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Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil

By Timothy Mitchell



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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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Editorial Review

Review

"Timothy Mitchell's *Carbon Democracy* examines the simultaneous rise of fossil-fueled capitalism and mass democracy and asks very intelligent questions about the fate of democracy when oil production declines."

—**Benjamin Kunkel**, *New Statesman*

"*Carbon Democracy* is a sweeping overview of the relationship between fossil fuels and political institutions from the industrial revolution to the Arab Spring, which adds layers of depth and complexity to the accounts of how resource wealth and economic development are linked."

—**Financial Times**

"A challenging, sophisticated, and important book."

—**Marc Lynch**, *Foreign Policy*

"A brilliant, revisionist argument that places oil companies at the heart of 20th century history—and of the political and environmental crises we now face ... If we're ever to curb such behaviour, and to regain some comprehension of our planet's preciousness, we need first to understand how it came about. Not a book for the season of indulgence, this one. But one that demands to be widely shared."

—**Susanna Rustin**, *Guardian*

"This study of the basis of modern democracy over the past century connects oil-producing states of the Middle East with industrial democracies of the West. Mitchell argues that carbon democracy in the West has been based on the assumption that unlimited oil will produce endless economic growth, and he concludes that this model cannot survive the exhaustion of these fuels and associated climate change. Tim Mitchell has written a remarkable book that deserves a wide audience."

—**Mahmood Mamdani**, author of *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim*

"It's a book that tackles a really big subject, in a sweeping but readable fashion, and after reading it, it's hard to imagine thinking about political power the same way again ... This book utterly blew me away."

—**Matt Stoller**, *Naked Capitalism*

"A remarkable account of the politics of oil and nation building in the Middle East."

—**The Herald**

About the Author

Timothy Mitchell teaches at Columbia University. His books include *Colonising Egypt*, *Rule of Experts*, and *Carbon Democracy*.

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Melissa Chandler:

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