The crazy curse and crude domination: Toward an anthropology of oil

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Abstract: Oil has turned out to be something of a curse. Most developing petro-states have found that their economies have worsened, their political regimes have become more authoritarian, and their conflicts have intensified. Further, this curse is a bit crazy because oil brings wealth, which would seem to bring peace and prosperity, not the trouble that so often accompanies it. The goal of this introduction is to propose a research strategy for the anthropological analysis of oil. It does so by examining existing oil literatures, discussing the implications for research arising from the articles contained here, and, finally, formulating an anthropology of oil in a turbulent world. This formulation proposes a ‘crude domination’ approach to explain oil’s crazy curse.

Keywords: anthropology of oil, development, conflict, domination approach, Africa, Latin America

The oil price is very high, it’s crazy. There is no additional supply.
—Pumomo Yusciantoro, OPEC president, in 2004

Immanuel Wallerstein has written of a “systemic crisis” that he believes will produce “disintegration of our existing historical social system” within twenty-five to fifty years (1997: 1256)—strong rhetoric from a person dedicated to painstaking investigation of the *longue durée* of the modern world system and not to histrionics. It might be objected that Wallerstein is to the left, and besides, that he is an intellectual and so not a practical person of the world. Consider the practical world of government and journalism.

Alan Greenspan, former chairman of the U.S. Federal Reserve, respected elder statesman of U.S. finance, and an architect of neoliberal globalism, has written *The age of turbulence: Adventures in a new world* (2007). Here he suggests that it is now a time of instability, a world of turbulence. Naomi Klein, a journalist covering global calamities, has written *The shock doctrine: The rise of disaster capitalism* (2007), in which she strips away neoliberal cloaking rhetoric to reveal contemporary capitalism in shockingly complicit

bondage with disaster. So there you have it. On the left and right, academics, statesmen, and journalists currently talk of systemic crisis in a world of turbulence characterized by disaster capitalism. Why?

Responding to this question brings us to oil. Oil is the key scarce, strategic resource needed for almost all capitalist enterprise (Homer-Dixon 2001; Klare 2002). It is not renewable. One concern of those studying oil has been how to conceptualize its supply. M. King Hubbert suggested in the 1950s that it might be imagined as a bell curve. This meant it would have an ascending slope as output increased; a highest point before decrease set in; and a descending slope as output decreased. The high point has come to be known as Hubbert's Peak. Hubbert's work allowed yearly projections of what the oil supply bell curve would look like. In 1956 he predicted that U.S. oil production would peak around 1970 and decline thereafter (1956). He was correct. His simulation methods have been improved and found to be reliable (Deffeyes 2006). Thus, the approach helps answer the question: what years will be those of Hubbert's Peak, after which production subsides? Available evidence suggests that Hubbert's Peak is fast approaching. There are 98 oil-producing countries in the world; 64 of these are believed to have passed their geologically imposed production peak; and of those, 60 are in terminal production decline (Deffeyes 2006). Oil prospecting has turned sour. Nine barrels of oil are consumed for every new one barrel discovered (*ibid.*). Peak oil specialists predict that Hubbert's Peak has occurred, or will occur, between 2000 and 2010 (Kunstler 2006). Indeed, Deffeyes has asserted that it occurred in 2005 (Green Car Congress 2006). Consumption of oil, on the other hand, is predicted to rise 60 percent between 2003 and 2025 (IAGS 2003). So, oil production declines, very soon, under conditions of rising demand. Its replacement is theoretically possible, though not currently economically or technically feasible.

What will the loss of oil mean? There is a general concurrence that there will be severe and lengthy worldwide depression resulting from shrunken economic activity, high inflation, and

rising transportation costs. Furthermore, reduction of petroleum supplies will compromise food production, giving rise to possible mass human starvation, because contemporary industrial agriculture is dependent on cheap oil (for fertilizer, herbicides, pesticides, and machinery fuel). Additionally, the carbon dioxide released into the atmosphere by the utilization of fossil fuels is a major cause of global warming. This means that global warming will accompany consumption of the remaining oil supplies "during the 21st century" and "could lead to a relatively abrupt lowering of the ocean" temperature due to melting ice packs, which, in turn, could lead to "harsher winter weather . . . , sharply reduced soil moisture and more intense winds," leading finally to reduction in "the human carrying capacity of the Earth's environment" (Schwartz and Randall 2003: 1). It should be noted that the preceding judgment does not come from 'radical' ecologists. Schwartz and Randall work for the U.S. Department of Defense. Under such conditions, according to one observer, "If the U.S. controls the sources of energy of its rivals—Europe, Japan, China and other nations aspiring to be more independent—they win" (Dayaneni and Wing 2002: 2). Thus, there is a gathering turbulence due to systemic crisis because, as the head of OPEC put it in 2004, there is "no additional supply" of oil—"it's crazy" (Trotti 2005: 2).

One point to draw from the preceding is that in some sense the future of the world depends upon oil and how humans use it. As the past and the present are the *only* predictors of the future, this means to some extent that the fate of humanity depends upon inquiries into how oil affects the dynamics of human social forms. As we shall see below, anthropological inquiry into oil is limited, while that of other social sciences is richer. So the goal of this introduction is to propose a research strategy for anthropological analysis of oil. It will do so by interrogating findings of existing oil literatures, discussing the research implications of the articles that compose the offerings of this section in *Focaal*, and finally sketching on the basis of these analyses an anthropology of oil in a turbulent world. This

sketch, offered in the third section, will propose a 'crude domination' approach, whose goal is explaining oil's crazy curse.

The crazy 'curse': Current approaches

The oil literature to be discussed is that in economics, political science, and anthropology starting in the 1970s, because it was at this time that the current turbulence began. The turbulence began on a high note. Oil prices boomed in the years following the early 1970s, bringing, according to one oil minister, "more money than we ever in our wildest dreams thought possible" (Karl 1997: 3). 'Petro-states, as understood here, are capital-intensive oil exporters with high ratios of oil to total exports, petroleum industry enclaves, and enormous rents or royalties (from oil sales), which accrue directly to the central government. Social development is any sequence of events that leads to beneficent, sustainable economic, social, and political change for all segments of a population. The 1970s boom meant that oil rents became enormous. Petrodollars, people dreamed, would buy petrostates' development. Dream and reality marched down different paths.

Oil turned out to be a development "curse" (Auty 1993; Ross 1999). Most developing petrostates found that their economic performance worsened in the 1990s (Attiga 1981; Gelb 1988; Karl 1997, 1999). Some 'oil-rich' petrostates found themselves 'dirt poor' in the sense that their poor became poorer (Gary and Karl 2003). Michael Ross (2001) found democracy unlikely and authoritarian regimes likely in petrostates. Worse, oil is 'black gold' over which social pirates fiercely compete. So, oil-exporting countries have found themselves operating under conditions of intense internal and external conflict (Kaldor, Karl, and Said 2007; Klare 2002). Some of this has been nonviolent, involving competition for oil-derived benefits. Much has been violent. There has been international (Peluso and Watts 2001; Vallette, Kretzman, and Wysham 2003) and intrastate warfare (Ross 2002). Oil's curse, as understood here, is the

triple conjunction in petrostates of stagnating social development and poverty; high conflict, often violent; and a tendency toward authoritarian regimes.

The preceding suggests a paradox: If money is a condition for development, and it surely is, why do petrodollars buy petrocure rather than petro-utopia? Because this paradox is so puzzling—what is supposed to create prosperity in fact produces the reverse—let us recognize that oil producers suffer from a *crazy* curse. Crazy phenomena, important for human welfare, beg for solution, and, accordingly, investigation of oil's crazy curse is the research object of this anthropology of oil. Some major contributions to this literature are considered next.

Resource curse, Dutch Disease, and greed

Economics, often labeled the dismal science, strengthens this reputation with its handling of oil's crazy curse. Classical economists in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries first formulated theory relevant to the curse. They observed that Spain and England had marched down vastly different developmental paths—Spain to decline, England to growth. Adam Smith explained this with a theory of resources, which warned of the perils of natural resource rents. Rents or royalties are payments to owners of land for using its various raw materials in the production of goods and services. Economies based on renting natural resources motivate rent-seeking behavior and not profits from productive activity (Smith 1776). Further, raw material rents were exhaustible and, thus, experienced diminishing returns (Mill 1851). Thus, classical theory predicted that economies based upon rent of their raw materials were flawed. Their logic was: Rent a lot, and then, less and less. It was as if they suffered a resource curse.

The Dutch Disease, based upon studies of contemporary resource booms, seemed to amplify classical theory of renter economies (Auty 1993). This 'disease' is a body of generalizations concerning "the sectorial reallocation of productive factors" during a raw material boom

(Gelb 1988: 22). Specifically, “if the income derived from this is spent rather than saved abroad, the sum of the consequences includes a resource movement effect which draws factors of production out of other activities and into the booming sector, and a spending effect which draws factors of production out of activities producing traded commodities (to be substituted by imports) and into non-traded sectors” (ibid.). Traded sectors are those selling export goods, usually in industry and agriculture. They suffer. Non-traded sectors are those not involved in export trade, including services and transportation. These prosper. Oil is a particular resource, so oil’s curse is a specific instance of the Dutch Disease in petroleum-based resource booms.

Sachs and Warner believed that the evidence showed the curse to be “solid fact” (2001: 828). Recently, however, solid fact has appeared less so. Some find the Dutch Disease “less common” than originally believed (Ross 1999: 305). David and Wright (1997) provide evidence that some resource-based economies actually do well, while others do not. Thus economic evidence suggests that sometimes economic development is hampered by the curse and sometimes it is not.

Recently in economics, stimulated by the work of two economists associated with the World Bank, Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler, there has come to be an economic explanation of why oil’s curse involves so much warfare. Their approach emphasizes greed, asserting on the basis of statistical data from seventy-eight civil conflicts from 1960 through 1999, that “opportunities are more important in explaining conflict than are motives” (Collier and Hoeffler 2001: 2). Further, abundant resources play a major role in providing opportunities, with it being greed over control of these resources—legal or illegal—that provokes and/or maintains wars, most of which are civil strife. This approach to the association of warfare and oil is discussed and critiqued in Andrea Behrends’s contribution to this issue. Suffice it to say that it has become a major position in the literature on oil and violence, attracting support, modification, and skepticism (Ballentine and Sherman 2003; Mar-

chal and Messiant 2002; Reno 2004). Let us now turn to political science.

Rent-seeking/institutional and patrimonial theory

Two political science approaches have been significant in the study of oil’s curse. The first offers an explanation of the development difficulties of petrostates under conditions of rent seeking. The second is more specific to African conditions and emphasizes patrimonialism. Karl’s seminal investigation of oil booms, *The paradox of plenty*, emphasizes “political institutions” (1997: xvi). Her central claim is “that prior interactions of structure and agency create the institutional legacy that constrains choice down the road” (1997: 10). These legacies are path dependencies. In petrostates high oil rents multiply “the opportunities for both public authorities and private interests to engage in rent seeking” (ibid.: 15). Rent seeking occurs when an individual, organization, or firm seeks money by manipulating the political and/or economic environment, rather than by making a profit through either trade or productive enterprise (Krueger 1974). U.S. agriculture is rent seeking when its agents seek subsidies and tariffs to protect its revenues. In petrostates, rent seeking, according to Karl, “leads to a ... marriage between entrepreneurs seeking to link up with the state and public officials seeking to intervene further in the market,” with the unfortunate economic consequence that the state’s oil rents go to those adept at manipulating officials and not “to those engaged in less remunerative but more productive activities” (1997: 57). This is a rent-seeking/institutional hypothesis because transformations that lead down the path of development difficulties result from actors altering economic and political institutions to facilitate rent seeking. Oil ministries and companies become institutions that distribute oil rents. Private enterprises become institutions less involved in productive or distributive business than in seeking rents.

African oil is becoming increasingly important to the global economy. Further, African

petrostates, as documented by Behrends and Watts in their contributions to this issue, have been especially and violently burdened by oil's curse. A type of patrimonialism, called neopatrimonialism, may explain this situation (Bayart 1993). Weber (1978) developed the concept of patrimonial states for ancient and medieval polities where the state was regarded as some form of 'private' property of a kin group. Certain political scientists, importantly J.-F. Médard (1991), proposed that neopatrimonialism explains the development woes of postcolonial African states. This is because institutions of "public authority" in African states were "made an object of appropriation by the formal office-holders, functionaries, politicians and military personnel," who based their "individual ascendancy or family ascendancy on a private usage of the *res publica*" (Médard 1991 167). This is a neopatrimonialism because patrimonies, officials with the capacity to allocate public assets, act as if the state were their patrimony, even though in contemporary times this is not the case. Patrimonies allocate public assets from public institutions to maintain or create loyalty among their rent-seeking clients, kin, or friends. Oil rents are public assets. Their vastness in petrostates raises the potential of corruption to new levels. This can produce two possible, not mutually exclusive outcomes. A first outcome is that client enterprises perform poorly because clients lack the qualifications to manage the enterprises, as is well documented for Gabon (Yates 1996). A second outcome is that conflict turns violent, because the patrimony's favoritism to certain rent-seekers inflames antagonism among the disfavored. Let us now consider literature on the anthropology of oil.

The anthropology of oil

Roy Rappaport, when president of the American Anthropological Association (1987–89), urged the discipline to contribute to the formulation of public policy, particularly concerning the drilling of oil and gas. But to many anthropologists at the time, such a concern seemed

peripheral. Why do applied anthropology when there were other, tastier fish to fry, such as those in *Writing culture* (Clifford and Marcus 1986) and other fishy, postmodern delicacies? Consequently, today the *New York Times* does not announce triumph after triumph in the anthropological analysis of oil, but rather publicizes Pentagon programs to embed anthropologists in the U.S. army to support America's colonial oil wars in Iraq and Afghanistan (David Rohde in *New York Times*, October 5 2007).

Scrutiny of the literature that does exist reveals some fine studies, informed by anthropology, by those in other disciplines, such as Robert Vitalis's work on Saudi Arabia (2006). Some applied anthropology did follow Rappaport's suggestion and sought to document the effect of oil on local communities in oil- or gas-producing regions. There have been impact studies, for example, concerning New Guinea (Sagir 2004), Nigeria (Fentiman 1996), the U.S. Gulf Coast (McGuire and Gardener 2003), throughout the arctic north (Degteva 2006; Picou et Al. 1992), and Latin America (Pearce 2004; Rival 1997). There are articles where discussion of oil is a detail in a broader canvas, such as James Ferguson's insightful critique of James Scott's *Seeing like a state* (Ferguson 2005). Finally, and promising for a richer future, there is research by younger anthropologists who make oil the core of their intellectual practice. However, there are three mature works concerning the anthropology of oil: Suzana Sawyer's *Crude chronicles: Indigenous politics, multinational oil, and neoliberalism in Ecuador* (2004), Andrew Apter's *The pan-African nation: Oil and the spectacle of culture in Nigeria* (2005) and Fernando Coronil's *The magical state: Nature, money, and modernity in Venezuela* (1997). Let us look more closely at these texts, beginning with Sawyer's book.

Ecuador's Amazon jungle is a major supplier of crude oil to the United States. Consequently, the Ecuadorian Amazon has endured the economic, political, and environmental consequences of a growing U.S. thirst for petroleum and the policies of neoliberalism designed to satisfy that thirst. *Crude chronicles* tells the story of the rise of an organized indigenous move-

ment during the 1990s and its struggles against a U.S. oil company and Ecuadorian neoliberal policies. *Crude chronicles* documents the growing sophistication of indigenous politics—utilizing marches, demonstrations, occupations, and negotiations—as Indians fenced with, undermined, and, occasionally, yielded to U.S. Big Oil. Equally, Sawyer follows the complex strategies and discourses that the multinational corporations and the Ecuadorian state deployed as they sought to brook no opposition from their indigenous opponents. Against mounting government attempts to privatize and liberalize the national economy, Sawyer shows how Ecuadorian neoliberal reforms led to a crisis of governance, accountability, and representation that fueled one of the strongest indigenous movements in twentieth-century Latin America and which ultimately led to the more leftist government that currently governs Ecuador. Crudely put, the heart of Sawyer’s analysis is who is going to get how much of the value of the crude and, as such, her ethnography documents conflict between Big Oil, their neoliberal allies in the Ecuadorian state, and indigenous Amazonians over oil rents.

Pan-African nation interprets the significance of the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC) in 1977. This was for Nigeria a lollapalooza cultural extravaganza, as important for what might be termed a Nigerian postmodernity as England’s Great Exhibition in the Crystal Palace had been for Anglo-Saxon modernity. *Pan-African nation* argues that FESTAC forged a new national culture, one reflecting Nigeria’s confidence resulting from its oil boom, through its showcasing of masks, dances, images, and souvenirs from its different peoples. In the dazzle of its oil boom, FESTAC stood as an ‘empire’ of cultural signs that included all black and African cultures within its sovereignty, erasing colonial cultural memories from collective consciousness. But Apter also documents the postcolonial Nigerian political economy in which this cultural empire is found. Here he describes the association of an ethnic clientelism with oil wealth and the rise of a new entrepreneurial elite. This elite struggles for as

much of the oil rents as possible, using kin and ethnic clients in a distinctively Nigerian version of the patron/client model. Let us turn to Coronil’s work.

The magical state is a minor classic that comes with three analytic concerns. The first is to offer a historical interpretation of Venezuelan state dynamics tossed in the turbulence of oil booms and busts. At the heart of these dynamics was the cultural view that the state, the “transcendent and unifying agent of the nation” (Coronil 1997: 4), would act as the guardian of natural wealth, “sow the soil” with oil wealth, and magically bring about a prosperous and diversified modernity, hence the notion of a magical state. *The magical state*’s second concern is to present an ethnography of the state during the boom of the 1970s and the bust of the 1980s. The third concern is to interrogate Marx’s theory of ground rent, in the context of a Latin American literature on dependency and underdevelopment, in order to contribute to a theory of subaltern modernity. The second concern is in many ways the most original. *The magical state* explores the rise during the boom years of an automobile industry, the rise and fall of a tractor factory, and the emergence of a new criminality, involving political assassination. Coronil interviewed the actors in these events, be they government officials, corporate executives, or ordinary folk, and was able to construct their daily lives and lived experience in the magical state as they went about sowing, or being sown, by oil. Coronil’s contribution to subaltern studies argues that the Venezuelan state is dominant in Venezuela but subaltern in a global system dominated economically, politically, and discursively by “Occidentalism.” However, each of the three sections reports a similar *telos* for life in the magical state. This *telos* applies both to individuals and groups and has to do with striving to acquire a slice of the oil pie. So oil rents were sown not so magically throughout the nation but pragmatically to those whose strategies prevailed in contests over oil rents.

Anthropology, as is illustrated by this work, brings to the investigation of oil’s crazy curse three benefits absent in economic and political

science approaches, and one concurrent with them. First, absent in the other approaches is the presentation of the reality of an oil-dominated world from the vantage of everyday, experienced lives. Second, these lives tend to be lived in local settings. Third, there is an expertise in discovering the significance of culture in the crazy curse. However, the anthropologists share with their counterparts in economics and politics recognition that crude realities, that is, those involving oil, tend to be conflictual, with the struggle being one over acquisition of oil rents. Let us offer a summary of these oil literatures.

Five explanations of oil's crazy curse predominate. These are that, in some measure, according to economists, the difficulties arise from (1) a resource curse, (2) the Dutch Disease, or (3) Collier and Hoeffler's greed hypothesis; or, according to political scientists, that it is caused by (4) rent-seeking/institutional or (5) patrimonial theories. These explanations are not necessarily mutually exclusive. The Dutch Disease is an amplification of the resource curse. The greed hypothesis, rent-seeking/institutional, and patrimonial approaches might well operate when the resource curse is present. No anthropological account of oil's crazy curse has been nearly as influential as the five preceding positions. However, anthropologists bring to the study of oil concern for human experience, in local settings, in which culture operates. It is time to turn to the contributions of the anthropologists in this issue.

The crazy curse: Approaches in this thematic issue

There are three contributors to this issue. Two of them investigate Africa (Watts and Behrends); one Latin America (Gledhill). The rationale for such a choice is that it allows comparison between older, established petrostates, those in Latin America, and younger, emerging ones (those in Africa). We begin our discussion in Africa. Michael Watts is a geographer by training, but his African work is so deeply informed by anthropology that it can be included with

the anthropologists. Further, his work over the decades has established him as one of the major figures in social analyses of oil.

His article provides understanding of the current oil insurgency of the Niger Delta in Nigeria. He does this by revealing the full complexity of local, regional, and global structures and policies influencing this rebellion. He documents a new scramble for the prize of African oil. Watts explains the insurgency as the result of a particular dynamic exhibited by African petrostates, characterized by a decline into brute force and nongovernmentality, resulting from a vortex of forces linking war, eviction, and oil. This vortex is the article's focus. It is analyzed in six parts. In the first, Watts situates readers in a Panglossian world that is the contemporary Niger Delta. Remember Pangloss was Voltaire's character in *Candide* who promulgated the hyperreality that was the best of all possible worlds in a world whose actuality was utter horror. In the Niger Delta, Panglossian hyperreality—orderly modernity conjured by politicians, planners, and development experts—turns out to be an everyday life 'weirded out' on the steroids of violence, poverty, and competing (so, mutually defeating) governmentalities. Such life in the Niger Delta is, as it was in Voltaire's fable, utter horror—except that the Delta is no fable. The remaining sections of Watts's contribution explore the vortex generating this situation. The second section analyzes the role in the vortex of recent development policy, a worldview dominated by the neoliberalism of Hayek, the structural adjustment of the World Bank, and the stabilization policies of the IMF, with further underdevelopment of Africa as a consequence. The third section details application of this worldview in the development of the oil industry throughout the continent. The fourth and fifth sections narrow the analysis of the vortex to Nigeria and the Niger Delta, explaining how two institutional forms—the petrostate and the oil complex—operate within the vortex. The final section adds an 'imperial' force to the vortex, reporting development by the United States and Europe of a military capability to control African oil, especially in the Gulf of Guinea,

where the Niger Delta is located. Watts concludes his analysis of the vortex of forces operative in the Delta with a rejection of what he terms the “commodity determinism” of economic explanations of warfare in petrostates. Rather, he suggests that in the Delta, “insurgency emerged from the political struggles over centralized oil rents, a struggle in which party politics, the electoral cycle, intergenerational politics, organized oil theft, and the history of ethnic exclusion played constitutive roles.” In effect, Watts accuses the economists of oversimplification. It is not simply the oil that determines the occurrence of violence; it is the complex of institutions, each with their different powers, that forms a vortex with the force to drive actors to violence.

There follows Behrends’s article concerning the border zone between two countries—Sudan and Chad. Most of the social science oil literature deals with areas of well-established oil production. Understudied are regions where the oil sector has only just begun. Therefore, inclusion of these two countries allows us to strengthen understanding of the beginnings of petrostates.

Behrends’s paper considers the case of fighting for oil when there is no oil yet. It does so by explaining the role of regional actors, such as rebel militias doing the fighting; national actors, such as the Sudanese and Chadian governments; and international actors, such as multinational oil companies, the United States, China, and the United Nations. Importantly, Behrends brings individual actors into the analysis, showing their relevance to events involving global processes and, further, that individuals in different structural positions possess varying subjectivities. So, for example, local actors fight for reasons quite different from those of regional or national actors. The heart of her analysis is why they fight.

Behrends provides a critical reading of the literature, especially the economic literature, dealing with warfare in petrostates. She follows Marchal and Messiant (2002) and Watts (2004) in critiquing the greed position by showing how in Darfur it oversimplifies events. Instead, she explicates how increasing disintegration, and with it violence, results from problems related

to current and the previously existing socioeconomic conditions and to power structures involving local, regional, and state governance regimes. Thus, oil and violence in Behrends’s analysis are explained as part of the dynamics of a complex system structuring power and wealth, whose dynamics are understood to involve on all too frequent occasion the exercise of violence to achieve wealth, even though this wealth is only a possibility in the imagination of gossipers.

Attention now turns to Latin America. John Gledhill’s contribution analyzes three major oil producers in Latin America at the beginning of the third millennium—Mexico, Venezuela, and Brazil—by exploring the struggles and alliances between economic elites, political classes, and diverse popular forces. Specifically, he considers the effects of a “persistent imaginary,” a popular nationalism, which involves deeply held popular views that there should be national control over oil in order to develop social justice. Gledhill speculates that this imaginary facilitates countermovements to the neoliberalism fostered by the U.S. colossus to the north.

The article shows that the state counts—in the sense that how different social actors in the state operate opens up different spaces for social development. A value of comparing three South American states is that it functions a bit like a controlled experiment: holding constant geographic regions and treating the states’ different histories of politics and policy as experiments in social transformation. However, the article equally clarifies that just as the state counts, so do other actors, especially imperial ones such as the United States, whose transnational oil firms organize under what might be termed the empire’s neoliberal imaginary.

A significant amount of Gledhill’s analysis documents struggles to capture portions of the oil rents. Whereas in Africa this conflict has tended to be violent, in the countries Gledhill considers it operates relatively peacefully. In part the competition is over acquiring position in institutions that control oil rents. Such institutions have importantly been national oil companies or their associated trade unions. Equally, the struggle has been over determination of

policy that regulates how much oil rent should be allocated to what actors under what social conditions. It is here that Gledhill's imaginary is most persistent, impeding efforts to privatize Mexico's oil industry and facilitating Venezuelan and Brazilian labors to build a more multipolar world. Let us proceed to sketching an anthropology of oil.

Piñatas and domination: An anthropological investigation of the crazy curse

Remember that the anthropology of oil we propose is one for investigating oil's crazy curse. Let us be clear what we mean by this. The curse is the paradoxical situation where what should bring good brings bad. Oil's fabulous revenues bring the bad of the triple conjunction to petrostates: stagnating social development and poverty; high levels of conflict, often violent; and a tendency toward authoritarian regimes. It is our contention that the curse, at least in part, can be understood as an aspect of crude domination—that the concept of domination has not played a central role in the existing social science of oil—so we believe it useful to sketch rudiments of such an approach to oil's curse. This sketch comes in two parts. The first leads to comprehension of what is meant by crude domination, and the second offers generalizations that show how the crazy curse may be explained in terms of crude domination. To help readers grasp crude domination, we bring them on a sentimental journey to a birthday long ago where the celebrants played “Bop the Piñata.” But before going to the party, we accentuate two findings of our review of the social science literature of oil.

A first finding is that it makes sense to speak of a scramble for oil. This finding is warranted by the conclusions of the political and economic perspectives emphasizing the war/oil connection, rent seeking, and patrimonial politics; the existing anthropology of oil in the work of Apter, Coronil, and Sawyer; and the three papers included in this issue. But we further insist that this struggle is far more complex than many schol-

ars imagine. Rather, it includes local, regional, national, and transnational structural actors. For example, as Watts suggests for Nigeria, there are transnational actors such as Chevron and Shell Oil, as well as the U.S. military; national actors from the Nigerian central government, such as the oil ministry; regional actors from different state governments or insurgent groups such as the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND); and local actors from different Niger Delta villages. Each of these actors is involved in a scramble in the sense that they are struggling directly, or indirectly, for access to some of the oil rents. In different ways Behrends documents a similar struggle for the Darfur/Chad border, while Gledhill does the same for the three Latin American examples. Consequently, accounts of oil's curse need to explain the complexity of the struggle for oil wealth.

A second finding is that while all developing petrostates exhibit the curse, some suffer it more than others, suggesting a hierarchy of damage from the curse. For example, if amounts of violence and poverty are taken as curse indicators, Mexico, Brazil, and Venezuela are less cursed than Nigeria, Chad, and Sudan. Further, it might be observed that there is oil production in one advanced capitalist state (Norway) inclined toward programs of social welfare. Here the curse appears less in force than in Latin America. Thus there appears to be a three-tiered hierarchy of oil's curse in states developing their production: level one, least cursed (Norway); level two, cursed (Latin American developing petrostates); and level three, really cursed (African developing states). The preceding suggests that any anthropology of oil needs to explain *both* the struggles for oil rents and the hierarchy of oil's curse. Crude domination will fill the explanatory bill here and a remembrance of birthday parties past explains why.

Crude domination

One of this introduction's authors, Stephen Reyna, remembers attending a birthday party in the United States when he was about eleven

years old. In the 1950s Mommy brought you to such festivities in a car with big tail fins. Once there, first you played games. Next, the birthday girl or boy blew out the cake's candles and opened presents. You ate the cake and some ice cream. Then you played for a second time. Finally, Mommy came and took you home in the car with big fins. At the game time of this particular party, the birthday boy's mommy announced, "We are going to play 'Bop the Piñata.'" (The verb "to bop" in American slang means "to hit.") We already knew "Pin the Tail on the Donkey" and "Musical Chairs"—quite tedious. "Bop the Piñata" suggested relief from the tedium.

The birthday boy's mommy explained that a piñata was a "Mexican thing." She showed it to us and it looked like a pink cardboard donkey. She promised it had lots of candy inside. She also advised it would be hung from the ceiling and we were to "bop it hard" with special plastic sticks. When it broke we could collect all the candies. The birthday boy's mommy stood on a chair and hung the piñata. She gave us our plastic sticks, made us stand in a circle under the piñata, counted to three and shouted, "Go!" We bopped, oh, did we bop—the piñata, each other, and sometimes nothing at all. Finally, the piñata broke, candy fell. Everybody jumped for it—pushing and shoving. The birthday boy started crying. He had just stood around, getting mercilessly bopped, coming away with little candy. His mommy, looking like she thought maybe she hadn't organized bopping the piñata right, turned pink—like she was going to cry, too.

Bopping the piñata is a useful metaphor for what happens when domination occurs, and we believe that the curse occurring in developing petrostates can be investigated in terms of struggles to regulate domination. Why is this the case? Oil when sold on the market produces vast rents. This 'black gold' might be imagined as fantastic candy in a piñata. Different social actors, seeking to acquire, or continue acquiring, some of these rents are like the kids at the birthday party bopping for the candy. Their rush to get hold of rents, emphasized by rent-seeking

approaches in political science, is a struggle to constitute, or reconstitute, domination. Existing social science approaches, as we have seen, simply do not emphasize understanding of this topic in terms of domination. We do, and in order to understand how this is the case, let us present our notion of domination.

Colloquially, domination is the uses some people make of other people to get a lot of 'candy.' Less colloquially, the understanding we propose is a structural/regulation or, more simply, a structural one. Its central explanatory chore is at the structural level and concerns explaining why, and how, certain groups regulate other groups and, in so doing, acquire social value, such as capital.

Structural approaches to domination are concerned with regulation, the managing of what groups do so that value can be acquired for one group, or groups (the dominators), from another group or groups (the dominated). Regulation takes place within two connected realms of objective and subjective structures. Objective realms are external to, but inclusive of, individuals. They are spaces of individuals doing things in groups, in which groups exhibit structures of force and power (Reyna 2001, 2003). Creation of such structures is said to be their constitution; their maintenance or enlargement is that of reconstitution. Domination involves constitution and reconstitution of regulation of value flows such that some groups differentially acquire that value. Different forms of value flow that result in diverse structural actors differentially accumulating value are different modes of domination (MODs). Modes of domination based upon accumulating oil rents are oil modes of domination (OMODs).

Subjective realms are internal to individuals, that is, the subjects, and pertain to biological structures involved in experiencing, feeling, and knowing objective realms (Reyna 2002). Persons lacking in subjective realms are like players in a game who do not know what to do, such as the birthday boy at his party who just stood around while everybody else bopped the piñata. Formation of subjective realms creates subjects who know how to play their parts in objective structures, such as OMODs. Creation of such

structures is said to be their construction; maintaining them is their reconstruction. Such construction and reconstruction involves placing within individuals the cultural and authoritative knowledge about how to regulate force resources in particular objective realms. Because such knowledge comes with an emotional impulse, it is termed cultural or authoritative desire. Desire is wanting to regulate force resources in some way. Cultural desire is defined by a person's culture. For example, it might be a person's desire to get rich. Authoritative desire is sanctioned by some authority a person has as a member of a group. For example, Exxon employees in Chad had full authority, and hence desire, to negotiate with the Chadian central government the greatest oil rents possible for Exxon. Domination cannot occur unless the dominators and the dominated desire to do the regulatory work in the different modes of domination. So oil company executives are constructed to be executives; provincial bureaucrats are constructed to siphon off oil rents; and peasants are constructed to have desires based upon knowing what it means to have others accumulate all the oil wealth. Of course, some dominated may experience domination as unpleasant. When this occurs, what may be constructed or reconstructed in their subjectivities is opposition, that is, resistance, to domination. This embedding of cultural or authoritative desire in individuals may be said to be the construction and reconstruction of the subject. Crude domination in this optic refers to the constitution and reconstitution of OMODs as well as the construction and reconstruction of subjects who regulate or resist OMODs. It is time now to suggest how the examination of crude domination assists in the study of oil's curse.

Explaining oil's crazy curse

Let us return to the trope of bopping the piñata. When oil is discovered, it is as if a gigantic piñata has been found, and everybody wants some of the candy. 'Everybody' here is the different subjects in different groups that might desire a cut of the oil wealth. To begin to analyze

the complexity of the struggle for oil-candy, four types of structural players at ascending levels of geographic power might be imagined. First, there are local groups: those in, or near, the area where oil has been found, whose force resources are such that their powers typically extend over a few communities. Second, there are regional groups. Regions may be provinces within states. Regional groups are those whose force resources are such that they have only the power to operate within provinces. Third are national groups that have the force resources to have the power to act throughout a particular state. Regional and national structural actors often involve economic or governmental agencies. However, they may involve religious groups. Fourth, there are transnational groups. These are political, economic, or religious groupings with the power to act across international boundaries. These players are the participants in "Bop the Oil Piñata."

Unfortunately, there is only so much oil in the ground, and only so much can be sold each day, meaning only so much rent can be generated. The candy transnational players get is denied to local players. "Bop the Oil Piñata" is a contradictory game. Contradiction is defined in terms of power, though this definition is derived from the broad Leninist sense in which contradictions refer to "mutually exclusive, opposite tendencies in all phenomena and processes of nature" (Lenin 1958: 357). In social phenomena these opposite tendencies refer to the propensity of groups (players) to operate so as to acquire power and value from each other—with power being the ability to do things and value the 'candy' that confers power and the understanding that the revenues from oil are an especially sweet candy. 'Contradiction' in this optic is the operation of particular structures (players) in an articulated system of structures (players) in the system. The government and transnational corporations in a petrostate are two players articulated to each other by oil revenue flows. Oil revenue flows are flows of money value (candy), which is easily transformed into power. If, as has frequently occurred since

the oil crisis of the 1970s, governments reconstitute OMODs by successfully nationalizing oil, then more revenues are regulated to flow to the governments and less to the oil companies, and the governments' powers are augmented. Contradictory situations, where large quantities of value flow to player X at the expense of Y and Z players, may be said to be those where X constituted or reconstituted domination over Y and Z. Operations of players to constitute or reconstitute more value and power from other players may be said to be struggles.

A field of contradiction consists of all the structural players struggling for value and power. In the "Bop the Oil Piñata" game this struggle is above all over portions of the oil rents. Out of this bopping are constituted, and reconstituted, different varieties of regulation of the flow, or nonflow, of oil wealth to all the players in contradiction with each other. So investigation of the struggle for domination, and how such MODs are constituted and reconstituted, allows investigators to intensively explore the curse's complexities, because such analyses oblige elucidation of the regulatory fate of all the players in the struggle.

We posit that the intensity of conflict in a mode of domination influences the level of curse exhibited by it. The intensity of contradiction is the ratio of the amounts of value flowing to dominators and dominated in MODs. Contradictions are said to be intense when the percentage of total oil rents going to dominators is high. Contradictions are said to be intensifying when the percentage of total oil rents accruing to dominators is rising. A hypothesis is proposed, termed Oil's Crazy Curse (OCC), which accounts for the relationship between the intensity of contradictions and the severity of the crazy curse. The OCC hypothesis consists of two propositions. The first states:

The severity of oil's crazy curse is positively related to the intensity of contradictions in MODs.

The second proposition accounts for why this positive relationship is found. It states:

In OMODs characterized by intense contradiction: (a) too little value flows to the dominated for their development or poverty alleviation; (b) differentials in values sharpen conflicts between dominators and dominated, would-be dominators, and fallen dominators, often escalating violence; (c) the existence of intense conflict in OMODs produces authoritarian governance regimes.

Attention now turns to consideration of how to investigate the hierarchy of different curse levels. Here the object of analysis is not the actual bopping itself but, once modes of domination have been constituted or reconstituted, the implications of this for the degree of curse. Remember, the birthday boy's mommy regulated the game so that everybody flailed away and dived for the candy at the same time—an aggressive way to do things. But the game could have been managed differently. Mommy could have regulated it so that only one person at a time bopped the piñata. She could have ruled that everybody got the same number of pieces when it finally burst. Comparative analysis of the utilization of force resources in the regulation of different modes of domination can enhance understanding of how different curse levels in oil-producing states occur. Underpinning such comparison is recognition that the more violent force resources are utilized, the more cursed is the OMOD. Recourse to utilization of violent force resources would seem to be in part a function of first, the amount of oil rent available to those competing for it in contradictory fields, and second, whether institutions utilizing nonviolent regulation of oil rent distribution control sufficient force resources to inhibit violent forms of regulation of these rents. In Chad, for example, the amount of oil rents has turned out to be less than what certain elite competitors for it had imagined. Some of those who feel slighted in this regard have organized armed rebellion to acquire control over the state to have the ability to control the state's portion of the oil rents. Further, the central government lacks sufficient force resources—violent or nonviolent—to prevent these rebels from fighting

for the oil rents (Reyna 2007). Consequently, Chad suffers grievously from oil's curse.

Speculatively, two curse levels for modes of domination might be distinguished, with one mode having two submodes. There is a first mode of domination where the flow of value is in some measure regulated by utilization of violent force resources and a second mode where this flow is regulated through operation of political and economic authorities. Nigeria, Chad, and Sudan are examples of the first mode, while Latin American and Norway are examples of the second mode, with relatively more of the value flow diverted out of the public sector for the upper classes' use in the Latin American instance, and relatively more of the value flow remaining in the public sector to benefit a wider range of classes in the Norwegian case. Investigation of different curse levels becomes the search for knowledge of why and how different force resources come to regulate value distributions in different modes of domination.

We have been discussing the analysis of OMODs in objective realms. Certainly, there needs to be understanding of what happens to individual actors' subjectivities in modes of domination. Investigators seeking such knowledge need to discover how individual actors' cultural and authoritative desires are constructed, and reconstructed, in different groups receiving different amounts of oil wealth. This study of the making of the subject we believe to be one for which anthropologists are particularly suited. This finishes our sketch of a crude domination approach to oil's crazy curse; let us offer something of a conclusion.

Conclusion

This introduction began with recognition that knowledgeable people from all points of the political compass feared systemic crisis in a world of turbulence plagued by disaster capitalism. It was suggested that one reason for this crisis was oil's crazy curse. We argued that this curse was part and parcel of struggles to dominate the flow

of value produced by oil; that the existing social science literature overlooked the role of domination in oil's curse; and, hence, that an anthropology that analyzed the curse as a struggle to dominate oil wealth would be a useful addition to existing approaches. How significant might such a domination approach be for understanding the crisis of the current conjuncture? If oil becomes scarcer, as the peak oil specialists predict, and if the United States, with its huge military, continues striving to violently and globally dominate allocation of oil rents, then the conditions for greater conflict would be met, and oil's crazy curse would be gasoline thrown on the global systemic crisis made explosive by a United States seeking crude domination (Reyna 2005).

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