

Explorations | Exploraciones

Oil and Conflict in the Ecuadorian Amazon: An Exploration of Motives and Objectives

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Abstract

This exploration piece challenges the dominant reading of oil-related social conflicts through an environmental prism. Through a methodological intervention that classifies conflicts as ‘brown’ (concerning primarily the distribution and investment of economic rents) or ‘green’ (demanding ecological remediation, improved extraction practices, or cessation of oil extraction altogether), it analyses a database of oil related conflicts in the Northern Ecuadorian Amazon. The region is particularly suitable for such a study not only because oil extraction has a long history there but also because the resulting conflagration has been well-documented. Building on the finding that twenty-two of the thirty-six cases that could be classified along this dichotomous divide are “brown”, the article problematizes the extant scholarly literatures’ conceptualization and discusses the potential analytical benefits of recognizing that some movements might be motivated primarily by concerns that are not necessarily environmental. A more thorough recognition of the motives underpinning contentious action concerning extractive industries is also a prerequisite for understanding the policy influence of social mobilization. *Keywords:* conflict, hydrocarbons, extractivism, indigenous people, environmental justice.

Resumen: Petróleo y conflicto en el Amazonas ecuatoriano: Una exploración de motivos y objetivos

La presente exploración desafía la lectura dominante de los conflictos sociales relacionados con el petróleo a través de un prisma ambiental. Mediante una intervención metodológica que clasifica los conflictos como “marrón” (principalmente en relación con la distribución y la inversión de las rentas económicas) o “verde” (que exigen reparación ecológica, prácticas de extracción mejoradas o el cese de la extracción de petróleo en su totalidad), se analiza una base de datos de petróleo relacionada con los conflictos en el norte de la amazonia ecuatoriana. La región es particularmente adecuada para un estudio de este tipo, no solo porque la

extracción de petróleo tiene una larga historia, sino también porque la conflagración resultante está bien documentada. Sobre la base del hallazgo de que veintidós de los treinta y seis casos, que podrían clasificarse a lo largo de esta división dicotómica, son “marrones”, el artículo problematiza la conceptualización de la literatura académica existentes y discute los posibles beneficios analíticos de reconocer que algunos movimientos pueden estar motivados principalmente por preocupaciones que no son necesariamente ambientales. Un reconocimiento más profundo de los motivos que sustentan la acción contenciosa sobre las industrias extractivas también es un requisito previo para comprender la influencia política de la movilización social. *Palabras clave:* conflicto, hidrocarburos, extractivismo, indígenas, justicia medioambiental.

Introduction

Extractive activities are globally entangled with a number of conflicts that have come to be seen primarily as *environmental* conflicts, analysed through such conceptual frames as “ecological distribution conflicts” and “environmental justice movements” (Martínez-Alier et al., 2016; Nixon, 2011). Consequently, owing also to the considerable and otherwise laudable presence of an ethic of “activist scholarship” within these prevailing approaches, the literature has often highlighted certain aspects of societal responses to oil in a way that gives an impression of them as being “against” oil extraction, an assertion that is not empirically tested. Furthermore, much of this literature has been built around case studies. This has resulted in what can be seen as a sequential approach to analysing responses to oil extraction, with researchers either conducting longitudinal investigation of a particular case or documenting the emergence of the latest one. Despite recent attempts to create larger data sets concerning environmental conflicts (e.g. Greyl et al., 2013), our understanding of them is shaped and constrained by the analytical choices made in these studies. This exploration piece suggests ways of overcoming these shortcomings illustrated through an analysis of a novel database of such conflicts. To be clear, the database collects cases of contentious action (such as strikes or roadblocks) that we see as manifestations of conflict. Thus, contentious actions imply conflict, but conflict does not necessarily express itself solely through contentious action. In other words, the absence of contentious action does not imply the absence of (latent) conflict. In line with the praxis in the environmental conflict literature, we are examining evidence generated from the analysis of contentious action and generalizing our findings to conflict.

The database in question focuses on the northern Ecuadorian Amazon, an emblematic area that has attracted much scholarly attention and where hydrocarbon extraction coincides with outstanding natural values, indigenous people and long-lasting social movements (e.g. Martínez-Alier, 2011; Pappalardo, De Marchi & Ferrarese, 2013; Sawyer, 2004; Rival, 2002). Departing from the common practice where social mobilization and conflict surrounding oil extraction is treated with an *a priori* designation of an *environmental* conflict, our analysis of the data pays attention to the underlying motivations of social actors engaging

in contentious action. Rather than reducing them to instances of anti-oil activism, we focus on their specific motivations to characterize them as “green”, “brown”, or “mixed”. The communities in question have made different demands, some choosing to ask for more jobs while others demanded the total and complete abolition of the oil sector in their territories (or in the whole of Ecuador!) This paper disentangles the motivations observed in such conflicts with a view to creating a more systematic and clearer understanding of contentious action surrounding oil in the Ecuadorian Amazon. Building on these findings, this piece aims to create a debate around the methodological and ontological assumptions that dominate in the study of conflicts surrounding extractive processes.

While we are not aware of other studies taking on this issue in the oil sector of Ecuador, Arellano-Yanguas found similar results when examining conflict concerning mining in Peru (2011). In fact, most of the conflicts in the mining sector in the period 2005-2008, based on data from the Defensoría del Pueblo, had to do with the allocation of rents allotted to local government, and conflicts increased with the increased decentralization of royalties. In a related vein, reluctant support for or acquiescence to extractive industries, which can be puzzling given the extensive and generally well-known socio-environmental liabilities they have engendered, have also received scant attention in studies that found that they are the result of skewed power structures or missing development alternatives (Gaventa, 1982; Jerolmack & Walker, 2018; Arsel, Pellegrini, & Mena, 2019; Adaman, Arsel & Akbulut, 2018).

Oil extraction and development in the Ecuadorian Amazon

Since the start of exploration in the north of the Amazon in the 1920s, oil has held a transformative potential in Ecuadorian socioeconomic imaginary. A breakthrough was the discovery in the Amazon of the first productive well in Lago Agrio in 1967, a town whose official name – Nueva Loja – has been superseded by a popular name that is a translation of Texaco’s base in the United States, Sour Lake, Texas. Five years later, the production of oil began with a great spectacle that brought together the country’s key centres of power: a bishop blessed the first barrel as the military dictator Guillermo Rodríguez Lara initiated the flow of oil. Forging oil’s evident image as a central asset, the first barrel of production was transported through Quito on a tank and deposited into the temple of heroes at a military academy. A genuine sense of hope and expectation marked this episode, which, despite repeated setbacks and disappointments, the country has refused to completely abandon to this date (cf. Pellegrini, 2018). Thus, while the “petroleum period” ended in the 1980s (with the decline of prices) (Falconí-Benítez, 2001; Sawyer, 2004, 11), the central role of this resource in Ecuadorian politics has not been toppled.

The ensuing years of socio-economic crises might have dampened the country’s enthusiasm for oil-led development, but this has proved to be temporary. In fact, the economic hardship that characterized this era, marked by neoliberal

austerity, has itself fueled a backlash that culminated in the “Pink Tide” that carried President Rafael Correa and the “extractive imperative” that defined his rule (Arsel, Hogenboom & Pellegrini, 2016). That the early 2000s saw a spike in commodity prices that echoed the 1970s has certainly played a role in oil’s return to primacy (and the parallel rise of mining as well). In addition to the especially aggressive push by the Correa administration to “nationalize” the extractive sector (which in effect meant that the state renegotiated contracts that gave more authority over and greater share of revenues from resources), the main difference between these two waves can be seen in the social-environmental promises made in the latter. This was partially a response to the already existing grievances corresponding to past environmental liabilities and partially an attempt to stymie potential resistance, especially by Ecuador’s dynamic environmental activist sector (which eventually found itself criminalized and harassed) (Becker, 2013). After several years of intense activity and expectations, oil’s role has once again receded somewhat in the wake of diminished oil prices and the replacement of President Correa with President Lenin Moreno, who is far less of a firebrand than his predecessor.

At the level of national governance, much of the political debate has focused not on whether the “resource curse” prevalent in the country can be overcome but on *how*. The stark differences between different types of administrations highlighted above correspond to shifting perceptions on this question, which, however, is not the focus of this paper. Neither does this paper focus on national-level environmental mobilization. For example, the paper does not engage with the debate surrounding the Yasuni-ITT initiative and other similar macro processes (see, e.g., Arsel, 2012). Rather it focuses on conflicts emerging from communities at the frontline of oil extraction. Over the years, indigenous and *colono* communities have challenged the presence of extractive processes in their territories in a variety of ways. At times, some of them have tried to reason with the operators, choosing to pursue dialogue and negotiation. Other times, some have taken direct action, such as blocking roads and oil installations (Fontaine, 2007). In arguably the best known and most sustained form of waging conflict, activists have pursued a legal route, seeking to hold Texaco-Chevron accountable for the damages its operations wrought on local ecosystems and public health alike (Kimerling, 2013), which led to the remarkable but so far unenforced decision in an Ecuadorian court that ordered the company to pay US\$9.5 billion in compensation (Martínez-Alier, 2011).

Since oil exploration continues to be the major economic activity in the *Oriente*, social mobilization and conflict remain a prominent, if episodic, presence in its political life. What is important to note, however, and what this paper seeks to illuminate, is that given the enduring power of oil-related expectations and the lack of other channels through which societal demands can be expressed, the array of conflicts in the region cannot be reduced to anti-extractivism.

Conflict and oil operations

This article focuses on conflict associated with hydrocarbon extraction, a part of the broader phenomenon of social mobilization (cf. Giugni, 2007, 59). Conflict is often defined by contrasting it with the alternative situation of dialogue (Bavinck, 2014). In fact, such a dichotomous definition can be misleading. Taking a dynamic stance, and looking at the evolution of relations over time, conflict is often a premise for dialogue (Orta-Martínez, Pellegrini, & Arsel, 2018). For example, in several cases of contentious action in our study area, be it a road block or the occupation of an oil installation, the objective of these movements was to either initiate meaningful dialogue with high-ranking state authorities, or to achieve the effective implementation of existing agreements that had been reached through previous rounds of dialogue. Thus, the action was considered a necessary precondition to engage otherwise indifferent state authorities. Accordingly, we understand contentious action as a transitory manifestation of conflict that can generate the conditions for dialogue and overcome conflict.

Direct experience through fieldwork in the area, undertaken intermittently in the period 2011-2018, led the authors to recognize that motivations underpinning contentious actions vary from case to case and that a comprehensive database would be necessary to examine the issue systematically. The purposefully built database includes 46 cases of contentious action taking place from the year 2000 to the first half of 2018. The method to identify and include cases in the database was based on national and local mass media that have web-based interfaces and could be searched online. The information collected was complemented by first-hand knowledge of contentious action that took place during fieldwork or that involved organizations or individuals related to the research team.¹

In terms of the actors engaging in various forms of contentious action, they include local unions, environmentalists, spontaneous popular movements with or without the support of local elected authorities, indigenous people, and settlers' organizations. The actors involved are multiple and defy clear-cut characterizations since many categories are transversal with respect to one another. Additionally, over time some mobilizations have taken different trajectories expanding or shrinking in terms of popular involvement and geographical coverage.

In terms of uncovering the motives underpinning the various forms of contentious action, we proceed retroductively by focusing on the objectives and demands put forward during the mobilization. From these objectives and demands, we classified the motives underpinning the mobilization in three categories: "green", "brown" and "mixed". The green motives are those whose objectives refer to environmental claims, broadly understood, and would either require substantial changes in the way oil extraction is taking place (for example, would require significant investment in the maintenance and replacement of pipelines to reduce the risk of oil spills), or would require existing extraction to be decreased, limited in terms of expansion perspectives, excluded from certain

geographical areas, or stopped altogether. The cases characterized as green include requests to perform environmental remediation of contaminated soil, decrease pollution emissions (including reducing noise), respect territorial rights of indigenous people, or halt oil exploration in protected areas. Green objectives challenge the “business as usual” model of oil companies and might be incompatible with their continued operation and expansion. The brown motives involve the redistribution of rents that are generated through extractive operations. The objectives of cases that we classified as brown include increased employment of the local workforce by the oil company or the construction of infrastructure, e.g. improved roads and bridges. Brown objectives can coexist with the continuing operation and expansion of the oil industry. In fact, some of the brown objectives, such as the local labour quota and employment opportunities provided by oil companies, implicitly rest on the assumption that the extraction of hydrocarbons will continue and may even expand. We used the categorization mixed objectives for mobilizations where several demands, referring to green and brown objectives, coincide. Examples of these cases include mobilizations whose objectives were to obtain improvements in environmental practices and, at the same time, increase local employment in the oil sector. Additionally, there are a few cases in our database where the motives are not explicit or they do not lend themselves to this classification, such as protests demanding the release of imprisoned activists.

The cases in the database include various forms of contentious action ranging from road blocks to lawsuits. An example of a contentious action classified as green is a lawsuit that was filed in 2005 by members of the Pacayacu community against the state-owned company PetroEcuador. The demands of the plaintiffs – also underscored by street protests – were associated with environmental remediation of contaminated areas and socio-economic compensation.² One example of a brown action was the strike that included road blocks and the suspension of oil operations in the town of Dayuma in 2007. In this case the demand of the movement was the implementation of a prior agreement to direct investments in road infrastructure and bridge building to the oil producing area.³

Clearly, the classification into green, brown and mixed motives and mobilizations is to be understood as an analytically-motivated shorthand that is functional to a descriptive analysis of the universe of mobilizations, but does not imply that the mobilizations and all the individuals engaging in them can simplistically be reduced to uniform and single motives. Moreover, some degree of arbitrariness is necessary to classify cases that would otherwise fall into a grey area. As a consequence of these caveats, the classification proposed here and its implementation to the cases in our database should be taken as indicative.

Overall, according to our classification criteria, the database includes 22 cases of brown action, 14 cases of green action, 1 mixed and 9 unclear cases. In other words, there is a clear preponderance of contentious action motivated by claims over the redistribution of extraction rents if compared to environmentally motivated mobilization.

Brown motives and “environmental” conflict

Looking at almost 20 years of oil-related conflicts in the Orellana and Sucumbios provinces of Ecuador, we show that most episodes were associated with brown motives. That is, mobilization was motivated by requests to redistribute rents, directly via cash disbursements or indirectly via the creation of employment opportunities or physical infrastructures. This finding runs counter to conventional wisdom for two separate reasons.

First, much of the political ecology literature that has focused on such cases of conflicts have highlighted the salience of ecological sustainability as a trigger for mobilization. It is for this reason that contentious action such as those covered in our database are often referred to as “ecological distribution conflicts” and part of the global “environmental justice movement” (Martínez-Alier et al., 2016). Second, a class-based reading of “brown” cases challenges dominant readings of the connection between identity and environmentalism (Arsel & Dasgupta, 2015). More specifically, the dominant approach in the literature, despite oft-repeated disavowals of the trope of the “noble savage”, has been reluctant to let go of the (often unspoken) expectation that indigenous and other local communities remain as the last barrier between nature and a rapacious global capital that can only perceive the Amazon through the lens of a profit motive, reducing all wealth to cash value. That the majority of cases demand different economic outcomes rather than the complete cessation of extractive processes therefore calls for questioning the putative “green” credentials of local communities, indigenous or otherwise.

The proposed methodology here can deliver another analytical gain, one that concerns mobilization effectiveness (cf. Silva, 2017). In fact, an in-depth exploration of the motives underpinning and objectives of social mobilization is a necessary condition when exploring the role played by social movements in shaping public policies. Furthermore, assuming that the centres of power targeted by activists are able to deliver certain demands more readily than others, it might be possible to connect the feasibility of mobilization outcomes with their corresponding demands. For instance, the Ecuadorian state might be more willing to respond positively to a movement that demands a guarantee that a percentage of jobs at an oil installation should be reserved for local residents rather than one that calls for the abandonment of oil extraction. There are indications that this was indeed the case with the Amazon Law that was passed by the Ecuadorian assembly in May 2018. Assuming that movements exercise a degree of reflexivity about their demands, it would then be possible to apprehend the “greenness” or “brownness” of movements not as inherent qualities but as strategic choices. Moreover, prevalence of brown cases should not lead to the facile conclusion that the local population and social organizations at large are satisfied with the impact of the oil industry. In fact, the opposite seems to be the case: many people are cognizant of the negative impacts and consider the oil industry responsible for a deterioration of livelihoods at the family, community and

regional level but are constrained in their choices and in their developmental perspectives (Arsel, Pellegrini, & Mena, 2019). As a consequence, people might not engage in contentious action but experience their discontent in a state of latent conflict. Alternatively, engaging in brown conflict can be seen as the only viable strategy to improve one's prospect once development alternatives are (believed to be) out of reach.

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Notes

1. The database was constructed using web-based search engines (Google, DuckDuckGo), academic search engines (Google Scholar), searches through the global atlas of environmental justice movements (EJAtlas), and searches through national and local news portals (*El Comercio*, *El Telégrafo*, *La Hora*, *Periódico Espectador Amazónico*, *Periódico Independiente*, *Radio Sucumbíos*). Search terms included combinations of the words conflict (conflict), roadblock (bloqueo), strike (paro) with the names of the two provinces (Orellana and Sucumbíos) and terms related to the oil sector (petróleo, petrolera). Recollections of conflicts encountered during field work by team members was also used to complement the information.
2. See “Caso Pacayacu,” 2016; “Pacayacu y la mano sucia de Petroamazonas,” 2017.
3. See Aguirre, 2008; “Dayuma Ecuador”, 2012.

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