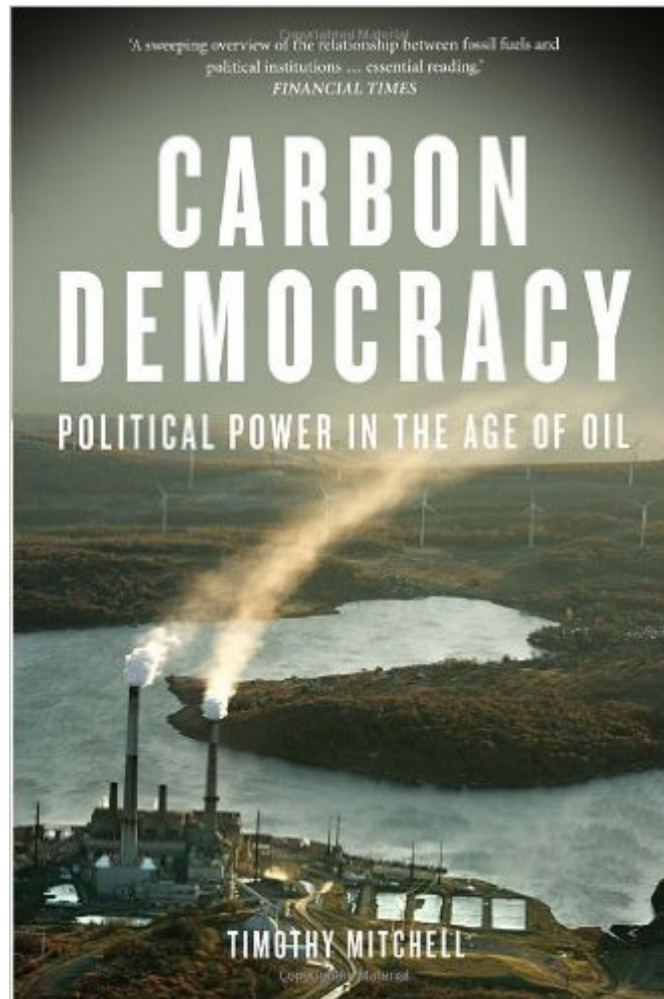


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Carbon Democracy: Political Power In The Age Of Oil



Synopsis

Does oil wealth lead to political poverty? It often looks that way, but *Carbon Democracy* tells a more complex story. In this magisterial study, Timothy Mitchell rethinks the history of energy, bringing into his grasp as he does so environmental politics, the struggle for democracy, and the place of the Middle East in the modern world. With the rise of coal power, the producers who oversaw its production acquired the ability to shut down energy systems, a threat they used to build the first mass democracies. Oil offered the West an alternative, and with it came a new form of politics. Oil created a denatured political life whose central object — the economy — appeared capable of infinite growth. What followed was a Western democracy dependent on an undemocratic Middle East. We now live with the consequences: an impoverished political practice, incapable of addressing the crises that threaten to end the age of carbon democracy — namely, the disappearance of cheap energy and the carbon-fueled collapse of the ecological order.

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Customer Reviews

Which came first, the oil business or the war machine that protects it? Who started this madness, the military that consumes so much of the oil or the corporations that distribute and profit from the filthy stuff? An answer of sorts can be found in Timothy Mitchell's book, *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil*. "Western oil corporations were never strong enough, Mitchell finds, to monopolize the flow or stoppage of Middle Eastern oil without major military and financial assistance. So, they began talking about their control of Middle Eastern oil as being an imperial

interest. When "imperial" went out of fashion, the phrase shifted to "strategic interest." Early in the 20th century, the Anglo Persian Oil Company discovered that its oil stank. It contained high levels of sulfur, and people wouldn't burn it for illumination. So, the oil company enlisted the British Navy, as a customer. In fact, it pretended the Navy was a major customer for a few years until it actually became one. The British empire thus developed an interest in protecting the company's control of the oil of what is now Iran, in order to fuel the new ships of the Navy -- a navy designed to protect Britain's imperial interests. The Royal Navy had another reason for shifting to oil-burning ships, according to Mitchell. Coal miners were developing the annoying habit of going on strike, effectively flicking off the light switch on the empire and all its toys. Coal mining involved more workers than oil drilling, and the movement of the coal, once mined, was more easily blocked en route. Coal, and the ease with which it could be sabotaged, was a driver of democracy, whereas oil would be its enemy. Mitchell also describes British support for the Zionist settlement of Palestine in the 1920s as motivated by a desire to create a population in need of protection, protection that would involve controlling the flow of oil from Iran to the Mediterranean. Well, ... that and a population to serve as protectors of the pipeline. In 1936-1939 the British created a force of armed Jewish settlers to guard the Haifa-Lydd railway line -- a force that would form the nucleus of the army that seized control of Palestine in 1948. Also in 1920 Winston Churchill proposed winning hearts and minds in what is now Iraq by bombing the place, to which the British secretary of state for war objected thus: "If the Arab population realize that the peaceful control of Mesopotamia ultimately depends on our intention of bombing women and children, I am very doubtful if we shall gain the acquiescence of the fathers and husbands." Such logic would no more stop Winston Churchill than it would Barack Obama. Come the second world war, and it was the turn of U.S. oil companies to win subsidies from their government to develop production in the Middle East ... to meet the needs of the U.S. military, which in turn would end up viewing the bulk of its needs as consisting of wars to control that oil whenever CIA coups wouldn't do the trick. Immediately after the 1945 talks at Yalta, the United States wanted to move forces from Europe to the Pacific, and to refuel planes in the Middle East. That need motivated President Roosevelt to meet with Ibn Saud. The agreement with Saudi Arabia regarding its oil followed. By the time a U.S. air base was built in Saudi Arabia, the Pacific war was over. But the oil companies had learned that for them every advantage lay in talking about their work as if it were somehow in the "strategic interest" of the United States. Next came the giving and selling of mountains of weapons to the dictators of the Middle East, also justified as "strategic." The real explanation for the dramatic rise in such sales in the 1960s, according to Mitchell, was that the oil-rich dictators had more money than they could spend on anything else. They might have

invested in improving the lives of the people of their nations, of course, but much of that spending would have flowed to third nations. With weapons, the United States could remain the sole provider, or at least try to. It could also enrich its weapons companies. Oil companies actually opposed selling weapons to Iran and argued for ceasing to back Israeli settlements. But weapons companies won out every time. To the extent that the oil companies started the cycle of killing people with war in order to kill the planet with oil, they did so through the power of connections (even if fictional) to weapons sales. The British Navy drove the demand for Western dominance of the world's oil supply, just as the U.S. military today consumes vast quantities of the oil it fights its wars over. In fact, if we go back before history, and ask the question of which came first, wars or the weapons with which to fight them, the answer is fairly clear. The weapons came first. They were developed for fighting lions and bears. They were turned against humans when the lions and bears had been effectively reduced or eliminated. Intense agriculture, used to feed the warriors who would not feed themselves, and to provide them with their weapons, served the purpose later served by oil extraction. It was the military that came first. It is always the military that comes first. And it is the military that pushes relentlessly to own the last word as well.

Don't fancy a whole book on economics? Me neither - this may be the solution. Strange that no-one has thought to review this, which seems to my inexperienced eye to map out pretty lucidly (footnotes helpfully integrated with text) how we got where we are now, from pre-industrial to coal to 'the economy' to the present enmeshing of oil in everything. We know about the imperialist mindset (Mitchell's background in colonial Egypt informs the earlier part of the text) but Woodrow Wilson doesn't come out of it that well either. By choosing to combine against each other rather than giving the producing countries independence while keeping production of crucial raw materials under international control (paternalism without nationalism? I guess it was always a non-starter) the Powers eviscerated the nascent League of Nations, then the economists got in on the act (Ch 5) and now heaven help us. As an economics virgin who had never heard of America's 'greatest economist' (p132), let alone ordoliberalism, I found it absolutely fascinating. This is all our histories. Please, Ian biomass, am I right?

We like the image of our country in Harold Evans' *The American Century*, a noble, unselfish people who want the best for all the world. It's no coincidence that Evans' book was released before the Supreme Court appointed a war criminal president. We have no illusions now, but there was a time about 70 years ago when the U.S. saved civilization, and we yearn for the admiration and love that

our parents earned and for our lost innocence. Sadly, we see in this excellent essay/book that our goodness is deeply tarnished by a use of military and political force for the benefit of Standard Oil and other robber barons for at least 100 years. Alas, our indifference to the suffering we inflict on brown people in distant lands is not a 21st century phenomenon.

The title for this book is misleading. The theme of this book is indeed the history of oil and its development. But in doing so, Mitchell chronicles the social, political, and economic development of mankind from the Industrial Revolution to the 21st century, and with that defines the social and economic fabric of the present. Reading this book gives a new meaning to the phrase, "we did it for the oil," and demonstrates that the foreign policies of the U.S. and much of the Western world is, and has been, all about the oil. This book is a must read for anyone, as it provides a framework from which we can look at the flawed and short-sighted policies of our governments and the disastrous impacts that they have on people all around the world today and at home.

Very likely essential reading if you care about the quality of future life on our planet. If you are at all interested in energy and our dependence on oil, read this book, much sooner than later. The strategy of the oil industry is deconstructed as one designed to "sabotage" (by implication) significant reductions of demand and also especially to limit the available supply so as to keep the price up. Thus the implication is that Iraq was invaded not so much to gain access to their oil, as to "take that oil at least for a while, 'off the market.'"

I was very pleased with this book. The author gives a very interesting twist to the story of fossil fuels, noting how the centrality and difficulty of coal production helped give unions greater power, while oil production led to a more dispersed energy system, with less power for labor. An excellent overview of a critical part of our economy -- and speaking of which, he also does a good job of analyzing the rise of neoclassical economics in the context of a rapidly emerging oil industry.

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