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The biopolitical war for life: Extractivism and the Ugandan oil state



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ABSTRACT

In Uganda, “oil for development” is being championed as a key to a “better life”. It is being promoted alongside a seemingly ever-growing discourse of state security aimed at promoting a particular biopolitical life and eliminating, both physically and politically, societal groups deemed incompatible with this vision, including human rights groups and particular Congolese nationals. Through political de-subjectification – that is, the reduction of the political subject into a political object – incompatible groups populating the natural resource-rich sections of Uganda have been identified. They are under constant threat of being removed, under the pretext of the betterment of a society based on resource development, at any given time.

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1. Introduction: Uganda, biopolitics and security

Since the discovery of commercially viable oil and gas deposits in the Albertine Graben, the Republic of Uganda has championed “oil for development”, alongside a discourse of state security. This discourse and the treatment of particular groups, such as human rights activists and Congolese nationals, however, have been biopolitically motivated. In this paper, I show how the Ugandan state administers the population by shaping social expectations, promoting Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), and making promises of peace and security. The analysis that follows is informed by, and traverses debates on, resource rents,¹ environment scarcity² and civil violence,³ and illustrates how, in the case of Uganda, the “problem of population” becomes relevant to resource governance. Here, the state’s focus on the governance of a population as one “biological corpus” (after Lemke, 2011) manifests as violence throughout. As Dillon (2008) has shown, through selective population control, biopolitics is paradoxically violent in that a very particular life is pursued in an attempt to “make life live”. Taking stock of experiences shared and testimonials provided by human

rights activists,⁴ I conclude by questioning Agamben’s (1998) position, and what the furthering of biopolitics can possibly uncover about resource governance in Uganda, and extractivism more broadly. This is accomplished through a critical analysis of the violence which occurs with impunity across resource-rich regions.

In this paper, I use the term “extractivism” broadly but focus on the characteristics of oil and gas production. However, as Uganda is yet to produce oil commercially, I also depend on the breadth of this term to highlight and identify the mechanisms enacted throughout processes associated with extraction, both upstream and downstream, and their discursive qualities.⁵ The paper offers insight into a “new” extractive state and its focused approach on the development of its oil resources. It includes a critical analysis of this focus, highlighting the potentiality of developmental benefits from proposed oil production but at the same time, questions how it impacts the livelihoods of the country’s citizens.

Through the discourse of development and security, extractivism takes life as its referent object. This focus on life makes extractivism, as a problematic that is, inherently biopolitical (See: Dillon, 2008; Dillon and Lobo-Guerrero, 2008).

⁴ Of which I gathered during my dual position as a Research Intern for the East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Project and a graduate student at York University. The research has been presented in a report produced for the Ugandan NGO as part of the East and Horn of African Human Rights Defenders Project (2012). In the period May–August 2012, I conducted more than 20 interviews with human rights defenders, including journalists, NGO officers, and human rights activists engaged mainly in the monitoring of the oil and gas industry in Uganda. Although each stakeholder was not interviewed, the experiences and testimonies of civil society actors looking to play an important role in equitable resource extraction cannot be under-analyzed or overstated. What follows is an attempt to understand how these testimonies and experiences contribute and relate to the discourses permeating the Ugandan oil and gas industry.

⁵ The term has taken on a discussion of its own. For interesting debates around the breadth and limits of extractivism see among many others: Browder (1992), and Gudynas (2010).

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E-mail addresses: devin.holterman@gmail.com, holterman.devin@gmail.com¹ How, paradoxically, countries rich in natural resources do not necessarily maintain increased levels of development (see Sachs and Warner, 1995).² A number of variations of scarcity-induced theses have been put forth by Thomas Homer-Dixon (1999), Homer-Dixon and Blitt (1998) and others (Baechler, 1998; Baechler et al., 2002; Kaplan, 1994). These theories link environmental and resource scarcity, including demand-induced scarcity caused by population and/or consumptive growth; supply-induced scarcity caused by the depletion/degradation of resources; and structural scarcity affected by the inequitable distribution of said resources.³ An understanding of violent conflict inflicted for the sole purpose of procuring and/or securing valuable natural resources.

When a biopolitical development “lens” is applied, populations are sub-divided in what often amounts to a violent, warlike endeavor, in which particular groups are identified and ultimately terminated politically and/or physically. Within the discursive spirals of extractivism lies a focus on life potentially enhanced by the development of natural resources, this violent prerogative notwithstanding.

Foucault (1997) recognized and asserted a particular transformation in the political right in the nineteenth century. The political sovereign’s right over life or “right of the sword” had mutated into a new entity, inscribed with the power to make live and let die. This transformation came on the heels of the arrival of disciplinary techniques of power in the seventeenth century, the aim of which was to supervise the individual body viewed as a complex machine (Lemke, 2011). These disciplinary techniques varied from the traditional forms of domination, such as slavery or serfdom, through to encouraging increased economic productivity of the individual’s very body while simultaneously ensuring that its forces were weakened to allow for complete political subjugation (Lemke, 2011). After the emergence of disciplinary techniques of power which focused on the individual body, Foucault (1997) traced the appearance of a new power. It does not focus on the individual body; instead, it focuses generally on man-as-species.

Sovereign power, therefore, is subordinated to a biopower that looks to manage life (Lemke, 2011). Foucault (1997) argued that the relationship between sovereign power and biopower is possible due to its normalizing qualities – namely, that the “technologies of discipline” and “technologies of regulation” succeeded in articulating the spaces between the body and the population as one. For Foucault, this political transformation is just that: a transformation, not a complete separation from the sovereign tradition or a supplement to traditional political norms. Rather, biopolitics “reformulates concepts of political sovereignty and subjugates them to new forms of political knowledge” (Lemke, 2011, p. 33). The population becomes the new focus within the management of life (Foucault, 1997); the administration of life (Roberts, 2010) is vital in this process. As Campbell (2005) shows, killing for the collective survival of the population is “justified by the necessity of preserving life” (p. 135). “Unfit” life, which, in the case of Uganda’s extractive economy, includes, in the eyes of the regime, particular Congolese nationals and human rights activists, therefore, is targeted using various forms of violence and is “justifiably” removed.

The sub-division of the population in resource regions is where, I argue, we must pause and consider Agamben’s (1998) conception of “bare life” and the “state of exception”. His theory is situated within the central binary relationship of politics as an understanding between bare life, known as *zoē*, and political existence, known as *bíos*, or more simply: the variance between natural being and the legal existence of that being (Lemke, 2011). Central to Agamben’s theory is a figure known as *homo sacer*, who occupies a space in which s/he can be killed with impunity due to its banishment from the politico-legal community and stripping of all political ability. From a political subject to a political object, *homo sacer* is “reduced to the status of his physical existence” (Lemke, 2011, pp. 54–55), or in Agamben’s (1998) own words, is a life that can be killed but not sacrificed.⁶

⁶ Key to Agamben’s thesis is an argument built upon a logical connection between sovereignty and biopolitics, unlike Foucault who painlessly pointed to the transformative nature of biopolitics and the ultimate separation from sovereignty (Lemke, 2011). Indeed there remain numerous points of contention between both Foucault and Agamben, the role of sovereignty in biopolitics being key. The sovereignty debate is unfortunately out of the scope of this paper; however the definition of life comes to represent a critical avenue in both claims and is particularly important in the following argument (Dauphinee and Masters, 2005).

Indeed, much criticism has been lodged at Agamben’s theories. Two points are of particular importance to this paper.⁷ The first is that bare life appears to lack distinction. Agamben’s construction of the camp as a single border or a line between bare life and political existence avoids the possibility of “gradations and valuations” within bare life itself (Lemke, 2011, p. 59). It would appear that bare life exists as simply one type of life. It cannot be qualified as higher or lower, better or worse; it is just simply bare (Lemke, 2011). Bare life appears to have the same effect on all human life regardless of gender and/or sexuality (Ek, 2006; Pratt, 2005).

The second criticism important to this analysis is Agamben’s avoidance of the relationship between the state of exception, bare life and colonialism. Scholarship points to how Agamben’s original thesis is not considered outside of the political environment of Western politics and therefore, the mentioning of colonialism is trivial. Furthermore, this avoidance also excludes the critical interventions of colonized peoples themselves (Bignall and Svirsky, 2012). That said, a number of scholarly works have indeed taken Agamben’s theorization and applied it to colonialism and colonial legacies.⁸ One such volume goes as far to conclude that the “Agamben effect” allows particular reflection into “the difficult relations between legal and political bodies and their subjects, revealing how these bodies are shaped by hierarchical selections that reify two interconnected spheres of existence, “*zoē* and *bíos*” (Bignall and Svirsky, 2012, p. 6). As will be explained, the “Agamben effect” has particular relevancy to the case of Uganda.

Despite this criticism, Agamben’s (2005) *State of Exception* finds particular relevancy when analyzing elements of the “war on terror”. The discursive rise of the “global civil war” and the “war on terror” has led Agamben to argue that the state of exception is increasingly seen as a paradigm of modern politics, particularly with reference to war-time measures taken by governments to the point where, in the modern political state, it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish between peace and war, and foreign and civil war (Agamben, 2005). Within this paradigm of modern politics, the “emergency exception”, namely, situations in which bare life which was at once on the sideline is harnessed, ultimately becomes the norm (Agamben, 2005). However, Agamben’s (1998) notion of bare life represents a reality in which a questioning of life remains. Dauphinee and Masters (2005, p. xiii) identify a rupture in the realm of control which biopower enlists over the human. Bare life questions the very definition of *human*: how can something that is not living be killed? The authors argue that “It is this process of ‘desubjectification’ – construction of life as (potentially) bare life – that makes it necessary to read Foucault and Agamben simultaneously”.

Biopower manifests in particular ways across resource-rich regions due to its delicate connection to security and in the case of Uganda, the “War on Terror”. According to Agamben (2005), the discourse of security continues to blur the existence of the state of exception, as security becomes the “normal” technique of government. I argue that the biopolitics underpinning the governance of the country’s resource-rich region, and the bare life that comes to populate it, removes the barriers of the dominant discourse presented in critical analysis of resource rents, territory and the environment. It instead, much like the war on terror, takes analysis “through the sites that are not explored – the sites where human bodies succumb to technologies of death and are erased” (Dauphinee and Masters, 2005, pp. xiii–xiv). The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to examine these “sites”. Specifically, it asks the question: What are the implications of a resource regime which

⁷ For a more detailed review of the criticisms of Agamben’s work see, among others: Ek (2006).

⁸ There are a growing number of examples of such work including: Kearns (2007) and Svirsky and Bignall (2012).

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