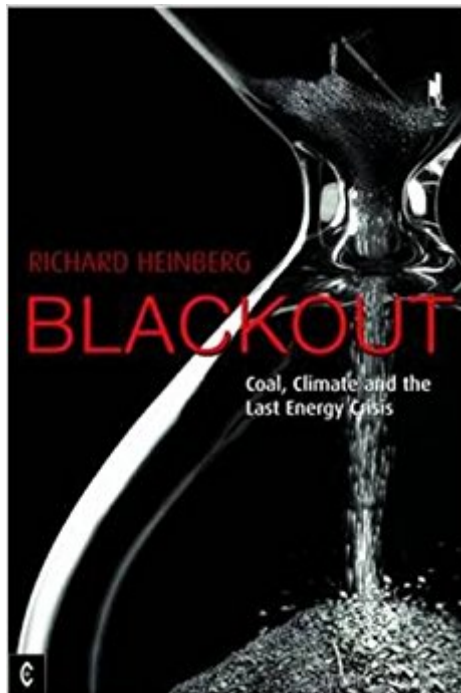




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Blackout: Coal, Climate And The Last Energy Crisis



Synopsis

Coal fuels more than 30 per cent of UK electricity production, and about 50 per cent in the US, providing a significant portion of total energy output. China and India's recent ferocious economic growth has been based almost entirely on coal-generated electricity. Coal currently looks like a solution to many of our fast-growing energy problems. However, while coal advocates are urging us full steam ahead, the increasing reliance on this dirtiest of all fossil fuels has crucial implications for energy policy, pollution levels, the global climate, world economy and geopolitics. Drawbacks to a coal-based energy strategy include: Scarcity - new studies suggest that the peak of world coal production may actually be less than two decades away; Cost - the quality of produced coal is declining, while the expense of transportation is rising, leading to spiralling costs and increasing shortages; and, Climate impacts - our ability to deal with the historic challenge of climate change may hinge on reducing coal consumption in future years. "Blackout" goes to the heart of the tough energy questions that will dominate every sphere of public policy throughout the first half of this century. It is critical reading for planners, educators and anyone concerned about energy security, oil depletion and climate change.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

The book begins by exposing the flaws of using R/P ratios to forecast future supplies of coal, which ironically is the most common method used to estimate how much coal we have. The author instead lays out a thorough argumnet that coal supplies must be estimated using a Hubbart-curve type of

analysis, similar to that used to forecast future oil supplies. Different types of coal, and a history of their uses are also discussed in the early pages. The bulk of the book (more than half of it) is structured as a review/summary of several recent studies of coal supplies in different regions all around the globe. The author presents a balanced set of studies, summarizes their findings and forecasts, and then critiques them. The author does not simply state which study is correct, but rather points out the robustness and validity of each study, slowly building a body of evidence and a conclusion about the future of coal in a given region. These pages were surprisingly technical and were a bit of a chore to read at times, but the presentation of hard facts builds a more credible position on future coal supplies and is valuable to the book. The book continues by briefly discussing coal and how its use relates to climate change. New coal technologies are discussed, such as carbon capture and sequestration (CCS) and integrated gasification combined cycle (IGCC). The current status of these technologies is presented along with some discussion of their future role in coal usage. Although IGCC can improve the efficiency of coal-fired electricity, it also greatly increases the cost, as does CCS. It is a good summary of new coal technology, and dissects facts from hype. The book concludes with three potential scenarios in which our usage of coal is very different.

I bought this book hoping to gain a better understanding of coal futures, and a glimpse into the inevitable transition to a 'post-carbon' world. The first expectation was met with brilliance, but the second was given only superficial treatment. If it weren't for the pressing urgency of the coal depletion issue, I'd have rated this with only 3 stars. However, the evidence Heinberg presents makes it clear that people must, if they take the physical basis of industrial civilisation seriously, bravely face up to this frankly scary issue. The Introduction emphasises the importance of coal for electricity production and hence narrowly defined economic growth. It also describes succinctly the environmental impacts of coal, which include local water and air pollution near mines, the release of contaminants such as mercury, arsenic and sulphur dioxide at the point of combustion and the fact that coal is responsible for 40% of global CO₂ emissions despite only providing 25% of global energy consumption. What is not mentioned in the book, however, is that James Hansen, probably the world's most eminent climate scientist, has called for a global moratorium on the construction of coal fired power plants (...), describing them in uncharacteristically strong language as "death factories". When the environmental impacts in Heinberg's book are considered, this seems like a fair description. Chapter 1 contains the core of the book's argument and analysis, and convincingly suggests that global coal production is reaching geological limits and will begin to decline within a

decade or two.

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