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Oil curse,

State instability and violence

in developing countries:

theoretical lessons

for Nigeria



Marc-Antoine PEROUSE DE MONTCLOS\*

## **Oil curse, State instability, and violence in developing countries: theoretical lessons for Nigeria**

### *Abstract*

Oil production in Nigeria is often believed to bring economic failure, political instability, the inability to democratise, high levels of corruption, and violence in the form of rising crime, interstate wars, and internal conflicts. Such an assumption is quite prevalent amongst aid practitioners, journalists, activists, and some academics. Yet there are many exceptions in developing countries, and this paper empirically criticizes the 'resource curse' theory by focusing on the relationship between oil-producing states and war. It first examines contradictions and correlations that do not demonstrate causality. To escape economic determinism, it then suggests paying more attention to political contexts and historical timeframes, especially when authoritarian regimes existed before oil production. Sometimes, the oil rent can indeed exacerbate conflicts. But it is never a single cause. A quick reading of averages and correlations can be misleading in this regard. The conclusion thus calls for further qualitative investigation.

### *Keywords*

Oil, Resource curse, War, Crime, Dutch Disease, Democratization, Development

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Oil has a bad reputation in Nigeria. It is said to bring economic failure, political instability, the inability to democratise, high levels of corruption, and violence in the form of rising crime, interstate war with Cameroon, and internal conflicts in the Niger Delta. Such views on the resource curse in developing countries are usually shared by journalists, NGO activists, and many academics, both in the Northern and the Southern hemisphere.<sup>1</sup> However, this critique has changed considerably over the last two decades. During the Cold War, the Marxist view of the rentier state focused on imperialist exploitation, the terms of exchange, and the intermediary role of the compradore ruling class in the international order (Nore & Turner 1980). The so-called “dependency theory” described oil-producing countries as being dependent on price volatility and capitalist interference, as in the case of the Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh, who was toppled in 1953 because he wanted to nationalize oil companies.

Today, however, the determinist analysis of the “resource curse” insists more on the toxic role of petroleum per se and not as much on the state and the terms of exchange. Coined by Richard Auty (1993), the notion does not focus on oil specifically. The “curse theory” deals with all kinds of natural and mineral resources, claiming that resource conflicts last longer and are more likely to restart. According to the famous World Bank economists Paul Collier and Anke Hoefler (2000), for instance, the risk of civil war is maximized when primary commodity exports comprise about one third of a country’s GDP.

Of all natural resources, however, Michael Klare claims that petroleum is the most likely to provoke large-scale conflicts (2001: 27). Over one third of the wars recorded in 2002, for instance, occurred in oil-producing or oil-pipeline countries (Yanacopulos & Hanlon 2006: 126). On average, since the Arab oil embargo of 1973,

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<sup>1</sup> For a journalistic view on the oil curse, see Maass (2009). For a Venezuelan account of the rhetoric of the “devil’s excrement”, see also Pérez Schael (1997)

states in which revenues from net oil exports constituted at least 10 per cent of GDP engaged in militarized interstate disputes at a rate more than 50 per cent higher than non-petrostates (Colgan 2013b: 2). More specifically, argues Päivi Lujala (2009, 2010), fighting in or near oil fields causes more deaths and lengthens governmental conflicts, whether there is production or not, whereas the presence of oil within a country but outside the conflict area—especially offshore—decreases the severity of the hostilities. Other statistical studies confirm the problem. According to a regression analysis on armed conflicts from 1980 to 1992, the risk of civil war appears to be higher if a country is poor, populous, politically unstable, and abundant in oil, but not if it has suffered from water shortages or land degradation (Theisen 2008). States that derive at least one third of their exports from oil double the probability of conflict, especially if they are large, even if there is no evidence that population growth raises the risk (Fearon & Laitin 2003: 85-7).

### 1. THE POLITICAL DUTCH DISEASE: A POST-COLD WAR PARADIGM

At the end of the Cold War, the “oil curse” theory was actually an elaboration of the so-called Dutch disease, a term which referred to the poor economic performance of the Netherlands after the discovery of natural gas in the 1970s. Indeed, the oil shocks of 1973 and 1979 were supposed to accelerate economic growth and promote resource-based industrialisation in producing countries. Yet nationalisation and the improvement of the terms of exchange failed to diversify economies and achieve sustainable industrialisation in the 1980s. In Venezuela and Nigeria, for instance, the non-oil economy declined significantly (Auty 1990). In general, resource-abundant economies underperformed when compared with other developing countries (Auty 2004). Of 97 countries examined by Jeffrey Sachs and Andrew Warner (1995), those with a high ratio of natural resources exports to GDP recorded abnormally slow growth rates between 1971 and 1989. In a manner typical of the Dutch

disease, greater export revenues appreciated the national currency and precipitated inflation, while talent and investment were allocated to rent-seeking activities rather than less rewarding productive activities in industry or agriculture.

There was clearly a political dimension to this. Indeed, rentier states failed to modernise, and the oil wealth did not lead to higher education and greater occupational specialisation. On the contrary, the availability of the resource resulted not only in economic inefficiency, budgetary mismanagement, and high levels of income inequality, but also corruption of public institutions, subsidies based on nepotism, and a poor fiscal policy of redistribution. Of 34 less-developed economies where oil and gas constituted at least 30 per cent of total export revenues, for instance, none could be classified as democratic or free (Birdsall & Subramanian 2004). In the worst-case scenario, such as that of Nigeria in the 1980s, the oil rent funded authoritarian regimes that did not even improve the standards of living of the population, unlike Iraq, Algeria, and Libya in the 1970s.

Political scientists have identified several dimensions to such a problem (Mahdavy 1970; Ross 2001, 2006, 2012). First is the lack of accountability of rentier states. Oil-producing countries, it is argued, are institutionally weak because resources, and not people, become their primary tax base. As a result, they do not need an elaborate bureaucracy to raise revenues, and their administration is smaller than one would expect given their level of income (Karl 1997). In addition, royalties do not require governments to be accountable to citizens, unlike taxes per capita. Oil is also quite specific as a mineral resource. In nineteenth century Europe, the masses were much more involved in the production and distribution of fossil fuels, especially in the coalmines, where they set up strong trade unions. On the contrary, today's oil industry has a very low capital-labour ratio. It does not employ many workers and is often located in remote regions, far from industrial cities. So it does not open up democratic possibilities (Mitchell 2011, 2013).

Another problem is that mineral resources help in the building of coercive machinery to repress dissent. Oil money funds the security forces of authoritarian regimes that try to manipulate both their population and foreign clients, as was the case in Nigeria and Libya, which escaped international sanctions in the 1990s. The problem does not concern states only. According to Jeremy Weinstein: rebel groups that emerge in environments rich in natural resources or with the external support of an outside patron tend to commit high levels of indiscriminate violence; movements that arise in resource-poor contexts perpetrate fewer abuses and employ violence selectively and strategically. (2007: 7)

In other words, combatants relying on mineral assets need little social support, so they have no compunction about killing their own people, somewhat like oil-producing states that are not accountable to their citizens because their tax base depends on royalties.

As violence breeds violence, oil wealth also reduces the possibilities to resolve conflicts peacefully. Whereas taxes would require making bargains with society, resource rents and easy money allow rulers to repress instead of reforming. In addition, oil wealth opens the way to revolts. Øystein Noreng (1997), for instance, claims that economic policies based on petroleum revenues precipitated Islamism in the Middle East and North African Muslim countries, which recorded 70 per cent of the world's proved oil reserves in the 1990s. Indeed, corruption and wealth became easy targets of criticism. Moreover, the growth of the oil industry and a large public sector, as well as the development of the army and a new technocratic class, infringed upon the interests of the private sector and the merchant class which were the traditional base of Islam. In addition, the absence of independent political life outside the state made the mosque the only channel for opposition. In Saudi Arabia, for example, oil wealth fostered the opposition, exacerbated social inequalities, and did not buy off dissent (Okruhlik 1999).

## 2. BEYOND CORRELATION: SOME CONTRADICTIONS AND THE (MISSING?) LINK BETWEEN OIL AND VIOLENCE

Nevertheless, there are two main objections to the conventional wisdom that posits a direct link between underdevelopment, resource dependence, dictatorship, and armed conflicts. The first has to do with cases that contradict the oil curse theory—after all, they are not so exceptional. The second objection is that correlation does not demonstrate causality (Di John 2007). Indeed, violence in oil-producing countries is not always a result of oil competition—far from it. For reasons of clarity and owing to lack of space, my critique does not investigate daily crime. Instead, it focuses on wars defined as the organised form of violence of open, collective, and deadly armed conflicts between two or more state or non-state belligerents.

I shall begin with the contradictions. As we know, not all oil-producing countries are run by dictators, and not all dictatorships produce oil. Australia, Canada, Great Britain, and the United States are typical examples of “oil democracies”. The quality, the solidity, and the longevity of their political institutions are an obvious explanation for this (Brunnschweiler & Bulte 2008). But developing countries that produce—and sometimes export—oil are not always “cursed” with authoritarian regimes either. In the 2000s, both Brazil and Mexico democratised while oil production rose in the former and declined in the latter.

In addition, political changes do not always coincide with the evolution of oil revenues. In Iran before the fall of the Shah in 1979, for instance, the demand for democratisation paralleled a rise in petroleum production and prices, as well as a higher dependence on oil exports. During the following period, production and the fiscal reliance on oil income declined, together with the occurrence of a war and a restriction of civil liberties in the 1980s (Haber & Menaldo 2011: 8). In the same vein, Ecuador experienced a military coup in 1972, just prior to

its oil boom, but re-democratised in 1979 when it could fully benefit from its mineral rent. As for oil-rich Venezuela, it was one of the only democracies left in Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s. In the 1980s and 1990s, however, its parliamentary regime became destabilized when the government's oil revenues plummeted. Under Hugo Chavez during the following decade, Venezuela then experienced a return to authoritarianism and both a rise in homicides and a decline in oil production and exports.<sup>2</sup>

The arguments of the “curse theorists” are far from conclusive in this regard. Thomas Friedman (2006), for instance, claims that the rise of the price of crude oil funded and exacerbated the authoritarianism of Hugo Chavez in Venezuela. But he forgets to mention the fall in production after the large strike of 2002. By the same token, he argues that civil rights and political freedom were reduced in Nigeria in the beginning of the 2000s. In fact, the situation had dramatically improved since the end of the military dictatorship in the most populated African country, a dictatorship which was in power in the 1990s when the price of crude oil was low.

Actually, there is no systematic correlation between oil, state failure, dictatorship, and violence—especially war—as shown in Norway and the United Arab Emirates. With 10 per cent of the world population, for instance, Africa south of the Sahara had “only” 4.8 per cent and 3 per cent of oil and gas reserves, respectively, and it accounted for 6.2 per cent of oil production and less than 1 per cent of gas production in 2004 (Copinschi & Noël 2005: 29). Yet it recorded between one fifth and one half of all armed conflicts registered between 1990 and 2007 (Mack et al. 2005: 24; Harbom & Sundberg 2008: 104). Poor countries with no or few natural resources, like Rwanda or Somalia, experienced dreadful wars. But poor countries replete with oil also suffered from long-standing conflicts, such as in Angola. On the other hand, Botswana and Gabon remained fairly stable and peaceful “despite”

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<sup>2</sup> Le Monde 6 January 2013, p. 3

their mineral assets. In other words, both the lack and the profusion of natural resources have triggered competition and violent conflicts in Africa. The theories of ‘scarcity’ or ‘abundance’ are compatible and do not exclude each other.<sup>3</sup> It all depends on point of view on the half-empty or half-full glass. Oil is a curse. But the lack of oil is also a curse!

In the same vein, there is no automatic relationship between dictatorships and armed conflicts. Young and fragile democracies, for instance, are very unstable, and some researchers argue that they are more prone to civil wars than old authoritarian regimes (Snyder 2000; Hegre et al. 2001). Sometimes the same goes for crime, as with Russia after the collapse of the communist regime in the 1990s. Likewise, Mexico put an end to its one-party system in the 2000s, yet experienced a rise in homicides and drug wars. To prove their point, the “curse” theorists would thus need to show not only that oil-producing developing states are less democratic than others, but also that dictatorships are more often engaged in wars. In addition, they would have to bring evidence that oil-producing dictatorships are more prone to conflicts because they are authoritarian and violent, and not because of other reasons such as ethnic competition or malevolent interferences from foreign states.

The causalities are not clear in this regard. The “curse” theory claims that oil rent both destabilises developing states and reinforces authoritarian regimes. Looking at the history of monarchies in Europe, one then wonders why dictatorships would not be the first step in state-building in Africa, Asia, or Latin America. Clearly, some states can become stronger, yet do not democratise. But democratisation does not always prevent state failure either. According to Thad Dunning (2008), oil rent can actually contribute to consolidating democracy when it mitigates inequalities. If not, it may exacerbate authoritarianism. In any case, these processes are so complex that it would be hazardous to analyse them only

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<sup>3</sup> For a summary of the debate, see Pérouse de Montclos (2007: 60-4); Le Billon & Cervantes (2009)

through the proxy of mineral assets. Nathan Jensen and Leonard Wantchekon (2004), for instance, argued unconvincingly that resource scarcity partially determined the success of democratic consolidation in Africa. To prove their point, they mentioned successful democratic reforms in Mali and Madagascar, two resource-poor countries which became destabilised just after the authors published their article.

### 3. THE TWO SIDES OF THE COINS

It is certain that natural resources sometimes have a positive impact and should not be understood as a systemic curse. To clarify their role, Benjamin Smith (2004) suggests comparing developing countries with or without mineral assets. Focusing on 21 oil-exporting developing countries from 1974 to 1992, he finds that oil wealth is robustly associated with increased regime durability and lower likelihoods of civil war and anti-state protest. In other words, the rent increases the stability of regimes, and repression does not account for this effect. According to studies based on a larger panel of countries, economic performance is not always bad either, with a positive direct association between mineral resources and real GDP growth in 1970–2000 (Wright & Czelusta 2004; Brunnschweiler 2008;). Amongst 13 successful economies studied by the Commission on Growth and Development in 2008, for instance, four (Malaysia, Oman, Indonesia, and China) were oil producers and a fifth (Botswana) had important mineral resources. Since 1950, these countries have grown at a remarkable average rate of 7 per cent a year or more for 25 years or longer.

In any case, violence does not always weaken the power and the sovereignty of governments. In Europe, wars have been an intrinsic part of state-building. In developing countries, violence, oil dependence, and the stabilisation of authoritarian regimes can also go together. Chad, for example, relied on oil-production to assert its sovereignty, playing China off against the United States to escape pressures to democratise and reform (Djournessi 2009). In 2005, President Idriss Deby amended the

petroleum law that had been negotiated in 1998 to fund development and save money for the future generations by depositing 10 per cent of net oil royalties and dividends in an offshore account opened with foreign banks. As a result, the government of Chad was able to raise its military expenditures in order to crush internal opposition and fight armed groups on the Sudanese border. The United States adopted a low profile because they did not want their Chinese rival to occupy the place they would have left, as happened in the Sudan when Washington placed economic sanctions on the Islamist regime in power in Khartoum in the mid-1990s.

Thus appears one of the paradoxes of the resource curse: oil can reinforce both state apparatuses and dictatorships—sometimes in a very brutal manner, sometimes not. Today, Chad and Nigeria are showcases of bad governance. Yet they are certainly not as “failed” and violent as in the 1960s or the 1980s, when they were torn apart by civil wars and lost control over whole slices of their territory. In the same vein, argues Ricardo Soares de Oliveira (2007: 9), weak states like Congo or Angola became sustainable because they were cash-rich and aloof from external pressures thanks to oil. As for Libya, it was one of the poorest and most illiterate countries in the world when it became independent in 1951. The industrial sector was non-existent, and the economy seemed to be unviable as it relied to a large extent on foreign aid. However, with the start of oil production in 1960, Libya became a serious economic and political player (Gurney 1996).

The relationship between natural resources, political instability, and violence needs to be reassessed in this regard. On one side, theoreticians of the Dutch disease argue that oil wealth predicts higher levels of political terror because states can repress more when they have the financial capacity to do so. The oil industry fits perfectly a feudal model of governance. It requires little manpower, thereby preventing social struggles from within, and considerable capital and political connections; hence its proximity to dictatorships. As for foreign allies, they tend to turn a blind eye to repression when

governments pretend that the opposition threatens the oil industry, even if the protests have nothing to do with it (Omeje 2004). Last but not least, corruption is said to be positively correlated with political instability because it aggravates the pressure on an equitable distribution of the resource (Mauro 1995; Le Billon 2003). Large rents heighten the demand on the state capacity but not the supply of infrastructures because they increase the inclination to invest in instruments of power instead of public services.

On the other side, corruption does not only erode reciprocal commitment; easy money also helps to co-opt opponents, buy off dissent, resolve conflicts, and build strong social consensus that underwrites regime stability and durability. National oil companies provide a good example in this regard. In Africa, especially, they are used as channels of patronage and intermediaries with foreign investors. These flawed corporations do not create much employment because the capital–labour ratio is usually very low in the industry. But they fund a myriad of local contractors. While they do not involve the masses as in the nineteenth century European coalmines, they can still foster the development of strong trade unions which lead social protest in countries such as Nigeria and Venezuela today. In other words, they sometimes have a positive social impact. In Saudi Arabia, for instance, the demand of oil companies for salary workers helped to stop slavery (Botte 2010).

#### 4. SAME CAUSE, DIFFERENT EFFECTS

The relationship between oil and violence is not clear-cut in this regard. In Nigeria, it is alleged to have precipitated the Biafran War in 1967, when actually the Ibo fought for independence because they feared a genocide. Yet oil also contributed to funding the reconstruction and the unity of the most populated country in Africa in the 1970s. At independence in 1960, Nigerian northern Muslim leaders had opted for a virtual confederation of autonomous regions to protect their traditions against the modern sector of the economy in the

“Christian” South. But at the end of the Biafran War in 1970, they favoured unity to retain a stake in oil wealth. Sudan, on the contrary, followed a different path. On one side, oil exports that began in 1999 helped the Islamist junta to buy weapons and consolidate its power in Khartoum. On the other, they did not prevent the secession of Southern Sudan in 2011 nor the Darfur insurgency from 2003. Today, they are both a factor of peace and war. Located on the present border and former front-line, oil fields raise tensions between the North and the South, yet compel Khartoum and Juba to find a compromise since the two governments need each other to produce and export through the pipeline heading towards Port Sudan.

In fact, the spurious relationship between secessionist wars and oil could be challenged by “qualitative” investigation in more than half of 22 cases listed in petroleum-producing states from 1960 to 1999: Russia and Chechnya in 1994 and 1999; Azerbaijan and Karabagh in 1992; Croatia and Krajina in 1992; Turkey and the Kurds from 1984; Bosnia and Srpska in 1992; India and Kashmir in 1989; Yugoslavia and Krajina in 1991; Pakistan and Bangladesh in 1971; Morocco and Western Sahara from 1975; and the United Kingdom and Ulster from 1969. Michael Ross himself (2006) acknowledges that the correlation would lose statistical significance if he removed the oil-rich country with most civil wars—Russia.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, this list says nothing about oil-producing countries like Norway that did not experience secessionist wars, or the Federation of the United Arab Emirates (where oil fostered a sense of national unity and put an end to old tribal feuds). It does not explain either why Singapore, which has no petroleum, left the Malaysian Federation in 1965 while the oil-producing regions of Sabah and Sarawak did not attempt to break away despite the physical divide of the South China Sea. The list of secessionist cases is also not useful to understand why Curaçao, a small island which

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<sup>4</sup> He argues, however, that whether production is onshore or not, negative oil trade shocks are more associated with separatist conflicts than positive shocks with national conflicts.

refines and exports Venezuelan oil, remained a Dutch territory despite various attempts by oil companies to support its independence since the 1920s.

The role of transnational corporations deserves some explanation in this regard. John Oneal (1994) considers that they are attracted by dictatorships. On the contrary, Nathan Jensen (2003) claims that they find democratic environments to be more secure. But what about international oil companies (IOCs) more specifically? The industry earnings certainly benefit from wars that affect major petroleum producers and provoke rising prices. Sometimes, foreign investors can also thrive on conflicts by speculating on shortage and scarcity (Guidolin & La Ferrara 2007). “Revolution and war”, writes Morris Adelman (1995: 176), “are to the oil market as epidemics and famines to population control”: favourable because they raise the prices. As for the operators, they are engaged in a fierce competition. In the 1920s, for instance, the “seven sisters” allegedly blocked wells, restrained production, and undermined prospection to avoid a diminution of crude oil prices due to the improvement of the techniques of extraction and refinery.

Since then, large companies have sometimes attempted to destabilise oil-nationalising governments when they were faced with no alternative but eviction. In cases of war, they choose to pay taxes to all belligerents or to support only one side. During the Algerian struggle for independence in the late 1950s, for instance, the Italian oil company ENI was suspected of supporting the insurgents to hasten the departure of its French competitors (Aïssaoui 2001; Malti 2010). Elf funded ex-President Denis Sassou Nguesso against President Pascal Lissouba during the civil war in Congo in 1997 (Englebert & Ron 2004). As for small, risk-taking companies that are used to bribery and disregard of corporate social responsibility, they negotiated shady deals in war-torn Sudan and Uganda (Rone 2003; Patey 2010).

But does this mean that IOCs really prefer to operate in war-torn countries in order to circumvent public authorities, the rule of law, and taxation? Actually, oil companies often choose to work in high-risk locations simply because petroleum is there and not because they expect to make more profits by taking advantage of a war or a coup. In the unstable environment of weak states, IOCs usually prefer to deal with only one party because they dislike uncertainty and fragmented powers with too many stakeholders. Consequently, they can contribute to centralising states, as was the case in Libya, where oil taxation prompted the monarchy to put an end to the federal system in 1963, or in Nigeria, where the military dissolved regional governments and took control of all mineral resources in 1967–1969.

In this regard, it is extremely doubtful that IOCs deliberately intend to divide and rule to provoke instability. In general, it seems more sensible to suppose that they would prefer to avoid violent situations that impact on oil production, raise operating costs, minimise profit, exacerbate security risks for expatriate staff, and discourage private investment. Wars usually provoke a collapse of oil production, as in the case of Iraq when it invaded Iran in 1980 and Kuwait in 1990, or when it was invaded by the United States in 2003 (Colgan 2013b: 92). In Nigeria, for instance, IOCs lost money when the Biafra secession put a stop to oil production. In Chad, the civil wars of 1975–1990 even prevented the development of oil, which was discovered in 1969 and eventually extracted from 2003. The same goes for Southern Sudan in the 1990s. In other words, the relationship goes both ways. Oil can exacerbate violence, and violence can also kill oil production.

Of course, national oil companies are of a different type. Parastatals are less driven by profit-making. They depend first on governments, more than on markets and investors. To break the opposition, Hugo Chavez thus committed ‘economic suicide’ by firing the staff of the Venezuelan national oil company after a strike in 2002–2003. As a result, production and government revenues fell, while ideology and local politics prevailed.

The case of Venezuela showed that the priority of rentier states and their public companies is not always to develop oil production in order to finance repression and social control. In this regard, the expectations of analysts on the destabilising role of foreign operators are sometimes misleading. In 1976, for instance, a Marxist author was writing that Iran was a cohesive state that would remain stable because its private sector included indigenous capitalist producers, while Nigeria was typically a comprador economy, prone to conflict because transnational corporations dictated how it was ruled (Turner 1976). In fact, both faced the same problems of rapid growth and massive injection of oil wealth. But in 1979, the Iranian government collapsed and Islamists took power, while Nigeria organised pluralist elections. According to Lawrence Frank (1984), this is because the political culture in Nigeria was less centralised and more materialist.

A major problem of the oil “curse” determinism is indeed that the same cause does not lead to the same results. While the oil boom did not prevent the fall of the Shah in Iran in 1979, it helped Suharto’s New Order government to restore political control in Indonesia. Both countries were Muslim with ethnically and culturally diverse populations, and both regimes were patrimonial and authoritarian, relying on military coercion, patronage networks, and capitalist development strategies. The big difference is that Suharto set up a party for the masses to stabilise the country and quell opposition, whereas the Shah did not really try to use the oil rent to reform and modernise the political techniques of social control (Smith 2006).

Because they underline the peculiarities of different types of governance, further comparisons between pairs of developing countries that produce oil demonstrate all the limits of the attempts to draw a general rule. Another example is Nigeria and Indonesia. Large, multi-ethnic, and heavily populated with Muslims, they both experienced colonisation, civil wars in the 1960s, corrupt military regimes in the 1970s, and shaky

democratic transitions in the 1990s. But Indonesia was more stable under Mohammed Suharto, whereas Nigeria endured a chaotic political life and a weaker management of its oil resources (Bevan et al. 1999; Lewis 2007). As a result, Nigeria recorded one of the top ten worst per capita growth rates in the world, an average of -1.6 per cent for the period 1980–2002, while Indonesia’s income per head has grown threefold since the 1960s (Easterly 2006: 347).

## 5. THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND THE QUALITY OF INSTITUTIONS

Undoubtedly, the determinism of the curse theory does not explain properly why oil wealth undercuts or bolsters some regimes and not others. The lack of a general rule shows how necessary it is to investigate the social context, the sustainability of institutions, and the longevity of states. Jeff Colgan thus agrees that the political effect of oil is not uniform and depends much upon the nature of the government. It is the combination of revolutionary regimes and oil production that makes petrostates aggressive. Oil and war do not necessarily go hand in hand: it is a small group of ‘petro-revolutionary states’ that drive the overall figures and initiate international conflicts at a rate two-and-a-half times higher than the typical non-petrostate (2013b: 263).

Indeed, the effect of oil wealth on political order and stability is contingent on the quality of government, especially when it comes to corruption and social redistribution (Fjelde 2006). Conversely, the political economy of rentier states also plays a role. The theory of the Dutch disease focuses on the risk of oil and gas depleting other sectors in diversified economies like the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, or Australia. But it does not elaborate so much on the role of the mineral wealth in developing countries where it is the only viable source of revenue. Saudi Arabia, Venezuela, and Equatorial Guinea, for instance, are much more dependent on oil exports than diversified economies where the private sector is strong. Thad Dunning (2008: 21) thus suggests that “resource-dependent countries tend

to be more authoritarian than the merely resource-abundant countries”.

However, dependence is also contingent on development policies, political will, population size, and the capacity to diversify economies. States with strong institutions, a dynamic private sector, and a longer experience of democracy are certainly in a better position to avoid the Dutch disease. In contrast, ‘new’ states which are poor, heavily populated, and already under authoritarian rule are likely to face greater challenges. In this regard, oil is not the cause of their misfortune but a catalyst that exacerbates and makes bad governance more visible. Consequently, argues Benjamin Smith (2007: 1), the proponents of the curse theory should ask not whether a country is oil-rich, but since when. To clarify the role of hydrocarbon resources, analysts should actually investigate state institutions before oil came into production and became a major export commodity.

Indeed, the oil boom and the nationalisations of the 1970s did not create the authoritarian regimes that already existed in many developing countries, such as in Iraq since 1958, Algeria since 1962, and Libya since 1969 (Martinez 2010). They funded their security forces and their social control. But we do not have any evidence that these regimes would have democratised and become pacified if not for their oil rent. Likewise, in Africa south of the Sahara, writes Duncan Clarke (2008: 530), “the prevalence of coercive regimes typically pre-dates oil in most instances... and rarely emerges only when, and because, oil is discovered”. Nigeria, Angola, and Congo, for instance, were run by military dictatorships when they experienced their first oil boom in the 1970s.

Terry Karl (1997: 213-21) thus considers that the poor economic and political performance of resource-rich developing countries is first and foremost related to the development of good institutions, as in Norway, where the establishment of a democratic polity preceded oil exploration. In other words, countries in earlier phases of state building are more vulnerable to the damage of oil

production. “Where there are structured and powerful institutions in place predating oil dependence, the oil curse is less likely to take hold”, concludes Samuel Schubert (2006: 5). In this regard, it is crucial to study both oil dependence and the development of the state from a historical perspective.

To extend the period of investigation is not enough, however. It needs to be complemented by a qualitative understanding of these issues. Otherwise, timeframes can be misleading, both for the opponents and the proponents of the curse theory. To contest the “oil curse” claim, for instance, Stephen Haber and Victor Menaldo (2011) used new data on natural resource wealth for the years 1800–2006. But this period, note Michael Ross and Jørgen Andersen (2012), is far too long to draw conclusions since no country produced significant quantities of oil before 1918. Moreover, they argue, Haber and Menaldo studied changes of regimes from one year to the next. Such an interval is too short to take into account the slow transformation of political institutions and the role of stabilisation funds that smooth out fluctuations in oil revenues to maintain government expenditures and avoid political pressures over the medium-term. It would have been more relevant to control the panel with another group instead of claiming that oil-producing states have grown slightly more democratic over time, yet at a slower pace than non-oil states. Michael Ross and Jørgen Andersen thus show that, on the contrary, oil wealth began to inhibit democratic transitions together with decolonisation and nationalisations, when authoritarian governments became sovereign and took control of production during the wave of contract revisions in the 1970s. Before that, the global petroleum industry was dominated by a few vertically integrated IOCs, and developing countries were unable to capture these rents.

In the same vein, Pauline Jones Luong and Erika Weinthal (2010: 4-19) insist on the evolution of the ownership structure of the mineral sector, more than on the role of weak institutions. In their case, they contest the resource curse literature because it is too narrowly

focused on the period from the 1970s to the 1990s, when the vast majority of oil-producing countries exercised state ownership over their mineral reserves. Of the five oil-producing countries that emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, for instance, Jones Luong and Weinthal observe that Russia, Azerbaijan, and Kazakhstan outperformed petroleum-poor countries of the CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States), as well as Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, where oil fields remained state-owned. In the opinion of these authors, this is because Russia pursued private domestic ownership, Kazakhstan chose private foreign ownership, and Azerbaijan opted for state ownership without full control on production.

Of course, the necessity to look at history also applies to armed conflicts. In Sudan, for instance, the grievances of southerners led to several insurgencies from 1956 and, again, from 1983, well before oil was produced from 1999. In the same vein, the civil wars of Nigeria in 1967 and Angola from 1961 started before the oil boom of the 1970s, respectively because of pogroms in 1966 and a liberation struggle that turned into a power contest after independence in 1975. In 1975–1990, Chad was also torn apart by fighting even before oil was produced from 2003. As for the liberation war in Algeria from 1954, it did not start because of oil production, which began in 1956. The prospect of hydrocarbon resources prompted the French to retain control of the colony and to favour the failed secession of an independent Sahara region, together with Northern Mali, in 1957. But the resources were not a major stake in the conflict. The Front de Libération Nationale (FLN) spared the oil fields, which were located in the desert, far from the fighting areas, and the operating companies were even suspected of having made a secret agreement with the rebels (Saul 2012).

Unfortunately, the curse theorists do not bother to go into details when they link oil to on-going conflicts without investigating their history. In their dataset, for instance, Päivi Lujala and her colleagues (2007: 239) include struggles for autonomy or independence in the

oil-rich regions of Cabinda in Angola since 1991 and Aceh in Indonesia since 1989. But the Front for the Liberation of the Enclave of Cabinda and the Free Aceh Movement were actually launched in 1963 and 1976, respectively. In another article on oil production zones, Päivi Lujala also argues that “conflicts in which the financial stakes are high for both sides are the most severe” (2009: 68). To illustrate her findings, she refers to the Biafran secession in Nigeria (1967–1970) and the Second Sudanese Civil War (1983–2004). But she does not try to correlate the presence of oil fields with levels of production, which were very low before the conflict and almost non-existent during the Biafran War. Likewise, she forgets to mention that oil production and export in Sudan started in 1999, impacting five years of hostilities out of a total of 21, notwithstanding the duration of the First Sudanese Civil War between 1956 and 1972. In addition, she does not correlate the number of battle deaths with population data in oil production areas and countries like Nigeria, which is the most populated in Africa. However, should we not expect the severity of an armed conflict to vary according to the density of population in a given place?

Clearly, many factors interfere. If it had no monetary value, oil per se would not be likely to provoke armed conflicts. According to James Robinson et al. (2006: 447), “the political incentives that resource endowments generate are the key to understanding whether or not they are a curse”. Indeed, people are not fighting for oil as such, but for the way its revenues are redistributed and centralised. Hence one has to distinguish problems related to the rent, on one hand, and to the extraction of mineral resources, on the other. The first are the heart of the matter. The so-called resource wars are actually political conflicts. The curse is not inevitable. Natural resources are a social construction that changes over centuries, according to the demand and the creation of markets and associated commodity chains.

## 6. THE LIMITS OF ECONOMIC DETERMINISM

In other words, the role of oil rent in violence needs to be placed not only into historical perspective but also into its political context, especially in areas where competition and the (mis)management of conflicts usually led to the use of force. Oil naturally received its fair share of the post-Cold War focus on natural resources because it is very mediatised and involves huge amounts of money: it is the most valuable commodity traded in the world as measured by the total value of exports and imports. Nonetheless, explained Philippe Le Billon (2001), it is certainly not the best mineral asset to fund rebellions, as it is much more difficult than cocaine or blood diamonds to extract, carry, and export. So far so good when it comes to the political economy of internal armed conflicts. But the theoreticians of the resource curse are also concerned with interstate wars and the raw materials race. Indeed, writes Morris Adelman:

the flow of oil wealth makes some producing countries worth invading and gives others the means to invade... The smaller the oil revenues are, the less is the chance of aggression and of the producing government's buying nuclear or other weapons. (1995: 329)

Interestingly enough, the analysis of interstate wars through the prism of hydrocarbons often reverses the perspective, which is then on scarcity rather than abundance. The focus is no longer on "conflict resources" that fund the belligerents in internal conflicts, but on "resource conflicts" where oil is both a strategic target and a motivational factor for war. Hence a Malthusian view of the problem expects rising tensions when oil reserves are to decline after production reaches the Hubbert peak (Ardillier-Carras 2012). The fear of depletion is actually quite old. As early as 1922, a governmental report of the Department of Geology predicted that the United States would exhaust its oil reserves by 1940 (Zischka 1933: 43). Consequently, America was motivated to find alternative supplies, competing with the United Kingdom, Germany, France,

and even Japan. In 1941, for instance, an American and British blockade forbade oil shipments to Tokyo, a factor that pushed Japan into war.<sup>5</sup>

During the following decades, the competition then opposed the two superpowers. In an oft-quoted article published in *Time* magazine on 15 January 1979, for instance, President Jimmy Carter's national security advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski predicted:

within a decade, the Soviet Union will be running short of the oil it needs to fuel an expanding economy. Thus the [Gulf] region could easily become the fulcrum of world conflict in the 1980s.

Later on, China replaced Russia. After the end of the Cold War, Michael Klare (2004) explained that America's growing dependency on oil imports would push the United States into conflict with China. In the same vein, Andy Rowell and his colleagues (2005) anticipated rising tensions in the Gulf of Guinea because the United States bought approximately 20 per cent of its oil and gas from this region of the world. Jeremy Keenan (2009: 5) also argued that Washington launched its Pan-Sahel Initiative in 2007 to secure strategic national resources in West Africa, even if there were no hydrocarbons in Mali, and oil production in Nigeria was actually quite far from the Sahara.

In fact, all these authors overestimated the role of mineral assets as a determinant of foreign policy. They did not acknowledge the capacity of governments, companies, and consumers to adjust rapidly to external shocks, nor did they forecast a possibility for compromise and peaceful mediation, the development of alternative sources of energy, the opening of the markets, lower prices, the finding of new reserves, cheaper production costs, or a reduction in oil consumption. However, Eugene Gholz and Daryl Press (2010; 2013: 140) showed that "the world is not perched on an energy precipice". Major oil-consuming countries, they argue, hold large government-controlled stockpiles, while private

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<sup>5</sup> But in 1967 it was the Six-Day War that provoked the use of the "oil weapon" as a retaliation against the West in 1973.

companies and cartels like OPEC keep pumping capacity in reserve to be able to fill the shortfall in case of disruptions. In 2011 during the civil war in Libya, for instance, OPEC responded quickly by turning spare capacity into actual production. In the same manner, threats to oil tankers and naval chokepoints are exaggerated. Except for the Strait of Hormuz, key waterways could be avoided, and rerouting would not impact markets so much because ships are partially underutilised and transport costs comprise a small percentage of the price of oil. In addition, the development of hydraulic fracturing to release petroleum has dramatically reduced America's dependency on oil imports. On present production trends, the United States should be entirely self-sufficient by 2020 or 2030.

Obviously, other competitors are still struggling for their share of oil. But this does not mean that they would be ready to go to war. Border disputes on oil or gas blocks between neighbouring producing countries are significant in this regard. Sometimes, they do end up in brief and low-intensity conflicts, as with Gabon and Equatorial Guinea in the Guinea Gulf in 1972, Nigeria and Cameroon along the Bakassi peninsula in 1994, and the Democratic Republic of Congo and Uganda around Lake Albert in 2007. But in Malawi and Tanzania since 2012, disagreements over oil prospection on Lake Nyasa have led to some movements of troops—and nothing else. In the same vein, Nigeria and São Tomé resolved their oil conflict peacefully in the 2000s. In general, such border disputes never reach the proportions of civil wars. On the contrary, they are not very violent because they are regulated and oppose states, not people.

Historically, the competition for oil has seldom resulted in armed conflicts between neighbouring states, except perhaps for the famous Chaco War, which opposed Bolivia and Paraguay in 1932–1935. Oil was one of the causes of the deadly fighting between Iraq and Iran from 1980 to 1988. But it was not the only one. And in neighbouring Azerbaijan, the war with Armenia in 1988–1994 actually had nothing to do with oil. Azerbaijan had

been extracting petroleum since 1846, and it currently has a (peaceful) border dispute with Iran which hinders the development of offshore drilling in the Caspian Sea. The war with Armenia was a contest over the control of Karabagh, an enclave without oil in the hinterland.

The role of oil alone is thus difficult to assess and perhaps impossible to isolate in international armed conflicts. As it converted its navy from coal to oil in the 1910s, Germany certainly tried to control Mesopotamia and Persia during World War One, while an Austro-Hungarian commando infiltrated Egypt to destroy British oil installations (Le Billon 2012: 51). But the political economy of hydrocarbons was not the cause of the conflict. Likewise, it did not determine the course of the fighting during World War Two, even if Nazi Germany tried—and failed—to capture or destroy oil fields in the Caucasus in 1942. The competition between IOCs did not degenerate into armed conflicts either. During World War One, for instance, Standard Oil and Shell signed a pact of non-aggression which eventually led to a compromise despite renewed rivalry between American, British, and Dutch companies in the 1920s. In any case, the major IOCs have lost much of their influence: today, they no longer dominate the market.

## 7. A GEOGRAPHICAL VIEW OF OIL

The role of oil is as difficult to assess in internal conflicts. Large producing countries like Mexico, Venezuela, and Nigeria experience various types of large-scale violence that are not directly related to petroleum: drug trafficking, gangs wars, political assassinations, Islamist terrorism, armed robberies, etc. If we consider excess mortality to be a good proxy to assess human security, we should then acknowledge that most violent deaths result from a variety of causes that are not related to oil. Within the Federal Republic of Nigeria, for instance, the four littoral states that concentrate oil production and reserves in the Niger Delta account for a small part of the numerous lethal conflicts recorded in the 32 other states, which are more populated, and the littoral states are no longer the most violent regions of the

country since the government granted an amnesty to the rebels in 2009.<sup>6</sup> Daily crime is much more frequent and deadly in Lagos, the largest Nigerian city, which does not produce oil, as it also is in Caracas in Venezuela, a country where the rural oil-producing regions are spared from violence—and also less populated.

Of course, the repartition of population is a major factor in explaining the geographical distribution of violence. In many cases, onshore oil fields are located far away from urban centres, if not in deep offshore, where the risk of communal friction is minimal. In Congo, for instance, oil is located almost entirely offshore, so the civil war of 1998–1999 concentrated on Brazzaville in the hinterland, whereas the coastal region of Pointe-Noire remained peaceful. Indeed, the greed for petroleum rents pushed the militias to fight for control of the capital city. But as soon as former President Sassou Nguesso demonstrated his ability to defend Brazzaville, rebel leaders preferred to surrender to negotiate a return to their old public sector jobs. Southern rebels did not attempt to secede and to seize or destroy oil facilities in Pointe Noire, which was defended by Angolan troops. In any case, write Pierre Englebert and James Ron, “a successful attack would not have secured control over the oil fields themselves, and the oil companies could have easily moved their headquarters elsewhere”. The fighting was rather brief and the petroleum rent was a way to buy social peace. According to Englebert and Ron, the offshore location of oil production eschewed protracted rural warfare in a country where armed groups had no alternative way of raising funds from natural resources. Thus, Congo was “the opposite of Angola, where easy access to alluvial diamonds allowed the rebels to endure for several decades despite the government’s control of offshore oil” (2004: 71).

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<sup>6</sup> Nigeria: Third Report on Violence (2006–2011), Nigeria Watch, 2011, 22 pp. Accessed: <http://www.nigeriawatch.org/index.php?html=7>

For Philippe Le Billon (2012: 29), the location of oil fields is in fact crucial to their impact on conflicts, if ever they have one. Yet oil should not be associated in a deterministic fashion with coups d'états if it is offshore, with chronic civil unrest if it is onshore, or with secession if it is located in politically marginalised areas. A geographical reading of violence has its limits. To start with, the lack of spatial coincidence between oil and conflict can be misleading. Indeed, it happens that the belligerents of a civil war spare producing areas because they expect to benefit from them later on. Oil-related conflicts can also develop in other countries, outside of production areas, along pipelines or shipping routes. Conversely, there may be a spatial coincidence and no causal link. For instance, the Mexican drugs cartels of the 2000s developed in oil-producing regions along the frontier with the United States to control cross-border drug trafficking, yet the driver of violence was not related to the oil industry.

The lack of causal link and geographical coincidence is even clearer at the level of interstate wars, as in Azerbaijan in 1988–1994, where the fighting was in Karabagh and not in the oil-producing Caspian Sea. In this regard, a spatial analysis of the problem can also contribute to the usual confusion in the curse theory between correlation and causality. Indeed, the econometric reading of the violence of resource dependence is often misleading because its coding per country does not take into account the fact that most civil wars are regionalised or internationalised (Gersovitz & Kriger 2013). In other words, it points to the role of local oil production when actually the origin of the conflict may be imported from neighbouring countries that do not produce oil.

## 8. THE BIAS OF THE CURSE

Thus, the limits of the curse determinism compel researchers to relativise the impact of resource dependence on armed conflicts. More than the mineral commodity in itself, oil wealth certainly plays a secondary and, much less often, a direct role in many

types of violence within producing countries. As this article focuses on war and not daily crime, we can assume that it sometimes exacerbates the propensity to conflicts and that disputes over the allocation of its revenues have indeed fuelled secessionist struggles in Nigeria's Niger Delta, Indonesia's Aceh, Angola's Cabinda, Iraq's Kurdistan, Southern Sudan, and even Scotland, where the independence movement grew up along with oil production (Shankleman 2007: 43). But "oil is never the direct cause", writes Nicholas Shaxson (2007: 231); "it is always stealthier than that. It just wakes and energizes the old demons, and conjures up a few new ones too".

In the Niger Delta of Nigeria since the mid-1990s, for instance, oil has exacerbated violence because the political and social conditions were ripe for the explosion. But the story would have been different if it were not for corruption, bad governance, greed, educational problems, and political repression. Likewise, oil financed, prolonged, and shaped the contours of the fighting in Angola (Frynas & Wood 2001). But it was not the cause of the conflict. The same goes for interstate wars. The focus on oil as the main—or even only—cause of a confrontation is misleading. During World War Two, the United States did not fight against Japan and Germany because it produced oil. Yet the curse theorists would surely have speculated about the role of hydrocarbons if the conflict had opposed two producing, developing countries in the Southern hemisphere.

In fact, we know that warmongers and dictators do not need oil to fight and kill. Thus a limitation of the curse determinism is that it does not take into account the multiple reasons for an armed conflict. In the same vein, a focus on oil hardly proves that petroleum would be worse than other resources. Take for example the issue of price volatility, which is analysed only in a negative way. On the one hand, dwindling supplies are supposed to increase crude oil prices, exacerbate competition, and create conflicts. On the other, lower prices are also expected to destabilise oil-producing governments because they decrease incentives for external support and reduce

internal revenues for patronage, security, and public welfare (Jaffe & Manning 2000). However, this problem of uncertainty and volatility is valid for any commodity, whereas oil demand and supply are usually more stable than is the case with other minerals. Like any valuable resource, the black gold contributes to funding belligerents, and it is both a military objective and a material motive. As it involves a lot of money, it is certainly more crucial than, say, cacao. But it is not always essential for the locals. Usually, people first fight for land and access to basic resources: water, food, grazing, fishing rights, and so on.

A focus on oil dependence is too narrow in this regard. A qualitative understanding of the role of petroleum in armed conflicts should also investigate other variables that are sometimes interrelated, such as the offshore or onshore location of wells, the distribution of population, the weak rule of law, the lack of strong institutions, poor property rights, the state involvement or foreign ownership in the sector, and the relative influence of domestic versus international factors. Pauline Jones Luong and Erika Weinthal (2006a & 2006b), for instance, insist on the structure of ownership over mineral resources. In their opinion, offshore exploitation is less likely to affect conflicts than onshore production in oil-dependent states with low revenues per capita and few private companies. Indeed, domestic private ownership may deter groups from attempting to control the state to capture oil revenues. Moreover, international social and environmental pressures usually focus on private companies and may be a better incentive to address local problems and prevent conflicts.

Another limitation of the curse theorists is thus that they focus on the link between oil and violence only. Aside from a few studies, they hardly begin to investigate the relationship between oil, peace and, possibly, state building and stability.<sup>7</sup> Yet Philippe Le Billon (2012: 154) shows that oil wealth may shorten conflicts if its

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<sup>7</sup> For the exceptions, see Basedau & Lay (2009)

revenues are exclusively available to the stronger party, if they prompt participation in a peace process, or if they contribute to fragment and weaken military groups. Contrary to the argument that loot-seeking rebels aim to prolong conflicts, Macartan Humphreys (2005) finds that natural resources are associated with shorter wars and end with military victories, amongst other reasons because external actors have incentives to bring the fighting to a close when their supplies are threatened. Of course, rebels can sometimes sabotage and deliberately damage the oil industry to cut a government's funding and bargain for a better deal. But they can also spare producing areas because petroleum is located offshore, as in Congo, or because they expect to benefit from it later on, as with the independence war in Algeria. The targeting of the oil industry is not very conclusive in this regard. Strikes against oil and gas installations represented only about 2 per cent of international terrorist attacks recorded between 1968 and 1999 (Kjøk & Lia 2001: 10). Of these incidents, only 58 per cent occurred in petroleum-producing countries, and nearly half of the world's oil-producing countries were spared.

In any case, the curse theorists do not really expect a halt or a reduction of oil-production to pacify and democratise regimes that were already authoritarian and violent before they started to export hydrocarbon resources. We thus wonder why the abundance of raw materials would cause conflicts, while their scarcity would fail to topple dictatorships, prevent wars, or put an end to hostilities.<sup>8</sup> The truth is that the curse determinism can only be tested one way, the negative way. For instance, the Dutch disease theorists insist on the lack of accountability and the reluctance of the elites to diversify the economy because it might engender future political competition in resource-dependent states. But they do not investigate the reverse causality, when civil wars exacerbate resource dependence because they reduce the size of the manufacturing sector. Nor do they

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<sup>8</sup> The academic literature suggests that economic sanctions are not efficient in this regard. See Elliott (1998); Pape (1997)

acknowledge the fact that there can be representation without taxation.<sup>9</sup>

A major weakness of the oil curse theory is indeed the permanent confusion between correlation and causal relationship. We know that many people die in their beds, yet this does not mean that beds are dangerous. In the same manner, econometric works can produce many correlations. But qualitative investigation is required to identify mechanisms and causal links. Averages and general assumptions do not help to isolate the role of mineral resources amongst many other factors. They also do not clarify the various links between oil and violence.

Quite to the contrary, a qualitative analysis of the databases used by economists and the “mathematicians of politics” reveals many discrepancies. For instance, of 166 armed conflicts that took place between 1945 and 2006 in countries where oil had been discovered, only one in four seemed plausibly related to oil (Le Billon 2012: 63). The indirect relationship to war is often dubious. Thus the claim that oil causes climate change, which in turn could trigger armed conflicts, is mired in controversy. Likewise, the role of oil in providing finance for foreign non-state actors to wage wars remains doubtful. Indeed, Jeff Colgan pays no attention to the fungibility of aid and state resources when he argues that oil rent explains the support of Iran to the Hezbollah and of Saudi Arabia to Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan (2013a: 152).

#### CONCLUSION: A NEW RESEARCH AGENDA

The limitations of the curse theory thus have implications for research and policy making in Nigeria. First of all, they show that oil alone is not enough to explain violent conflicts. Consequently, decision makers should pay more attention to state governance in producing countries like Nigeria, where the political

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<sup>9</sup> India, Turkey, and Latin America thus democratised despite the growing share of indirect taxation in their fiscal revenue. See Hachemaoui (2012: 217)

context and the ‘quality’ of institutions are crucial prerequisites of the curse. A focus on reform only of the oil industry would not solve and prevent conflicts. In this regard, the determinism of the curse theory is clearly misleading. For peacemakers, the main issue is indeed to find sustainable solutions for reconstruction and conflict prevention. In other words, the question they must address is also to know whether there would have been a war without oil. And the answer is often Yes.

But the limitations of the curse theory also require a new research agenda for Nigeria. The complexity of the different factors that determine violence, authoritarianism, and corruption calls for a multidisciplinary investigation by economists, political scientists, geographers, sociologists, anthropologists, historians, and demographers on a case-by-case basis. The prism of mineral resources should come only at a later stage, to understand the different dimensions of the issue: the development of the state, the influence of economic dependence on politics, and the impact of local and international governance on the way oil is extracted and redistributed. Such a research agenda would then require a common framework to elaborate comparisons between Nigeria and other countries—wherever comparisons are possible.

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