



Resource geography II: What makes resources political?

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Abstract

What makes resources political? We often imagine that politics is something done to resources (i.e. larger contestations over access to and control over resources). In this second “progress report”, I question whether resource politics is simply about fighting over stuff. How does the materiality of resources themselves shape broader conceptions of “the political” in general? I highlight the role of resources in shaping three central meanings of the political or politics. First, the commonsense ideology of politics as electoral contests over political power. Second, the state – as the sphere of “the political” – is constructed as a geographical entity based on a specific form of territoriality. Third, the nation-state reflects a complex political duality: both an institutional state apparatus and a cultural imaginary of shared nationhood. I conclude with some thoughts on the need to expand the terrain of the political in resource geography.

Keywords

resources, the political, state, nationalism

I Introduction

What makes resources political? Broadly, resource geography defines resources as ‘those components of the non-human world that are considered to be useful or valuable in some way’ (Bridge, 2009: 1219). In other words, as Ray Hudson (2005: 42) once pithily observed, ‘Natural resources are not naturally resources.’ It takes social, political and cultural work to define part of nature as a resource. If ‘resources are not; they become’ (Zimmermann, 1951: 15), one of the forms of ‘becoming’ is politics, struggle, and often violence. Political ecology itself is often defined as ‘tools for thinking about the conflicts and struggles engendered by forms of access and control over resources’ (Peluso and Watts, 2001: 25). Resources become an object of political contestation between groups over their immediate useful properties (e.g.

firewood, mushrooms) and value-generating potential (e.g. oil, iron, timber). Such political conflict over resources might entail quotidian disputes between local communities or property owners, or global geopolitical struggle between states. These examples all demonstrate the manifold political conflicts *over* resources.

Is this the only way we can think politically about resources, that is as *objects* of political struggle? This way of thinking imagines that politics is something *done* to resources. It is actually a quite rudimentary conception of politics that comes down to fighting over stuff. It fails to account for how resources might shape

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politics, or ‘the political’, in general. To put it another way, how do resources shape what counts as politics? This requires an understanding of ‘the political’ as already grounded in material relations with resources. It involves moving from the politics ‘over’ resources to the resource-materiality of politics itself. As Erik Swyngedouw (2015: 131) suggests, we need to understand ‘not only that the “political” matters in grasping and influencing trajectories of socio-ecological change and transformation, but also that [the] “physical” and “biological” matter politically’.

In this second progress report I will review emerging literatures that seek to understand how resources shape ‘the political’ in general. I draw from reflections on the nature of the political in contemporary society (Rancière, 2001; Mouffe, 2005; Žižek, 2006) but try to condense the review around more general ideas of the political or politics. Under capitalism, the political, conventionally understood, resides in a particular sphere quarantined off from ‘the economic’. Although not exclusively so, this sphere or ‘region’ is institutionally and geographically centered around the state.¹ Thus, I mostly concentrate this review on the relations between the state, populations, and territory. I highlight three meanings of the political or politics. First, the commonsense ideology of politics as electoral contests over political power – that is, politics as democracy or other struggles over who holds state power. Second, the state as a geographical entity based on a specific form of territoriality. Territorial control of resources is not simply about imposing politics on natural stuff; rather, the processes of territorially delimiting control and access to resources actively constitute the state. Third, resources are also central in constituting the nation-state as both an institutional state *apparatus* and a more cultural imaginary of shared *nationhood*. I conclude with some thoughts on the need to vastly expand the terrain of the political in resource geography.

II Resource democracy

In mainstream discourse, the word politics often refers to electoral or other attempts at capturing state power. A liberal approach would simply call this ‘democracy’, but we should also recognize the extra-legal and sometimes violent ways in which state power can be captured (e.g. military coups, revolutions). Any attempt to explain the relationship between resources and democracy could begin with Timothy Mitchell’s path-breaking work *Carbon Democracy* (2011). Mitchell links the rise of carbon-based fuels (coal and then oil) with the rise of mass popular democracy itself. With its labor-intensive forms of extraction, coal gave miners political power to foment popular and electoral demands. Although the *idea* of a liberal representative democracy obviously precedes this, Mitchell suggests the mass action of coal miners provoked the era of *mass* democracy. It bears remembering, however, that Mitchell was responding to an argument that equated oil with a *lack* of democracy – that is, the authoritarian states of the Middle East and beyond (something addressed below). This literature – broadly associated with the concept of the ‘resource curse’ – argues that there are certain properties of oil and other resources themselves that *cause* a lack of democracy (e.g. rents, corruption, undiversified economies (see Ross, 2012); for a critique see Watts, 2004, and Le Billon, 2005). In this section I will focus on how research in resource geography has built on Mitchell’s fundamental insights.

The appeal of Mitchell’s formulation is its focus on carbon’s embeddedness in the lives and infrastructures of modern social formations. The key political question today centers on the capacities of democratic states or alternative forms of ‘planetary sovereignty’ to address the crises engendered by carbon-based life (Wainwright and Mann, 2013, 2015). It is tempting to conclude that carbonized democracy and the embeddedness of the ‘fossil fuel landscape’

prevent political constructions of a post-carbon future (see Carton, 2017). Beuret (2017) explores how the global framing of climate change forecloses a political solution through national states. Much research has explained how the so-called solutions of carbon markets (e.g. Bryant, 2016) or international treaties (e.g. Weisser and Müller-Mahn, 2017) fail to actually solve the problem by offering any avenue toward a needed transformation of the energy infrastructure (Beuret, 2017). On the other hand, Haarstad and Wanvik (2017) critique the vision of ‘permanence’ of what they call ‘carbon-scapes’ and, instead, highlight the profound *instability* of the fossil fuel landscape. However, their examples of instability, like the market shocks of an oil price collapse or the emergence of bike culture in gentrifying cities, are not necessarily positive changes. The key democratic challenge is to imagine a more politically directed form of dramatic change that could rationally transition society away from carbon.

In a more hopeful vein, other approaches highlight the central role of democracy and grassroots social movements in forging a ‘just transition’ away from our carbonized society. Plainly, overcoming the political economic power of the fossil fuel industry will require such mass, democratic movements attuned to the distributional outcomes of energy transition (Newell and Mulvaney, 2013). Angel (2017) shows how social movements use the concept of ‘energy democracy’ to extend state and non-state control over the commons of renewable energies. Routledge et al. (2018) also highlight how energy re-municipalization initiatives must work in and beyond status quo state institutions to achieve climate justice. Pulido et al. (2016) also reveal the *limits* of organizing through the state in the context of environmental justice struggles.

Other approaches see carbon extraction at the core of national political shifts. Carbon (and other mineral) extraction has fueled a left-wing (and often democratically elected) ‘post-

neoliberal’ political formation in Latin America (Grugel and Ruggirozzi, 2012; for a cautious view see Humphreys Bebbington and Bebbington, 2013). On the other side of the political spectrum, Peyton and Franks (2016) link Canada’s conservative politics to a discourse of extractivism (particularly in the oil fields of Alberta).

The story is not all about carbon, however. Geographers are increasingly conceptualizing other resources at the center of contests over political power. Harrison (2016) draws from Boyer’s (2014) concept of ‘energopower’ to examine the relationship between electricity networks and the reproduction of racialized – and undemocratic – political domination in North Carolina. Before ‘carbon democracy’, scholars had long highlighted the centrality of water to centralized forms of state power – or, ‘hydraulic society’ (Wittfogel, 1957). Akhter (2015) demonstrates how dam infrastructure is central to the decidedly uneven construction of state power in postwar Pakistan. Menga’s (2017) fresh concept of *hydropolis* shows how dams are central in the construction of the ‘other’ foreign countries of geopolitical conflict.

Somewhat surprisingly, there is a relative dearth of research on the role of resource capital in *subverting* democracy.² The power of ‘Big Oil’ or other resource-based corporations in corrupting political processes is well established in more journalistic accounts (see, e.g., Maass 2009). One exception is Anonymous (2018), who explains how rosewood loggers in Madagascar use their resource wealth to shape electoral outcomes in their favor – a process s/he calls ‘rosewood democracy’. The contributions to the edited volume *First World Petro-Politics* (Adkin, 2016) also offer a powerful window onto the undemocratic nature of the ‘petro-state’ in Alberta.

Given the political tumult of 2016, there will be increased attention to the role of resource regions in shaping ‘populist’ political

movements. Andreucci (2017) shows how Evo Morales's 'populist' anti-neoliberal project in Bolivia has become fractured as indigenous and other movements threaten resource-based accumulation. Marston and Perreault (2017) offer a deeper history of how small-scale cooperative miners are central to changing populist and hegemonic formations of Bolivian politics (on both the left and the right). Finally, we cannot ignore the centrality of coal mining – despite its infinitesimal contribution to employment in even so-called 'coal regions' like Appalachia (Ingraham, 2017) – to the rise of an anti-globalist nationalism in the United States (and beyond). If coal is central to mass electoral democracy, as Mitchell suggests, political geographers should reflect on how this kind of coal nostalgia is embedded in a longer standing sense of American exceptionalism (Koch, 2017). Studies of the dispossession that shapes these resource regions (Ellen Smith, 2015) can also shed light on seemingly perplexing electoral outcomes. Although much of this new populism is centered within suburban geographies and deindustrialized zones (for the US case see Davis, 2017), it is also worth thinking more generally about rurality – and the resources within – and new forms of 'authoritarian populism' (Scoones et al., 2017).

III Resources, territoriality, and geopower

Capitalism is marked by a historically-specific separation between the realm of the economic and the realm of the political – state power and its 'relative autonomy'. Political geographers and theorists have shown how this realm of 'the political' is also a geographical entity premised on the construction of territorial forms of power – property, jurisdictions, borders (Hyndman, 2001; Agnew, 2003; Elden, 2013a). So much of how we imagine 'the political' is framed by the territoriality of a planet composed of sovereign-territorial entities.

How do resources shape the very construction of the modern territorial state? It is obvious that states often 'control' resources. This has led to a large political ecology literature on how local resource communities resist, struggle, or accommodate various forms of state power (see Neumann, 2004; Vandergeest and Peluso, 2015). Yet, as Robbins (2007) complained, there has been little effort to analyze nature-society-state relations through core political geographical concepts of territory, nationhood and sovereignty. This latter view would not simply analyze the role of the state in the struggle 'over' resources, but seek to understand how resources are constitutive of the modern territorial state itself. In this sense, resources constitute the material ground (literally) of the formation of the 'modern geopolitical imagination' (Agnew, 2003: 2).

Parenti (2015) forcefully advances this position and argues few state theorists consider 'the role of non-human nature's use values to accumulation and the territoriality of the state'. He follows Luke (1995) and Ó Tuathail (1997), to conceptualize state-nature territoriality as *geopower*. Geopower is useful for understanding how the modern territorial state asserts itself – its *sovereignty* – through the territorial delimitation of resource access. These include what Jason Moore (2015: 204) refers to as 'abstract social nature', or 'the family of processes aimed on simplifying, standardizing, and otherwise mapping the world in service to the expansion of abstract labor'. The territorial state is central in creating these conditions for resource capitalization. Emel et al. (2011) show how *national* forms of sovereignty and legal ownership of subterranean resources form the basis for attracting capital investment in mining to large territories.³ Vela Almeida (2018) suggests the concept of 'territorial partitions' to explain how the state juridically produces the uneven geographies of wealth and extraction in Ecuador.

However, as many political geographers have shown, the territorial state is highly

ambiguous and contradictory and includes accommodating or contesting forms of territorial rule beyond the state itself. As Bridge (2015: 64) points out, ‘complex ecologies of resource access and control are frequently obscured by a naïve “national” imaginary that understands resources as a state’s territorial contents’. Research has explored non-state territorial claims on resources. Zimmerer (2015) and Asher and Ojeda (2009) illustrate the centrality of indigenous territorial rights in the making of new ideas of the environmental state which claims to recognize and protect biological and cultural diversity. Movements centered around ‘food sovereignty’ attempt to fashion non-state geographies of resource control and territorial power (Trauger, 2014). Vandergeest and Unno (2012) show how aquaculture capitalism has ushered in a new form of ‘extraterritoriality’ where supranational institutions govern resource access *against* national sovereign states. Zalik (2015) explores seabed mining in international waters as a stateless space of ‘ocean grabbing’.

Most of this literature focuses on the legal-institutional making of territorialized resource access through contracts and cadastral maps. Yet, there is also *violence* inherent within the state-territory-resource nexus. Indeed, making territory appear open for resource investment is often a violent process of dispossession. Massé and Lunstrum (2016) examine the military enforcement of wildlife tourism and conservation in South Africa. Devine and Ojeda (2017) analyze how tourism-based accumulation in Colombia is premised on state violence. Ballvé (2012) shows how coca production funds a decentralized network of paramilitary groups who also supplement counterinsurgency efforts of the Colombian state. Extractive capital also deploy their own privatized security forces to create quasi-internal states within states or private resource enclaves (see Ferguson, 2005; Appel, 2012).

Somewhat absent in these discussions is the foundational role of property, which is itself a form of territoriality and enclosure (Blomley, 2017). It is not enough to simply show how state forms of property (subterranean ownership, public lands, etc.) link with resource extraction. As McCarthy and Prudham (2004) point out, there is also the centrality of land to the foundational liberal (and neoliberal) imaginary of property itself: the Lockean vision of mixing labor with the land, or Hardin’s (1968) vision of the ‘tragedy of the commons’. In addition, there is the notion at the very core of the liberal state – the very grounds of ‘the political’ – of enforcing property rights. This enforcement is highly spatial and territorialized. In practice, this often means a violent support of privatized control over those who claim common property and longstanding communal resource use. It is also worth reflecting on the resource flows that sustain private property itself – from the iron that clips hedges during the enclosures (Blomley, 2007) to coal-fired electricity that makes private, air-conditioned suburban property in Phoenix possible (Needham, 2014). Property, and the state power to enforce it, always requires resources from *elsewhere*.

IV Nation-(resources)-state

The state itself is an *apparatus* of buildings, staff, laws, and documents. The state also gains its consent through the ‘imagined community’ of shared national belonging (Anderson, 1983). Sparke’s (2005) reflections on the ambiguous ‘hyphen’ between nation-state could allow us to see the materiality of resources as a connective tissue shaping the hyphen itself.

For a while now, scholars have argued against a reified view of the state, and advocated a more fine-grained, everyday, relational study of actually-existing form of state power (see Evans et al., 1985; Mitchell, 1991; Mountz, 2003; Painter, 2006). A relational theory of the state would also understand the critical role of

resources in the reproduction of the state apparatus. At first glance this is simple. We can examine those sectors of the state charged with managing a territory's resources – specific agencies that manage public lands, parks, forests, and wildlife. This is a perspective on 'the political' where the state imposes 'politics' over resources. In this section, I'm more interested in how resources make the state possible in the first place.

The state is a *fiscal* entity that must be reproduced through flows of money. State ownership of resources often generates 'rents' by leasing out resources to private firms or developing them through state-owned enterprises. Scholars from political science and international relations argue that states that generate substantial revenue from resource rents display a common set of pathologies: rentierism, corruption, violence (Auty, 1993; Karl, 1997; Ross, 2012). Yet, most of these approaches create a sense that it is resources themselves which cause internal pathologies and fail to explain how such resource states are produced through longer regimes of coloniality and uneven development. More critical approaches deploy a Marxist theory of rent to explain how corporations from the core capitalist countries exploit resource-owning territories or 'landlord states' (Bina, 1985; Coronil, 1997; Mommer, 2002). The work of Michael Watts (2004) is perhaps the most detailed study of how the spectacularly violent and corrupt petro-state is enmeshed in global flows of capital and brutal colonial histories of partition and ethnic division.

After decades of debates on the commodification of nature and value relations (e.g. most recently, Kay and Kenney-Lazar, 2017), Marx's theory of rent is perhaps more helpful than value in explaining the geographies of resources and political power (Coronil, 1997; Felli, 2014; Andreucci et al., 2017). Purcell et al. (2017) deploy what they call a 'rent-theoretical' perspective to examine the linkages between resource rents, state power, and import-

substitution strategies in the knowledge economy in Ecuador. Yet resource rents are subject to the boom and bust cycle of commodity prices, with political consequences. In the cases of Chad and Nigeria, Guyer (2015) shows how oil price fluctuations profoundly manifest through popular protest over rescinded fuel subsidies and social programs. Although the rentier state is often exoticized, Carter and Zalik (2016) persuasively demonstrate the provincial state of Alberta is a 'rentier state' *par excellence*. They also push back on 'rentier theory' in general and its tendency to 'reify state forms' (p. 62) as impervious to social movements and contestation. By examining state ownership of ocean space, Campling and Havice (2014) demonstrate that a 'rent-theoretical' perspective is not only relevant for oil extraction.

Too often the actual distribution of resource rents is assumed and not investigated. There remains much work to be done in actually 'following the money' of rent into the state and the everyday geographies it makes possible (e.g. the expansion of staff, buildings, and programs). While usually this involves tracing money into corruption and offshore bank accounts (Maass, 2009), there are rare instances where resource rents enable grassroots social justice programs and vast redistribution of wealth, as we have seen in Bolivia, Venezuela and Ecuador (Åse-døtter Strønen, 2017; Riofrancos, 2017). The question, of course, becomes what happens when those resource rents go bust with commodity prices.

Resources also constitute the 'nation' side of the nation-state nexus. 'Resource nationalism' is a common object of study in wider fields of political science and international relations, but it is only recently being explored within critical political geography (Childs, 2016). Resource nationalism often means the increased control of sovereign states over territorial resources through nationalization or levying increased rents or taxes on private extractive capital (Bremmer and Johnston,

2009; Haslam and Heidrich, 2016). The state itself stands in as an enactor of ‘nationalist’ politics against a global world of capital. Yet the more important meaning of ‘nationalism’ is a much broader and more everyday form of *shared national identity* among the citizens of a nation-state (Anderson, 1983). Thus, nationalism relies on wider popular understandings and forms of consent to state power. As Koch (2013: 127) puts it nicely, even in an authoritarian state like Kazakhstan, ‘the rhetorical practices of ordinary people are instrumental to confirming the “state” as a coherent actor and naturalizing its control over bounded, abstract space (the national “territory”), as well as the people and resources located therein’.

Nationalism is something expressed by ‘the people’, but this is a vast and unspecific construction. Resource nationalist discourse often emerge from specific social fractions and movements. Valdivia and Benavides (2012) illustrate how petroleum workers in Ecuador continually deploy ideas of shared national identity in framing their critiques of the presence of western oil capital. In a much different context, Ince et al. (2015) show how British refinery workers combine militant labor actions with ideas of shared national ‘British’ identity. Kaup and Gellert (2017) direct attention out of the national territory itself to examine the role of hegemonic powers in creating the conditions for resource nationalism. Nationalism does not only emerge from resource extraction but also from consumption. Don Mitchell’s (2005) idea of the privatized American ‘SUV model of citizenship’ connotes a resource consumption complex – oil, steel, plastic, asphalt. Hoelle (2017: 751) uncovers a culture of beef consumption in Brazil – where ‘beef is considered to be a national food and Brazilians take great pride in their *churrascos*, or barbecues’ (p. 751). Yet these forms of nationalism hide widespread deforestation and ecological degradation in the Amazon.

V Conclusion

As I suggested in the introduction, resource geography often reduces politics to struggles over the natural stuff we call resources. The focus on ‘fighting over stuff’ seems to fit Rancière’s (2001) argument that ‘the essence of politics is the manifestation of dissensus’. Whether one is looking at indigenous struggles against extractivism in Ecuador (Riofrancos, 2017) or the Brazilian workers landless movement (Wolford, 2010), resource geography appears as a constant dissensus. However, Rancière (2001) also argues that we must see politics as ‘specifically opposed to the police’. He does not mean the police in the narrow sense of one of the violent apparatuses of the state. For Rancière, ‘The police is a “partition of the sensible”’.

In concluding this report, I argue that the ‘partition of the sensible’ of what counts as resource politics is quite narrow. We only tend to see resource politics ‘on the ground’ where individuals or communities seek to either harness specific use values of resources or to block the flow of resource exchange values (what Naomi Klein (2014: 293) calls ‘Blocadia’). This vision of resource politics adheres to a larger problem in left politics today that Srnicek and Williams (2016) identify as ‘folk politics’: ‘Against the abstraction and inhumanity of capitalism, folk politics aims to bring politics down to the ‘human scale’ by emphasizing temporal, spatial, and conceptual immediacy.’ This politics of immediacy is always characterized by a ‘deep suspicion of abstraction and mediation’. In this view, politics becomes a fight to maintain these longstanding forms of resource use and protection against state or capitalist projects of enclosure or valorization. By rejecting mediation and abstraction, left politics nearly always emphasizes its dialectical negation of global capitalism: the immediate, the local, the grassroots. Yet it is unclear how this politics can meet and overcome global

neoliberal capitalism and its associated resource and ecological crises.

Let me be clear, I'm not trying to say this kind of politics is bad. It is vitally necessary, particularly for those communities whose control of resources is imperiled. As Srnicek and Williams (2016) suggest, 'the politics of immediacy is necessary but insufficient' to address our conjuncture. It is worth revisiting Marx's (1976) comments on the violent enclosures of 'primitive accumulation'. He argued that this expropriation of a scattered, peasant-based private property allowed for capitalism to create a highly *socialized* form of production. Marx's political intervention was not about protecting direct, use-value resource relations, but rather harnessing the social basis of capitalist commodity systems to create 'socialized man, the associated producers, govern the human metabolism with nature in a rational way' (Marx, 1981: 959). This vision of *socialized* production is not an idea based on an 'immediate' local, place-based relation with nature. It is based on a more 'social' or inherently mediated – one could even call it *planetary* (see Wainwright and Mann, 2013) – form of production geared toward widespread social and ecological needs. Similarly, and often forgotten, Harvey (2003) argues for the *limits* of a politics only resisting 'accumulation by dispossession' like the privatization of resources or the enclosure of the commons. Political movements must also seek a politics that builds power within the larger capitalist system itself. It is this kind of *social* power that has the capacity to resolve our environmental or resource crises. While we have plenty of inspiring examples of small-scale cooperative economies promoting sustainable 'immediate' relationships with resources, what we lack is any sort of vision of 'the political' that could amass power at the scale needed to resolve our global ecological crisis.

Walker (2007: 364) famously called out political ecology for its lack of 'politics' in the

sense of politics as the capacity, 'to wield political power'. As much as Walker rightly blames our inward academic focus on peer-reviewed journals like this one and conferences, I think our failures to 'be political' are as rooted in our narrow conceptions of what counts as politics as anything else. As I have suggested elsewhere (Huber, 2017), reconceptualizing politics means *making political* nature-society relationships that have been 'off limits' from contestation and struggle. This is a role that we as scholars are well positioned to advance.

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Notes

1. Wainwright and Mann (2015: 315) have recently articulated this nicely through a geographical metaphor of 'regionalization'. They draw from Poulantzas, who bases his state theory 'in the historical separation (or "regionalization") of the political and the effect this process has had on modern state formation'.
2. Indeed, it is far more common to see scholars suggest that resource states are somehow inherently illiberal or undemocratic (e.g. Ross, 2012).
3. This connects with new interest in political ecologies of 'vertical territory' (see Braun, 2000) and more 'volumetric' rather than horizontal approaches to space (see Elden, 2013b; Bridge, 2013).

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