



Short communication

Limitations of resource determinism in international energy studies

Andrei V. Belyi^{a,b,*}^a Centre for Energy, Environment and Climate Change Law at the University of Eastern Finland, Finland^b Centre for Energy, Petroleum, Mineral Law and Policy, University of Dundee, United Kingdom

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ABSTRACT

Most of the energy related studies do often fall into a trap of resource-determinism, which turns the arguments around a primary importance of energy resources. The present commentary attempts to highlight major shortcomings of the resource-determinism and aims to conversely argue for a necessary social dimension in the resource–society interactions. Four critical points are then raised about resource–curse, energy dependencies, consumer–producer juxtaposition and about resource market interrelation. The comment draws an attention to the ontological debate in social sciences and to societal embeddedness of economic processes. On these grounds, the comment suggests to consider a resource as a dependent variable in international energy relations analysis.

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1. Introduction

Most of the international energy studies consider *prima facie* importance of hydrocarbon resources in interstate relations. Derived from the assumption, scholarship usually focuses on effects stemming from the energy resource distribution upon political and economic institutions at various levels of policies. Energy is commonly portrayed to be an independent variable leading to both domestic and international outcomes. *Inter alia*, resource curse, security-dependence nexus, producer–consumer juxtaposition, and resource–market linear correlations are frequently ascertained to be general IPE trends. Hereby, I will attempt to conversely argue for defining energy as dependent variable inherent to various societal developments. Foregrounding assumption of energy as a dependent variable offers a better reflection of causes and effects related to the resource–society interrelation. In other words, circumstances should be taken into account instead of defining linear links between energy and institutions.

The conceptual polemic with resource-determinism does not necessarily imply denying all earlier debates on resource–society interaction. Moreover, a number of previous studies have already foreshadowed a need to integrate various non material factors into the discipline. Among others, the first issue of ERSS largely addressed socially-driven energy transformation that implies a

political intentionality toward resources (see Refs. [16,35]). Even integrating an idea of contextual conditions in resource curse [26] demonstrates a progression toward the complexity approach. Instead of denying the role of material structures, the proposed complexity approach suggests to complement the energy policy analysis by recognizing the primary place of Durkheimian “social facts” in international energy relations.

2. Determinism vs complexity

Determinism–complexity dichotomy is deep-rooted in the ontological controversy shaping the recent trends in the philosophy of science [20]. Determinism is thus far defined as a set of constant behavioral expectations in institutional change, while complexity is about an array of correlations specific to each analyzed case. The dichotomy was primarily addressed in Popper [31] seminal works, where he stipulated a need to distance from determinism for a better scientific accuracy. Later on, Prigogine and Stengers [32] posited that an analysis of any complex system, to which societal systems would naturally belong, requires refuting deterministic presumptions. This conception suggests then to integrate time-related changes in correlations and circumstances. Hence, contrary to determinism, ontology of complexity distances from externally-deducted and presumably permanent correlations.

Adding to that, a large part of the scholarship casts a light on circumstance-based explanations of various phenomena [17]. Hence, the scholars provide a human dimension to interpretation of correlations. In the familiar vein, international relations theories entailed agency–structure ontology [38] aiming at integrating

* Correspondence address: Centre for Energy, Environment and Climate Change Law at the University of Eastern Finland, Finland.

E-mail address: andrey.belyi@yahoo.com

social complexities and agency-based perceptions into the discipline.

Without entering into detail of the vivid ontological discussions, I would argue that distancing from a resource-determinism complements to a more accurate explanation of energy policies and interrelations. The scholarly literature might then define global resource distribution, dependencies, and the existence of oil export revenues within the scope of societal macro-foundations, institutions and social perceptions. By contrast, a focus on primacy of energy resource oftentimes may hinder scientific validity of an argument

A similar dividing line between panoply of arguments exists in political economy debates to which energy naturally belongs. More specifically, the determinism–complexity dichotomy has indirectly shaped a conceptualization of societal factors in general economic choices. The very notion of societal embeddedness stems then from the integration of social facts into economic interrelations.

3. Homo economicus vs homo sociologicus

The classical approach to the rational choice behaviors originally stems from a deterministic assumption, while the bounded rationality may easily be questioned by the societal and informative contexts in which agents operate [22]. Indeed, recent decades have seen increasing criticism of traditional economic methods on the basis that they do not adequately address an array of factors impacting on the economic institutions [36]. This occurred concurrently with a continuous controversy between *homo economicus* and *homo sociologicus*, where the former reflects an explanation of human behavior, and the latter fleshes to understandings of complex societal processes [20].

Among initial theorists who evoked the social embeddedness in economics, Polanyi defined all economic activities (logically comprising energy markets) as being part of existing social relations [30]. In his cardinal thoughts, Polanyi alludes to “market society” of professional networks affecting the economic development [23]. In accordance to this conception, all economic interactions are inherent to social interrelations, and therefore an economic practice (e.g., markets) stems from an intrinsic societal structure. Consequently, the context of economic trends and infrastructural developments are endogenous to societal evolution. Polanyi argued that an economic system is “in effect, a mere function of social organization” ([30], 49).

Applying these theoretical premises to our field of energy studies, one could note that even the very conception of natural resources evolved throughout time with societal evolution [6]. Under a similar complexity-based perspective, energy security can be apprehended as a time-dependent concept. Energy security evolves with changing understandings of markets, transactions and import dependencies [9]. Taking into consideration a variety of possible interpretations of “social facts” in energy-related issues, the present comment suggests framing some existing concepts into the depicted ontological debate. The objective here consists in a theoretical impetus to the existing scholarly literature on “resource curse”, “energy security-dependence nexus”, “producer–consumer juxtaposition” and resource–market correlation.

4. Resource curse and oil-war linkage

Largely elaborated in the T. Mitchell’s book “Carbon Democracies”, a link between hydrocarbons and political behaviors currently gained an important dimension among analysts and scholars. Even some earlier speculative studies portrayed the oil interests to be the key motivation for the US-led interventions in the Middle East. Linear cause might be easily refuted because the US are

not much dependent on the hydrocarbon imports from the region, unlike some European states and Japan, who are less involved in the local geopolitics. By contrast, complexity-based explanations have also been advanced to explain motives behind the US interventionism. Among others, US policies in international energy geopolitics have been stimulated by normative dimension of *Pax Americana* [34]. Certainly, an approach focusing on the normative dimension can relativize the importance of oil geopolitics by some more general societal circumstances.

Determinism also foregrounded a linear dyadic relation between a cause (oil) and an outcome (war), *inter alia*, numbers of inter-state wars would increase with the “resource curse” of some revolutionary petrostates having capability to support political tensions across countries (see Refs. [33,7]). The correlation is taken for axiomatic without any falsifiable alternative. For example, a validity of the conclusions would have been better illustrated if a decline in oil revenues did also lead to conflict number decline.

Moreover, even if proven, the correlation itself remains time- and circumstance-dependent. In fact, states motivations regarding oil revenues might also vary in accordance to national contexts. For instance, quite a large number of hydrocarbon revenue dependent states usually avoid territorial tensions surrounding them (e.g., Central Asian states neutrality, small Gulf states foreign policies, Azerbaijan’s attempts to peacefully resolve territorial disputes, etc.), whereas a scale of conflict support by revolutionary states did rarely depend on oil revenues. *Inter alia*, Soviets were more active on the revolutionary arena before the oil windfalls, whereas gas revenues rather created economic interdependence with western Europe despite ideological bipolarity (see Refs. [18,4]). Most of regional conflict studies demonstrate that political instabilities usually stem from non-energy component in each problematic area (e.g., religious wars, political uprisings, territorial disputes etc.), withal it might be even evidenced through historical observation that wars were seldom motivated by economic drivers. Even the most evident tensions surrounding access to oil (e.g., Biafran war in 1965–66, Soudan–South Soudan conflicts in 2013–14, Irak–Kuwait conflict in 1990–91, etc.) are politically and socially contextualized within particular circumstances of each. Empirical observation oftentimes flesh to a frequent opposition by the state-owned oil companies of “resource curse” states to an exacerbated use of revenues for foreign policy strategies.

5. Energy dependence–security nexus

Scholarship on international energy relations either directly or indirectly highlighted the most industrialized nations structural vulnerabilities related to import dependencies on hydrocarbons [2,37]. Subsequent deterministic computation of resource–society interaction also leads to welter definitions of the ambiguous “energy security” concept [11]. In this context, it becomes almost heterodox to question the primacy of dependencies for ensuring energy security. Nevertheless, directly identifiable empirical evidences easily reveal inconsistencies of the “security–independence” relation. *Inter alia*, energy policies diverge from one state to another despite the import dependence levels. For instance, for some nations, energy self-sufficiency is the key objective in mitigating the dependency (e.g., Baltic states), while others see a response to the challenge by integrating themselves into the world markets (e.g., cases of Germany and Japan). Here, some energy-related studies applied an innovative concept of securitization emphasizing social processes in security priority formulation [25].

The very definition of import dependence obtains then a different connotations in accordance to different contexts of securitization. For example, Europe’s import dependence on Soviet

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