

Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil

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Oil is a curse, it is often said, that condemns the countries producing it to an existence defined by war, corruption and enormous inequality. But this view obscures a more complex relationship, for no nation escapes the political consequences of our collective dependence on oil. The dependence shapes the body politic both in regions like the Middle East that rely upon producing oil, and in the places that are most dependent on consuming it. The relationship begins with the rise of coal, a source of energy so open to disruption that oligarchies in the West became vulnerable for the first time to mass demands for democracy. The development of cheap and abundant energy from oil, especially from the Middle East, offered a means to reduce this vulnerability to democratic claims. The abundance of oil made it possible for the first time in history to reorganize political life around the management of something now called 'the economy' and the promise of its infinite growth. The politics of the West became dependent on an undemocratic Middle East. By making the production of energy the central force shaping the democratic age, we can rethink the history of energy, the politics of nature, the theory of democracy, and the place of the Middle East in our common world.

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