

History and Future of Environmental Policy: A Review of Writing on Oil and Global Warming

David E. Toohey

This review will examine two books on the rise and fall of fossil fuel industries and the implications for democratic governance and consumption-based global economies: Timothy Mitchell's *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil* (2011) and Paul Gilding's *The Great Disruption: How the Climate Crisis will transform the Global Economy* (2011). Both of these books share common themes. They both look at how various natural resources, and subsequent dependence on these resources, have shaped and will shape economic and environmental policy within nation-states and between nation states. Both see conflict in these relations. While these books at times present a dystopian view of carbon resources, they depart with common sense thinking that humanity's dependence on these resources is something natural, outside of human agency.

In contrast to some writing on the environment, especially on consumption of fossil fuels, Mitchell and Gilding attempt start with a somewhat politically neutral analysis of the worlds' energy use and subsequent policies. Mitchell for example, sees the use of coal as actually beneficial to democracy, in part because its transport can be disrupted by strikes, thereby meaning that elites must pay attention to workers (2011, 19). Similarly, Gilding does not characterize business elites that run environmentally destructive companies as evil per se (2011, 27), but rather portrays society as running into a series of limits to a consumption based economy. Neither does so to promote the current economic status quo, but rather to set the stage for understanding how we got to and sustain the use of fossil fuels.

Both books also provide food for thought about how the use of resources influences relations between more privileged countries, generally "The West" and the Middle East in *Carbon Democracy* and the global south in *The Great Disruption*. At this point, they paint a less democratic portrait of carbon fuels.

Carbon Democracy recounts how the West frequently intervened in Middle Eastern politics. *The Great Disruption* looks at what Gilding considers to be inevitable catastrophic effects of climate change upon the global south exploring various scenarios including large scale refugee flows from soon to be uninhabitable countries and the possibility of resultant violent conflicts (2011, 108).

Both books see the abovementioned relations as having great impact on the world. However, they depart slightly by looking at different time frames. *Carbon Democracy* looks at the present through reference to the past, whereas *The Great Disruption* begins with a tumultuous present, an increasingly dangerous near future of climate change, and eventually a major social, economic, and political shift that will end our reliance on fossil fuels.

This departure in time frames makes these books interesting to read as a series. *The Great Disruption* builds a working plan for humanity's future relation to fossil fuels to avert severe global climate change. This requires, as Gilding notes, not just abandoning fossil fuels, but on a global scale abandoning consumption based economics. This is based on two things that are difficult to understand through direct observation: 1) the future (which cannot be observed); and 2) an economy that does not rely on high levels of consumption and fossil fuels. In this context, the historical view of *Carbon Democracy* provides a window into an observation of how a new energy economy was created and how fossil fuel consumption is only one way that humanity has survived, rather than an essential, unchangeable human activity. Therefore, this book gives a little bit of empirical weight to Gilding's assertions which are about an unobservable future without fossil fuels.

Despite his future orientation, Gilding is not vague on what the objective is for mitigating climate change. He sets a clearly understandable scientific goal:

The logical, science-based response is to set a target that gives society a "safe" outcome. Based on currently available science, bringing global warming back to below one degree centigrade above preindustrial levels can be considered reasonably "safe" for humanity on a crowded planet. Returning below one degree of warming, in other words, is the *solution to the problem*. It is what is necessary. (Gilding 2011, 128)

Thus, we have a target for the future which needs to be done. Yet, the future is somewhat difficult to describe.

This is not to say that Gilding does not reference the past. He borrows many strategies and metaphors from the past and present. He in fact has a gift for metaphors based on solid historical experience, borrowed from outside the environmental movement. This undoubtedly frames his ideas in ways that will be easy to understand to a broad array of people that are conservative or disinterested in environmental policy. Many ideas for how to proceed are based on Western historical experience. For example, he draws on the idea of mobilization of resources during World War II England to argue that human beings can survive contemporary consumption driven economics:

World War II in England was a real-world example of putting these ideas into practice. Over the years of World War II we saw rapidly *decreasing* inequality, *decreasing* individual consumption, *decreasing* material standards, and yet rapidly *increasing* public health, and all with a huge degree of public support.

(Gilding 2011, 233)

For Gilding, this war-style effort will help us mitigate climate change, despite contemporary pessimism about full-scale ecological collapse:

As the full scale of the immanent crisis hits us, our response will be proportionally dramatic, mobilizing as we do in war. We will change at a scale and speed we can barely imagine today, completely transforming our economy, including our energy and transport industries, in just a few short decades. Perhaps most surprisingly we will learn there is more to life than shopping.

(Gilding 2011, 2)

He also (2011, 105) draws on the U.S. War on Terror to look at how society and government bureaucracies—when they are motivated—can respond to external threats, though the threat in this case would be global climate changes. These metaphors may be easier and more quickly understood to people living in increasingly militarized societies in the United States and Europe, than the environmental movement's other metaphors: i.e. back to nature, save the whales, etc.

This strength in some points may restrict his appeal to more conservative constituencies in the United States and other industrialized countries. This rhetoric may expand the appeal of U.S. policy to mitigate climate change. This would be useful because the U.S. does not yet have serious policies to offset its high rate of oil consumption and green-house gas emissions, yet has potential to backfire. At one point, Gilding frames his appeals in terms of democratic ideals and contemporary international economic conflict. He argues that the Peoples' Republic of China is creating another paradigm that addresses the supposedly future climate change crisis of "The Great Disruption" through sustainability (2011, 178–179). He portrays China's authoritarian political system as thereby outcompeting Western democracy on ecological issues (180–181). While probably directed to influence American conservatives to stop blocking U.S. policies that mitigate climate change, by encouraging them to compete with China on stopping climate change, this rhetorical plea may easily scare away progressive constituencies, Asian Americans, and global audiences. Moreover, the constituencies Gilding is targeting also may fail to recognize the potential for the United States and China to cooperate with international policy to stop rising global consumption and other negative trends that are influencing the menace of catastrophic climate change. Yet, what could we learn from the past of changing fossil fuel economies that might help us chart a path for future global environmental policies?

In *Carbon Democracy*, a couple theoretical points inform Timothy Mitchell's political economics approach to environmental and energy policies. He sees the establishment of the oil industry as subtly different from imperialism. He contrasts this to a variety of important texts. He sees the oil industry as the establishment of what Andrew Barry (2006) calls "technological zones" (quoted in Mitchell, p. 40). Mitchell paraphrases these technological zones in the oil industry as "a set of coordinated but widely dispersed regulations, calculative agreements, infrastructures and technical procedures that render certain objects or flows governable" (40). By using the term technological zones, rather than imperialism, Mitchell moves the locus of power away from nation-states and more toward a combination a hybrid oil industry-national power structure. Yet, this does not entail

a portrayal of the oil industry as benign or imperialist expansion as irrelevant.

Mitchell traces the oil industries power from early twentieth century colonialism until the current era. There are various power structures, which cannot all be mentioned here. Yet, an important transformation is the oil industry's misappropriation of trade unions' mode of sabotage. According to Mitchell, this was developed with trade unions at the turn of the last century, with the first carbon economy: coal. Because coal was shipped along vulnerable pathways, railroads and canals, and required skilled laborers, workers could gain political power (2011, 12). With the exception of a few oil workers' strikes—such as in Baku (in the Russian Caucasus in 1905 (33) and the national refinery strike of 1945–1946 in the United States—the ability of workers to democratically mobilize in the petroleum industry was based on their circumstances within their own, local part of the oil industry rather than the nature of manufacturing and distribution (31). Mitchell supports this with evidence about how production and transport after World War II, became extremely flexible with sea shipping (38). If an oil producing nation had “nationalization” that “affected a production site,” oil tankers could easily be re-routed to another country (38). Moreover, they could circumvent labor laws in extraterritorial ocean areas, thus evading unions' power (38). Yet, these technical innovations did not change the basic nature of the petroleum economy. Oil companies would also make the supply of oil seam scarce to drive up prices (39–40) and in 1904 Standard Oil was rumored to have instigated a labor strike in Galicia (in current Ukraine and Poland) that was violently suppressed by the Austrian army (32).

Another tactic was to water-down the Socialists' calls for democratic control of imperialist expansions through the term “self-determination.” Mitchell discusses how countries such as Britain would claim to be helping distinct racial populations develop natural resources for the “good of civilization”, i.e. in ways that circumvented labor politics in industrialized countries. Countries like England might claim to protect local, non-white leaders, from their own non-white populations (2011, 90). This was referred to as democratic, rather than imperialist and thus shows how resource production frames racist imperialist expansion and

contemporary securitized understandings of regions like the Middle East.

Within this context emerges something else, which Mitchell treats as somewhat separate from the abovementioned racial and imperialist policies, which may be a weak point of the book. In *Carbon Democracy* the world outside of America is adequately portrayed as racist in places like Africa where colonial expansion happened, but not other places such as the Middle East and the United States. This, echoes some of Gilding's framing of the Peoples' Republic of China and Third World countries as external, but instrumental to environmental policies, rather than always active collaborators with industrialized democracies in environmental policies. For example, Mitchell concludes *Carbon Democracy* by discussing the possibility of a world that moves beyond oil. Yet, he delves into the post-World War II rule by economic experts which casts an idea of limitless expansion without regards to nature, but frames this as "natural" (2011, 247). Using Bruno Latour's theories, he argues that when discussing oil and the environment, economists have used the idea of "nature" to avoid dealing with "the messy subjective world of politics" (2011, 246) and where humanities involvement with nature is not looked at (239). While this may be, *Carbon Democracy* does not discuss the racist power structures internal to the United States that sustained this expert driven economy, an issue taken up by scholarship about environmental racism. A culture that feels separate from the natural world was able to form and sustain such attitudes in large part through genocide against Native Americans whose cultures often prioritized humanity's relation to the natural environment, this perhaps is overshadowed by Mitchell's focus on technical and business factors.

To be fair, Mitchell ironically may not have been able to fully develop an account of environmental policy that fully includes identity as a consequence of providing an excellent, detailed historical account of Middle Eastern oil politics, which takes into account Western states' troubled relations to people of different identity groups (in its foreign policy). One example involves revolutions, such as Iraq in 1958 with British Petroleum, the main oil producing company weakening oil production after the revolution (Mitchell 2011, 147), and eventually overthrown by right-wing Iraqis with the United States supplying the name of Communists to be

assassinated (149–50). In this example, it is more difficult to claim environmental racism when there is not a clearly defined oppressor vs. oppressed binary. Mitchell in fact avoids some of the ambiguities of discussing identity in international settings. Hence, he criticizes how the idea of self-determination created an early form of global identity politics:

A further advantage of ‘self-determination’ was that the world could now be grasped in terms of political identities that were determined by race or ethnicity, a flexible concept that could refer to language, religion, shared history or most often, simple geographical demarcation. Since no population was ethnically homogenous, this created the possibility of identifying or shaping groups as ‘minorities.’ The imperial power could then claim the duty to protect them as an endangered fragment of the population. (Mitchell 2011, 99)

Yet, it also misses an important opportunity to describe how environmental policy, in this case that concerning oil consumption, may in fact be tied to issues of racism. This is more evident in the domestically expressed antagonism toward Middle East people and their immigrant/diaspora communities in the West that helps to sustain Western nations’ international foreign policy toward the region.

That said, Mitchell uses an excellent variety of primary source technical and policy writing, as well as an array of secondary historical and social science sources, to discuss in the final chapter how U.S. environmental and resource policies have actually obscured serious environmental and economic problems with fossil fuel industries. For example, knowledge of the amount of oil has been hidden from public view by oil companies, with little government oppositional intervention and plenty of support from modern economic thought to support ideas of, and economic arrangement based on, false perceptions of unlimited resources (2011, 245–247). These sources are also used to show how, since the 1960s, various branches of the U.S. government have given and rescinded financial support for Charles D. Keeling’s monitoring of CO₂ in the atmosphere, thus halting progress in understanding global climate change (242).

The Great Disruption and *Carbon Democracy* both incorporate a large amount of data about broad geographical and time frames to look at how fossil fuel based

industries have, are, and will impact democracy, foreign policy, the economy, and the future of the natural environment. *Carbon Democracy* differs from *The Great Disruption* in accepting a greater role for economies that do not use crude oil to offer greater degrees of democratic participation: coal based economies made organized labor and mass movements possible, and highly polluting, water intensive, oil sands, according to Mitchel (2011, 252) may render new forms of democratic, protest politics possible. *The Great Disruption*, due to the fact that it is more of an advocacy book and less an academic text, is uncompromising: for Gilding we need to abandon fossil fuels and abandon current consumption rates if humanity is to survive. In contrast perhaps to Mitchell, Gilding states that using less democratic aims also may be desirable for ending climate change including “a strong, dominating government” and “system-wide intervention” (2011, 119) though there will later be a more enjoyable, healthy democratic society not affected by the problems of petroleum based economies (117). So these are different, yet somewhat merging priorities. Gilding’s text helps us understand a post-carbon democracy, whereas Mitchell’s text helps clarify how resource extraction have, and may continue to, hinder or promote democratic participation.

Sources

- Barry, Andrew. 2006. Technological Zones. *European Journal of Social Theory* 9, 2: 239–53.
- Gilding, Paul. 2011. *The Great Disruption: How the Climate Crisis will transform the Global Economy*. London, Bloomsbury.
- Mitchell, Timothy. 2011. *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil*. London: Verso.