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# The real resource curse and the imperialism of development

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THE REAL RESOURCE CURSE  
AND THE IMPERIALISM OF DEVELOPMENT

• TIM DI MUZIO •

The idea that the scope of anthropology in the face of the new development economics be widened is a welcome one. In explaining what has been called ‘the resource curse’, Gisa Weszkalnys (in this issue) suggests that anthropologists must go beyond merely looking for the social details that might help economists account for why their theories often go awry in real social settings. In other words, the role of the anthropologist is not to provide social justifications for economic models gone wrong. Rather, Weszkalnys asks anthropologists concerned with studying communities with coveted and valuable world resources to approach their study with a broader gaze. Doing so, according to the author, would entail at least four things: 1) providing ethnographic research on the role played by local and international individuals and groups involved coordinating, negotiating and governing resource extraction, 2) to explore and document how the local community experiences resource exploitation, 3) to study the very real material transformations that accompany resource extraction, and 4) to problematize the idea of ‘the resource curse’ by considering the specificity of the local environment and how locals understand the relation between resources and development. In addition to these four roles anthropologists might play, Weszkalnys suggests that the notion of a resource curse and how local communities might respond to it be contextualized within a broader history of ‘development’ projects that may or may not have been successful. These are all indeed convincing and worthy

guidelines for conducting research in so-called 'resource curse' environments. But are there additional factors that anthropologists might consider?

I think so. First, a focus on unequal power relations should be at the forefront of any study. This would not only include an attempt to identify the social forces involved in coordinating, negotiating and governing the resource extraction process, but also how certain ideas about 'development' are implemented and become hegemonic. The dominant development paradigm is almost solely focused on economic indicators such as growth or income per capita. But as is well known, these indicators often do more to obscure our understanding of human development. They tell us nothing about the actual distribution of income or how growth is being generated. Here, Weszkalnys is right to suggest that one of anthropology's strong suits has been its 'scepticism regarding the assumptions at the heart of the development project.' So anthropologists would do well to study how powerful actors produce these indicators, why they use these indicators, and how far and in what ways alternative models and understandings of development might become silenced or marginalized in the face of more powerful social forces.

Second, anthropologists should be critically aware of the international dimensions of these power relations. Much of the literature on the resource curse places blame on the local political culture for poor social, economic and political outcomes. But while studying local political dynamics is important, the effects of colonialism, international norms and transnational firms are often downplayed. Where there are indications of a 'resource curse', anthropologists will have to learn to weigh the local and international dimensions of bad social and economic outcomes. This, of course, is not only a matter of empirical research but of historical and theoretical knowledge which brings me to my next point.

A third concern that Weszkalnys raises, but does not elaborate on is whether ethnographic research is the only method by which to understand the 'resource curse'. Being on the ground participating with local communities, conducting surveys and getting questionnaires filled out is certainly an important part of social scientific inquiry but this empirical research is not enough. It must be complemented with historical knowledge and a theoretical framework that is able to make sense of the power relations involved in producing certain outcomes and not others.

But there is a deeper issue here that goes straight to the heart of the development project writ large. Why is it that the concept of a 'resource curse' only applies to those countries that have been the victims of Western colonialism and neo-colonialism? Can we find one example of an industrialized country—the USA, France, or Japan for example—that was colonized by a non-Western country? Of course not. It is a lesson of modern history that those countries not tied to a colonial master avoided a 'resource curse' and industrialized.<sup>1</sup> And as we know today, the industrialized and industrializing countries of the world are heavily dependent on raw materials—particularly oil—to sustain their high energy intensive patterns of development. Why do we not say, then, that Britain or the United States or China is the victim of a 'resource curse'? And here I want to suggest that there is a latent imperialism in the use of the term 'resource curse'. Perhaps the Global South is the victim of the fossil fuel fed capitalism of the Global North.

At first glance this may seem like an absurd proposition given the euro-centricity and self-congratulations of the West often found in the resource curse literature in the social

sciences. But if we define the term ‘curse’ as ‘something that brings harm’ then it might make sense to apply the term universally. For example, what would it mean to say the United States, or any other ‘developed’ nation for that matter, is the victim of a resource curse? The transition from a largely commercial and agrarian republic to an industrialized capitalist economy was made possible by the discovery and exploitation of fossil fuels found within the United States. In the beginning of this transformation coal was the primary energy source but by the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, oil became the indispensable capitalized commodity that created a ‘developed’ United States. With the peak of US oil production in the early 1970s, the US is now a major importer of oil and in order to guarantee future supplies for the social reproduction of its market civilization has engaged in overt and covert imperial wars. This strategy of militarized energy security has cost the United States international prestige, contributed to a ballooning national debt and persistent trade deficits, borne witness to the largest military on the planet, destroyed local environments and caused considerably more harm and death to US citizens and peoples around the world. Its particular pattern of capitalist development is also one of the major contributors to global warming.

But given that all modern economies depend upon abundant, affordable and accessible fossil fuels, could we not say that the last three centuries of ‘progress’ and ‘development’ have been cursed by their discovery and use as a primary energy source. In other words, perhaps the real resource curse we should be talking about today is industrialized societies’ addiction to fossil fuels as non-renewable and polluting resources. This is so for at least two main reasons: global peak oil and global warming.

As even the traditionally conservative International Energy Agency (2008: 3) has recently noted in its flagship report, ‘global trends in energy supply and consumption are patently unsustainable—environmentally, economically, socially.’ Many now recognize that oil—not to mention other raw materials—will become increasingly scarce and expensive during the first half of this century. What happens to the ‘development project’ of the West and the hopes of industrializing countries such as China and India if oil reaches \$200 a barrel, if it reaches \$400 a barrel, or even \$600? Surely there will be chaos as even previous—and relatively minor—oil price spikes led to increasing food prices and riots and political discontent in many quarters of the globe. The point here is that the infrastructure for a post-carbon society on the scale needed to bring about a peaceful transformation has nowhere been put in place despite many community efforts to build sustainable local ecologies. So even if the Global South was to overcome its so-called resource curse and ‘modernize’ along the lines of the West, this pattern of high-energy intensive development would be impossible to sustain—even in this century. Should foreign exchange earnings really be spent to ‘modernize’ or ‘develop’ in the same way as the capitalist core countries have? Can we label something as ‘progress’ if it is not sustainable?

Moreover, centuries of development fueled by fossil fuels has led to a process whereby the planet is being warmed by greenhouse gases. As the UNDP stated in its flagship report, global warming is a scientific fact. Carbon fueled economic growth and the release of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere is the chief contributor to the rise in global temperatures. While some of these gases are naturally found in the atmosphere, humans have contributed massively to the warming of the planet primarily by burning fossil fuels

for industry and transport (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change 2007: 36). It is a known fact that rich nations and a global consuming class of roughly 1.7 billion people account for a large and disproportionate share of global emissions (Worldwatch Institute 2004; UNDP 2007). While there have been some international attempts at climate cooperation—Kyoto and now the non-binding Copenhagen Accord—leading scientists have emphasized that the commitments made so far are in no way adequate to confronting the challenges of global warming. What makes matters worse is that despite mounting popular awareness, world carbon dioxide emissions are projected to increase at least until 2030 and many believe beyond (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change 2007: 44).

World society is currently being locked into a fossil fuel dependent future that will have severe, if at times unpredictable, consequences for the biosphere. In sum, perhaps the real ‘resource curse’ is a pattern of capitalist high energy intensive social reproduction premised upon cheap and dirty fossil fuels. Anthropologists might do well to help stop this harm.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This point is emphasized in the masterful work of Leften Stavrianos (1981).

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