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"Carbon Democracy: Historicizing Friction?: Review of Timothy Mitchell. Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil"

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Mitchell, Timothy. *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil*. London: Verso, 2011. 278 pp. \$33.50 CAN. ISBN-13: 978-1-84467-745-0.

REVIEW BY MARK SIMPSON

Ezra Levant, the foremost proponent of the idea of ethical oil, depicts Alberta's bitumen industry in utopian terms: "the oil sands are proof of the great good fortune that a huge amount of energy, in the right hands, can deliver to a staggering number of people" (224-5). Levant's account encapsulates and epitomizes the narratives of social and petrocultural smoothness that underpin prevailing defenses of bitumen extraction in the contemporary moment. Smooth oil and smooth society enable one another, to the enrichment of all, now and forever – or so the story goes.

Timothy Mitchell's *Carbon Democracy* manages, among its many bracing interventions, to demolish the smooth oil story. Over the course of an introduction, eight chapters, and a conclusion, the book historicizes and critiques the aims and ends, origins and outcomes, of smooth oil's narratives. In so doing, it affords new and incisive insight into modernity's politics of mobility.

"But what if," Mitchell wonders, "democracies are not carbon copies but carbon-based? What if they are tied in specific ways to the history of carbon fuels? Can we follow the carbon itself, the oil, so as to connect the problem afflicting oil-producing states to other limits of democracy?" (5-6). His project's key concept, *carbon democracy*, issues from these questions. Rendering inextricable energy from politics as modes of power, it presupposes democracy in two senses: "ways of making effective claims for a more just and egalitarian common world," or else "a means of limiting claims for greater equality and justice by dividing up the common world" (9). Mitchell connects the first of these senses to coal, the fuel source that petroleum would come to supplant. Coal matters to his argument in the significance it holds for capitalist industry and democratic possibility together. Since access to coal – the preeminent form of

energy in mid- to late-nineteenth century industrial life – hinged on the labor power and technical expertise of miners, their ability to disrupt the extraction and distribution of the resource afforded them tremendous leverage in demanding and asserting democratic rights. Such vulnerability, intolerable to the sovereign powers of industrial modernity, was as Mitchell makes clear a prime spur in the shift away from coal toward petroleum – and so toward democracy in his second sense. From the outset, the oil network was a distended one, with refinement occurring far from the scene of extraction, and distribution managed by pipeline and tanker more than by rail. Against the model of coal, in other words, oil production and circulation displaced and diminished the agency of workers – and thereby the energy vulnerability of the ruling order. Concomitantly, oil expertise became increasingly the province of the engineer and the economist, complementary figures whose combined knowledge could serve to complicate the meanings of petrocarbon fuels, and so occlude mass or everyday understandings of them. Thus rendered a nearly magical resource, oil could supply the name, in social narrative or ideology, for democratic freedom, abundance, and opportunity, yet also undermine, in social practice, the very conditions of possibility for mass democratic life.

Mitchell's analysis manages to demonstrate, compellingly, the intimate inextricability not antinomy between authoritarian oil states in the Middle East and liberal democracies in Europe and North America. In the age of oil, the former constitute something like the latter's necessary supplement – what Mitchell pithily terms "McJihad" – as dynamics of the oil system fuel resilient kinds of imperial control while checking democratic potentiality everywhere. Petroculture's carbon democracy impels the continuing support, by Euroamerican governments and corporations, of repressive regimes globally; the productive yet contradictory – or productive because contradictory? – association of oil with plenitude and crisis; the rise of an arms industry serving chiefly to recycle petro-profit; and the invention of "the market" as a mode of future-oriented common-sense hiving off broad dimensions of

social life from democratic contestation. As Mitchell makes clear, carbon democracy in the age of oil cannot do without the problematic of abundance and scarcity – of petro-plenitude and petro-precariousness – that it aggressively puts into circulation, and that it repeatedly (and increasingly) fails to be able to control. Hence the uncertainty and anxiety that, in the contemporary moment, attend the looming exhaustion of oil reserves: a whole biopolitical order, not just a form of fuel, is very much in play and at stake.

Mitchell's study compounds its accomplishment in theorizing and historicizing the dynamics of carbon democracy by refusing to propose any straightforward alternative or solution to the passing of the age of oil. That said, *Carbon Democracy* clearly empowers its readers, both by advancing such a stimulating account of the interrelation of energy to politics in the modern era and by identifying, in the very uncertainty of the present moment, the conditions of possibility for new political potentialities to emerge. Anyone concerned with the genealogy and futurity of energy politics – as for that matter of democratic energies – needs to read this remarkable book.

Works cited:

Levant, Ezra. *Ethical Oil: The Case for Canada's Oil Sands*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2010.

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