



# Kent Academic Repository

Eslava, Luis, Natarajan, Usha and Parfitt, Rose (2012) *(Post)Revolutionary Interlinkages: Labour, Environment and Accumulation*. Review of: *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil* (Verso, 2011) by Mitchell, Timothy. *Transnational Legal Theory*, 4 (1). pp. 108-125. ISSN 2041-4005.

## Downloaded from

<https://kar.kent.ac.uk/64665/> The University of Kent's Academic Repository KAR

## The version of record is available from

<https://doi.org/10.5235/20414005.4.1.108>

## This document version

Author's Accepted Manuscript

## DOI for this version

## Licence for this version

UNSPECIFIED

## Additional information

## Versions of research works

### Versions of Record

If this version is the version of record, it is the same as the published version available on the publisher's web site. Cite as the published version.

### Author Accepted Manuscripts

If this document is identified as the Author Accepted Manuscript it is the version after peer review but before type setting, copy editing or publisher branding. Cite as Surname, Initial. (Year) 'Title of article'. To be published in *Title of Journal*, Volume and issue numbers [peer-reviewed accepted version]. Available at: DOI or URL (Accessed: date).

## Enquiries

If you have questions about this document contact [ResearchSupport@kent.ac.uk](mailto:ResearchSupport@kent.ac.uk). Please include the URL of the record in KAR. If you believe that your, or a third party's rights have been compromised through this document please see our [Take Down policy](https://www.kent.ac.uk/guides/kar-the-kent-academic-repository#policies) (available from <https://www.kent.ac.uk/guides/kar-the-kent-academic-repository#policies>).

## (Post)Revolutionary Interlinkages: Labour, Environment and Accumulation

A review of: Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil* (Verso, 2011).

Luis Eslava, Usha Natarajan and Rose Parfitt \*

In 4(1) *Transnational Legal Theory* (2013): 108-25.

In this collective review, we explore Timothy Mitchell's *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil* with a view to reflecting critically on a contemporary historical juncture, which we call a (post)revolutionary moment. The review builds on discussions at a seminar we co-organised in Doha, Qatar under the auspices of Harvard Law School's Institute for Global Law and Policy as part of its annual workshop in January 2013.<sup>1</sup> *Carbon Democracy* is part of a significant body of scholarship stretching over several decades where Mitchell explores the relationship between economic expertise and the material conditions of socio-economic development. Mitchell's analyses over the years have been wide-ranging in their interests and implications, but his particular focus has been the Arab region. In *Carbon Democracy*, Mitchell maintains this geographical focus, investigating the internal mechanics and political repercussions of that quintessential Middle Eastern commodity, oil. Yet this is not an ordinary resuscitation of the 'rentier states' thesis: as Mitchell explains: '[r]ather than a study of democracy and oil, [this] became a book about democracy *as* oil—as a form of politics whose mechanisms on multiple levels involve the processes of producing and using carbon energy' (5).<sup>2</sup>

For international lawyers, the importance of this non-legal text is both substantive and methodological. It draws our attention to a region undergoing historic transformation, the repercussions of which are being felt globally, not least in the capacity of the Arab uprisings to inspire other social movements for change. At the same time, Mitchell's methodology provides alternative and perhaps more radical ways of understanding law.

---

\* Luis Eslava is Senior Fellow, Melbourne Law School, The University of Melbourne, and Visiting International Law Scholar, Adelaide Law School, The University of Adelaide, [leslava@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:leslava@unimelb.edu.au). Usha Natarajan is Assistant Professor, Department of Law, The American University in Cairo, [unatarajan@aucegypt.edu](mailto:unatarajan@aucegypt.edu). Rose Parfitt was, at the time of the seminar, Assistant Professor of International Law, Department of Political Science, The American University in Cairo. She is now a McKenzie Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Institute for International Law and the Humanities, Melbourne Law School, [rose.parfitt@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:rose.parfitt@unimelb.edu.au). With gratitude to David Kennedy and the Institute for Global Law and Policy for the opportunity to discuss this text and issues arising from it at the IGLP 2013 Workshop, Doha, Qatar, 5-14 January 2013.

<sup>1</sup> See further <http://www.harvardiglp.org/>.

<sup>2</sup> Emphasis in original.

The title of the seminar, '(Post)Revolutionary Interlinkages: Labour, Environment and Accumulation', stemmed from our desire, as international lawyers at a global law and policy workshop in Doha, to identify analytically productive interlinkages between local, regional, transnational and global policy-making spheres and between different areas of expertise and political action. We wondered, for instance, whether Qatari migration, labour and human rights law might be better understood in light of the international fossil-fuelled economy that influences and shapes regional and local economic options and political choices. Conversely, we asked whether international economic, environmental or human rights lawyers might profit from a fuller understanding of the interaction of their regimes with local contexts. At the local level, the rise of social movements—from the Arab uprisings to tribal movements in South Asia, environmental movements in East Asia, mining protests in South Africa, indigenous movements in Latin America, Occupy movements in North America and Europe, and other contemporary social mobilisations—made us curious as to whether there were any common threads linking these groups and any shared demands of relevance to international policy makers. We considered other events that directly or indirectly impacted these movements: the 'triple F' crises of food, fuel and finance in 2007; the collapse of the European Union's communitarian ethos; the failure of international mechanisms to address pressing environmental challenges; and the economic 'emergence' of populous developing states with their own capitalist class dynamics and strong-fisted approaches to indigenous issues and radical politics. In light of these developments, we identified three phenomena that cut across various global demands: the pauperisation, deregulation and casualisation of labour; environmental degradation; and spiralling disparities of wealth and power. While separately none of these phenomena led to the layered contextual understanding we sought, our objective in focusing on interlinkages between them was to allow such an understanding to emerge.

Such interwoven crises present a number of methodological and substantive challenges. Here, Mitchell's text offered a helpful method and analytical trajectory. We realised that our struggle to make sense of our times was not due to the complexity of actual conditions, but rather to our limited capacity to conceptualise or articulate issues beyond our disciplinary affiliation, and to our reliance on the conventional political and legal organisation of the nation state and the jurisdictional assemblage that gravitates around it. It is a testament to Mitchell's methodology that he conquers this challenge.

At our seminar, the challenge was also to unite an audience with expertise in diverse but relevant fields to address issues of common concern together. We invited four scholars, each with close connections to different parts of the world, to think fluidly about (post)revolutionary interlinkages and how to engage with these links in useful ways. Sheila Jasanoff and Hani Sayed began by focusing on questions of method in the context of the Arab uprisings. Dennis Davis, Kerry Rittich and Luis Eslava broadened the focus to look at interlinkages in other parts of the world. The discussion ranged from

the merits of ‘co-production’ as a method capable of taking into account the power of ‘things’ in relation to human wills (Jasanoff), to the assault on the Cairo *Zabbaleen* community’s system of rubbish collection and recycling by an alliance between the Egyptian government and transnational capital (Sayed). A recurring theme was that of an ongoing global project of ideological reconfiguration, whether the recasting of labour politics as an issue of public health in the case of the *Zabbaleen*; or Rittich’s critique of the idea that ‘an economy’s health is better measured by stock-markets than by labour markets’; or, as Eslava argued, the Ecuadorian notion of the ‘mature left’ designed to allow Latin American governments to accept a certain amount of environmental degradation and dispossession of indigenous land without sacrificing their socialist credentials. The importance of method was reiterated, for bringing into effect and naturalising such reconfigurations, as well as for creating the conditions under which resistance takes place. Mitchell’s materialist approach, his inattention to non-carbon materials or carbon beyond coal and oil (particularly relevant to the situation in South Africa, as Davis noted), encountered some criticism. Nonetheless, *Carbon Democracy* was understood as an important intervention, one which made visible the material limits of contemporary democracy for addressing poor labour conditions, environmental degradation, and increasingly unequal distributions of wealth and power. In the following three sections, we each consider, through the lenses of labour, environment and accumulation respectively, the substantive and methodological insights that *Carbon Democracy* offers.

## **Labour**

### ***Rose Parfitt***

What triggered the ‘Arab Spring’? For the development economist Hernando De Soto one thing is clear: ‘it wasn’t politics, it was economics’. Purporting to reveal the ‘real’ identity of the Tunisian fruit-seller whose self-immolation on 17 December 2011 in protest at the seizure of his stock by local officials unleashed the wave of popular uprisings across the Middle East and North Africa region, De Soto declares: ‘above all [Mohamed Bouazizi] was a repressed entrepreneur’. This, he continues, ‘is why Bouazizi’s death resonated so strongly and became a unifying force across the culturally, politically, and religiously diverse Arab world, from Morocco to Syria’. To commit suicide over ‘the loss of \$225 worth of goods and a regular location on the street for a fruit stand seems inconceivable to most people in the United States and Europe’, De Soto declares. Yet,

Bouazizi’s counterparts throughout Tunisia and in the extralegal economies in the rest of the Arab world understood immediately his desperation. In their eyes, Bouazizi had not been just the victim of corruption or even public humiliation, as horrible as they are; he had been

deprived of the only thing that stood between him and starvation—the loss of his place in the only economy available to poor Arabs.<sup>3</sup>

De Soto's willingness to transform Bouazizi, the all-too-real Arab worker stripped of his social rights, into an imagined universal figure—the 'repressed entrepreneur' lacking adequately transparent and enforceable property rights—is characteristic of current thinking in international, regional and national financial and 'development' institutions. The 'solution' such thinking points to is obvious: tackling poverty requires growth (rather than redistribution); and growth, in the post-'stagflation' era, requires nothing less than the 'formalisation' of the informal economy, mandating the expansion of the 'free' market into every nook and cranny of social life, to encompass every slum-shack, every tuk-tuk, every fruit-stall.<sup>4</sup> The 'negative externalities' associated with growth can be dealt with later by 'good' governments disciplined by means of bilateral investment treaties, international loan agreements and conditional debt swaps, to limit their capacity for intervention to the role of 'partner' in privatisation schemes. The function of 'democracy' in this context, equated with the holding of periodic 'free and fair' elections, is not so much to give human societies a say over what form and direction their collective existence should take as it is to protect and legitimate this ever-expanding market.

With the concept of carbon democracy, however, Timothy Mitchell is able to give an entirely different account of the relationship between labour, environment and accumulation, both in the Middle East and elsewhere. In this account, workers are conceived not as frustrated profit-maximisers but rather as human beings harnessed to each other, to their physical environment and to the products, tools and techniques by means of which they earn their living by a complex web of symbiotic relationships. This is an account which emphasises real physical relationships over assumed psychological drives. One of *Carbon Democracy's* most powerful insights is that the more the global economy isolates workers from one another and places them at a distance, not only from the products of their labour but also from their physical surroundings and from the social costs arising from the process of production, the weaker is their capacity to mount effective demands for a more equal

---

<sup>3</sup> Hernando de Soto, 'The Real Mohamed Bouazizi', *Foreign Policy* (16 December 2011) <[http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/12/16/the\\_real\\_mohamed\\_bouazizi](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/12/16/the_real_mohamed_bouazizi)> accessed 7 March 2013.

<sup>4</sup> See eg World Bank MENA Development Report, *From Privilege to Competition: Unlocking Private-Led Growth in the Middle East and North Africa* (2009) viii-xiv <[http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTMENA/Resources/Privilege\\_complete\\_final.pdf](http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTMENA/Resources/Privilege_complete_final.pdf)> accessed 18 February 2013. The Introduction asserts, '[a]ll countries in the region face a pressing employment challenge: about 40 million jobs will need to be created in the coming decade. A young and increasingly well educated labor force is looking for opportunities to use their skills and creativity. Governments will not be able to create these jobs in the public sector – nor will state-owned enterprises in a sustainable manner. The jobs will have to come from the private sector ... That is what this report is about: enabling new generations of entrepreneurs to play a bigger role in the growth of their countries.'

distribution of resources and for a safer environment for their children—that is, for a more ‘democratic’ form of democracy.

It is Mitchell’s central argument that the emergence of what is known today as ‘democracy’ on the one hand—namely a system of rule by popular ‘representatives’, legitimated by means of periodic elections, in which issues of social justice are treated as only one set of policy options among many, rather than as a fundamental aspect of the legal and institutional framework *within* which policy-making must take place—and the emergence of oil as the world’s primary source of energy on the other, were part of precisely the same process. As discussed by Eslava below, Mitchell’s unique methodology draws its inspiration from contemporary approaches to social production in which material relations are understood to be no less important than social and ideological relations. Mitchell’s analysis of democracy in the age of oil begins neither from the standpoint of political theory nor from the critique of material distribution, but rather from the objects and techniques associated with energy extraction. Mitchell rejects an orthodox understanding of such objects and techniques as mere instruments through which modern man enacts his mastery over ‘nature’ and in so doing reproduces his subjectivity. On the contrary, ‘in tracing the connections that were made between pipelines and pumping stations, refineries and shipping routes, road systems and automobile cultures, dollar flows and economic knowledge, weapons experts and militarism’, he insists, ‘one discovers how a peculiar set of relations was engineered between oil, violence, finance, expertise and democracy’ (253).

Mitchell explains how the transition from renewable energy sources to coal and steam power not only made possible the industrial revolution (thereby setting in motion the twin processes of capitalist globalisation and climate change) but also established the conditions necessary to ensure that demands to *mitigate* the devastating effects of these process on workers, in the Western metropolises at least, would be (temporarily) successful. It was a feature of the mining industry, he points out, that moving carbon stores from the coal seam to the surface created unusually autonomous places of methods and work’, contributing enormously to the militancy of the miners and to their capacity to organise, strike and sabotage productivity effectively (20). At the same time, miners’ strikes were apt ‘to spread through the interconnected industries of coal mining, railways, docking and shipping’ (23). For, as Mitchell explains:

The rise of large industry had exposed populations to extraordinary forms of social insecurity, physical risk, overwork, and destitution. But the concentration and movement of coal required to drive those industrial processes had created a vulnerability. Workers were gradually connected together not so much by the weak ties of class culture, collective ideology or

political organisation, but by the increasing and highly concentrated quantities of carbon energy they mined, loaded, carried, stoked and put to work. The coordinated acts of interrupting, slowing down or diverting its moment created a decisive political machinery, a new form of collective capability built out of coalmines, railways, power stations, and their operators. More than a mere social movement, this socio-technical agency was put to work for a series of democratic claims whose gradual implementation radically reduced the precariousness of life in industrial society. (27)

In this way, the very physicality of industrial labour—the *real* dimensions of workers' conditions and practices during the era of coal-power—gave rise to the possibility of the alleviation of their exploitation (though not, of course, its elimination).

It is at this point, during the inter-war period, that oil enters Mitchell's picture. For coal-power's inbuilt 'vulnerability' was soon addressed by those who stood to lose most from the introduction and protection of workers' rights by means of the conversion of American and then, thanks to the Marshall Plan, Western European industry from coal to oil—oil sourced primarily from European-controlled parts of the Middle East, and transported to industrialised parts of the world by means of pipelines and tankers. The effect on the ability of labour to organise effectively was catastrophic, Mitchell argues:

[W]hereas the movement of coal tended to follow dendritic networks, with branches at each end but a single main channel, creating potential choke points at several junctures, oil flowed along networks that often had the properties of a grid, like an electricity network, where there is more than one possible path and the flow of energy can switch to avoid blockages and breakdowns.

Oil produced, say, in Iraq (then the British mandate of Mesopotamia) could now be shipped anywhere in the world by vessels registered under flags of convenience, allowing labour regulations neatly to be sidestepped. In this way, '[t]ransoceanic shipping operated beyond the territorial spaces governed by the labour regulations and other democratic rights won in the era of widespread coal and railway strikes' (38).

As this analysis suggests, current orthodoxy regarding democratic transition in the Middle East (or the lack of it)—namely the 'rentier states' thesis, according to which resource-rich states like Saudi Arabia are able to buy off or simply suppress potentially revolutionary populations using their abundant oil revenues—is oversimplified. For as Mitchell points out, '[t]he transformation of oil into large and unaccountable government incomes is not a cause of the problem of democracy and oil, but

the outcome of particular ways of engineering political relations out of flows of energy' (5). Carbon democracy is, in other words, a global phenomenon. It describes the United States no less accurately than it does Iraq: the difference being that in one, labour rights hard won such as the minimum wage and maternity leave have gradually been eroded with the shift from coal to oil, whereas in the other, the internationally supported emergence of the oil industry prior to the emergence of (carbon) 'democracy' ensured that such rights would never be fully implemented. What links them together, of course, is the (global) economy.

Contrary to orthodox accounts, which trace its birth to the eighteenth-century economic theories of Adam Smith (whose now-classic image of the pin factory is deconstructed by Eslava below) and David Ricardo, Mitchell insists that the economy emerged 'as an object of calculation and a means of governing populations' only in the mid-twentieth century, as a direct consequence of the emergence of the oil industry. For it was oil (together with technological innovation) that allowed the classical assumption of scarcity to be overturned: if resources were unlimited, then growth could be conceived as infinite, and concerns over environmental externalities and unequal distribution could be cast to the wind (234). Crucially, however, it is for Mitchell precisely in the instability of this economic conception of the relation between nature ('below ground') and society ('above ground') associated with carbon democracy that the potential for emancipatory change is contained. For if the shift from plant to coal to oil energy brought into being new modes of governance (or 'socio-technical' organisation), he argues, then the growing scarcity of available oil and the search for new sources of energy and methods of extraction also contain possibilities for the creation of a space in which workers—vulnerable human beings situated in an equally vulnerable physical environment—might again be able to intervene successfully. As he puts it,

In response to threats as widespread as peak oil or climate collapse ... rival technical solutions become experiments in the composition of the collective world ... These situations offer occasions not simply to defend existing democratic rights or extend them to others, but to re-democratise the forms of democracy. (240)

How should we assess this cautiously optimistic conclusion? The answer we give will relate, perhaps, to our response to the question posed at the start of this section. In light of the thesis laid out in *Carbon Democracy*, what *did* trigger the 'Arab Spring'? Mitchell himself makes the point that '[b]y and large, the less oil a country produced, and the faster its production was declining, the more readily the struggles for democracy unfolded. Tunisia and Egypt, where the uprisings began, and Yemen, Bahrain and Syria, where they quickly spread, were among the region's smallest oil producers, and in most of them production was declining' (1). Can we, as this suggests, attribute the uprisings to the temporary *breakdown* of 'carbon democracy'? Was the 'Arab Spring' in fact the outcome of a long-



term *failure* on the part of resource-poor Arab states to prevent their out-of-work workers from organising and demanding change *as human beings*, resulting from an inability to provide the very jobs which would have locked these human beings into the global carbon economy at a safe distance from one another and from their social and physical environment—a failure itself attributable, at least in part, to the spiralling costs of imported oil in recent decades? Many things have changed since 17 December 2010, however, and today—as rivers of money and weapons flow into post-revolutionary Arab states from hyper-capitalist Western states and international institutions on the one hand, and from oil-soaked Gulf states on the other – a further question springs to mind. Can we link the broken promises of the Middle East’s new ‘democratic’ governments to a successful reconfiguration and reassertion of ‘carbon democracy’ in the region? The price of US ‘support’ laid out by Barack Obama in the wake of the first wave of uprisings may give us all the answer we need:

[I]t’s important to focus on trade, not just aid; and investment, not just assistance. The goal must be a model in which protectionism gives way to openness; the reins of commerce pass from the few to the many, and the economy generates jobs for the young. *America’s support for democracy will therefore be based on ensuring financial stability; promoting reform; and integrating competitive markets with each other and the global economy*—starting with Tunisia and Egypt.<sup>5</sup>

If the powerful international institutional and legal complex for which De Soto and Obama stand is successful in recasting oppressed workers as ‘repressed entrepreneurs’—with the implication that a living, far from being an entitlement, is on the contrary something which must be scraped out from such hairline cracks between costs and revenues as only an ingenuity born of desperation could discover—then even Mitchell’s guarded optimism might be misplaced.

## **Environment**

### ***Usha Natarajan***

Environmental issues such as climate change are often transboundary in nature, involving complex, interconnected ecosystems that may transcend state borders, as well as globalised chains of production, consumption and waste. International environmental law evolved in an attempt to manage such issues. From its inception in the 1970s, this area of law has been polarised by a strong north-south divide that, in more recent years, has manifested as a stalemate on international cooperation for issues such as mitigating climate change. Broadly, the debate consists of environmentalists in rich

---

<sup>5</sup> ‘Barack Obama’s speech on Middle East – Full Transcript’, *The Guardian* (19 May 2011) <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/may/19/barack-obama-speech-middle-east>> accessed 4 March 2013, emphasis added. For a penetrating analysis, see Adam Hanieh, ‘Egypt’s Orderly Transition? International Aid and the Rush to Structural Adjustment’, *Jadaliyya* (29 May 2011) <<http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/1711/egypts-%E2%80%98orderly-transition%E2%80%99-international-aid-and->> accessed 7 March 2013.

states demanding that development occur in environmentally sustainable ways, and developing states insisting that they will alleviate poverty by whatever means available without being held hostage by environmental problems that developed states created.

Mitchell's text directs us out of this stalemate and towards more profitable debate in two ways. *First*, it moves international lawyers beyond state interest and interstate cooperation by revealing the inextricability of (i) the public and private spheres of law and (ii) local, national, transnational, international and comparative law. Such an understanding illuminates the relationship between the natural environment and politics and reveals how structures of privilege and subalternity are systemically reinforced both in creating environmental problems and in circumscribing available solutions. *Second*, Mitchell's analysis complicates the north-south relationship by describing the tangled web of mutually reinforcing interests across developed and developing states that underlies a lack of progress on addressing environmental problems.

On the *first* point, Mitchell asserts a link between the types of fuels that energise our lives and the politics we produce—or, to put it more broadly, between the state of nature and the nature of the state.<sup>6</sup> The term 'carbon democracy' derives from Mitchell's argument that fossil fuels make democracy as we know it today possible and fossil fuels also prescribe limits to democracy. The two dominant fuels of industrialisation, coal and oil, are both produced by subterranean stores of carbon. When compared with renewable fuels such as wood, coal and oil provide exponentially more concentrated amounts of energy. Their nature derives from the compression of vast quantities of space and time: 'organic matter equivalent to all of the plant and animal life produced over the entire earth for four hundred years was required to produce the fossil fuels we burn today in a single year' (15). Hence the name 'fossil' fuels, described by Sartre as 'capital bequeathed to mankind by other living beings'.<sup>7</sup>

Coal and oil differ in nature. Coal extraction requires a larger workforce than oil in relation to the quantity of energy produced. Thus, as Parfitt reviews in relation to labour above, coal miners working in large groups underground may develop a degree of autonomy and expertise. In contrast, oil workers are fewer in number and work on the surface where production expertise is diffused amongst engineers and managers. There is usually a single conduit from the production of coal to its use, which can be slowed or disrupted by workers at any point along the way as a means of realising their demands. As oil is light, fluid, easily vaporised, and leaves little residue compared with coal, multiple

---

<sup>6</sup> See further Usha Natarajan, 'TWAAIL and the Environment: The State of Nature, the Nature of the State, and the Arab Spring' (2012) 14 *Oregon Review of International Law* 177.

<sup>7</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason Vol 1, Theory of Practical Ensembles* (New Left Books, 1976 ed) 154, as quoted by Mitchell at 6.

pathways for its transportation and handling are easily established, making the supply process flexible and difficult to disrupt. The location of coal deposits is readily known and it is useable after cleaning and sorting. However, exploration for oil is complex and it has to be refracted into various hydrocarbons before it is useable. Mitchell describes how, from exploration to production, from research and development to marketing and promoting their products and services, the oil industry is more capital-intensive, has more extensive networks, and more opportunities for asserting exclusive expertise. He argues that the nature of fuel affects our politics in various ways, including the ability of workers to realise their demands and thus the functioning of representative democracy (see Parfitt above), a global economy dynamised by the mythic possibility of endless economic growth and thus tied to exacerbating inequality and environmental degradation (see Eslava below), and the creation of disciplines that circumscribe our ability to resist harmful consequences.

In tracing how the material world shapes our ideas, Mitchell considers our calculations—what we count, how we count, and why we count it—and the construction of the discipline of economics. He observes that perceptions of scarcity and plenty are central to this process. The accessibility of coal and oil in the last two centuries provided abundant energy that fuelled economic growth at extraordinary, unprecedented rates and encouraged new types of calculation based on the possibility of unlimited economic growth. This context shapes how we measure our economy. Instead of counting a nation's wealth, economists count its aggregate income—the sum of every instance of money changing hands—because each such instance represents income to the recipient regardless of the transaction's productiveness or waste. As goods and money can theoretically change hands limitlessly, the same goods or money may be counted multiple times. Additionally, the waste incurred as income is generated—the exhaustion of natural resources, labour and machinery—is not counted. Mitchell describes this as a process whereby economics withdraws from studying the capacities of nature and natural resources and turns instead into a science and technology of commodification and pricing.

Additionally, to count things accurately, a finite boundary is helpful. For economics, the central frame is that of the nation state. Economists have reproduced the institutional structure of the state within their discipline as evidenced in the basic distinction between macro and microeconomics. As with other state-based disciplines such as international law, the geopolitical construction of such spaces and the ensuing negative consequences for certain peoples, places and things is obscured. As a result, our capacity to understand and effectively address concerns that transgress national boundaries, such as environmental issues, becomes limited. For instance, the traditional assertion of a state's sovereignty over its natural resources does not adequately address, and in many instances has compounded, the plight of many of its most impoverished citizens, who are not only prevented from

benefiting from these resources, but additionally suffer most from the negative impacts of environmental degradation.

Thus, through exploring the relationship between the hydrocarbon age and the development of economic expertise, Mitchell undoes the ostensibly commonsensical notions of the economy and what it counts, and the dividing up of the common world into areas of public and private concern and their corresponding legal regimes. As Mitchell observes, in today's economy nature speaks to us primarily through measuring devices and tools of calculation (233), which in turn function with reference to the state. It is then unsurprising that our solutions to environmental problems are limited by the same frame and therefore tend to be equally technocratic and economic: carbon markets and emissions trading schemes, debt for nature swaps, incentivising funds for technology transfer and clean development mechanisms, promoting ethical or green consumerism, and so on. Indeed, since the measurement of the economy makes no distinction between beneficial and harmful costs, Mitchell points out that the increased expenditure of dealing with environmental damage appears as a spur rather than impediment to growth (140). He describes the economy as a space between culture and nature: 'the object of economics was not the material forces and resources of nature and human labour, but a new space that was opened up between nature on one side and human society and culture on the other—the not-quite-natural, not-quite-social space that came to be called "the economy"' (132). He points out that such a space is strategically located to claim a variety of topics as subject to determination by technical expertise rather than democratic debate (124). Many environmental issues have fallen prey to just such a move.

On the *second* point, Mitchell's central argument regarding the link between hydrocarbons and the nature of democracy rests upon a consistent deep engagement with past and present strategies of empire. Mitchell addresses the role of international law and organisations in empire, from Lassa Oppenheim's understanding of protectorates in his 1920 treatise to Antony Anghie's work on the Mandate System of the League of Nations, from the 1884 Berlin Conference to the Bretton Woods organisations and OPEC. For Western states, the 1870s to the First World War was the age of industrialisation, democratisation and empire. This combination is unsurprising, as Mitchell observes, because utilising fossil fuels requires a rapidly expanding control of territories (18). Similarly, with regard to Western democratisation, Lugard stated that 'the democracies of to-day claim the right to work', but without the raw materials produced in the colonies 'the satisfaction of that claim is impossible' (101). Through the lens of empire, there are numerous continuities between the use of coal and that of oil. 'The switch in one part of the world to modes of life that consumed energy at a geometric rate of growth required changes in ways of living in many other places' (16). Relative to renewable fuels such as wood, coal and oil require considerably less land to supply energy. However, ever increasing amounts of land are needed to produce the industrial raw materials to which this

exponentially increasing quantity of energy is applied, especially for the production of concentrated food energy. This transformed aspects of everyday life in the colonies, affecting available choices with regard to clean air, water and food, health, shelter, employment, and politics, among many other things, and this dynamic continues to play out in impoverished regions today.<sup>8</sup>

Mitchell emphasises that the operations of empire are simultaneously straightforward and nuanced, through hegemonic assertions in a mixture of private and public spheres, religious and secular spheres, material and ideal spheres: ‘Rather than assume that control of Middle Eastern oil was the imperial or strategic interest of Britain, Germany, US, etc; or that it served the national interest of producer states; we will ask who mobilised these claims and for what purposes’ (45). For instance, oil companies portray their efforts to control the global supply of oil as important, not for their own profits, but for securing and furthering the imperial interests of states. The profit incentive is high as oil offers the possibility of being sold at one hundred times the cost of production. As oil was abundant in the twentieth century, producers risked undercutting each other’s prices. Thus, profits could be maximised only if mechanisms were put in place to create scarcity through anti-market arrangements. The control of Arabia is essential to maximising profit as its massive production capacity is pivotal to creating either scarcity or surplus. As oil profits depend on those who control Arabia, Mitchell points out that it is an Islamic movement that has made possible the enormous revenues of the oil industry: the *muwahhidun* (adherents of Wahhabism, a sect with strict interpretations of Islam) in alliance with the House of Saud (205). Conversely, these forces derived and maintain their power from oil and its industry. As a region with numerous entrenched conflict and security issues, Western states’ payment of massive petrodollar reserves to Arab oil states could be recouped by selling weapons to the same governments, who remain Western arms suppliers’ largest customers. Thus, the oil industry has created and sustained a world where its products thrive.

Contemporary analyses of the nexus between energy resources and global environmental policy tend to focus on technical fixes through, for example, expanded use of clean energy technologies or more efficient energy use. While these are worthwhile endeavours, Mitchell’s description of the supply side of the fossil fuel economy shows why coal and oil will inevitably continue to be dug up and used as long as they remain accessible, thus limiting the usefulness of such endeavours in mitigating issues such as climate change. While accessible oil supplies are not easy to estimate, it is unlikely that new sources of oil can be found at a rate that keeps pace with the decline of existing fields and rising consumption in developing states, including in major oil producing states such as Saudi Arabia and Iran. The share of available energy exports consumed by China and India is increasing and, as the role of the West as major consumers of oil from the Arab world declines, the extension of Mitchell’s

---

<sup>8</sup> See eg Timothy Mitchell, ‘America’s Egypt: Discourse of the Development Industry’ (1991) 169 *Middle East Report* 18.

analysis to new global energy partnerships with the East will be of increasing importance. Likewise, his hypotheses may be tested and perhaps strengthened by application to regions of the world where economies are largely fuelled by coal, such as China and India.

By tracing the link between fuel and politics, one of Mitchell's aims is to expose a web of interconnected incentives and strategies helpful to those concerned about environmental degradation. The 'carbon' in carbon democracy refers not only to coal, oil and its by-products, but also connotes the term's contemporary currency with regard to climate change. The international community's incapacity to collectively mitigate climate change leads Mitchell to observe that '[t]he political machinery that emerged to govern the age of fossil fuels ... may be incapable of addressing the events that will end it' (7). Since the advent of Western environmental concerns in the 1960s and 1970s, the oil industry has participated in defining the nature of environmental crises and promoting particular solutions. For instance, Mitchell describes how, when the increase in oil prices threatened to make affordable rival sources of energy such as nuclear power, oil companies joined 'the effort to frame the environment as a new object of politics and to define and calibrate it in particular ways' (192). He points out that, like the economy, the environment is not simply an aspect of external reality; it is a 'set of forces and calculations that rival groups attempt to mobilise' (192).

Mitchell observes:

What we call ideals are ways of speaking, and of referring to the words of others, that acquire this general, disembodied circulation. While appearing to be nonmaterial, with the incorporeal form we attribute to ideals or principles, terms like self-determination and democracy acquire their lightness and transportability through specific practices. To understand their effectiveness we need to follow the work done to strip such terms of the varied circumstances that produce them, to translate and mistranslate multiple claims into a common idiom, and to build the acoustic machinery of their circulation (69).

Such a method provides profitable avenues of inquiry for addressing challenges of resource scarcity and ecological change. Mitchell rightly observes that people have always demanded a less precarious life. What was missing in certain times and places was not consciousness, nor a repertoire of demands, but an effective way of forcing the powerful to listen. Thus, uncovering the materialities that underlie the modern environmental movement will help us successfully resist environmentally harmful tendencies. What is the link between these materialities and the ideals that the environmentalism today transports in an age of climate change? Does the movement hold within itself some of the seeds of failure? Such questioning better identifies points of vulnerability in existing

paradigms, allowing for strategic resistance to the downward spiral of environmental degradation, thereby creating new opportunities for democratisation.

### Accumulation

*Luis Eslava*

*Sir, the insolence of wealth will creep out.*

Samuel Johnson (1778)

In this collective review, my task is to discuss *Carbon Democracy* through the lens of accumulation, the third of the conceptual phenomena whose inter-relationship my co-authors and I consider most useful when reflecting critically on our (post)revolutionary present, in light of recent events in the Arab world and beyond. But before I embark on my task, I would like to make a more general point about how the relation between the economy and the constitution of social and productive relations has traditionally been understood in social sciences and policy circles. To do this, we need to return to one of the foundational texts of our modern world: Adam Smith's *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*. Revisiting Smith's classical framing can help us to place the question of accumulation in a broader analytical framework and at the precise level on which Mitchell invites us to understand the motions and political effects of our current global economy.

*The Wealth of Nations* was published for the first time in 1776. At the beginning of the industrial revolution, Smith's text brought together a new way of understanding productive relations, the class and labour structures in a capitalist system, and the mechanics of wealth accumulation at the local and international scales. To facilitate his analysis of these complex facets of the new global political economy emerging at the time, Smith mobilised the image of a pin factory at the start of his book. With a voice full of admiration and a sense of achievement, Smith narrates how the division of labour in the pin factory epitomises the way in which productivity is increased, and wealth is reused and expanded in industrialised societies. According to Smith, in the processes that occur within the walls of a pin factory, industrialised societies radically depart from the 'scantiness' that characterises life '[a]mong the savage nations of hunters and fishers'.<sup>9</sup> Although in these savage nations 'every individual who is able to work is more or less employed in useful labour', '[s]uch nations ... are so miserably poor, that from mere want, they are frequently reduced, or, at least, think themselves reduced, to the necessity sometimes of directly destroying, and sometimes of abandoning their infants, their old people, and those afflicted with lingering diseases, to perish with hunger, or be devoured by

---

<sup>9</sup> Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (Oxford University Press, 1998 ed) 8.

wild beasts'.<sup>10</sup> In contrast, 'among civilised and thriving [industrialised] nations', 'a great number of people do not labour at all'; 'yet the labour of the society is so great, that all are often abundantly supplied, and a workman, even of the lowest and poorest order, if he is frugal and industrious, may enjoy a greater share of the necessaries and conveniences of life than it is possible for any savage to acquire'.<sup>11</sup>

Smith's optimistic reading of the workings of the pin factory conceals the particular class-labour relations and the environmental externalities that result from the process of industrialisation. Murray Minuteman life in from Australia all the way across and even I know that I can all that we can drink because are now guys chocolate with which she the video below zero yeah actually spending up all day really might down which is not yes yes is I just this is not very flexible so I just left that thing and yeah I like it Dragon Dictate pay grey has I just like publications you are just providing, the of all record and so should mongers stranger you can drink you like when looking for a professor and upper so the while these games to diary three another one drill for formal but floral unity Riddell your working was by you Si Sim Sim. Similarly, the pin factory was, and still is, an enabling metaphor to assess—in the negative sense—those large sections of the world's population which subsist on alternative non-industrialised political economies, and in this way to forget about those who find themselves on the losing side of the process of industrialisation. Most importantly, however, Smith's pin factory has for a long time been a powerful statement about how we should conceive of the relation that exists between the economy and the larger activity of *world making* that is conducted under the banner of ideas such as modernity, economic growth or development.

The power of the image of the pin factory resides in its capacity to place the larger human and material universe that revolves around the productive system beyond the scope of our analytical radar. Maybe because of their insignificant or innocuous character, the 'pins' of the pin factory, as well as the workers and their surrounding environment, are silent characters in Smith's account. They are muted and docile elements that exist solely as appendages of proto-Fordist assembly lines. By allowing commodities, workers, natural landscapes, raw materials and the sources of energy that keep machinery moving in the factory to slip away from our attention, Smith seduces us with an image of the economic system that is disassociated from the social, political and cultural world that solidifies around such nodes of production.

For Smith, the world at large is, as a result, a galaxy of factors of production and market exchanges that can be controlled and profited from through rational adjustments. In this peculiar separation between the economic world and the rest of the world resides the possibility of crafting thriving

---

<sup>10</sup> Ibid 8.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid 8-9.



economies regardless of any potential—and potentially unforeseen—ripple effects. Economics, politics, and law become here instruments of facilitation—activities to ease the progression of our economic history. As Susan Marks has recently reminded us, thanks to this understanding of economics, politics and law, we now live in a world where material and human superfluity are far from exceptional. Excessive consumption and wealth, repulsively maldistributed across regions and nations, have become natural features of the contemporary world.<sup>12</sup>

It is emblematic, in this context, that the image of Adam Smith and his pin factory should adorn English £20 notes. In a world in which the financialisation of the economy has in many ways superseded production as such—at a time when we are facing a global financial crisis as a result of this de-materialisation of the economy—Smith and the pin factory have become fetishes for money decoration. And in doing so, they have confirmed the success of their own creation: namely, an economic system in which it is possible to justify environmental degradation, the managerialisation of labour relations, and unlimited wealth accumulation on the basis of economic expansion. To confirm this impression one simply needs to look at the systematic depletion of natural resources, the erosion of labour conditions, and the sharp increase in socio-economic inequalities across the world since the end of the Second World War—the same period in which the world economy has experienced the largest expansion ever recorded.<sup>13</sup>

The analytical framing that we have inherited from *The Wealth of Nations* is didactically reversed for us in Timothy Mitchell's new book. Deploying a particular sensitivity to the study of material relations,<sup>14</sup> and tapping into a growing interest in the analysis of commodities as a way of approaching world history,<sup>15</sup> *Carbon Democracy* brings to the forefront of our examination the crucial role that factors intrinsic to the economic system, as well as background *and* surrounding factors, play in the constitution of our world.

At a general level, Mitchell demonstrates how the nature of commodities, workers' actions, environmental transformations, geopolitical intricacies, social asymmetries, and modes and means of production are all inseparable aspects of the way in which the world is made through the economic system. At a more particular, and perhaps more substantive level, Mitchell shows us how what

---

<sup>12</sup> Susan Marks, 'Law and the Production of Superfluity' (2011) 2(1) *Transnational Legal Theory* 1.

<sup>13</sup> See eg Will Steffen et al, *Global Change and the Earth System: A Planet under Pressure* (Springer-Verlag, 2004).

<sup>14</sup> See eg Sheila Jasanoff (ed), *States of Knowledge: The Co-Production of Science and Social Order* (Routledge, 2004); Bruno Latour, *The Making of Law: An Ethnography of the Conseil D'État* (Polity Press, 2010 ed);

<sup>15</sup> See eg Sidney Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (Viking, 1985); Kenneth Pomeranz and Steven Topik (eds), *The World That Trade Created: Society, Culture and the World Economy, 1400 to the Present* (ME Sharpe, 1999); Steven Topik, Carlos Marichal, and Frank Zephyr (eds), *From Silver to Cocaine: Latin American Commodity Chains* (Duke University Press, 2006).

becomes possible in this process of *world making* through the economic system is not always dictated by human inventiveness or by humanity's self-proclaimed will to progress and developmental ingenuity—the typical liberal entry points when it comes to narrating world history.

Reading *Carbon Democracy*, we realise that the horizon of possibility in the entanglement between the economy and our world is drastically shaped by those primordial factors that give form to the global economic apparatus, in particular the kinds of resources that we use to propel our industries and the types of political processes that such resources allow or inhibit.

With a detailed analysis of the shift from a coal to an oil-based global economy, in *Carbon Democracy* Mitchell unpacks how environmental conditions, the power of the working classes and, most importantly, the distribution of wealth amongst countries and social classes are decided neither in the high realm of managerial practices or diplomatic negotiations nor on the earthier terrain of social mobilisations. Instead, the resources that fuel the global economy—those resources that make of it a hyper-producing apparatus for the generation and accumulation of wealth—set in motion the basic conditions through which we come to participate in, experience and possibly change our reality.

As Parfitt and Natarajan show above, Mitchell invites us to think in terms of how the world that emerges through the economic system is one in which the situation of the environment, labour conditions, and the distribution of resources are determined, to a large extent, by the natural characteristics of coal or oil. The reading offered in *Carbon Democracy* is not, however, deterministic. On the contrary, in revealing the undermining effects that an oil-based economy has had on the environment and the political processes facilitated through coal mining, Mitchell opens up a new set of questions about how international law, labour regulation and the economic discipline as a whole were readily adapted in order to intensify the power dynamics and destructive effects that oil unleashed. Through each of these different bodies of knowledge and regulation a disjointed image of the relationship between the economy and the greater world has been solidified. Things like international law, labour regulation and the discipline of economics have functioned as regimes of enunciation through which a particular distorted understanding of nature has emerged: one that has been promoting, already for a very long time, 'ways of living and thinking that treat nature as an infinite resource' (231). In this process, value extraction and wealth accumulation have been not only amplified, but also legitimised.

With regard to international law, Mitchell offers abundant examples of the ways in which international legal principles and categories have been deployed and re-moulded in order to magnify the effects of our reliance on oil. Mitchell's accounts of the way European and North-American oil companies mobilised a wide array of international legal concepts, such as self-determination, or the

‘consent of the governed’, in order to secure their hold on Middle Eastern oil sources during the last part of the nineteenth century and first part of the twentieth century (66–108), and of the way Europe’s economic apparatus was forcefully shifted towards oil after the end of the war *via* the Marshall Plan (27–31), are just a couple of examples that clearly illustrate this point. In the case of labour regulation, *Carbon Democracy* outlines an entire genealogy, tracing current discussions about the decimation of labour standards and the global concentration of wealth in a few hands back to the emergence of labour practices over the previous century in which the excess of low-cost energy that resulted from the exploitation of oil dispersed workers’ control over production.

In the case of economics (which in many ways operates, according to Mitchell’s account, as the normative horizon for international law and labour regulation), the abundant low-cost energy released in the shift from coal to oil transformed the field of economics from a discipline concerned with the exhaustion of natural resources and the conditions of material life into a science dedicated to the study of money circulation—‘a circulation that could expand indefinitely without any problem of physical limits’ (234). As Mitchell puts it, ‘[e]conomics became a science of money; its object was not the material forces and resources of nature and human labour, but a new space that was opened up between nature on one side and human society and culture on the other—the not-quite-natural nor quite-social space that had come to be called “the economy”’ (234).

Importantly, this shift resulted not simply from the turn to oil as the main source of power. It took place at the end a long transformation in which a selective, all too human, political process took place. In this sense, the birth of an economy based on oil and secured through legal arrangements and new labour practices facilitated a form of global political economy that was not only de-materialised and de-natured; it was also intentionally, and excessively, biased towards particular actors and nations. The following fact renders the output of this process painfully clear: ‘[T]he \$240bn US net income amassed in 2012 by the richest 100 billionaires would be enough to make extreme poverty history four times over.’<sup>16</sup>

That in our current times—in our times of crises!—we should be reading such statements in the global media, while remaining fully aware that almost nothing significant is likely to happen that will reverse such global maldistribution of wealth, only confirms the deep political, economic and juridical biases that structure our existence on this planet.

---

<sup>16</sup> Philip Inman, ‘Billionaires’ fortunes hinder fight against poverty, says Oxfam’, *The Guardian* (19 January 2013) <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2013/jan/19/super-rich-fight-poverty-oxfam>> accessed 22 February 2013.

After reading *Carbon Democracy*, it becomes clear that the current state of affairs—a situation in which 100 people *could* solve global extreme poverty with simply *one quarter* of the wealth that they amassed in the midst of a global crises, and in which we do not have any legitimate means to ask them to do so—is neither the fault of oil, nor of any other inanimate political economic force. Such material forces certainly frame our present; yet they remain subservient to those actors and nations, and to that part of ourselves, happy to let such a reality go unchallenged. If Mitchell is correct, then subverting and taking control of the modes in which we conceive of and manage the relation between the economy and the world, of those things like law and economic knowledge and the institutional apparatus behind them, is our first duty—and may be our only chance. If we remain pusillanimous, however, the ‘insolence’ of this odious maldistribution of wealth will certainly continue to ‘creep out’. And most importantly, those revolutionary acts that pepper our present, in the Middle East, as well as in Africa, Latin America, the Pacific, Europe and North America, will continue to be reduced and repackaged as just expressions of people (of repressed entrepreneurs) claiming to be part of the narrative of growth and development that was put in operation by Smith more than two centuries ago; a narrative in which they are already a part of, yet on the losing side of, the equation. To oppose these captures, which Parfitt explores in detail in her review above, we need to understand that today’s (post)revolutionary moment is about substantially reconstituting the terms and conditions that support our existence on this planet.