

RE-CONCEIVING THE RESOURCE CURSE AND THE ROLE OF ANTHROPOLOGY

• GISA WESZKALNYS •

Think Africa, think oil—are you thinking trouble? São Tomé e Príncipe (STP), where I have conducted fieldwork on and off since 2007, has been the focus of substantial efforts to destabilise that equation. In fact, STP has attained a bit of fame amongst (potentially) oil rich African states: it has an exemplary oil-revenue law; has signed up to various agreements ensuring transparency in its oil sector, such as the UK-led Extractive Industry Transparency Initiative; has a Permanent Fund for future generations and a Public Information Office. NGOs, including International Alert and Global Witness, have made the small island state one of their targets of action. The World Bank has financed a governance capacity-building project; and the renowned economist Jeff Sachs has advised STP with a high-calibre team of lawyers, agronomists and public health specialists as well as a bunch of bright graduate students who carried out a public survey and awareness-raising campaign. Type ‘Africa’ and ‘oil’ into the Google search engine, one of the top hits will be a Time Magazine article on Africa’s ‘oil dreams’, featuring the pundits of a bar in the small-island state of São Tomé e Príncipe where oil is rumoured to exist but has yet to be exploited. Whilst STP has been making headlines with its speculative resources, these have also spurred a small research bonanza focused on preventing what economists have dubbed the ‘resource curse’.

I will use the Santomean example to argue that the role of anthropology *vis-à-vis* the new development economics has to be much broader than what I term ‘filling the gaps with social detail’. In doing so, I take up an idea from Hirokazu Miyazaki and Annelise Riles (2005). In their account of finance market specialists in Japan, they argue that a typical response to the failure of economic theory has been the search for social detail that might explain the failure. However, like them, I am sceptical that providing this detail is a satisfactory role for anthropology.

According to economists, such as Paul Collier and Jeffrey Sachs, contrary to what one might expect, the presence of large natural resources—especially oil and other minerals—rarely results in general economic development in the producing country. Rather, it may lead to the rapid decline of certain sectors of the national economy as well as internal social strife and struggle for access to the frequently staggering wealth derived from resource revenues. Economists and, with them, the large transnational institutions, notably the World Bank, now argue that governance, political culture, and local elites are to blame for this state of affairs—by misappropriating income derived from the resources, for example. Whilst it was once received wisdom that poverty brings corruption, the so-called Washington consensus since the 1990s is that corrupt countries are poor. Simultaneously corruption was linked to particular institutional characteristics and policy environments and effectively de-politicised (Kraštev 2004: 30–31). Experts and technocrats now seem to agree that the remedy for the resource curse is transparency on the part of all the parties involved (Humphreys et al. 2007).

Particular areas, such as the Gulf of Guinea, have occupied centre-stage in these reformulations of the relationship between resources and development (Soares de Oliveira 2007; Weszkalnys 2009). Nigeria with its seemingly unsolvable Niger Delta conflicts, running along regional, ethnic and political cleavages, and Equatorial Guinea with its spectacular wealth, extreme poverty, and bungled coup attempt are but two prominent examples. Watertight legislation and agreements between governments, oil multi-nationals and local civil society, as well as institution-building measures are now recommended to prevent this from happening. A first, but alas failing, experiment was the Chad-Cameroon oil pipeline project (Pegg 2005). Such projects indicate an important about-turn in the conception of the role of natural resources for development, one the one hand, and the role of development organisations, on the other.

The resource curse has played an important role as a future imaginary in managing and generating expectations regarding oil in STP. My own research focused on the hopes engendered by the speculative presence of oil—a hope which many of my international and local interlocutors thought had produced unwarranted and even dangerous excitement alongside a marked complacency among Santomeans. What I found, however, was less a population enthralled in the anticipation of hitting a huge jackpot, than one that was quite wary of the things, good and bad, that oil might bring. “*O petróleo— bênção ou maldição?*” (Will oil be a blessing or a curse?) was one of the questions that the young trainees of a community radio station, sponsored by the London-based NGO International Alert, asked members of the public in a first interview session. Most of the answers were ambiguous, converging on the important role that government would play in determining the outcome—for better or worse. Santomeans are well accustomed to the notion that oil may bring conflict rather than betterment. They hear it on radio, television, and in the streets, and national surveys and awareness campaigns have alerted them to this potential development.

What role does this open up for the anthropologist? I think the Santomean example requires an anthropological stance that problematises the very theories that seek to describe the politico-economic context in which ethnography operates. It raises questions about the ways in which economic theory is implemented in, and shapes, specific cultural and political contexts. To my mind the specific contribution of anthropology to the study of development, more broadly, has been its scepticism regarding the assumptions at the heart of the development project; its commitment to a distinctive ethnographic approach, frequently upsetting the scientific certainties driving the development machinery; and its critical comparative perspective highlighting the particularity—not universality—of development discourse.

Building on this, I suggest a continuing anthropological engagement with development, which—perhaps more than ever—refuses to be reduced to the role of an ‘aide’ filling in the gaps in development knowledge with details about social life. By this I refer to the fact that economic theory—and resource economics illustrate this beautifully—has increasingly come to acknowledge its blind spots. It is blatantly obvious that topics like ‘political culture’ and ‘national elites’ require more than a quantitative or econometric analysis. Gauging opinions and shaping the expectations of a whole nation—even if as small as that of STP—requires social skills and insight to be effective. As economic theory acknowledges its shortcomings, it has reached for socio-cultural detail to turn ‘externalities’

into a Pandora's box in which the anthropologists may rummage. But perhaps there is more for us to do?

Like Miyazaki and Riles (2005), I see another, more fruitful role for anthropological analysis. This is to keep an eye on how economists (and other people) respond when they find themselves confronted with the apparent inconsistencies of their theories. Also, it is to ask not how real life events shape economics but how economic theories shape real life. For anthropologists, 'the social' is not a neatly demarcated set of data that would serve as the 'stuffing' for economic truths.

So, what would be an anthropological approach to the resource curse? Some excellent work has already been done. More recently, Reyna and Behrends (2008) have sought to provide an anthropological explanation for 'the crazy curse of oil'. They propose a programme for future research focused on the modes of domination characteristic of different oil states. Other studies have indicated equally fruitful avenues of exploration. For example, anthropologists could focus their ethnographic enquiries on the often difficult to access—and even more difficult to report—actions and interactions of both local and foreign politicians, technocrats, experts and advisors. What might be some of the obstacles that impede the travelling of models (Reyna 2007)? Simultaneously, however, we need to pay heightened attention to how this is not a matter of imposing foreign, Western discourses and models on a kind of pre-theoretical, local reality. Economic theory and measures are readily appropriated and imitated by those who foresee benefits and advantages from adopting their language. In addition, there are the specific kinds of relations between local populations and multinational corporations forged by the discourses and tokens of transparency that corporate social responsibility initiates (Rajak 2008). In short, the question of how local people experience resource exploitation and its repercussions is another fruitful field of ethnographic enquiry.

There are also the tangible material changes that accompany processes of resource exploitation. Transformations of the physical landscape include the obvious machineries used for the actual exploitation of resources, but also more tangential ones. These include the new institutions set up to govern the resources, their offices, desks, stationary, logos, and other material effects; a more general building boom; changing socio-economic relations among locals; and influx of international personnel. Such transformations inevitably impact the lives of local people, and anthropologists are in a perfect position to record how people integrate them in their existing itineraries.

However, I believe that rather than to document or explain the curse, anthropologists could do much more to *problematise* it. They could ask some pertinent questions about the currency that resource curse theories have in specific locales, and how local populations conceive of natural resource developments. What frameworks are deployed to make sense of these developments? On the one hand, there emerges what I would term a public understanding of economics where scholarly theory mixes with first-hand experiences via the familiar routes of street talk, gossip, media reports, and the like. How does the resource curse—a theory now deployed by international agents and locals alike—mark out a particular future for the countries in question, a future that is then acted upon (Behrends 2008; Weszkalnys 2008)? On the other hand, local narratives of resource developments are imbued with historical analogies and cultural perceptions quite unlike those, or overlooked by, the international advisors descending on local situations

and making recommendations for betterment. At least that is my impression from the Santomean context, and I suspect it would be true elsewhere.

Hopes and expectations regarding oil were seen with scepticism, partly because the promise of oil seemed to resemble that earlier promise of development given first by independence, then by democratization in the early 1990s, as well as the structural adjustments programmes, the IMF, UNDP and the World Bank, let alone all the other major projects—amongst them a Free Trade Zone and a deepwater sea port. Responses to oil are, therefore, not responses to oil *per se* but they draw on a long history of encounters with (unsuccessful) development projects, more generally. In my view, this confirms the urgent need for historically and culturally informed analyses of how local populations view the past, present and future consequences of extractive industries and the burgeoning efforts by others to govern these developments. In other words, as anthropologists we may be particularly skilled to see that the trouble with oil that people perceive did not start with oil.

REFERENCES

-
- Behrends, Andrea** 2008. Fighting for Oil When There Is No Oil Yet: The Darfur-Chad Border. *Focaal* 52: 39–56.
- Humphreys, Macartan, Jeffrey D. Sachs and Joseph E. Stiglitz** (eds) 2007. *Escaping the Resource Curse*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Krastev, Ivan** 2004. *Shifting Obsessions: Three Essays on the Politics of Anticorruption*. Budapest: CEU Press.
- Miyazaki, Hirokazu and Annelise Riles** 2005. Failure as an Endpoint. In A. Ong and S.J. Collier (eds), *Global Assemblages: Technology, Politics, and Ethics as Anthropological Problems*. Malden, MA, and Oxford: Blackwell.
- Pegg, Scott** 2005. Can Policy Intervention Beat the Resource Curse? Evidence from the Chad–Cameroon Pipeline Project. *African Affairs* 105 (418): 1–25.
- Rajak, Dinah** 2008. ‘Uplift and Empower’: The Market, The Gift and Corporate Social Responsibility on South Africa’s Platinum Belt. *Research in Economic Anthropology* 28: 297–324.
- Reyna, Stephen P.** 2007. The Travelling Model That Would Not Travel. *Social Analysis* 51(3): 78–102.
- Reyna, Stephen P. and Andrea Behrends** 2008. The Crazy Curse and Crude Domination: Toward an Anthropology of Oil. *Focaal* 52: 3–17.
- Soares de Oliveira, Ricardo** 2007. *Oil and Politics in the Gulf of Guinea*. London: Hurst & Co.
- Weszkalnys, Gisa** 2008. Hope and Oil: Expectations in São Tomé e Príncipe. *Review of African Political Economy* 35 (3): 473–482.
- Weszkalnys, Gisa** 2009. The Curse of Oil in the Gulf of Guinea: A View from São Tomé e Príncipe. *African Affairs* 108 (433): 679–689.

DR. GISA WESZKALNYS
LECTURER IN SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY
UNIVERSITY OF EXETER
G.S.Weszkalnys@exeter.ac.uk