



Contested claims over space and identity between fishers and the oil industry in Mexico



Liina-Maija Quist*, Anja Nygren

Development Studies, Department of Political and Economic Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences, P.O. Box 18, 00014 University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland

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ABSTRACT

This essay examines neoliberal forms of resource governance and emerging struggles over control of sea space between coastal fishers, the para-statal oil industry and government authorities in the State of Tabasco, Mexico. The analysis focuses on the changing mechanisms of resource governance and networking related to contested claims over rights to offshore space. The study is based on material collected during ethnographic field research in Tabasco in 2011–2014. By linking a post-Foucauldian approach to governmentality with a Deleuzian perspective on networks, our research examines resource governance as a socio-political arena, constructed in negotiation between multiple governmental, private and civil society actors, including heterogeneous groups from local populations. The study demonstrates how hybrid techniques of resource governance lead to fishers' socio-spatial displacement, marginalization in the fields of political representation and subjection to ideas of aquaculture entrepreneurship. The ensemble of private regulation and governmental control provides a venue for drawing fishers into clientelist practices of governing while it diffuses questions of responsibility. These modes of governance fragment the fishers' efforts to mobilize politically, making them rely on less visible networks of contestation shaped by heterogeneous fishing groups, with varying access to resources and political representation. Recent transformations in environmental legislation and the fishers' mobile tactics of networking may offer opportunities for them to reclaim their resource rights.

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1. Introduction

Emilio, a political leader among cooperative fishers in Tabasco, launched my fieldwork with a serious lecture.¹ On the second day of my three-month stay in his family, Emilio devoted three hours to explaining fishing politics in one of Mexico's most important oil-producing regions. He quoted excerpts from complex federal laws on fishing and cooperativism, and explained the problems fishers face with regards the implementation and enforcement of existing legislation. Though he quit school at the age of twelve in order to devote his time to fishing, he demonstrated an impressive fluency in the applicable law and a sound grasp of underlying politics.

Emilio said the big change came when the federal government established a 15,900 km² marine zone of exclusion around oil platforms in the Gulf of Mexico in 2003. Access to the zone was limited exclusively to the oil industry to protect against terrorist attacks. The government is trying to persuade fishers to leave the sea and become

fish farmers, though few have either the desire or the finances to leave fishing and obtain the land required for an aquaculture operation. Many fishers prefer sea fishing because it is what they are used to, though in search of fishing areas away from the oil rigs, they are traveling into riskier, less familiar waters.

Emilio's remarks on the role of legislation in the fierce competition for offshore space between fishers, the oil industry and government authorities in Tabasco opens up interesting viewpoints onto the interplay of power, politics and meanings in current contestations over neoliberal modes of governance of extractive industries. His comments also provide a point of departure for understanding a range of shifting forms of resource governance and contestation characteristic of large-scale extractive operations in the global South (Bebbington, 2012; Watts, 2011; Zalik, 2009).

In this essay, we focus on contested claims to space and identity within the context of hydrocarbon politics in Mexico. Placing the fishers, the oil industry and government authorities at the center of our inquiry, we seek the "how" of hybrid forms of governance in contemporary extractive regimes (Appel, 2012). The struggles over resource space in Tabasco are connected to the establishment of the zone of exclusion for all but the oil industry in the Gulf of Mexico in 2003. This declaration has restricted the fishers' access to their fishing grounds and forced them to travel further out to

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: liina-maija.quist@helsinki.fi (L.-M. Quist).

¹ This narrative is based on the first author's field diary notes during her fieldwork among the fishers on the Coast of Tabasco in 2011. The names of all the informants have been changed to protect their anonymity.

sea, making their fishing operations more demanding and dangerous. At the same time, the Mexican para-statal oil industry is undergoing strong privatization and restructuring, and in order to boost production, it is extending drilling activities along the coast of Tabasco. The ongoing struggles for resource access are characterized by changing techniques of co-governance on the part of the government and the oil industry, fragmentation of the fishers' political mobilization and the fishers' shifting tactics of networking.

The main focus in our analysis is on the ways that techniques of governance and networks of contestation become shaped through the hybrid mechanisms of neoliberal oil governance. Inspired by Collier's (2009) Foucauldian approach, we examine how modes of resource governance based on conventional forms of authoritarian control (Watts, 2004b; Zalik, 2009) become combined with techniques of disentanglement and indirect governance (Appel, 2012; Himley, 2013). We argue that empirical analyses of neoliberal governance would benefit from more attention being paid to the complex articulations of different forms of governance. In Tabasco, within the shifting arenas of claim-making, for example, market-based mechanisms of governance are mixed with clientelist politics, producing a fuzzy ensemble. Fraternizing with the government enables the oil industry to relocate the responsibility for negotiating local fishers' demands for compensation to government authorities. Acting as mediator between fishers and the oil industry, government officials employ techniques that range from paternalist control to public–private regulation. At the same time, the oil industry is subcontracting foreign companies to carry out socially delicate oil exploration and drilling activities.

The challenges posed to local resource users by large development interventions have been analyzed in numerous studies on indigenous, peasant, human-rights and environmental-justice struggles against mega industrial development projects (e.g. Carruthers, 2008; Doane, 2005; Perreault and Valdivia, 2010; Scholsberg and Carruthers, 2010; Watts, 2011). Many of these studies focus on contestations in which local communities have succeeded in forming well-organized counter-movements with strategic links to transnational networks (Gustafson, 2011; Haarstad and Fløysand, 2007; Sawyer, 2004). Our study, in contrast, analyzes conflict over resource space and identity in a situation where local agendas are heterogeneous and counter-efforts have remained fragmented. As Auyero and Swistun (2009: 12, 7–8) note, these less visible struggles over resources and representation have received little attention in academic studies on social movements, despite their relative frequency.

In Tabasco, hybrid techniques of neoliberal governance tend to fragment the efforts made by local resource users to institute legal claims and political mobilization, making them seek resource access through everyday forms of connectivity. Here we link our Foucauldian analysis of governmentality with a Deleuzian approach to rhizomatic subaltern networks in order to analyze the fishers' networking (Escobar and Osterweil, 2010; Lenco, 2014). The fishers' endeavors in the contestation are mediated by their engagements with the sea space and through the asymmetrical relations between fisher leaders and entrepreneurs like Emilio, small-scale, licensed fishers and unlicensed, informal fishers, who have no legally acknowledged position from which to negotiate with the oil industry. Through ethnographic inquiry into the ambiguous forms of governing within the shifting oil regime and the fishers' everyday strategies of contestation, we seek to offer insights into the less visible faces of power (Nuijten, 2004: 210) within the situated contexts of neoliberal governance.

The following section presents post-Foucauldian theorizations of resource governance, combined with theoretical ideas of everyday contestation through rhizomatic networks. The third section explains the context and the methods of the study. In the fourth

section, we move to analysis of the hybrid government-corporate strategies of resource governance, followed by the fifth section's examination of the fishers' fractured attempts at political contestation. The sixth section provides conclusions concerning the contested claims of corporates and communities to resource governance characteristic of neoliberal extractive operations today.

2. Governance, politics and fragmented networks

Emilio's portrayal of the struggles over the occupation of the Tabascan offshore touches on important themes in the current discussion of discursive strategies, political games and identity codifications in the competition between extractive industries, government institutions and local resource users for access to resource space (Hatcher, 2012; Perreault and Valdivia, 2010; Watts, 2004a). Recent studies on governance have redeveloped Michel Foucault's concept of governmentality to better capture the processes of privatization, deregulation and self-management involved in neoliberal modes of governance and subject-formation (Collier, 2009; Ferguson, 2010; Rose et al., 2006). Within this discussion, Collier (2009: 99) proposes an analysis of governance that makes visible the diverse ways in which techniques and styles of reasoning are combined and become complex modes of governing. Such an approach seeks to reveal neoliberalism as a "heterogeneous space, constituted through multiple determinations, and not reducible to a given form of knowledge-power." Our study follows this line of thinking by tracing the mentality of governance in the hybrid ensemble of discourses and political practices through which the governing of the sea space and fishers' subjectivity is being reformulated in Mexican oil politics.

In his Foucault-inspired analysis of conflicts over oil extraction in Nigeria, Watts (2004a: 199) conceptualizes oil governance as a "complex" that constructs "differing sorts of community," with "differing sorts of identities, forms of rule and territory." This perspective of multiple actors, identities and spaces offers an interesting angle for examining relations between the oil industry and local communities. Furthermore, Watts (2004b: 55) suggests that examining the logic of both rule and unrule and thereby the "perhaps *ungovernable*" spaces of oil politics is crucial for a more detailed understanding of oil governance. Correspondingly, Li (2007a: 277) notes that an analysis of governing that goes beyond the "conduct of conduct," can provide important insights into processes and experiences "that cannot be reconfigured according to plan."

Exploring what remains unexplained in oil politics by the mentality of governance is crucial especially because, as Mitchell (2011) notes in his analysis of oil and democracy, the material qualities of crude oil, as well as the investments and technologies required for its transformation into a global commodity, make oil extraction highly vulnerable to disruption. For this reason, the oil industry seeks to organize its production into spatially isolated operations, separated from the social observation and political pressure of civic movements (Zalik, 2009). By appearing to remove itself from local social conflicts, the oil industry obscures the links between global projects of resource appropriation and local experiences of resource exclusion (Appel, 2012; Ferguson, 2005).

These dynamics call for detailed analyses of how the strategies and techniques of governing are implemented in particular times and places, and of their fragilities and fractures, as well as of ambiguous negotiations and contestations between differently positioned subjects (Li, 2007b; Nuijten, 2004). In Mexico, the economic and symbolic power of *Petróleos Mexicanos* (Pemex) in national politics, together with the melange of legacies of clientelism and new techniques of neoliberal governance, color the

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