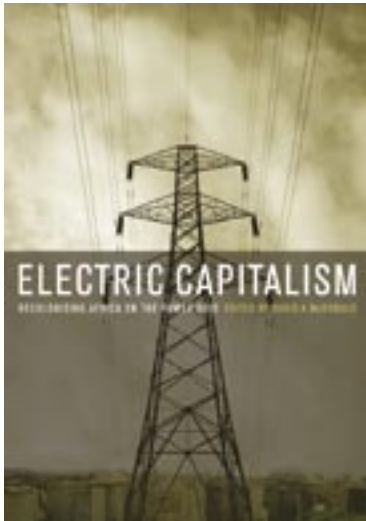


# Electric Capitalism

## Re-colonising Africa on the Power Grid

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David A McDonald (Ed)  
HSRC Press: Cape Town; Earthscan:  
London, 2009. 504 pp



South Africans know that electricity generation can be a “hot topic” – if it includes themes like Eskom’s dilemma of delayed capacity expansion, the debate about the privatisation of electricity generation, co-operation with other African states and economic partners (all the way up to the DRC and its fantastic Inga Falls), the acceptance (or not) of free basic electricity for the poor, to mention just a few. Yet one wouldn’t expect a book that covers these and all the other relevant themes around electricity needs and alternative supplies to reach high popularity ranking.

This, however, is exactly what has been achieved with this collection of 15 chapters by 18 academics well versed in the details of this sector and the broader issues of development, socio-economic conflicts and progressive private-public partnerships. And, while the title and subtitle raise the spectre of yet another ideological debate along conventional lines, McDonald’s guidance (well presented in his introduction, “The importance of being electric”, and concluding chapter,

“Alternative electricity paths for southern Africa”) and the sequence of the subsidiary topics introduce the reader in a very systematic and easily understandable way to the full range of issues related to electricity supply in (South) Africa.

Six major themes are covered in the 500-page text, starting with a conceptual framework to understand the significance, complexity and capital intensity of electricity generation and distribution in a country like South Africa. This naturally leads to two chapters about Eskom, covering the pre-1994 phase and the post-liberation phase.

The next four chapters cover the four main energy sources for electricity generation: coal, hydro, nuclear and renewable energy. These chapters offer clear and convincing presentations of arguments and evidence.

The fourth central theme, covering socio-economic issues and challenges, is equally rich in facts and the consideration of topical policy issues, focusing on prepaid electricity and free basic electricity for low-income households (and an alternative “rights-based approach”). To alert the reader or student to the more contentious dimensions of electricity distribution, additional chapters cover women and gender relations, the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee of 2000–01 and South Africa’s carbon-trading praxis.

A fifth core theme – directly linked to the subtitle – broadens the view from South Africa to two other African countries, Uganda and Tanzania, with the emphasis on privatisation and commercialisation. The African dimension is also covered in the first chapter, which includes a good factual overview of major electricity supplies on the continent and in the chapter on hydro-electricity.

McDonald’s concluding section and the brief epilogue successfully bring many of the rather diverse issues and policy themes together within a broad conceptual framework of a “social market economy”, which might be the alternative to the much-maligned “electric capitalism”.

In line with the textbook nature of the publication, the two appendices are of great value to eager students: an introduction to the technical jargon (“Electricity basics”), and a series of maps dramatically illustrating the relative insignificance of Africa in world supplies of electricity.

