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Frontiers: Authority, Precarity, and Insurgency at the Edge of the State

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Summary. — The focus of this article is two home-grown insurgencies which arose in Nigeria after the return to civilian rule in 1999: Boko Haram in the Muslim northeast, the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) in the oil producing and Christian southeast. The two insurgencies arose, I argue, from frontier spaces in which the limits of state authority and legitimacy intersected with a profound crisis of authority and rule on the one hand, and the political economy of radical precarity on the other. Boko Haram and MEND share family resemblances—they are products of the same orderings of power—despite the obvious fact that one is draped in the language of religion and restoration (but as we shall see modernity) and the insistence that Nigeria should become transformed into a true Islamic state, while the other is secular and civic (and also modern) wishing to expand the boundaries of citizenship through a new sort of federalism. There are striking commonalities in the social composition of the armed groups and their internal dynamics; each is deposited at the nexus of the failure of local government, customary institutions, and the security forces (the police and the military task forces in particular). Each, nevertheless, is site specific; a cultural articulation of dispossession politics rooted in regional traditions of warfare, in particular systems of religiosity, and very different sorts of social structure and identity, and very different ecologies (the semi arid savannas of the north, and the creeks and forest of the Niger delta). In both cases state coercion and despotism and the ethico-moral decrepitude of the state figures centrally as does the politics of resentment that each condition generates among a large, alienated but geographically rooted group of precarious classes.
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Capitalism … is a frontier process.

[Jason Moore, 2015, p. 107]

If we, rather broadly, see frontiers as regions at the limits of central power, then it seems likely that a great deal is happening there … Frontiers … are places where authority – neither secure nor non-existent is open to challenge and where polarities of order and chaos assume many guises

[John Markoff, 2006, p. 7]

INTRODUCTION

Since the return to civilian rule in 1999 Nigeria has produced two home-grown insurgencies. A Salafist rebellion originating in the northeast of the country which gained prominence and momentum after 2003, has laid waste to a vast swath of territory in the three states of Bornu, Yobe, and Adamawa, launching massive and deadly attacks across the north in major cities such as Maiduguri, Kano, and Katsina. According to the Council on Foreign Relations, during 2011–14 20,000 people were killed by Boko Haram militants (with another 6,000 mortalities in 270 attacks during 2015). Large-scale abductions, female suicide bombers, assassinations, beheadings, and the brutal terrorizing of civilian communities have become the tools of their trade. By April 2015, 2.5 million people had been displaced across six northeastern states (http://www.internal-displacement.org/sub-saharan-africa/nigeria/figures-analysis); over 1 million were barracked in refugee camps in and around Maiduguri. New estimates by the UN Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs suggest that 4.4 million people in the Lake Chad region of northeastern Nigeria are in need of urgent food aid. Countless hundreds of thousands are confronting the bitter reality of starvation and famine. One thousand kilometers to the south on the Niger delta oilfields, an armed non-state group—the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND)—emerged from the western creeks in late 2005 and within four years brought the oil industry, accounting for over 80% of government revenues, to its knees. According to a report released in late 2008—prepared by a 43 person government commission and entitled *The Report of the Technical Committee of the Niger Delta* (RTCND)—in the first nine months of 2008 alone the Nigerian government lost a staggering $23.7 billion in oil revenues to militant attacks and sabotage. By May 2009 oil production had fallen by over a million barrels per day, a decline of roughly 40% from the average national output five years earlier. At least 300 individuals were abducted during 2006–09, 300 armed assaults were launched during 2007–10, and 13,000 pipeline attacks and vandalizations were reported during 2006–11. By some estimates, mortalities ran to 1500 per year and perhaps as many as 200,000 people were internally displaced. A government amnesty, signed in October 2009 in the wake of a state-sponsored counter-insurgency program, brought peace to the delta by 2010. But it proved to be fragile, punctuated by periodic bouts of violence during 2010–15. Ominously, in early 2016 a new militant group—the Niger Delta Avengers (NDA)[1]—occupied the space vacated by MEND. By May 2016, NDA's 'Operation Red Economy' had shut-in over 800,000 barrels of oil (producing a thirty-year low in output). Clearly both insurgencies represent a major crisis of legitimacy for the Nigerian post-colonial state, a fact stunningly underscored by the combatants' capability to strike at the heart of

government power by launching devastating attacks in 2010 and 2011 in the very center of the country's high modernist capital, Abuja.

At first glance the insurgencies are a study in sharp contrasts. One is draped in the language of a return to a republic of virtue and the ideals of *dar al-Islam*, of 'true Islam' and the restoration of the Caliphate; the other is secular and self-consciously modern invoking a renovated civic nationalism, a new federalism, community rights and 'resource control'. One is located in a remote semi-arid and drought prone border region marked by agrarian recession and the collapse of its traditional industrial base (textiles); the other is housed in a huge deltaic zone of swamp rainforests and riverine creeks awash in federal oil revenues and populated by some of the largest transnational corporations in the world. Not least, the two regions exhibit, in general terms at least, quite different poverty profiles: in aggregate terms the northeast is the poorest region in the federation (the region has the highest multi-dimensional poverty in the federation and a poverty incidence of 86% [see Lewis & Watts, 2015]); the South–South (the nine delta states) posts a poverty rate of 34% and significantly higher human development indices. Along many axes of comparison—ecology, ethnic composition, forms of livelihood, political histories, and cultural formations—Boko Haram and MEND suggest little in the way of family resemblance.

On the other hand, they share a number of paradoxical qualities. Each was the offspring of the return to democratic rule and the birth of Nigeria's Fourth Republic in 1999 (Kendhammer, 2016; Pierce, 2016). Both insurgencies surfaced at a moment in history when each region might plausibly claim to have achieved what one could call political victories—both in relation to other regions in the federation and with respect to a powerful federal center. In the north, sharia law had been adopted across the twelve northern states in 2000, and the overwhelming victory in 1999 by a powerful and dominant party machine, the People's Democratic Party (PDP), reaffirmed northern hegemony in national politics. In the delta, the dark picture of economic and political marginalization painted by leader of the Ogoni struggle Ken Saro-Wiwa in the first half of the 1990 had brightened, at least in fiscal terms. A raft of powerful new youth movements had arisen among the so-called ethnic 'oil minorities' propelling a radical change in 1999 in the principles by which state oil revenues were allocated within the system of fiscal federalism. The so-called derivation principle by which states within the federation retain a proportion of the income of resources located within their jurisdiction—injected a huge quanta of petro-revenues into the oil-producing states and contributed to the ascension of a powerful, and nationally influential class of regional political 'Godfathers'. How, then, can we account for the somewhat paradoxical emergence of two apparently dissimilar insurgencies under these sets of conditions?

Despite their surficial differences and their counter-intuitive emergence, the two insurgencies were shaped by a common set of structural forces—a set of conditions of possibility—which have arisen from the political settlements and the ordering of power (Slater, 2011) associated with the dominance of oil and gas in Nigeria's political economy. In particular, the ordering of power within Nigeria's petro-state engendered particular sorts of spaces—frontiers—which can only be understood in relationship to the changing capabilities of the state on the one hand,[2] and a crisis of social reproduction of youth marked by the decay of systems of authority on the other. I seek to given analytical priority to a trio of forces which constitute the insurgencies' conditions of possibility: space, the state and systems of authority[3]. MEND and Boko Haram

were forged in the different frontier spaces of the northeast and southeast of the country, each constituted in their specificity by unique economic, cultural, and ecological conditions yet sharing common properties in regard to state capacity, the deepening illegitimacy of forms of political, civic and religious authority, and the radical precariousness by what Joe Trapido (2015, p. 31) in describing the Congo, has called a class of young, masterless men.

The frontier for my purposes is understood as a form of social space (Lefebvre, 1991) and stands in sharp contrast to the manner in which the term was deployed by George Frederick Turner (1893) in his famous account of the opening and closing of the American frontier. For Turner the frontier was defined by its remoteness, the defining qualities of which are abundant land, under-exploited resources, and gradual settlement by commercially oriented settlers and state authorities expanding their territorial jurisdiction. His account both underplays the importance and dynamics of the accumulation process—its violence and disorder—and has little of substance to say about the frontiers' relation to state power. Rather, in frontier spaces what is and is not legitimate authority, and who authorizes such legitimate power, is often an open question and an object of deep contention. The disorderly and often violent forms of rule associated with unreliable and partisan legal orders, unaccountable forms of state governance and ineffective forms of public authority, typically co-exist with the questionable legitimacy of most *other* forms of authority—civic, customary, corporate, and religious (Lund, 2006). As Markoff (2006, p. 78) puts it, "places where authority—neither secure nor non-existent—is open to challenge and where polarities of order and chaos assume many guises". To use Korf, Hagmann, and Dovenspeck's (2013) language, the social spaces which incubated Nigeria's insurgencies are 'political frontiers'. These frontier spaces emerge from, and are the products of, what Porter and I (2017) call "asymmetrical state capabilities". In a complex federal system like Nigeria, changing state capabilities and practices can *create* and *recreate* frontier-like spaces, exhibiting the generic qualities of all political frontiers. In this sense frontiers are spaces formed *before* the arrival of law and order (and systems of authority) but they may also arise *after* legal and authority systems collapse or wither.

If frontiers are defined in relation to state powers and forms of authority, they are also populated by specific classes and social groups who live in what Lorey (2015) calls "states of insecurity". Here the accumulation process—capitalism's making and unmaking of frontiers through the accumulation or the dis-accumulation process—is central to the configuration of social classes who struggle to make a living and make profit in and around and through these polarities of order and chaos. Capital accumulation is a frontier process because competition drives the search for what Moore calls "cheap Natures"—the opening up new commodity frontiers and new rounds of profitability by exploiting use-values (labor, energy, food, resources) produced with a below average value composition (Moore, 2015, p. 53–54). My argument is that these resource and commodity frontiers in Nigeria were constituted socially (a point made by Moore when he talks of "abstract social nature"). The social in Nigeria turns out to be a youth question—the 'restive youth problem' in popular parlance—that is to say, a form of generational politics (Mannheim, 1952/1972). A generation of young men were excluded (indeed alienated) from most forms of political, civil, social, customary, and religious authority at the same time that they stood at the outer margins of the market order. Youth is an important social category in Nigeria as elsewhere in Africa