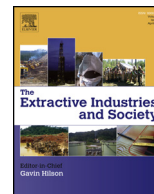




Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

The Extractive Industries and Society

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/exis



Review article

Geography and resource nationalism: A critical review and reframing

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 4 December 2015
Received in revised form 9 February 2016
Accepted 11 February 2016
Available online xxx

Keywords:

Resource nationalism
State
Geography
Political ecology

ABSTRACT

Used to describe state-led efforts to secure greater benefits from a country's resource stocks, 'resource nationalism' is an emerging scholarly concern. Yet writing on this topic has largely centred on work from the fields of international relations, political science and business which has been quick to warn of its limitations whilst simultaneously offering endorsements of the extant neoliberal world order that continues to dominate resource extraction globally. It is shown in this paper how a more critical framework for analysing resource nationalism can be achieved by drawing upon the insights from geography. In particular, geography's treatment of political economy/ecology, environmental justice and the politics of space can offer insights into the politico-spatial ordering of resource nationalism in three ways. First, resource nationalism should not be seen as anathema to the imperatives of private-led extraction but rather as something more hybrid. Second, It shows in a world of ever-expanding resource frontiers, 'national' borders of extraction are more fluid than those currently presented by mainstream literature. Finally, it argues that the 'one nation' discourse of resource nationalism is misguided as it fails to factor in matters of justice that operate at different scales.

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1. Introduction

Despite the recent reiteration that the control of extractive resources 'lies at the core of modern economic and social development' (Bebbington, 2014, p. 86), it also operates as something 'imagined' rather than just a material reality. One key mode of governance through which this dualism is highlighted is through the discourse and policies of a (re-) emergent 'resource nationalism'. Indeed, an increasing number of contemporary examples abound where the politics of natural resources is articulated in a shifting language of control, national identity, of 'reshoring' offshored resources and the self-determination of pathways to development. All of these are linked, in one way or

another, by an increasing trend that the state, as a unit of analysis, is 'gaining primacy in the analysis of resource geographies' (Bridge, 2014a, p. 118). 'Resource nationalism' is one such overt manifestation of this state-resource relation.

Resource nationalism is a term used loosely to describe the tendency for (nation) states to assert economic and political control over natural resources found within its sovereign territory. From this standpoint, much erstwhile understanding rests upon a territorial conceptualisation of the ways in which political power is exercised in controlling the economic distribution of rents derived from natural resource sectors. Yet thinking on resource nationalism has been largely centred on work from the fields of international relations, political science and business which has been quick to warn of its limitations. Much of this work is inspired by the seminal call to 'bring the state back in' to studies of political issue formation (Evans et al., 1985). However, it has largely failed to

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.exis.2016.02.006>

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take seriously the changing political geography of the resources being addressed, in particular the fact that new frontiers of extraction are emerging in ever more extreme spaces. It is argued in this paper that a more useful framework for analysing resource nationalism needs to draw upon geography's treatment of political economy/ecology and the politics of space. This centers resource nationalism around a more complex understanding of the politico-spatial ordering of extractive resources.

In Section 2, current understanding of 'resource nationalism' is evaluated, in particular noting the sheer variety of usages and strategies. Here, geography's theorisation of 'hybrid neoliberalisms' (McCarthy, 2005) is drawn upon as an initial entry point into a more nuanced understanding of resource nationalism in order to conceptualise the continuum between state and market that defines its policy. In particular, it shows how particular geographies of resource nationalism are represented as more or less 'threatening' to global trade and investment depending on old stereotypes of inefficiency and corruption in the global south.

Following this, Section 3 shows the how the contemporary modalities of resource nationalism(s) can be more critically analysed by invoking the relationship between resource politics and space (see Elden, 2013a,b; Bridge, 2013). This is a pressing need both in the context of the proliferating emergence of new frontiers of resource extraction through which claims to national resources are made and at a time when humanity's role as a geomorphological 'shaper' is under question.¹ For example, it questions how useful traditionally rigid assumptions made about nationally bordered geographies are in the context of a world where resource frontiers are pushed further afield, offshore and out of sight either underground or over the horizon. In this theoretical critique of resource nationalism, the ways in which offshore resources 'out there' become 'landed' both metaphorically (through a discourse of, for example, 'reshoring') and substantively (through the construction of offshore oil, gas platforms and so forth) profoundly matter. The argument that resources are connected in a 'point to point' fashion through capital which 'spans the globe' but does not 'cover it' (Ferguson, 2006, p. 14), tends to reduce the space *in-between* (including seas, oceans and coasts) to something abstract and 'without dimension' (Steinberg, 2013, p. 163). It also eschews engagement with the space *down below*, or a third dimension which defines the significance of thinking about resource politics in terms of volume, rather than area (Elden, 2013b; Bridge, 2013).

Across resource rich states, the discourse of the 'nation' is invoked to create geographies where the imaginaries of resources intersect with notions of rights, identity and citizenship. Cumulatively, these raise several questions of justice and suggest future avenues of enquiry surrounding the coupling of 'resources' and 'nationalism'. These are highlighted in Section 4.

2. Resource nationalism: a 'problem' for neoliberalism?

Whilst the contemporary re-emergence of the state in resource geographies has been pursued in a critical manner at a broad level (Bridge 2014a), there has been a tendency for more specific attention forwarded to resource nationalism to be conducted through narrowly defined, pro-market scholarship. These discursive and substantive engagements conceptually and variously reduce resource nationalism to a language of energy security and economic wellbeing and are read in a timeworn framework of geopolitics and international relations (e.g. Andreasson 2015; Bremmer and Johnston, 2009; Stevens, 2008). To a degree this

¹ This concern with 'shaping' is more apparent than ever at a time where the 'Anthropocene' is under review as a new unit of geological time defined by humanity's impact on the planet. For more on this, see Zalasiewicz et al., 2014.

should be no surprise as resource politics tends to be conducted with an ontological bias that situates resources (both physically and metaphorically) as a 'geo-political act' (Bridge, 2014b). Legal frameworks dictate that resources are nationally bordered and primarily in terms of their political and economic expediency, often serving as *de jure* and *de facto* constraints to policy making. Moreover, resources are not seen as just 'there', rather they are imagined to 'belong' to a people circumscribed within the territorial logic of the nation state. For example, every time that a new resource 'discovery' is made, the state is not only quick to assert its national claims but also to do so with reference to other nation states within a particular geo-political ordering. Thus, if we turn to recent empirical instances of resource discoveries, it is not just that gas is discovered in Tanzania and Mozambique but rather that these countries now 'have as much gas as Kuwait' whilst 'the whole of East Africa – Rwanda, Ethiopia, Kenya – is sitting on geothermal, which is what has transformed Iceland' (Yumkella, 2014). By placing resources in taxonomic, pseudo global league tables of resource wealth, such assertions simultaneously suggest the macro-economic possibilities of growth whilst offering the politically expedient projection of 'control', power and geopolitical relevance.

The importance of the theoretical case to better interrogate the 'national' framing of resources should not be understated, and is one way in which geography can foster a deeper understanding of the topic. Yet, it remains the case that the overwhelming foci of studies that have attended to resource nationalism as a discrete object of study have done so from literatures that reinforce rather than critique the fixity of the national imaginary. A greater regard for geography's critical insights into the state of neoliberalism (particularly the attendant emergence of 'post-neoliberalism' and 'neo-extractivism') fundamentally illustrates how resource nationalism should be not be read as the simple opposite of familiar neoliberal imperatives of resource governance but as something which is always hybrid and in flux.

The definitions of resource nationalism that follow are highly divergent, often contingent on political interests and conceptual biases. Taking this as a point of departure, it is assumed that resource nationalism, like state sovereignty more generally, is not only a social construction (Biersteker and Weber, 1996) but it is also constructed in a number of different ways. Whatever political slant it is given though, it is often assumed that resource nationalism should be seen as the antithesis of economic liberalisation or, as Halina Ward puts it, as 'resource privatism' (Ward, 2009). Indeed, this antagonism towards foreign capital (Emel et al., 2011, p. 71) is a repeated trope amongst free market apologists who see resource nationalism as 'limiting the operations of international... companies, and asserting greater national control over natural resource development' (Stevens, 2008, p. 5). Moreover, this dichotomy is often seen in historical terms as cyclical and naturally vacillating between 'the transfer of ownership of an asset or industry from the private sector to the public sector' and then back again 'from public to private ownership' (Butler, 2013; Chang et al., 2010). This 'swinging' in the logic of an economy's structuring highlights an early warning to the mainstream view that 'resource nationalism' is an extreme example of state control and of 'nationalization of the society's wealth of natural resources' (Veltmeyer and Petras, 2014, p. 107). It hints at its discursively unstable nature, pitching it as a policy strategy that is always in motion and part of a 'privatization/nationalization pendulum' (Hindery, 2013, p. 22) that is rarely one pole or the other but rather a form of resource governance that is hybrid.

The effects of setting up resource nationalism as a binary between state versus private control serves to reduce the conceptual range of the phenomenon down to a language of

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