

Book Review

- Clif Stratton, *Power Politics: Carbon Energy in Historical Perspective*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2021. Pp. xii + 152. Index. \$14.99 (paper).

The study of energy over the *longue durée* is the focus of noted energy scholars such as Vaclav Smil and Roger Fouquet. Their work captures the long, uneven flow of transitions from one form of energy use to another. Burning wood slowly concedes to the use of coal, which then is superseded by oil, and so on. Along the way, though, these energy transitions prove to be imperfect. Large numbers of households continued to burn wood during the “Coal Age” of the nineteenth century and coal continues to generate electricity well beyond the period that oil consumption became the most common form of energy use. Hydroelectric power actually draws upon the centuries old technique of damming up bodies of water and capturing some of the energy use as it flows downhill. This sort of subject thus lends itself to a long-term perspective as it involves several overlapping historical phases. In this spirit, Clif Stratton has attempted to link the energy problems that face us today—global warming in particular—with the *longue durée* tradition in studying energy use. *Power Politics: Carbon Energy in Historical Perspective* combines the long haul analysis of energy transitions with global history in order to shed light on why humans today seem so dependent upon fossil fuels. As a volume in Oxford University Press’s Roots of Contemporary Issues series, it trades depth for breadth and scholarly detail for undergraduate accessibility.

The narrative begins in earnest with a discussion of the Song dynasty’s “proto-fossil” economy that employed top-down pressure on its subjects to utilize coal around 1000 CE and in doing so it establishes the relationship between fossil fuel use and political coercion that Stratton weaves into *Power Politics* across time and space. China’s fossil fuel economy petered out, but the first chapter introduces a more familiar subject, English coal use in the Early Modern period, in which proto-fossil economies provide the foundation for a system that Stratton argues, “literally fueled European imperialism” (30). Without much acknowledgement of contingency in history, nor recognition of the agency of human actors, what unfolds next is hardly a mystery. Stratton leans very heavily—almost exclusively—on the work of Andres Malm, whose work *Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam Power and the Roots of Global Warming* (Brooklyn: Verso, 2016) argues that the use of steam power arose from

concerns over the control of cheap labor. Stratton certainly echoes the assumption that fossil fuel, by its very nature, tended to exacerbate exploitation and inequality.

Power Politics then tackles Britain's role in kick starting the global Industrial Revolution. Throughout the account of adoption of technology and rearrangement of labor relations in the 1700s and early 1800s, energy falls by the wayside. Stratton eschews the traditional explanations of industrial growth that he claims rely upon, "rational adoption of cheap coal and reliable steam technology," to hammer home the point that the adoption of coal allowed for the widespread adoption of labor-saving technology that thwarted the capacity of workers to organize resistance (49). Case studies of France and Japan follow a similar script; the names and institutions might differ slightly but the result is the same as in the British case.

As *Power Politics* moves into the nineteenth century, Stratton relies heavily upon the arguments forged in Timothy Mitchell's influential book, *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil* (Brooklyn: Verso, 2013). In this account, coal miners were able to use numbers and their strategic place in European political economies to push for democratic reforms like an expanded electorate and the recognition of collective bargaining rights. By the early twentieth century, these trends expanded to North America, where American coal miners secured similar rights, although often in the face of state-sponsored violence, such as the 1914 Ludlow Strike in Colorado. While carbon workers at home made industrialized nations more democratic, *Power Politics* is quick to note that, "carbon energy also facilitated the expansion of decidedly undemocratic, imperial forms of political and economic control" (69). This tendency became particularly acute as the global carbon economy expanded to adopt the use of oil. Here the relationship between transnational oil companies and Mexico in the first half of the twentieth century serves as a case study in the politics of petroleum production in developing nations. As oil companies exploited Mexican workers and wrenched concessions from Mexico's unstable patchwork of Revolution-era regimes, Stratton notes that the nationalization of the oil industry in 1938 offered a mixed set of results for the expectations of carbon workers flexing their political muscle: "Nationalization, if not collectivization, came to fruition in 1938, in large part because of the persistence and militancy of oil workers" (82).

Power Politics begins Chapter Four with a close look at Aramco, the joint venture between American and Saudi Arabian interests that rose to significance during the post-World War II years. The narrative then shifts to a more general discussion of the Cold War and how oil played a major role in shaping concurrent waves of decolonization and the Soviet-American rivalry. The U.S.-sponsored coup in Iran in 1953 that removed the reformist influence of Mohammed Mossadeq and replaced it with the more pliant regime of Reza Shah, along with the rise of Saddam Hussein and the Ba'ath Party in Iraq in the 1960s and 1970s placed the focal point of global energy politics in the Middle East. When

Stratton returns to the Saudi case, there is no doubt as to the impact of American power, which kept the Kingdom “relatively free from any serious consequences for its grave human rights abuses or for its active support of terrorist networks, including al-Qaeda, the group responsible for the attacks of September 11, 2001” (108). The difference between instability in Iran and Iraq and the rise to power and influence in the Middle East of Saudi Arabia, Stratton suggests, is directly the result of American sponsorship.

Chapter Five argues that the Energy Crisis of 1973 never really happened. Instead, Stratton cites a “political crisis that brought to an end the near complete post-World War II dominance of Western oil companies” that influenced media outlets and government authorities in the West to create a crisis mentality (113). This chapter is perhaps the least persuasive as it rests on the argument that no physical shortage of oil existed—no credible study of the energy crises of the 1970s has really made this case—and instead the “so-called energy crisis was in hindsight pivotal in creating and sustaining a series of conflicts in the Middle East that stretches from the early 1970s to today” (123). By this point, the narrative seems to drift into conspiracy, as oil companies and their handmaidens in policy circles duped consumers and citizens. Readers might instead consult Meg Jacobs’ book, *Panic at the Pump: The Energy Crisis and the Transformation of American Politics in the 1970s* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2017), which is by no means an apologia for the petroleum interests, but handles these crises with a sense of contingency and sensitivity to political and economic agency.

Power Politics argues that fossil fuel use, “became inextricably linked to the larger processes and systems of colonization, capitalism, industrial production, consumption, war-making, diplomacy, and others” (4). This makes sense, as generations of scholarship have demonstrated. In locations as diverse as Early Modern England, nineteenth century China, and contemporary Nigeria, we have seen intense struggles over who benefits from the extraction of coal and oil as well as which nations increase living standards on the back of fossil fuels. The case studies in this book demonstrate careful research and they are well written and accessible to students at a variety of levels. The concern here is with the overall argument that Stratton uses to connect these well-crafted case studies. While the presence of conflict and inequality in the rise of fossil fuel regimes is not a point of debate among serious scholars—one would be hard pressed to find anyone touting the wonderful and consequence-free advantages of fossil fuels—the way that these entanglements are presented to readers matters. The fact that *Power Politics* is an indictment of colonialism and capitalism from an energy perspective is not problematic, but the polemic way in which it presents this argument does raise issues for use in the classroom. Students deserve a nuanced look at the ways that coal and oil influenced history, and this brief volume does not deliver on that promise by setting up straw men based on a fairly selective reading of “traditional” themes in the scholarship and then knocking them down.

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