

CRUDE HISTORY

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Timothy Mitchell. *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil.* London: Verso, 2011. ix + 278 pp. Maps, notes, bibliography, and index. \$26.95.

Matthew T. Huber. *Lifeblood: Oil, Freedom, and the Forces of Capital.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013. vii + 253 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$25.00.

One salutary feature of these oil histories from political scientist Timothy Mitchell and geographer Matthew Huber is that they avoid the word “crude” in their titles. After a series of books and documentaries in recent years riffing on this theme—crude politics, crude democracy, crude impact, crude awakening, crude world, crude domination, and crude reality—it is refreshing to see new contributions that frame the subject somewhat differently. Mitchell intends to trace oil’s “materiality” (p. 2), and Huber attempts to demonstrate its “ordinariness” (p. xi). Although they offer original observations on oil’s relationship to “democracy” and “freedom,” both studies nevertheless fail to dispel the impression that oil has almost magical powers to bless, or more often “curse,” societies. Crude in substance if not in name, these studies caricature rather than clarify the role of oil in modern history.

Mitchell’s *Carbon Democracy*, which in the last few years has become a gateway text into oil for many social scientists and cultural theorists, is anchored by one big idea: that modern democracy and mass politics are inseparable from carbon-intensive forms of social and economic development. The opening chapter on “Machines of Democracy” explains how the nineteenth-century emergence of industrialization, imperialism, and democracy were linked to the exploitation of coal, which provided energy in such exceptional quantity and density that it reordered social relations on a global scale. Coal liberated populations, first in England and then elsewhere, from dependence on biomass energy gathered from large areas of land. It also created demand for new sources of organic energy to provide industrial inputs and sustain industrial workforces, setting in motion agrarian and colonial transformations beyond Britain and Western Europe.

Mitchell takes this argument further than other scholars have done, claiming that the characteristics of coal also politically empowered the new working class in industrializing countries. With its spatially concentrated mining sites, labor-intensive forms of extraction, and easily bottlenecked transport networks, coal gave workers a newfound ability to disrupt or shut down the flow of this essential source of energy and thus make new political demands. "Between the 1880s and the interwar decades, workers in the industrialized countries of Europe and North America used their new powers over energy flows to acquire or extend the right to vote and, more importantly, the right to form labour unions, to create political organizations, and to take collective action including strikes" (p. 26). These changes also "enabled" mass-based parties, social insurance, public pensions, and even the first women's movement.

There is a certain appeal in Mitchell's effort to interpret larger societal transformations in terms of the adoption of this revolutionary fuel. The reductionism of this argument, however, will not win over many historians who work on the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries or social scientists who study democratic transitions. Mitchell's definition of democracy is both too limited and too malleable. He asserts that democracy can have two meanings (and only two?). One refers to "ways of making effective claims for a more just and egalitarian world," and the other is a way of governing through popular consent "as a means of limiting claims for greater equality and justice" (p. 9). Coal, as a fuel that expanded the opportunities for making political claims, is an example of the former. Oil, whose physical characteristics constrained working-class power and democracy's potential, demonstrates the latter. Fluid and lighter than coal, oil could be shipped in large quantities across long distances, and it flowed through infrastructural assemblages too varied and dispersed to be easily blocked by organized labor.

The key to the switch from coal to oil and to the stunting of a more broad-based democratic politics was, in Mitchell's telling, the abundant oil reserves of the Middle East. Following World War I, Western statesmen preserved colonial dominance in this new oil-producing region by erecting a system of indirect rule that "replaced democratic claims with the process of 'self-determination' and substituted for democratic control of international capital the emergent apparatus of 'development'" (p. 109). Establishing control of oil overseas also had the added benefit, somehow, of undermining democratic forces at home—presumably because American and European workers could not interrupt the global flow of oil, although this proposition is never really explored.

In the post-World War II period, according to Mitchell, the growing use of oil permitted the rise of two complementary ways of governing democracies. The first was a new international arrangement for managing money and limiting financial speculation—the Bretton Woods system—built upon oil infrastructure and Middle East deals that shaped the supply and price of "dollar oil." The

Cold War provided a convenient means for policing the postwar Middle East and eliminating the need for previous “scaffoldings for imperial power” (p. 143). The second form of governance involved the Keynesian invention of a growth economy that “set limits to egalitarian demands” (p. 143). Oil’s “relative abundance and ease of shipping” (p. 139) contributed to the impression that “the economy” was something that could grow without limit. Mitchell cannot decide, however, whether Keynesian economists and policymakers operated with assured “petroknowledge” (p. 139) or whether they failed to appreciate the role of “physical energy” in their economic models (p. 140).

Not only did oil help establish the concept of “the economy,” but it also spawned a rival to Keynesianism for governing democratic politics: neoliberalism. Forged out of the global crisis of 1973–74, the neoliberal project expanded the laws of the market, reasserted the power and prerogatives of Big Oil, and placed “parts of the common world beyond the reach of democratic contestation” (p. 11). At the end of his study, Mitchell introduces the peculiar concept of “McJihad,” coined by political theorist Benjamin Barber, to argue that an alliance between Big Oil and Islamist political movements has preserved a fleeting condition of stability and staved off the final crisis of carbon democracy. (He does not explain why McDonald’s serves as a stand-in for Big Oil). The peaking of world oil production and the “passing of the era of fossil fuel” (p. 254), Mitchell predicts, will bring this crisis to a head and renew the possibility of achieving true democracy.

Carbon Democracy constructs a chain of arguments based on rhetorical sleights-of-hand, undocumented claims, and a poor grasp of how the oil industry operates. Mitchell’s tendency to rely on passive voice obscures the identity of his actors. Thus, “mechanisms were devised” or “constructed” (pp. 98, 136), the “system was introduced,” the “world was rendered,” and the “material world was arranged” (pp. 137–39). Drawing on a scattered secondary literature, this study avoids a great deal of scholarly work on the histories of coal and oil. Mitchell’s unsupported assertion that historians “sever the linkage” (p. 185) between the Arab oil embargo and the Israel-Palestine question, for example, reveals how little he has read by oil historians. He makes strained connections between gold mining in South Africa and oil exploration elsewhere. He accepts questionable claims that world oil production had peaked at the time of his writing, yet five years later it is still rising. Most troubling is his attraction to conspiracy theories, such as those about the shadowy influence of Chase Manhattan Bank (the “Rockefeller financial house”) over Standard Oil of New Jersey (Exxon) and the complicity of the international oil companies in the nationalizations of their own oil concessions as a way to jack up the price of oil. To support his argument at one point, Mitchell cites a study by William Engdahl, a conspiracy buff and former disciple of the controversial American political dissident and convicted criminal, Lyndon Larouche.

Carbon Democracy's treatment of oil as a business verges on parody. Mitchell contends that, for decades, the major oil companies obstructed the development of oil in the Middle East and deliberately engineered "the production of scarcity" (p. 40). Oilmen from that era probably wished they had been so powerful. Generous concessions and low production costs, not restrained output, made Middle East oil supremely profitable. Because of exports from this region, furthermore, oil in world markets became cheap and abundant, rather than scarce and expensive. Trying to align prolific oil production with unpredictable demand, which was the constant challenge faced by the major oil companies, is not the same as "preventing energy abundance" (p. 41).

Mitchell's approach to the recent history of oil business and politics is equally problematic. He argues that, since the 1970s, oil majors have perpetuated their quest for scarcity by using "political connections to defeat legislation aimed at restricting their influence or at managing natural resources" (p. 197). This was sometimes true, but it does not explain why oil companies suffered their own defeats, such as the imposition of price controls and the repeal of the oil depletion allowance during the 1970s, the passage of a crude oil windfall-profit tax in the 1980s, and a drilling moratorium along most of the U.S. outer continental shelf by the 1990s. Readers seeking to understand "political power in the age of oil" will need to look beyond *Carbon Democracy*.

One place to look is Matthew Huber's study, *Lifeblood*. Unlike Mitchell, Huber successfully shifts the discussion away from the familiar topics of "geopolitical strategy, oil kingdoms, titans of oil finance, and global oil capital" (p. xi). Proposing a "broader historical-materialist perspective," Huber is interested in how oil insinuated itself into everyday life, how it afforded a particular "spatial experience of freedom" (p. 157) and became, in the words of Nixon's treasury secretary and energy czar, William Simon, "the lifeblood of our economy" (p. 115). In contrast to Mitchell, Huber recognizes that the main feature of the global oil economy was not orchestrated scarcity, but unprecedented abundance, which made possible the mass consumption of energy. The centrality of oil to modern American life was less about Big Oil's corruption of policy or market manipulations, Huber observes, and more about "a specific regime of capitalism—rooted deeply in the entire architecture of twentieth-century American capital accumulation—that has become structured around a cultural politics of entrepreneurial life" (p. 152).

Examining "how life is lived beyond wells, pipelines, and refineries" (p. xii), Huber makes the insightful and persuasive observation that oil is not merely a commodity, but a "social relation" (p. 4). He begins by looking at how the New Deal "refueled capitalism" in the 1930s, providing the institutional support for mass consumerism and suburbanization, both of which were dependent on cheap oil. The Wagner Act boosted working-class "purchasing power."

Government lending programs fostered widespread home ownership. Large public investments in infrastructure shuttled the growing numbers of middle-class white families into the suburbs. At the same time, state and federal oil regulators worked out a compromise that limited oil production enough to maintain prices and ensure the survival of independent producers, but not so much as to raise prices beyond the reach of consumers.

After the Second World War, oil became more deeply infused into the “cultural politics of life” (p. 92) in the United States. The proliferation of oil products widened consumer options. Increased mobility afforded by the automobile and highways gave individuals a “sense of freedom and *power* over space in comfort” (p. 74). Homeowners so adorned their residences with petroleum products that Shell in 1956 could advertise, “your home is a house that oil built” (p. 83). The mechanization of farming and the intense application of petroleum-based fertilizers and pesticides further distanced people from the land and transformed the system of food consumption to a point where narratives about food shifted from “concerns with property and land control toward discourses of consumer choice” (p. 88). Together these developments masked the public construction and support of hydrocarbon society with a “privatized vision” of “entrepreneurial life” (p. 92).

Like Mitchell, Huber also traces the rise of neoliberalism to the energy crisis of the 1970s. But Huber emphasizes something different—how cultural pathologies of oil propelled the shift. Uninformed or misleading interpretations of the oil shock offered across the political spectrum led to populist cries for cheap energy and the tendency among both politicians and the populace to blame any kind of distortions in the energy market on big government. The “*decentralized geography of suburban life*” (p. 122) reflected the ideology of an impersonal market and buttressed the “antisocial freedom” (p. 164) of the “silent majority.” While agreeing with Mitchell that the notion of democracy cannot be divorced from carbon-intensive development, Huber adds that popular opposition to higher energy prices handicaps the potential of democracy to solve problems “directly linked to the persistence of carbon-based capitalism—war, ecological crisis, and suburban sprawl” (p. 149).

Although grounded in original primary research and perceptive analysis, *Lifeblood* has major weaknesses. For a study about the social or “socioecological” (p. 4) relationships engendered by oil, Huber could have looked harder at the social inequalities in American energy development. He notes only in passing how race, gender, and class shaped the imagery of the oil-built “home.” The section on refineries neglects to mention the system of racial segregation in Gulf Coast plants, where tensions rose in the 1940s and 1950s, or the racial disparities in the impacts of toxic pollution along the Louisiana chemical corridor. Missing from the story is the rise of environmentalism, which gathered strength in opposition to oil-led development and often sprang

from the “denaturalized” (p. xvii) geography of the suburbs. The “cultural politics of entrepreneurial life” shaped by oil, in his telling, seems to involve only the stereotypical white, politically disengaged, suburban middle class.

Huber’s take on the 1970s’ oil shock follows the standard popular narrative, uninformed by historical scholarship on energy politics and policy. He fails to make the important connection between oil and Nixon’s termination of the international gold standard, which accelerated the renegotiation of the major oil companies’ overseas oil concessions. His ensuing discussion about the assertion of producer power by non-Western countries never refers to the oil nationalizations that revolutionized the global oil industry. Finally, Huber dismisses as “dogma” (p. 118) those explanations that attributed fuel shortages to government price controls. But one does not have to be a free-market ideologue to accept that price controls intensified energy-market disruptions in the United States.

Heavy dollops of Marxist and postmodern jargon weigh down *Lifeblood*. Huber repeatedly resorts to abstruse theorizing about “the real subsumption of life under capital.” This apparently refers to capital’s domination of life in ways that extend beyond control over the means of production (the “formal subsumption”). Huber does not examine how this applies to workers or their workplaces and communities. Instead, he takes us on a meandering ride through Gramscian perspectives on hegemony and Foucault’s “micropolitics of neoliberal subjectivity” (p. 20) to reinforce his otherwise straightforward argument that energy is a site of “struggles over the production and reproduction of life itself” (p. 26).

The larger problem common to both *Carbon Democracy* and *Lifeblood* is that they treat oil as a substance that has agency, or life, all on its own. Both books set out to demonstrate the concrete and ordinary world of oil, but quickly give up on that task. Mitchell does not adhere to his own admonition to “follow closely the oil itself” (p. 253), nor does Huber really seek a “deeper understanding of the materiality of oil” (p. xix). If they had stayed true to their promise, we might have received a more accurate and nuanced picture of the oil business and at least some sense of technological change over time. Like many books written for popular audiences, these studies depict oil as monolithic. Actual oil companies are viewed as merely representations of Big Oil. Smaller, “independent” oil companies scarcely appear at all. To really follow the oil and comprehend its materiality would require some attention to diversity of oil firms and the legions of drillers, roughnecks, pipeliners, managers, engineers, geoscientists, royalty owners, investors, financiers, law firms, contractors, suppliers, regulators, technicians, refinery and chemical plant workers, marketers, sales people, service station attendants, clerical staff, truck drivers, jobbers, and others who make up this industry. Indeed,

it would require looking at oil *as an industry* and not just as a commodity or cultural construction.

Scholars from other disciplines can and do make valuable contributions to explaining the history of oil. But they ought to exercise more care. Both Mitchell and Huber commit mistakes that oil historians surely would have caught in the review process. For example, Huber refers to the powerful former speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, Sam Rayburn (D-TX), as “Tom Rayburn” (p. 53); and Mitchell, a scholar of the Middle East, misspells the name of Abdullah Tariki (“Taraki,” p. 212), the first Saudi oil minister and a co-founder of OPEC. These are small errors, but symptomatic ones. In addition to getting the details right, scholars must also wrestle with the fact that this is a giant, complex, and technologically sophisticated industry that does not lend itself to facile generalizations or analyses.¹ The metaphors of “carbon democracy” and “lifeblood” are provocative ways of thinking about oil, but not necessarily of knowing about it.

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1. For examples of the diverse approaches historians take in studying the oil industry, see the twenty essays in the special issue, “Oil in American History,” *Journal of American History* 99 (June 2012).