Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil*. London: Verso, 2011. 278 pp. ISBN: 978-1-84467-745-0

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In *Carbon Democracy,* Timothy Mitchell takes the topics of his previous researches one or two steps further, to the core of global civilization. There, he finds oil fuelling capitalist democracies, labour and international relations, Islamic schools, and economic calculations, among many other socio-technical systems. Mitchell's ambitious quest of bringing the material world – fossil fuels – to the forefront of the historical and anthropological analysis of world politics in the last two centuries does not stem from reductionist materialism. Mitchell is well aware that a complex network of socio-political alliances (and confrontations) is required for the oil to flow above ground, be transported in transatlantic voyages, and be transformed into the kinds of goods we depend on.

The argument, presented in a roughly chronological order, starts at English coal mines, the place of birth of the first mass "welfare democracy" movements in Europe. Enlightened pleas for democratization were purely oligarchical until coal and railway workers were empowered by their control of "mandatory points of passage" for coal to flow. They were capable of stopping the entire system that kept the new industrial factories transforming the organic materials coming from colonized territories.

By the first third of the 20th century, oil emerged as a way of countering the immense combined power of miners, railway men, and dockers: it could be extracted and transported without their participation. Oil companies were key players in promoting the transition from coal to oil in Europe and the US. The Middle East was a key spot for their historical development. Along the 20th century, it was there where they maintained and transformed political empires (first British, later American) and produced a system of scarcity.

The first of these endeavours, building up political empires in the Middle East, is described through a history of the idea of self-determination structured around the material practices that allowed it to become a tool for imperial powers to obtain the "consent of the governed", that is, the power of ruling through agreements

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with local elites and of intervening directly with the justification of protecting minorities. Oil was both the reason and the means for maintaining this cheap form of imperial rule.

The second venture of the oil companies, producing scarcity through "sabotage", is a major topic running throughout the book. Historians of technology and of industrial production often take for granted that increasing the output is an in-built goal of most productive innovations and systems — this is especially so when they describe capitalism. Mitchell, following Thorstein Veblen and others, shows that for most of the 20th century the main goal of oil companies in the Middle East was delaying production through acquiring rights to prospection, extraction, and distribution, which they had no intention to use.

Other means of maintaining scarcity included promoting instability and war. This was especially evident after World War II with what Mitchell considers the construction of a Cold War designed to justify intervention in the Middle East. Violence, moreover, became a machine for exporting American weapons and thus getting revenues back from oil producer countries once the latter had seized control of the oil, in the 1960s and 1970s. This was essential to maintain the Bretton Wood system and the dollar's strength as the international exchange currency. Since oil became the largest commodity in global exchange, controlling wells, refineries and pipelines was essential for winning the battle for the international monetary system.

This new world economy depended on oil for its very formulation. The combined systems of empire and scarcity allowed for the birth of "the economy" (Chapter 5) as a new object and field of study. Unlike 19th-century political economy, Keynsian economics were not about organizing a political society. Rather, the focus was in maintaining a system of macro-economic magnitudes of which reference to material resources had been subtracted. "National economies", the new units of analysis, were understood as frames for the flow of money and thus abstracted from geopolitical and resource components. The "cornucopian" view of nature as an infinite source for unlimited growth was also based on cheap oil.

The fragile equilibrium of the world politics of oil revealed itself in two ways. First, resource economics returned to the scene when evidence that a peak in the oil rate of extraction became too strong to ignore. "The market" and "the environment" then emerged as the two new entities charged with optimizing the world resources of the new "energy system." Second, US oil companies were drawn to rely on the forces

of political and fundamentalist Islamism, thus helping to construct an unstable and contradictory world of "McJihad".

In his conclusion, Mitchell suggests that the end of cheap oil opens up the door for new political orders, including new forms of democracy. Relying on the views on socio-technical democracies put forward by authors like Michel Callon or Bruno Latour, the argument here has the dangers of assuming a "we" ready to act as a political subject with a unified interest in egalitarian claims. But where is that political subject to be found? The political debates here are fierce and Mitchell's account is not the only one available. But it does have the virtue of reminding us that any political project needs to bring together the social, the technical, and the natural.

This overview of *Carbon Democracy* does not attempt to do justice to the immensely vast array of materials and secondary literature mobilized by Timothy Mitchell to build his provocative argument. As it is to be expected from such an ambitious work, specialists of different fields will perhaps be left unsatisfied by Mitchell's treatment of a particular topic or another. But the attractiveness and strength of Mictchell's argument lies in its wide scope, as it proves necessary to give rise to his insightful interpretations.