

# Grassroots Power—BOOKS

by Chris Calder

*The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money and Power* by Daniel Yergin is the *Bible* of the Oil Age. It looks like a *Bible*, weighing a couple of pounds in any printed form, and it delivers. The saga of how Pennsylvania rock (petro) oil (leum) went from a patent medicine ingredient skimmed from swamps, to the creator of John D. Rockefeller, the American Century and Hydrocarbon Wo/Man, aka you and me, is both scholarly and riveting. As with any good creation story, incredible, voracious characters and instructive tales abound. You do not understand our world well enough until you have read *The Prize*.

Many people hope that the Age of Oil will be followed by the Age of the Sun—in the form of a distributed, ‘democratic,’ non-polluting solar power grid—will find nourishment in *Who Owns the Sun: People, Politics, and the Struggle for a Solar Economy*, by Daniel M. Berman and John T. O’Connor. *Who Owns the Sun* is packed with tales clustered around the themes of solar power development (limited) and the (more interesting) public-private battles over energy that have periodically shaken this country, but consistently get downplayed in popular histories. Chief among these is the public-power movement, which swept the country and the West in the 1900s and 1910s with the intent to put the means of energy production, or at least energy retailing in the people’s hands. On the heels of the breakup of Standard Oil, dozens of private power companies were seized and converted into public utilities. A century later, most of those have been seized right back and, in California, gathered under PG&E, though remnants of the Public Power surge remain. In any case, a good set of case studies in the domestic politics of energy can be found here.

The international geopolitics of energy is Michael Klare’s focus in *Rising Powers, Shrinking Planet: The New Geopolitics of Energy*. Klare’s useful though admittedly oversimplified view is that ideology, politics, cultural history, even—gasp—capitalism itself—will take a back seat in the coming decades to the simple and possibly brutal pursuit of energy resources. Among the crucial facts Klare relates, over the past 20 years there has been a complete reversal, from mostly corporate to national control—81 percent and growing—of global oil reserves. Since countries do not behave like companies, Klare suggests, the global marketplace is becoming increasingly irrelevant when it comes to oil. Simple possession, and the granting or denial or access, is all that counts. Klare divides the world into oil surplus and oil deficit nations, the two largest of the latter being China and the US. He aptly traces the irony—or is it absurdity?—of building a vast military-industrial empire

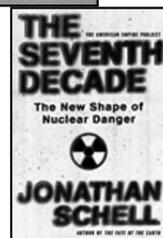
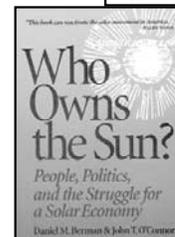
which can now be defeated simply by restricting the flow and/or raising the price of rock oil.

*The Last Hours of Ancient Sunlight: The Fate of the World and What We Can Do Before It’s Too Late* by Thom Hartmann is a kind of self-help book for what the author frankly assumes is the end of an age. Hartmann is perceptive about the deep cultural, even spiritual implications of a radical change, and likely radical reduction in energy consumption. He searches cultures from around the world, many indigenous, and marks a basic distinction between young cultures (the West, USA, etc.) and elder cultures, those who have lived on the land for thousands of years and continue to do so. Hartmann’s argument is, simply, that the future for us involves growing up.

Jonathan Schell’s *The Seventh Decade: The New Shape of Nuclear Danger* is about energy in its purest destructive form. This has got to be one of the best short histories of the Nuclear Age; Schell has always been one of its top chroniclers. He is just as diligent and illuminating about today’s chaotic world of nuclear arms development and “control.” Schell’s solution is disarmingly simple and what it has always been: for the main nuclear powers to lead the way to complete disarmament.

Though disarmament in the current climate seems impossible, Schell’s calm clarity drives home the point that to strive for anything short of it could well make it certain that the Greatest Generation was followed by the Generation that Failed.

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## Electricity: Past & Future

Richard Rudolph and Scott Ridley’s classic book, *Power Struggle: The Hundred Year War Over Electricity*, clearly lays out the long fight over who should rightfully own electric power. It traces the roles of Edison, who first identified the potential to sell electricity as a commodity and JP Morgan who put together the behemoth General Electric. It also follows the long waves of public power championed by Gifford Pinchot and others who established the first municipal power systems and Franklin Roosevelt who made the Federal government a large scale electricity producer. The authors’ critical analysis of the growth of the regulatory system as a corporate cover for their takeover of most of the electrical grid is an important observation.

Now it is time for Americans to take their power back and the booklet, *Common Sense*, by the Mendocino County Energy Working Group gives us a model of how communities can take hold of their electrical future. Put together mainly by Brian Corzilius, it calculates how much and what kind of energy a community uses for which purposes. It looks at the contribution of this energy consumption to the accumulation of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. It proposes specific wording changes to the general plan in order to appropriately deal with peak oil and climate change over the next twenty years. It also talks about how a community can gain ownership of its electricity through CCAs or municipal utility districts. Although written for the specifics of Mendocino County California its approach and techniques can be used anywhere. It is available online at [www.greentransitions.org/Papers/EWG2007\\_FReport.pdf](http://www.greentransitions.org/Papers/EWG2007_FReport.pdf). Brian Corzilius is available for consultation at [bcorzilius@corzilius.org](mailto:bcorzilius@corzilius.org)