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Response to Watts

Christine Chung
Macalester College

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Response

Christine Chung

First, I would like to take the opportunity to thank Professor Michael Watts for, to put it simply, a great presentation. After first reading a sample of Dr. Watts' work in my Geography Senior Seminar, coincidentally with Professor Moseley, I did not expect I would find myself sitting next to him for the purpose—of all things—to critique his work at the 15th Macalester International Roundtable. Perhaps I should have paid more attention in class! Not only was I intimidated by this feat because of the great length of his essay (which I might add is rivaled only by his *cv*), but also because at that moment I knew very little about the subject at hand: *Oil, Development, and the Politics of the Bottom Billion*. And I will confess to you now, I still know very little. My purpose in this article is not to tell Professor Watts where he went wrong or where he was out of line because I believe that after studying this subject for about thirty years, he probably knows what he is talking about. What I hope to bring to the table are my own questions that arose from the essay and my own perspective, as a Macalester student, as a budding Geography major, and as someone born and raised in the Global South, the developing world.

It seems only appropriate to the theme of this year's Roundtable that at the beginning of the year, the United Nations Secretary-General, Ban Ki-Moon, announced (unofficially) that 2008 was the "Year of the Bottom Billion."¹ He stressed, and I reiterate here, the need to address the plight of the world's poorest, who have been left behind by global economic growth. Drawing on Paul Collier's recent book, *The Bottom Billion*, there are fifty-eight countries that are trapped in the vicious cycle of poverty, their economies characterized by a lack of growth (measured in the most basic sense by GDP per capita). In addition, they are becoming increasingly marginalized from the global economy.² The category of the "bottom billion" was not created overnight. Although countries can fall into at least one of the four traps described by Collier, the path of decline does not happen instantaneously. Have we not been standing aside and watching the slow deterioration of these countries, witnessing the repeated occurrence of coups and civil wars? Of course,

the plight of the bottom billion is much more complex than I have just described; but if the global community does not even respond on a timely basis to the slow onset of famine in Ethiopia or genocide in Sudan, then how does one expect it to do so for the countries lagging behind? *Have these poor countries been left out of the loop of globalization or have they instead been the product of globalization — the very process of global integration that is both a cause and effect of development?*

In his essay for the Roundtable, Professor Watts has attempted to explore “the dynamics of oil-states, and specifically the relations between oil, politics, and forms of rule,” or governmentality. To accomplish this, he critically examined three claims: (1) the “rebellion as organized crime” claim; (2) the “territoriality/materiality” claim of oil; and (3) the “predation-insurgency” claim. In all three, oil is in some way being vested with specific qualities or, as Watts likes to say, “Olympian” properties, which are used to shape the means to political, economic, or individual ends. I would not consider these three claims to be mutually exclusive (is anything ever in Geography?), nor would I consider them to be necessarily interdependent. Does the “lootability” of oil necessitate the occurrence of an insurgency, and does this insurgency then influence the type of political outcome, be it a coup or secession? Perhaps these ideas are impacting each other, but playing out at different scales of relations within what Watts calls the governable spaces of the “oil complex.” The oil complex is Watts’ attempt to “lay out something of the structure of the political economic DNA as it operates through a particular economy of violence in the Niger Delta.”

Watts provides a critique through the deconstruction of existing theories and arguments that have been put forth to rationalize why oil disrupts the “normal course” of development. Scholars like Collier, Hoeffler, Le Billon, Obi, Ross, and Klare are just a few of the contributors to this burgeoning field of oil-centered studies. Watts also attempts to account for why oil, and to a larger extent, natural resources, are linked to a heightened risk of conflict and instability. Collier attributes it to the natural-resource trap and the conflict trap.³ Le Billon theorizes “the level of dependence, conflictuality and lootability of [oil] can also increase the vulnerability of societies to, and the risk of armed conflict.”⁴ Ross summarizes five aspects of the resource-conflict relationship, three of which are relevant to oil: (1) natural resources increase

the likelihood of conflict, especially separatist movements; (2) lootable commodities lengthen the duration of existing conflict; and (3) there is no solid relationship between primary commodities (including oil) and the onset of civil war.⁵

Watts draws upon Collier's argument, applying the natural-resource trap and the civil-war trap within the context of Nigeria, a place he has extensively studied for more than two decades. Through deconstruction, Watts presents the oil complex as a means of explaining the nuanced relationship between oil and resource conflicts. This consists of all the actors involved in the oil economy, with oil at the center of the stage, interacting at multiple scales and placed within an overarching political economy whose power dynamics help to mediate the social relations of access and allocation. The oil complex is specific to each country; the actors may be similar across borders, but the socio-ecological web of interactions is a function of the politics inherent in that geography.

Connected to these interactions within the oil complex are struggles, including specifically livelihood struggles. Academic scholar Obi contends that the "contestations over oil in Nigeria operate at several complex and interrelated levels that revolve around its centrality to the country's political economy."⁶ At the nexus of this political economy are struggles for resource control and ownership, struggles for the recognition of ethnic minorities, and struggles for the sustenance of livelihoods, all of which are occurring simultaneously at the interface between global oil politics and national geo-strategic motives.

One of the first things that struck me in Watts' essay was the starting questions he poses to the reader, compelling me to critically question my own motives and challenge whatever preconceived notions of the subject at hand. I will pose these same questions to you now: *Is Nigeria cursed by oil or corruption (or corporate capitalism); by petroleum or politics (or ethnicity)?* After reading Professor Watts' essay, what do you think the answers are? Are there any clear answers?

First, we assume that Nigeria is cursed, but cursed for whom? Cursed by whom or by what? In what ways does this curse manifest itself? The resource-curse theory is based on the notion that economies dependent on natural resources (in this case, oil) are more likely to experience armed conflict and political instability.⁷ Furthermore, the

abundant-resource wars hypothesis posits that resource endowment influences the type of political economy and governance in a country.⁸ What this would mean in Nigeria is that the abundance of oil is linked to poor economic growth as well as poor governance, both of which are associated with a higher risk of conflict.⁹ Resource-cursed societies are characterized by slow economic growth, high poverty rates, endemic corruption, and authoritarian or militaristic governance.¹⁰ With 70% of the population living on less than \$1 per day and with \$600 billion in oil revenues since 1960 reported “missing,” one can say with confidence that Nigeria has definitely been struck by the resource curse, or what Watts calls, a “nightmare.”

Yet this line of analysis directly falls into the trap of commodity or resource determinism. In other words, to contend that oil has the power to spark conflict or disrupt societal governance is to argue that economics trumps sociopolitical factors. Watts carefully notes that oil reflects a “complex set of forces and assumes an often Olympian power in contemporary life...a perfect expression of contemporary capitalism’s most basic genetic material.” We must understand that the physical endowment of oil causes neither conflict nor dependence. Instead, oil dependency is rooted in a historical process of resource extraction and exploitation of the environment for humankind’s needs.¹¹ Remember that “resources are not; they become,”¹² and what a resource becomes is connected on the most basic level to human needs and desires. *If oil is not the agent of corruption, inequity and poverty in Nigeria, challenging resource-conflict theories, then we must ask ourselves what are the larger sociopolitical and economic processes hidden behind the slippery scapegoat of oil?*

We must remember that as politicized and fetishized oil may appear in our global capital economy, it is still a *natural* resource, the key word being “natural.” Oil is a part of the natural environment. The Olympian powers, the high economic value and far-reaching influence that oil has been vested with, are all products of the social construction of oil as a commodity. Nevertheless, oil is derived from the environment, which makes the struggles outlined in Watts’ argument part of a larger ecological crisis or environmental conflict.

Political ecologist Paul Robbins defines the environmental-conflict thesis as follows: increasing deprivation produced through resource

enclosure or appropriation by state authorities, private/corporate interests, or social elites will accelerate conflict between groups.¹³ How does this thesis inform the resource control debate in Nigeria? First, the environmental-conflict thesis is based on the premise that social systems are structured around division of labor and power. The hierarchy of power leads to differential resource access and responsibility, on the basis of class, gender, and ethnicity. Robbins argues that any analysis of environmental conflict should require a careful consideration of the following questions: who controls the resource, who is allowed to decide about it, and who is expected to do which tasks? I will take it a step further and add: *why does this group control the resource and how is ownership/control decided?*

This leads us to the second premise related to ownership: that property is a complex bundle of rights, dictating the rights to own, use, manage, control or derive income from use, and control capital value.¹⁴ Often these bundles are not apolitical. They are influenced by the historical experience of development. Furthermore, development tends to be based on certain preconceived notions that revolve around (again) class, gender, and race or ethnicity.¹⁵ In Nigeria, the oil lands in the Niger Delta could be considered to be the property of the ethnic communities that have lived there for centuries, through the traditional rite of inheritance. Land tenure and property relationships have historically been conducted largely at the village or community level, varying by ethnic group; for example, property title is not an absolute right in the Hausa ethnic group, but rather a traditional claim transferred through family lines.¹⁶ In this sense, the land should be seen rather as collective property or community property. However, even if the local ethnic groups own the land, it is the right of the state to control oil-based revenue allocation. *If property rights and growth and development are supposed to be based within the public sphere, then what makes it in the private interests and motives of those in power, say the state, to implement public policies to secure them and the associated benefits?* Privatization of rights has a tendency to lead to “resource conflicts, production losses, and increasing inequality.”¹⁷ Production in this sense does not amount solely to oil revenues, but also to the productivity of the land and labor, to the loss of diversification, and to the loss of livelihoods.

It becomes imperative to understand how each participant in the development process in Nigeria impacts the others through the modification and exploitation of the environment and the production of oil-based systems. Encouraged by the skyrocketing oil prices of the 1970s,

the Nigerian government invested its resources in the oil industry, sacrificing the potential to develop the manufacturing and agricultural sectors, such as peanuts and cocoa. This created the underlying basis for conflicts and struggles as the ecological systems were altered to enhance oil production, and the benefits were geared towards a specific group, the ruling elites.

The rise of civil society in Nigeria and the emergence of new social movements, in particular the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), point to a new form of political action and help to demonstrate how local movements and interactions can modify or hinder global political and economic forces. An illustration is the 30% shut-in of production in the Niger Delta having negative reverberations throughout the global oil economy, with the rise in gas prices being the most relevant to the consumer.

What do the rebel insurgencies reflect about the condition of the state in Nigeria and the human condition within this oil economy? Struggles exist to expose underlying power differentials and it is only through opposition that the status quo is revealed.¹⁸ The rise of the civil society is “welcomed” with immediate state repression. Now embracing a new form of political action and the power along with it, civil society thus challenges the status quo. The relations between the actors of the oil complex have unveiled a lack of strong national identity among the Nigerian people, especially in the Niger Delta. It also exposes the weak state capacity, the distrust by the rulers of their own military, and hidden behind all, the twin hands of capitalism and neo-liberalism. The power dynamics between the actors in the oil complex are deeply rooted in historical tensions between ethnic minorities, the state and ruling powers, and the oil companies.

Embedded in the social field of violence is the main actor, the rebel. In the last twenty years the Niger Delta has been plagued with a surge in violent activity, mainly on the part of numerous social movements and militant groups. For the local communities, which are under the dominant impression that these groups are standing up for their collective interests and taking back what is rightfully theirs (oil bunkering

is not considered stealing, for example), there is an almost positive perception of these subterranean groups. It is significant to note the changing behaviors, practices, and morals of rebel groups in response to interactions with other groups, shifts in the distribution of oil rights and revenue, and continued military repression by the state. Watts advises us not to be naïve about the moral character of the rebels and their associated grievances.

Likewise, I caution Watts and others to not assume the “standard script” bestowed upon rebels by scholars in the discourse of development, who view resource users as “monolithic.”¹⁹ This view does not account for political forms of exclusion and marginality on the basis of ethnicity, class, and gender. The fluidity of the actors within the oil complex is in response to the new or changing social and ecological categories and strategies, influenced by knowledge, context, and political process.²⁰ *In this light, I call for Watts to delve further into the moral economy of the rebel and the insurgent group, and the specific adaptations that they make under (changing) conditions of conflict. Where do we draw the line between social movement and insurgency? Is violence the only defining characteristic? Why should social movements have to resort to violent means to reach their individual or collective ends?*

Under the principle of allocation, the development of one place, population, or industry must occur at the expense of another. The natural resources of the world, including human beings, are limited in every respect, either by their mode of reproduction or regeneration, their source and supply, their ease of distribution, the governing political economic systems, or by the simple reality that something being used at a certain time and place is not available for use elsewhere. It then becomes a question of distribution and ownership: *who determines what resource gets used where, when, and how?*

Development is an act of translation; an act that is centered on the interactions between the subject and the power apparatus, and neither can exist without the other.²¹ Increasingly, the civil society in Nigeria has become more vocal and active (and even more violent in its means). These groups are shifting the power dynamics in their favor, but at the expense of disrupting the status quo of the state and maybe even the “natural course of development.” Watts fulfilled his intent to provide an account and possible explanation for the dynamics between oil and

politics in Nigeria. By doing so, he exposed the livelihood struggles of the people in the Niger Delta.

Where does this leave us now? First, Nigeria is no longer the number one producer of oil in Africa.²² Second, the violent attacks on the oil companies continue. In September 2008, for example, the MEND had declared war on the oil industry after a weeklong attack, and vowed to reduce Nigeria's oil exports to "zero."²³ Third, Nigeria is currently in the process of drafting a strategic plan for the national vision of transforming Nigeria into one of the twenty largest economies in the world by 2020, "able to consolidate its leadership role in Africa and establish itself as a significant player in the global economic and political arena."²⁴ The first two themes listed in the strategic plan are poverty alleviation and development issues, and secondly, revenue allocation. This definitely offers optimism for the country and its people, but before the state can even consider implementing this impressive plan, it must first address the plight of its own people and their struggles to reclaim their property (oil), reclaim their local autonomy, and reclaim their national identity.

Notes

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15. *Ibid.*
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