

Extractive Economies and Conflicts in the Global South: Multi-Regional Perspectives on Rentier Politics

Kenneth Omeje. ed.

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Natural resources have presented scholars of the global south with a paradox. Oil, diamonds, gold and timber, to name but a few, characterize the economic geography of post-colonial countries throughout sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, Latin America and Asia. One might therefore expect that such resources would provide not only a reliable source of wealth, but a consequent foundation for social, political and economic development. Instead, as a growing body of literature has emphasized, their presence has contributed to continuing mass poverty, authoritarian political structures and violent conflict (see, for example, Paul Collier and Anke Hoefler, "Greed and Grievance in Civil War," *Oxford Economic Papers* 56, 2004: 563–95; Philippe Le Billon, "The Political Ecology of War: Natural Resources and Armed Conflicts," *Political Geography* 20.5, 2001: 561–84; Michael Lewin Ross, "Does Oil Hinder Democracy?" *World Politics* 53.3, 2001: 325–61).

In *Extractive Economies and Conflicts in the Global South: Multi-Regional Perspectives on Rentier Politics*, a variety of scholars from diverse academic backgrounds have provided a useful contribution to the continuing debate over why resource-rich countries are prone to so much instability.

What is unique about this work is its scope: thirteen chapters address the impact of natural resources through a focus on case studies drawn from several African, Middle Eastern and Latin American countries. This reflects the goal of the book's editor, Kenneth Omeje, to present readers with an analysis that will move beyond the study of oil and the so-called "rentier state" in the Middle East that has dominated academic attention since the publication of Hazem Beblawi and Giacomo Luciani's edited volume, *The Rentier State* (1987). To be sure, many of the general theoretical insights provided in that work, and those that followed it, are taken seriously by Omeje and his contributors. Profits amassed through the sale of natural resources—rents—have a determining influence in shaping state–society relations. With state survival virtually guaranteed by rent accumulation, populations lose the ability to influence the decision-making process, as taxation is not relied upon to sustain the state and its leadership. Instead, stability comes through continued reliance on rents, military and financial support from foreign powers dependent on the state's resources, and promises to provide for the basic material needs of the population (5, 36, 214–15). Where this book departs from the traditional model is in drawing from relatively recent work by Mick Moore that has questioned the rentier state's dominant role and its apparent ability to fend off challenges and maintain order ("Death without Taxes: Democracy, State Capacity and Aid Dependence in the Fourth World," *The Democratic Development State: Politics and Institutional Design*, ed. Mark Robinson and Gordon White, New York: Oxford University Press, 1998: 84–121; "Political Underdevelopment: What Causes 'Bad Governance'?" *Public Management Review* 1.3, 2001: 385–418; "Revenues, State Formation and the Quality of Governance in Developing Countries," *International Political Science Review* 25.3, 2004: 297–319). Though state capabilities are certainly enhanced by rents, the reliance on those rents in the place of taxation and other policies that encourage state legitimacy produces widespread societal grievances. Hence, rents serve as a primary cause of conflict once those grievances are mobilized by insurgent groups (37–38).

With such insights in mind, Omeje's introductory chapter makes the case for an alternative approach to studying rentier states: one which, while not neglecting the importance of the state, moves away from a state-centric focus and adopts an alter-

native that takes seriously the role of non-state actors. The model proposed is that of the “rentier space.” While important, and though its position might often be dominant, the state exists within a complex framework occupied by other equally relevant social forces: rebel groups, local non-governmental organizations, multinational corporations, foreign governments and development agencies (9–11). Each of these “contest and compete for accumulation within the rentier space” (10), and as such, their interests are often opposed (11). Thus, if underdevelopment in rentier states is to be understood, then these societies ought to be conceptualized as a space in which numerous competing actors interact with the state but also attempt to shape outcomes in ways that correspond to their overarching goals (12–13). This moves us beyond the trappings of a state-centric approach and hence allows for a fuller understanding of how natural resources, including but not limited to oil, impact upon social and political relations within the global south (5).

The argument is applied by the contributors in the analysis of numerous cases. Michael Watts’s chapter on Nigeria is the most impressive of these. Questions over the distribution of Nigeria’s vast oil resources in the Niger Delta have been at the heart of the violence that has plagued the country during the past decade (55). Since 2005, insurgent attacks by the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) targeting oil installations have led to major reductions in oil production that provides the Nigerian state with most of its revenue. State forces have sought to curb MEND as a result (66–70), yet Watts cautions against viewing the conflict as one that pits MEND against the state (61). Instead, in painstaking detail, he illustrates how the situation facing Nigeria is an inherently complicated one, involving numerous actors that compete, either directly or indirectly, to secure access to oil rents. As such, the responsibility for the violence is shared and exists as a product of the rentier space. State forces (often acting outside of government control) and MEND rebels obviously occupy a central role in the picture, but the more subtle impact of domestic and international oil companies is also of crucial importance, despite the fact that this is rarely acknowledged (60). For example, Nigeria’s constitution requires oil companies to distribute funds to the local communities in which they operate. Yet, rather than helping develop projects and services that could benefit communities, local chiefs have appropriated the aid and used it to maintain their dominance. As a consequence, frustrated youth lacking opportunities have been drawn to rebellion at the local level, expressed sometimes through attacks on chieftains and at other times through violent clashes over competition for employment offered by the oil companies (61).

In this way, a fuller and more accurate conception of the problems faced by rentier states in the global south is drawn. Watts’s focus on Nigeria is supplemented by other notable articles, such as those by John M. Kambia on Sierra Leone, Germain Tshibambe Ngoie and Omeje on the Congo, and Dauda Abubakar on the Persian Gulf states. For those interested in perspectives that advance our knowledge beyond simple state-centric frameworks, this volume serves as a welcome addition to the literature.

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