

## RESOURCE CURSE

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We might imagine that countries where significant oil reserves are discovered would experience unfettered socio-economic progress. Yet in many parts of the world, oil wealth is no guarantor of prosperity. Instead, as is documented, for example, in *The Curse of the Black Gold*, a collection of Ed Kashi's photographs and writing by Niger Delta activists edited by Michael Watts, oil wealth often seems to herald political instability and economic crisis. The title of Watts' and Kashi's book alludes to a phenomenon observed and described by some economists as the "resource curse," a key analytic tool in numerous studies of countries rich in natural resources. Yet this title belies the nuanced account of the resource curse idea contained in Watts' introduction, which criticizes many of the assumptions with which the term is fraught.

The term "resource curse thesis" first appeared in 1993 as the subtitle of *Sustaining Development in Mineral Economies*, a book in which Richard Auty traces the history of developing mineral-exporting economies from the 1970s to the 1990s. Describing the trend that "resource-rich countries [...] may actually perform worse than less well-endowed countries", Auty (1993: 1) focused his attention on countries that were rich in hard mineral resources; others have since noted similar trends relating specifically to oil-rich states. In *The Oil Curse*, Michael Ross explores the economics of the curse in order to offer advice on escaping the negative effects of resource wealth. The strength of his approach is that, unlike many economists who have been seduced by a simplistic version of the resource curse thesis, he bases his analysis on the full social and ecological cost of oil production. He draws attention to the considerable international political

efforts made by states and NGOs to counter the “curse” by promoting the “use of oil, gas and mineral resources for the public good” (2013: 246).

In developing the idea of the resource curse in this way, Ross takes up a line of argument familiar to political scientists, although his critique is markedly less radical than that of others. In *Paradox of Plenty*, for example, Terry Lynn Karl investigated the impact of oil on a number of important oil producer states (or “petro-states” as she termed them), in order to understand why these states chose similar modes of development that consistently produced “generally perverse outcomes” (1997: xv). Karl’s work is important not least because she was keen to draw connections across a diverse range of states; she eschewed a simple narrative that would draw essentialist distinctions between Global South and Global North. In her analysis, even Norway, so often held to be the model of a successful “petro-state,” does not entirely escape the potentially problematic effects of oil wealth on the political landscape, even if it is better placed than developing countries to weather the eponymous “paradox of plenty” (Ibid: 214-16). Conceived as a deliberate alternative to the resource curse thesis, this concept allows Karl to criticize the assumptions that underpinned much of the literature following Auty, which, she argues, routinely failed to understand economic effects as the outcome of particular political and institutional structures and specific forms of decision-making (Ibid:5-12). Related objections appear in Timothy Mitchell’s *Carbon Democracy*. Offering an important and nuanced set of reflections on the political relations engendered by the global reliance on oil, he notes that studies which assume a resource curse are generally flawed in that they seek to make essential distinctions between oil-producing states and non-oil states. This approach, Mitchell argues, serves to conceal the nature of

the cycle of production and consumption relating to oil and thus obscures how the issues faced by oil-producing states are actually closely connected to other “limits of carbon democracy” that affect producer and non-producer states alike (Mitchell 2011: 6).

Today, Mitchell and Karl are far from being lone voices raised against the resource curse thesis; the growing critical literature on the subject can essentially be divided into two camps. On the one hand, there are works such as *Beyond the Resource Curse* that, although seeking to overcome the limits of the concept, do not fundamentally disagree with it; on the other, works such as *Oil is Not a Curse* reject entirely the resource curse thesis and the thinking that underpins it. In the latter, Pauline Luong and Erica Weintal conclude their analysis of the fate of Soviet successor states with a chapter on the “myth of the resource curse,” in which they debunk the assumptions tied up with this way of thinking that, they claim, are based on the truncated time frame to which much of the standard literature refers (2010: 322-36).

This practical exercise in debunking fails, however, to draw out fully the implications of identifying the resource curse as myth: one might raise a further set of questions about the oil curse that attend to language itself. In this case, the crucial question to ask about the resource curse is not whether its underlying assumptions are empirically justifiable but rather: What does it mean to imagine oil as a curse and, concomitantly, what does it mean to imagine oil as a resource? To meditate upon these questions, as, for example, Rob Nixon (2011: 69-76) so eloquently does, is to reflect on our relation to the object—on our disposition towards oil itself. Understanding how dispositions are constructed and how they are put to work is, as Jane Bennett (2010) and others argue, a crucial aspect of the ethical-aesthetic turn that investigates mechanisms

through which knowledge leads to action. To reflect upon the ways in which we imagine our relation to oil is, then, in itself already an ethical act.

Considering what it means to imagine oil as a curse is the approach that Watts takes as he meditates upon evocative descriptions of the fetishistic nature of oil, in which narratives about oil, whether invoked in scholarly literature or by the popular imagination, appear in the guise of the cautionary fairytale (2004: 51). This approach informs Murad Ibragimbekov's award-winning short film *Oil / Neft* (2003), which deftly recycles archival footage of Azerbaijan's oil history to offer critical reflection on oil's status as both blessing and curse. Imagining oil in terms of the performative language of the "curse" imbues it with agency: a curse, after all, is an utterance that *does* something. It acts. And by attributing agency to oil, the language of "curse" appears to shift responsibility for the consequences of oil extraction to the substance itself. In other words, assigning agency to the object in this way brings with it, as Fernando Coronil (1997) suggests, the risk that the significant inequalities characteristic of many "petro-states" are seen as natural or magical and, in any case, inevitable.

While Coronil warns of the dangers of an over-reliance on the power of things, the language of the resource curse is conversely also routinely employed to rob oil of its very materiality. This is achieved by imagining oil primarily as an economic abstraction, a mere resource that lends itself to exploitation (Mitchell 2011: 1-3; Weszhalyns 2013). Describing oil and other fossil fuels as resources is part of the general disposition towards nature that lies at the heart of global capitalism. As Marx famously maintained, the accumulation of value – the very logic of capitalism – serves to degrade the "natural and social characteristics" of human and non-human nature (Marx 1959: 77; Moore 2003:

325). A price can be placed upon oil once it is imagined as a resource. This abstraction, which masks the human labor necessary to turn natural resources into commodities, presupposes the exchangeability of oil, which allows oil to be conceived as an isolated entity that can simply be removed from the ecosystem to which it belongs without consequence (Harvey 1993: 6).

To describe oil as a resource is to dematerialize and objectify it, while naming oil a curse mobilizes its imagined agency to maintain and justify the political and economic status quo. In the juxtaposition of “resource” with “curse,” in other words, lies a tension between “rational” control *over* oil and the “irrational” power *of* oil. This tension can perhaps best be described with recourse to the idea of the “dialectic of the Enlightenment,” as expounded by Horkheimer and Adorno (2002), in which they tease out the complicit relationship between Enlightenment and myth, between reason and its irrational other. The language of the “resource curse” as has been argued here, reproduces this dialectic by combining the abstractions of commodity capitalism with awe for the magical power of the material object. Recognizing how this linguistic structure functions offers a productive way of grasping and, potentially, countering the self-destructive yet seductive course of contemporary culture in socio-environmental terms.

Realizing this potential, however, entails nothing less than a fundamental rethinking of dispositions to oil and an attendant reimagining of conceptions of “nature,” following the critical approach of Bruno Latour (2004), Jane Bennett (2010) and others. Their emphasis on the artificiality of a divide between “nature” and “culture” offers a basis from which to develop alternative dispositions towards oil and other fossil fuels, in which they are imagined as *actants* in a global ecosystem, as things that produce effects

and demand responses in their own right. This form of thinking requires a fundamental shift from an economic model of energy production and consumption based on “ownership” of land and resources, to an ecological model that places “co-existence” at its center.

#### Works Cited

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