, *The Last Oil Shock: A Survival Guide to the Imminent Extinction of Petroleum Man* (London: John Murray, 2007)

[2] G. Hecht & P. N. Edwards, 'The Technopolitics of Cold War: Toward a Transregional Perspective', in M. Adas (ed.), *Essays on Twentieth-Century History* (Philadelphia, PN: Temple University Press, 2010), pp. 271-314, quote at p.274

[3] For examples of recent literature on technopolitics, see: M. Adas, *Dominance by Design: Technological Imperatives and America's Civilizing Mission* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005); N. Cullather, 'Miracles of Modernization: The Green Revolution and the Apotheosis of Technology', *Diplomatic History* 28:2 (April 2004, pp.227-254); G. Hecht (ed.), *Entangled Geographies: Empire and Technopolitics in the Global Cold War* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011)

determination) functioned as a method for maintaining imperial rule, securing control of Middle Eastern oil for a handful of major international oil companies, including Shell, the Rockefeller Standard Oil firms and Anglo-Persian Oil (the future BP). These organisations subsequently delayed the emergence of an 'oil industry' in the region during the interwar years, to protect their monopolistic control of world oil. Such a narrative, while problematic, represents a clear departure from conventional histories of swashbuckling 'oil pioneers'[4].

The establishment of a new world order after 1945 also heralded the construction of new energy networks, which replaced coal with oil. By approaching oil as a strategic resource and investing heavily in reconstructing Europe's financial system around petroleum, the United States secured oil's global predominance. Mitchell again emphasises the political implications of particular socio-technical systems, suggesting that new networks weakened Europe's political Left, as oilfields, pipelines, refineries and pumping stations could not be paralysed by organised labour as effectively as the systems which had governed the extraction and distribution of coal (p.108).

Mitchell's account of the rise of oil is multi-layered and sophisticated. A particularly impressive strand of analysis covers how rapidly increasing oil production fostered the now-familiar belief in 'unlimited economic growth', which in turn permitted new forms of democratic governance. Innovations in calculation methods and statistical analysis made it possible to construct the abstract 'economy' as a new object of politics in the mid-twentieth century (building on theories Mitchell has advanced in his previous publications)[5]. This object could then be deployed by experts to displace democratic debate and set limits to egalitarian demands (p.143). Mitchell thus also depicts the socio-technical systems of petroleum as key actors in the evolution of the disciplines of economics and political theory.

Mitchell's expertise on the Middle East is clear throughout, and the chapters which address this region are particularly strong. The rise of oil is linked to how political struggles in the Middle East were transformed into struggles with oil companies over the control of resources. The establishment of OPEC in 1960 reflected a shift from international firms to oil-producing states in regulating and restricting the supply of oil, culminating in the 1973 'oil crisis', of which Mitchell offers a fascinating revisionist account. Indeed, Mitchell argues that the very description of a 'crisis' simplifies complex transformations in governance, finance, energy flows and national economies into a single event - therefore failing to capture how oil networks became a 'political instrument' in bringing about the demise of the post-war Keynesian financial system (pp.198-199).

The collapse of the post-1945 system placed the weakened carbon democracies of the West into a new relationship with the oil states of the Middle East, while motivating the political right to promote the 'market' as an alternative technology of rule. Mitchell's relatively straightforward account of how the vulnerabilities of coal production related to democratic claims is heavily contrasted with the complex networks of oil, as the post-crisis 'neoliberal laws of market' also weakened the powers of labour by further 'placing parts of the world beyond the reach of democratic contestation' (p.173).

The rise of Political Islam in the Middle East following the 1970s crisis is another broad area of history which does escape Mitchell's revisionism. Conventional accounts have tended to

[4] For a classic example of this approach, see: D. Yergin, The *Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money, and Power* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991)

[5] T. Mitchell, *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity* (Los Angeles, CA: California University Press, 2002)

portray Islamist movements as the product of conflict between tribal religious forces and globalising capital ('Jihad vs. McWorld'[6]). Mitchell instead argues that Political Islam was co-opted into maintaining the political order constructed around oil, as the oil industry was obliged to collaborate with other social and political forces (primarily American military power and Islamic domestic politics) to guarantee its own survival (p.226). Mitchell cites Saudi Arabia as proof; as the pivotal actor in maintaining oil scarcity (with the overt support of the United States) all oil profits have depended on working with forces which could guarantee control of Arabia. In practice this has been the House of Saud, in alliance with the ultra-conservative Wahhabi branch of Islam (p.213). While Mitchell may push this concept of 'McJihad' too far, it provides an effective platform to reconceptualise globalisation and religion in the Middle East as inseparable from technological and political power.

Carbon Democracy is a meticulously researched and highly sophisticated multidisciplinary account of modern political and economic history, with challenging implications. It is not without limitations; the insistence on treating oil as a central actor can lead Mitchell to frame vast swathes of events and phenomena in terms of energy production, producing a number of contestable historical interpretations which specialists will take issue with. For instance, Mitchell's account of the 1973 oil crisis can seem overly-teleological, imposing a coherence on the period which it does not possess. This critique can also be applied to his treatment of the major twentieth- century conflicts (both 'hot' and 'cold'). The consistent emphasis throughout on technopolitics, while enlightening, can also appear reductionist; excluding a matrix of cultural interactions in the process.

Nonetheless, this is an important and original contribution which deserves to be read and discussed by a wide audience. The entirety of Mitchell's analysis is linked to explaining the contemporary limits of carbon democracy, as the era of abundant, low-cost carbon energy draws to an end and existing forms of democratic government appear incapable of protecting the long-term future of the planet. *Carbon Democracy* ultimately warns that new sets of 'political tools' will be required if we are to address the expiration of fossil fuels and construct stable, democratic futures.

[6] B. R. Barber, *Jihad vs. McWorld: How Globalism and Tribalism are Reshaping the World* (NY: Ballantine, 1995)