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Publication Date

1999-09-24

BERKELEY WORKSHOP ON ENVIRONMENTAL POLITICS

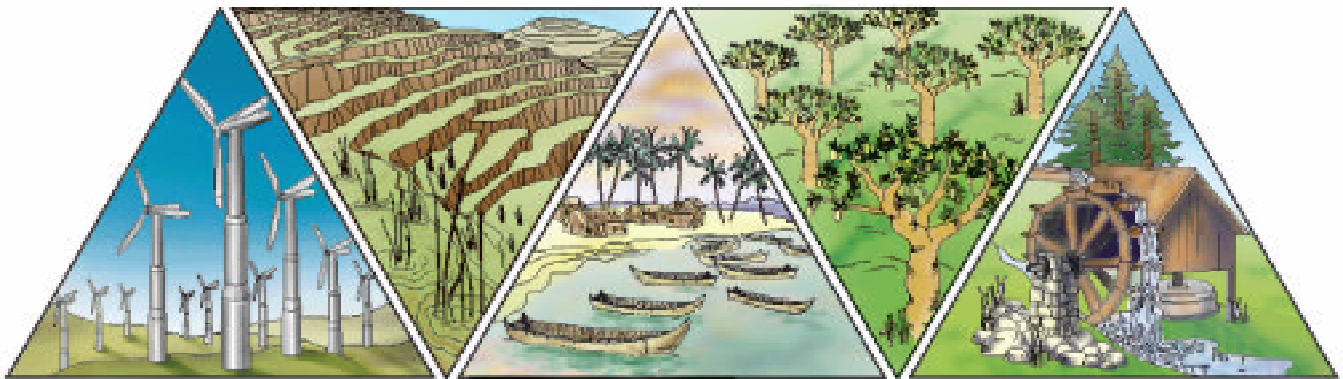
WORKING PAPERS

WP 99-1

PETRO-VIOLENCE

**SOME THOUGHTS ON COMMUNITY,
EXTRACTION, AND POLITICAL ECOLOGY**

Michael J. Watts



L. Carper/R. Reen, 1999

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**PETRO-VIOLENCE:
SOME THOUGHTS ON COMMUNITY, EXTRACTION, AND POLITICAL ECOLOGY**

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Oil, more than any other commodity, illustrates both the importance and the mystification of natural resources in the modern world.

Fernando Coronil, *The Magical State*, 1997, p. 49

I want to offer some thoughts on the violence that so often attends the extraction of oil [and necessarily on the ecological devastation which is its handmaiden]; what I'll call for the purposes of this workshop *petro-violence*. My purpose is not to offer, obviously, a sort of commodity determinism—petroleum is more violent than coal, or oil extraction breeds Muslim radicalism (Iran) while copper breeds evangelical cronyism (Zambia)—but to take seriously the idea that the biophysical properties of Nature, of a natural resource, matter in both palpable and analytical ways. It is both difficult and artificial to distill out the narrowly defined biological and geophysical properties of “crude” or “raw” petroleum from the social relations (institutional practices, ideological associations and meanings, forms of extraction, production and use) of petroleum, a commodity not only saturated in the mythos of the rise of the West but also indisputably one of *the* most fundamental building blocks of twentieth century industrial capitalism (“hydrocarbon capitalism”). But I do believe that a commodity focus—particularly on a part of Nature which has the density and weight of black gold—offers a way of thinking about the intersection of environment and violence: both biological violence, as it were, perpetrated upon the biophysical world, and the social violence, criminality and degeneracy associated with the genesis of petro-wealth and with its ecological destructiveness.

The entire history of the petroleum history is, as Daniel Yergin (1991) details in his encyclopedic account of the industry *The Prize*, replete with criminality, corruption, the crude exercise of power, and the worst of frontier capitalism. Graft and thuggishness are its defining characteristics. And it is to be expected then that in an age of unprecedented denationalization and market liberalization, the mad scramble to locate the next petrolic El Dorado continues unabated (irrespective of falling oil prices and the shambles that is OPEC). Petro-violence is rarely off the front pages of the press. The Caspian basin reaching from the borders of Afghanistan to the Russian Caucasus is a repository of enormous petro-wealth; Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Georgia and the southern Russian provinces (Ossetia, Dagestan, Chechnya) have, however, become, in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union, a zone of civil conflict and war, as the *San Francisco Chronicle* puts it (August 11th 1998, p. A8). As the oil companies jockey for position in an atmosphere of frontier vigilantism, petroleum has become central to what the Azerbaijani president calls “armed conflict,

*Paper prepared for the Workshop on Environment and Violence, University of California, Berkeley, September 24-26, 1998.

aggressive separatism and nationalism.” In Columbia, ELN guerrillas blew up the Cano Limon pipeline, and Occidental Petroleum, in a long-running battle with indigenous populations, was confronted with the prospect of 5000 U’wa Amerindians committing mass suicide if their “tribal lands” were the site of oil extraction (*The Economist* June 6th 1998, p. 34). And it is surely not too much of a stretch to see the black and sticky residues of Middle East petroleum in the wreckage of the recent bombings in Dar es Salaam and Nairobi [whether Mr. bin Laden, a son of a contractor who became fabulously rich overnight from the oil rents generously distributed by the Saudi monarchy, was or was not responsible in some way for the bombings, the very idea of a *fatwa* against the United States can only be understood in relation to the geopolitics of oil and the radically destabilizing consequences of the circulation of petrodollars within the Muslim world].

These instances of petro-violence raise the question of the boundaries of this paper and of the reach of oil in examining violence. I shall concentrate here on the point of production (on extraction) and its immediate consequences (environmental in particular), but this local focus cannot be rigidly demarcated from the crucial consequences of oil rents on the state, on national political discourse, and on the broad rhythms of accumulation. In fact it is this broader landscape of petro-politics and petro-accumulation which is crucial to understanding the violence of local production and the centrality of the things which concern me here, namely how petroleum as a natural resource, shapes a violence in which environmental justice or green compensation/retribution is so often fused to a debate over citizenship and the nation.

There are two sorts of argument made in the paper. One is *comparative*, speaking to oil exploitation in two different locations (Nigeria and Ecuador) and the outcomes (both at the level of the community and the national body politic) which involve different forms of violence (massive state violence versus scattered instances of intra-community and vigilante violence) and yet some similar objects of struggle (the Nation, citizenship and indigenous identity). The other is *theoretical*, and turns on how one might think about the specificities of Nature, of a natural resource. Here it is important to distinguish three levels at which the theory is operating. One is that oil speaks to a general set of questions about *extraction* (and the sorts of violence which might be typically attached to these sets of activities). There is, then, a class of questions which are about extraction and violence in general (of which one case is oil). Another level pertains to *rents*, and the rents which come to play a key role in national and local politics (in the oil case, rent is derived from the capitalist extraction of minerals but is obviously not unique to it, i.e., it could be an agricultural rent or a rent derived from other sectors). In other words, a part of the oil story turns on a class of phenomena pertaining to rents and rentier activities, and how both relate to violence and the environment (of which this is a case of oil but it could have been silver and the activities of the Hunt brothers). The final issue pertains to the *natural resource*, to the particularities and peculiarities of oil itself (all of which reflect differing degrees of “naturalness”): that it is finite, it is a black and sticky fluid that is pumped from the ground and transported from the point of production in pipelines, that it is almost always a national resource with territorial attributes (state landed property), that oil is inseparable from the largest forms of transnational capital, that oil has its own mythos in terms of wealth, its power, its centrality to hydrocarbon civilization and so on. I want to make some special claims about these latter properties—to grapple with the problem of Nature’s agency and a disaggregated sense of its causal powers—but the comparison I make necessarily raises generic questions about rentier politics and violence, and of course of extraction and environmental violence.

This paper has (unfortunately) an odd structure. My entry point is the much publicized struggle by the Ogoni people—a small ethnic society occupying a Lilliputian territory in the oil-rich Niger delta in southeast Nigeria—against Shell and the staggering ecological devastation wrought by the company since 1958 when pumping began. It is also the story of their one-time leader Ken Saro-Wiwa, and his efforts to create a space of autonomy and self-determination enshrined in an Ogoni Bill of Rights and in a mass political movement [MOSOP, the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People]. Saro-Wiwa and eight others were hung following a show trial at the hands of a military tribunal; nineteen other key Ogoni leaders remain in detention (the death of Abacha and the release of political prisoners by the head of the junta has threatened their incarceration). Since 1991 Ogoniland has been the site of extraordinary violence (intra- and intercommunity as well as between the state and security forces and the Ogoni), and since 1995 it has been under military occupation. I have provided a full account of this case of environmental violence which links transnational capital, the Nigerian military state apparatus, and the oil producing “community” (as it happens a complex notion) in a long (!) Appendix. My argument is roughly as follows: to the extent that the Ogoni struggle is a response to the violence perpetrated upon the environment by the slick alliance of state and capital, it is an effort by a Nigerian ethnic minority—an “indigenous people”—to simultaneously construct, first, representations of other Nigerians as “ethnic majorities” and of themselves as minorities and indigenous people. The struggle is also about political rights and entitlements on which alternative histories and geographies are constructed. Environment—that is to say, the particular biological and geophysical properties of what the Ogoni take to be their territory—is of course central to both of these constructions. In my view the Ogoni struggle for recognition is part of an incomplete decolonization of Africa, an effort to redeem something from the carapace of reformist nationalism and to maintain the imaginative liberation of an African people, what Aimee Cesaire in another time called the “invention of new souls.” The Ogoni struggle to identity themselves, and others in relations to themselves, turns in large measure, as I shall argue, on articulations of history and geography, on nature and biology. This brings me to a second point, namely Poulantzas” (1978) observation that “national unity or modern unity becomes a historicity of a territory and a territorialization of a history.” Markers of identity may become themselves commodities in a way that the histories of interrelated peoples becomes spatialized into bounded territories, and “since these spaces appear as being produced naturally, not historically, they serve to root the histories of connected peoples in separate territories and to sever the links between them” (Coronil 1996, p. 77). There is a double occlusion as histories of space are obscured and as social relations between societies are eviscerated. This double movement applies as much to the Nigerian state as it does to the Ogoni themselves.

I have provided an account of the Ogoni and the centrality of violence (both violence perpetrated by Shell and the state upon the Ogoni and their environment) in an Appendix because the purpose of the comments that follow are somewhat different. I wish to explore the case of the Ogoni in a comparative light, specifically with regard to the events surrounding oil exploration and production in the Upper Amazon (in the Ecuadorian Oriente in particular). There are both interesting similarities and points of departure in these two cases which I shall try to highlight. But the comparison also provides a powerful vehicle for exploring the violence which surrounds oil, and to delve into what Coronil calls the mystification of natural resources in the modern world.

FIGHTING FOR EL DORADO: ECUADOR AND NIGERIA COMPARED

In November 1993 a Philadelphia law firm filed a \$1.5 billion class action suit with 46 plaintiffs from the oil producing Oriente region of Ecuador on behalf of 30,000 Ecuadorian citizens against Texaco Inc. The heart of the suit turned on corporate irresponsibility. Specifically serious illnesses and ecological destruction attributable to the oil company, serious water contamination, and the consequences of 20 years of drilling which “caused widespread destruction of the Amazon rainforest and have endangered the lives of tens of thousands of people” (cited in Hvalkof, in press, p. 31). Oil exploration began in the Oriente with the collapse of the rubber economy during the 1920s,¹ by the 1930s the Ecuadorian state had secured state monopoly over all non-cultivated lands, American companies were active across the region, and by 1939 a regional company town had been named “Shell” (still in existence). The oil frenzy commenced in the 1960s. Texaco began its operations in 1967 and in a short time had established an enormous infrastructure including several hundred miles of pipeline. In the last 25 years 300,000 colonists have entered the region, bringing overnight boom towns. The Oriente, which is home to a complex array of Indian communities, had been converted into a landscape of “blocks,” i.e. concessions. Close to 30 companies operate concessions in conjunction with the Ecuadorian state and the national petroleum company. By the 1990s Ecuador was an *oil nation*: petroleum accounted for at least half of national export earnings and two thirds of the state’s budget. Ecuador was a member of OPEC until the early 1990s, when pressures to service its debt and its low quota (a reflection of falling oil prices) compelled the Ecuadorian government to withdraw from the organization. What is indisputable is that the discovery of petroleum in Ecuadorian territory marked by relative isolation and ethnic complexity marked the onset of a Faustian pact in which oil was traded for progress.

The Oriente has a somewhat sordid and violent history of extraction prior to oil of course. Indeed the Upper Amazon is most closely associated with the horrors and barbarism of the Putamayo incident just prior to the First World War (see Taussig 1987), in which the Indians of the Putamayo (an area on the Peru, Colombia, Ecuador border) were subject to extraordinary violence on the part rubber companies and subcontractors in search of the original “black gold” (rubber was coined black gold in advance of the 1970s oil boom). The legacy of the rubber barons continues and local patrons and contractors (now involved in logging, cattle raising and coca production) deploy debt bondage and labor peonage with Indian workers. The violence of rubber and the conditions of actual or near slavery shaped the production history of the region, which the advent of oil did nothing to reduce. The early companies fomented conflicts between Peru, Colombia and Ecuador while Shell was involved in a number of violent incidents between Indians and the company as early as the 1940s. During the 1980s, the pressure for debt service coupled with a neo-liberal agenda among a series of civilian governments placed new pressures on opening new concessions (the reform of the hydrocarbon law in 1982). In 1988 ARCO and two other companies were involved in prospecting and drilling in Block 10 in Pastaza Province (which became the site of a long and ongoing struggle). ARCO, working with the state land titling agency, ran into immediate conflicts with Indian communities whose indigenous

1. My account of Ecuador (about which I am certainly much less than an expert) is derived from Joe Kane, *Savages* (New York, Vintage) 1996; Suzana Sawyer, *Marching to Nation Across Ethnic Terrain*, Ph.D. Dissertation, Stanford University, 1997; Michael Brown and Eduardo Fernandez, *War Shadows* (Berkeley, University of California Press), 1996; and the writing of Judith Kimerling (*Amazon Crude*, Washington DC, National Resources Defence Council, 1991).

claims superseded the concessions. So began a long struggle between Indian organizations, federations and communities, and the oil companies, which brought about a class action suit five years later.

The parallels to Nigeria are striking of course. Oil was discovered in the early part of the century in the Niger Delta (ca. 1908) but it was only in the 1950s that commercial deposits were opened up. The vast majority of the onshore reserves are located in the Delta, a region of tropical rainforest and deltaic agro-fishing communities comprising some of the highest population densities in Africa. It is a region of unimaginable cultural and ethnic complexity—in which ethnic minorities are quite literally sitting on some of the largest and highest-quality petroleum reserves in the world. Like Ecuador, the Nigerian State nationalized the oil industry and has operated historically through complex joint ventures (between the Nigerian National Petroleum Company and the oil companies, Shell, Elf, Gulf and Agape in particular) and confessional arrangements in which the companies have a substantial autonomy (in Nigeria most oil and the largest concessions are owned by Shell [40,000 square kilometers, three times more than their nearest rival]; in Ecuador it is ARCO and Texaco). The Delta also has a history of earlier colonial (and pre-colonial) violent “extraction”: namely slavery and rubber between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. Violence has fundamentally shaped these communities, and as I attempt to explain in the Appendix, interethnic relations have often been tense played out in the colonial period by claims over local political administrative structures (Native Administrations in colonial-speak). A number of the Delta communities resisted colonial rule in the early part of the century and a number harbored secessionist intentions (which typically resulted in violent clashes), most notably the infamous effort by Nottingham Dick and his Delta compatriots to secede from Nigeria in 1957. Oil was a central ingredient in the civil war in which the eastern region (Biafra) did secede in 1967 (Watts 1996).

The plight of the Deltaic oil producing communities has, of course, been radically shaped by the activities of the oil companies and the [military] state (the so-called slick alliance). Nigeria (an OPEC member) has vast reserves of oil and a substantial OPEC quota, and as a consequence the impact of the 1970s boom was a massive expansion of petroleum infrastructure (pipelines, gas flaring), the highest spillage and flaring rates in the world, and the massive dislocation of the forms of livelihoods of Delta peoples. At the same time, oil unleashed a ferocious boom in the 1970s—what I have elsewhere called the “shock of modernity” (Watts 1994)—and converted Nigeria into a mono-economy: oil accounts for 90% of export revenues and over 80% of the fiscal budget. The proliferation of petrodollars channeled into the Exchequer unleashed a period of state-led development in which oil rents simultaneously served both political ends (the maintenance of some sort of militarized stability in a competitive and volatile multi-ethnic society) and a fabulously corrupt and undisciplined form of capitalism accumulation (I employ the latter loosely). Nigerian state capitalism was as Chinua Achebe called it, “one big crummy family.” By the 1980s Nigeria was enmired in debt, in economic recession, in neo-liberal reforms (structural adjustment), and surrounded by tumbling oil prices. In the context of massive waste and corruption, of ecological devastation in oil-producing communities matched by none of the rewards of petrolic development (Ogoniland is Nigeria’s Chiapas), the oil bust produced a right and proper resentment in oil producing communities across the Delta. As this became wrapped up with the shift to civilian politics in the early 1990s (Nigeria has been ruled for over 30 of its 38 year independence by military governments), the Ogoni Bill of Rights (and its legal case against Shell) came to embody the same explosive tensions as did the Texaco case in Ecuador. Nigeria is like Ecuador only more so.

THE NATURE OF PETROLEUM: A FAUSTIAN SPECTACLE OF ILLUSION AND DECEIT

The spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images.

Guy Debord, 1978, para. 4

Oil creates the illusion of a completely changed life, life without work, life for free...The concept of oil expresses perfectly the eternal human dream of wealth achieved through lucky accident...In this sense oil is a fairy tale and like every fairy tale a bit of a lie.

.....

[Oil] is a filthy, foul smelling liquid that squirts obligingly up into the air and falls back to earth as a rustling shower of money.

.....

Oil fills us with such arrogance that we begin believing we can easily overcome such unyielding obstacles as time. With oil.... I [Shah Pahlavi] will create a second America in a generation!

.....

Oil is a resource that anesthetizes thought, blurs vision, corrupts....Look at the ministers from oil countries, how high they hold their heads, what a sense of power....

.....

And oil's relation to the Mosque? What vigor, glory and significance this new wealth has given its religion, Islam, which is enjoying a period of accelerated expansion and attracting new crowds of faithful.

.....

Oil kindles extraordinary emotions and hopes, since oil is above all a great temptation. It is the temptation of ease, wealth, fortune, power. [But] oil, though powerful, has its defects.

Ryszard Kapucinski, 1982, p. 34-35

Why then is petroleum extraction such a violent endeavor? Why does it—and what about its physical and social properties—generate such explosive consequences among the oil producing communities? In both Ecuador and Nigeria, oil became the basis for important forms of political mobilization—indigenous or Indian communities in one case, ethnic minorities in another—and for forms of engagement and mobilization which were brimming with violence. In one case, Nigeria, this violence assumed quite extraordinary forms (military occupation, extrajudicial killings, and perhaps 1000 deaths in Ogoniland over a five-year period) which raises the question of why did the two cases differ in some important respects with respect to petro-violence? I want to start with the question of oil and its properties and then turn, in the following section, to the questions of similarity and difference.

In a rather shopping-list sort of way, I want to identify eight properties of oil, to begin at least

to address the question of the mystification of petroleum (and of Nature).²

Oil is money [Black Gold]: as surely the most global and commercially negotiable of commodities, “oil is money” as the Chair of ARCO once put it (all oil transactions are conducted in dollars). It is instant wealth—it is capable of generating unimaginable wealth in spite of the fact that this is in a sense quite mysterious. Oil as money/value typically creates an ambition and enervation—what one oil commentator called the *elan vital* of growth—appropriate to the magnitude of oil wealth (cf. the Shah’s White Revolution).

Petro-State and Nation: the central idea is taken from Ricardo Hausman (1981) that oil creates specific forms of state landed property. This means among other things that nationalized petroleum produces a state (the owner of the means of production) which mediates the social relations by which oil is exploited (concessions, joint ventures etc) and which is simultaneously granted access to the world market. State landed property necessarily converts oil into a theatre of struggle in which its *national* qualities are paramount—an “oil nation,” “our oil” and so on.

Petro-imperialism [the Faustian pact]: oil is unavoidably an engagement with some of the largest and most powerful forces of transnational capital (who show up on the local doorstep) and with all the contradictions of participating in the world market (boom and bust). Exploitation of oil is in effect a pact (hardly a social contract)—a Faustian bargain—in which a national project (modernity, development, La Gran Venezuela)—exchanged for sovereignty, autonomy, independence, tradition and so on. The realization of oil monies (through the world market) and the localization of oil revenues by the state embody this pact. Which is to say, as the founder of OPEC put it, “oil can bring trouble.”

Evacuative Extraction/Despoliation [liquid mobility]: the territorial quality of oil—its enclave character—and the fact that it has limited local linkage effects (oil is typically evacuated) produces a peculiar sort of double movement. On the one hand it literally flows out—it is lost value in a quite dramatic way—and is understood to be of enormous value, and on the other it is a subterranean (and brilliant) threat ecologically speaking [it is the subterranean working of telluric forces].

Hyper-centralization [rentier states]: oil has a centralizing effect (petrodollars rush into the Exchequer) and simultaneously increases the states dependence on one commodity. Rents become the basis of politics—this is what Karl (1997) means when she says that public expenditure displaces statecraft. Oil rents irrigate the body politic as a way of purchasing some form of state legitimacy or quiescence. The public contracts/tender—always massively inflated in a way that cost-overruns are politically desirable (the more costly the better)—becomes the metric of political choice. The states degenerates into a prebend (hence the common refrain that petro-states are especially corrupt, or “flabby”).

Petro-Fetishism/Petro-Magic [the el Dorado effect]: oil as a world of illusion. People become wealthy without effort; fabulous waste and fiscal madness (Venezuela’s factories with nothing in

2. I have written about these properties elsewhere (Watts 1997, 1994). I have also pulled upon Terry Karl’s book *The Paradox of Plenty: Oil Booms and Petro-States* (University of California Press, 1996) and Fernando Coronil’s *The Magic State: Nature, Money and Modernity in Venezuela* (University of Chicago Press, 1997).

them, Nigerian iron and steel produced at costs 7 times more than the prevailing market price). The ephemerality of money—boom to bust, here today gone tomorrow; wealth which scorches the fingers, signifies the loss of the soul. In the popular imagination oil produces all manner of extraordinary magical events and mythic properties (in Nigeria the trade in body parts, in Ecuador new forms of evangelicalism, in Venezuela syncretic cults). Among the politicians, bureaucrats and ruling classes oil is equally mythic—“to propel [us] into the twentieth century” as President Carlos Perez put it.

Valorization of Space/Territory: Insofar as oil has a point of origin and is unavoidably a national commodity (a patrimony), it is to be expected that the transformative potential of oil (how the oil is to be sown in the economy as Coronil describes it in Venezuela) invites a debate over who has claims over the resource itself. Here the valorization of territory turns on the contradictions between state imposed spaces (the concession) and local/indigenous territorial rights (Ogoni land or the Huaorani Ethnic Reserve). The fact that these two territorial claims embody different property claims and rights (national versus customary law say) necessarily instigates a debate over how the parts constitute the whole, how the regional and local relate to the national. Oil seems to always invoke the spatial lexicon in which the Nation figures prominently. To the extent that oil production happens to occur on lands populated by minorities, territorial disputes are inevitably about identity, rights and citizenship.

Monoecomania [the Dutch Disease]: oil produces what Karl (1997) calls the “petrolization” of society: the economy becomes a sort of a one-horse town, and oil rents reinforce particular patterns of class power (a *nomenklatura*, patterns of regional/ethnic political machines etc), and the boom produces depressive effects in other non-oil sectors (typically the collapse of agriculture and of other forms of state revenue generation, i.e. tax collection, which further deepens the monoeconomic tendencies.

PETRO-VIOLENCE

Ideas and deeds only exist in dialectical relationship. So does violence, which is a *habitus...*, at once structured and structuring; structured because the idea of violence results from historical events, stored as the memory of past deeds, of past encounters, of past frustrations; and structuring because the idea of violence informs human actions, determines the acceptability, even the banality of violence, if not the ability to erase the scandal of its occurrence.

Jean-Paul Dumont, 1995, p. 277

One can quite plausibly argue that the strategic significance of oil to North Atlantic industrial capitalism, coupled with the almost unimaginable wealth and power of the oil industry (Shell, after all, has sales in excess of the GNP of at least 127 poor countries), would in and of themselves suggest that violence is an expression of the crudest forms of geopolitical power potlatches. And this is surely not an unimportant observation. The oil companies in Ecuador and Nigeria had substantial autonomy and license to do what they wanted and without recourse; they had the backing of the military and indeed had their own security forces; their operations were congruent with a long lineage of local demonic capitalists (whether rubber barons or slavers) and acted rather like authoritarian local governments. In the space created by a history of prior violence and a slick alliance in which enormously powerful companies can act without local or global accountability—the state ensures this unaccountability in-country and the lack of a body of international law at the level of

global responsibilities—petro-violence emerges as a sort of culture of terror and a space of death (Tausig 1987). But I think there is much more to be explained than the might of petro-capital and the hegemony power of a slick alliance. And here I would return to the properties of oil.

I would want to argue that the strategic and economic powers of oil actually heighten and amplify the centrality, or perhaps more accurately, the visibility and presence, of the state in public life, (and therefore of claims over nation and citizenship), and the visibility of transnational capital (and therefore of questions of sovereignty and accountability). As a result (to condense the argument), oil sharpens, in a way that few other natural resources and forms of extraction can, the claims that oil-producing communities in particular have over oil (though the wealth which oil represents animates these concerns throughout the body-politic). Insofar as the oil is state property, then the relationship of oil producers (and citizens generally) to the state becomes an object of debate, and what I shall call forms of articulation often become the basis for exercising these political claims over national patrimony (“the national oil body”). Articulation is employed here in the double sense endorsed by Stuart Hall (1996), namely as a way of rendering an identity [*discursive coherence*] and of linking that identity to a political subject and project [*interpolation*]. The unity between these two sorts of articulations, in Hall’s view, encompasses the process by which an ideology finds its subject—rather than how a subject locates and articulates an essentialized set of ideas or thoughts—a task which always entails the positing of boundaries and edges in an always provisional and contingent way [see Li 1997, 1996]. Put differently, then, oil as a subterranean and *territorial resource which is highly centralized as property around the state* necessarily channels claims over Nature (“our oil”) into a sort of rights talk (Fraser 1996), where the rights speak to questions of local identity and territory and the rights which stem from them, the relations between local political and territorial claims and forms of governance (“decentralization,” “participation,” “autonomy”), and the links between various identity politics (Indian culture or minority tradition) and notions of citizenship (“what we are owed or entitled to”). Underlying all three is a notion of Nation on which discussions of state, community, citizenship, and rights ultimately turn. It is no accident that so much of the rhetoric of oil raises questions of the nation, or the social body, or of national development (the Great Civilization of Iran and La Gran Venezuela for example). Here is Cornoil (1997) on the Venezuelan case:

[Petro]money throughout this century was the universal equivalent that embodied the promise of universality. In exchange for the nation’s money, the state promised to bring modernity to Venezuela....To sow the oil condensed this aspiration the exchange of the nation’s subsoil for international money was justified in terms of the nationalist project....The Faustian trade of money for modernity did not bring the capacity to produce but the illusion of production... (pp. 390-391).

Oil, then, simultaneously elevates and expands the centrality of the nation-state as a vehicle for modernity, or progress, or civilization, or modernity...or something...and at the same time produces conditions which directly challenge and question those very same, and hallowed, tents of nationalism and development (the national development project). The question then is how these tensions and contradictions are dealt with—because in Ecuador one could argue that violence was present but constrained and these contradictions contributed to a national discussion (still in train) of a constitutional nature and to the debate over neo-liberal reform and agrarian reform in particular (Sawyer 1997). In the case of Nigeria it produced horrific violence and a slide into chaos and anarchy because what was at stake in the contradictions was the very existence of a fragile Nation itself, a national

symbolic as Laurent Berlant (1991) calls it, which was a “fantasy” (her term) that could easily be understood as such. In comparison to Ecuador, the lack of confederal organization among minorities and the lack of any constitutional precedent over minority rights made the prospects of talking about this national fantasy in, as it were, the public sphere almost impossible, and indeed from the vantage of the state (the military) extremely dangerous. In the Nigerian case this harkened back to the bloody civil war of the 1960s and was read as a call for secession, not a debate over citizenship.

What is striking in reading Sawyer’s (1997) detailed account of the ARCO affair in Ecuador (or indeed of the popular book *Savages* by Joe Kane [1996]), is the extent to which the renewed push for oil in the 1980s galvanized the politics of Indian nationalities. The Oriente becomes a theater, ultimately national in scope, which solidifies and deepens the federal quality of oil. The unit of oil exploration and extraction is geographical (the block or concession) which does not correspond with another territorial unit, namely the Indian “tribal” or indigenous lands (“territorio”)—which in the case of Ecuador had a constitutional standing. Property is immediately at issue, then, but property as a social relation is immediately attached to a local identity (the Huaorani case as described by Kane) and ultimately to a larger political project embodied in CONAIE (the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities, founded in 1980). The story of articulating a variety of Indian nationalisms and identities within the space of Ecuadorian nationalism is complex in two senses: first, because the likes of ARCO strenuously attempts to divide any notion of an Indian consensus—it assists in the creation of an oppositional group (DCIP)—and second because local Indian concerns are rapidly transnationalised as they are picked up by a national green movement (Accion Ecologia) and inserted into the international green networks [hence why we read about their plight in *New Yorker* magazine and why Rainforest Action Network among others takes up their cause]. To make a larger claim, then, the Ecuadorian case has the effect of thickening civil society in part because there is a constitutional reference point in which Indian nationalities could be discussed, a sense of Nation and nation-state, robust enough to accommodate the contradictions generated by oil, and a degree of organization sufficient to give their claims standing in the public arena. All of this is of course far from resolved, but the Ecuadorian case reveals something about the structural tensions created by oil and the points at which violence might occur (intercommunity animosity manufactured by the oil companies, guerrillas struggles at the point of production as increasingly mobilized Indian communities confront recalcitrant and militarized company installations and pipelines often at the periphery of state surveillance and control). It also suggests why in this case state violence, as opposed to the skirmishes between communities, was mediated by the complex popular alliances (most especially the indigena-campesinos alliance which formed in 1994 around the “Movilizacion Por La Vida” demanding that the new Ley de Desarrollo Agrario be annulled) which formed around a rethinking of the oil nation and its project.³

3. This is a complex story which involved complex new alliances between regional, local and national peasant and Indian groups around the agrarian reforms but also precipitated by neo-liberal reforms which had the effect of vastly increasing oil prices in Ecuador in 1994. This is again an instance of how the link between the nation (“nacion”) and the national patrimony (“patria”) embodied in oil is exercised by the fact that citizens now have to pay more for something that is legitimately theirs, and from which they have not benefitted. This story is told brilliantly in Sawyer’s dissertation, chapter 8-10 who concludes that this struggle by indigenous communities “reconfigured a prevailing law for the first time in Ecuadorian history” (p. 283).

Here of course Nigeria stands as a striking counterpoint. But the centrality of state (and company) violence does not turn solely on the existence of a military junta (the Abacha regime) which was, without question, one of the most brutal in the history of Nigerian post-colonial development. The oil-producing communities had experienced almost forty years of systematic exploitation, marginalization and neglect, and the property and rights talk stimulated by the Ogoni case represented precisely the *possibility* of what existed in Ecuador: namely, some form of confederation of minorities. Saro-Wiwa encouraged this proliferation of minority groups with their own Bill of Rights (for example MORETO [Ogbia people], the Council for Ekwerre Nationality, MOSIZEN [Izon/Ijaw peoples]) in communities which contributed much more to the national oil pool than did the Ogoni fields (which ironically by the 1990s were of limited importance). Nigeria's shallow history of nationalist construction (hastily fabricated in 1914, but in effect three regional systems which were nominally rendered independent as Nigeria in 1960), a brutal civil war against a secessionist oil producing region (Biafra) in the 1960s, and a much more fragile sense of nation-stateness, collaborated to produce a situation in which a seemingly local case of oil-inspired identity politics cast in large measure as a green movement (compensation for past ecological damages) represented a massive threat. Saro-Wiwa had simply pointed out that the emperor had no clothes. That Nigeria was, as Obafemi Owolawo put it, "a mere geographical expression." What the oil-producing minorities represented, then, was not only an important, and of course, potentially threatening challenge to the slick alliance—compensation from Shell, a share of federal revenues—but also exploded the national fantasy, that is to say, the very idea of Nigeria and what it might mean to be a Nigerian (as a citizen rather than a subject) [Mamdani 1996].

The manner in which the mythic and magical properties of oil enters into these violent struggles—how oil is talked about, framed and given meaning—is ultimately an empirical question: which is to say one needs to examine carefully the historical and cultural local context of oil. In Nigeria—though I have no evidence for Ecuador, but there is a suggestion in Coronil's work—oil's liquid and subterranean properties, and the fact that it is in many respects invisible, flowing through pipelines or being burned as gas, contributes to popular understanding of petroleum as socially polluting, magical and powerful. Oil is invariably attached to debates over the legitimate sources and use of wealth—a recurrent theme in TV soap operas, dime novels and mobile theatre (Watts 1994)—and not surprisingly its power to tarnish and turn everything into shit (oil as "the devil's excrement" as a past president of Venezuela put it). In this sense oil as nature, to take something from Walter Benjamin, becomes a sort of wish image.⁴

Violence in and around the environment is profoundly wrapped up with the properties of that which is exploited. And the specifically green content of the political mobilization which may be either a cause or a consequence of violence invariably ends up taking on a number of other colors and hues. It is the mythic, magic and national properties of oil—its wealth, its value, its magical

4. I have explored this idea in "Geographical Imaginaries" in Doreen Massey and John Allen (eds.), *Human Geography Today*, Polity Press, 1998. Susan Buck-Morse refers to the wish image in Benjamin as follows: "In nature the new is mythic because its potential is not yet realized; in consciousness the old is mythic because its powers were never fulfilled. Paradoxically collective imagination mobilizes its powers for a revolutionary break from the recent past by evoking a cultural memory reservoir of myths and utopian symbols from a more distant ur-past. These collective wish images are nothing else but this" (from *The Dialectics of Seeing*, MIT Press, 1989, p. 116).

powers to transform—coupled with its subterranean and territorial nature which seems to elevate petro-violence to the point where profound questions of state and nation and citizen are posed by it, and where structural violence is perpetrated in its name:

Violence is expressive. Violence is also expressed. It is at once representation and represented, at once manipulative and manipulated (Jean-Paul Dumont, 1995, p. 260).

* * * * *

APPENDIX

PETRO-VIOLENCE: THE OGONI AND THE SHOCK OF MODERNITY

Are you sure it is my name?
have you got my particulars?
Do you already know my navigable blood,
my geography full of dark mountains,
of deep and bitter alleys
that are not on the map?

Nicolas Guillen, *My Last Name*⁵

If the recent history of Nigeria has been the tale of petroleum (Watts 1994, Khan 1994), then Ogoniland has simultaneously been at its centre and at its periphery.⁶ Indeed, the paradox of Ogoniland is that an accident of geological history—the location of more than ten major oilfields within its historic territory—ushered in not petrolic modernization but economic underdevelopment and an ecological catastrophe. Ken Saro-Wiwa and the Ogoni hated modernity because *they could not get enough of it*: the Ogoni were angry because they could afford neither the cars nor use the roads which were the icons of petrolic success. In this sense, the Ogoni story is deeply Benjaminian. Throughout his Parisian production cycle (Cohen 1993) he employed two alternative vocabularies as a way of investigating base–superstructure relations through the language of dreams: one was the vocabulary of *phantasmagoria*, the other of *shock*. In Ogoniland it was the phantasmagoria of petrolic commodification (of wealth without effort), and the shock of modernity which frame the rise of MOSOP and what Benjamin himself, in his concern with utopias, called “the moment of awakening.”

The Ogoni are typically seen as a distinct ethnic group, consisting of three subgroups and six clans.⁷ Their population of roughly 500,000 people is distributed among 111 villages dotted over 404 sq. miles of creeks, waterways and tropical forest in the northeast fringes of the Niger Delta. Located administratively in Rivers State, a Louisiana-like territory of some 50,000 sq. kilometers, Ogoniland of one the most heavily populated zones in all of Africa. Indeed the most densely settled areas of Ogoniland—over 1500 persons per sq. km.—are the sites of the largest wells. Its customary productive base was provided by fishing and agricultural pursuits until the discovery of petroleum, including the huge Bomu field, immediately prior to Independence. Part of an enormously complex

5. I have taken this from Fernando Coronil's excellent article “Beyond Occidentalism” in *Cultural Anthropology* 11/1, 1996, p. 51, which attempts to outline a variety of Orientalist representations and to dialectically represent Otherness to representations of the West. See also his *The Magical State*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1997.

6. For a more detailed account of Ogoniland and its relation to oil see Watts (1997); for the fullest accounts of oil and Nigerian political economy see Khan (1994), Ikein (1990), Lewis (1996) and Forrest (1995). I have written at length on the relations between the petro-boom in Nigeria and the shock of modernity which it precipitated (see Watts 1994).

7. Ogoniland consists of three local government areas and six clans which speak different dialects of the Ogoni language. MOSOP is in this sense a pan-Ogoni organization.

regional ethnic mosaic, the Ogoni were drawn into internecine conflicts within the delta region—largely as a consequence of the slave trade and its aftermath—in the period prior to arrival of colonial forces at Kono in 1901. The Ogoni resisted the British until 1908 (Naanen 1995) but thereafter were left to stagnate as part of the Opopo Division within Calabar Province. As Ogoniland was gradually incorporated during the 1930s, the clamor for a separate political division grew at the hands of the first pan-Ogoni organization, the Ogoni Central Union, which bore fruit with the establishment of the Ogoni Native Authority in 1947. In 1951, however, the authority was forcibly integrated into the Eastern Region. Experiencing tremendous neglect and discrimination, integration raised longstanding fears among the Ogoni of Ibo domination.⁸ Politically marginalised and economically neglected, the delta minorities feared the growing secessionist rhetoric of the Ibo and consequently led an ill-fated secession of their own in February 1966. Isaac Boro, Sam Owonaro and Nottingham Dick declared an illegal Delta Peoples Republic but were crushed and were subsequently, in a trial which is only too reminiscent of the Ogoni tribunal in 1995, condemned to death for treason. Nonetheless, Ogoni antipathy to what they saw as a sort of internal colonialism at the hands of the Ibo, continued in their support of the federal forces during the civil war. While Gowon did indeed finally establish a Rivers State in 1967—which compensated in some measure for enormous Ogoni losses during the war—the new state recapitulated in microcosm the larger “national question.” The new Rivers State was multi-ethnic but presided over by the locally dominant Ijaw, for whom the minorities felt little but contempt.⁹ In Saro-Wiwa’s view (1992), the loss of 10% of the Ogoni people in the civil war was viewed as a betrayal by federal authorities: they provided no postwar relief, seized new on- and offshore oil fields, and subsequently sold out the minorities to dominant Ijaw interests.

Traces of Ogoni “nationalism” long predate the oil boom but they were deepened as a result of it. Ogoni fears of what Saro-Wiwa called “monstrous domestic colonialism” (1992) were exacerbated further by federal resistance to dealing with minority issues¹⁰ in the wake of the civil war and by the new politics of post-oil boom revenue allocation. Rivers State saw its federal allocation fall dramatically in absolute and relative terms. At the height of the oil boom, 60% of oil production came from Rivers State but it received only 5% of the statutory allocation (roughly half of that received by

8. As constitutional preparations were made for the transition to home rule, non-Igbo minorities throughout the Eastern Region appealed to the colonial government for a separate rivers state. Ogoni representatives lobbied the Willink Commission in 1958 to avert the threat of exclusion within an Ibo-dominated regional government which had assumed self-governing status in 1957, but minority claims were ignored (Okpu 1977; Okilo 1980).

9. The Ogoni and other minorities petitioned in 1974 for the creation of a new Port Harcourt State within the Rivers State boundary (Naanen 1995, p. 63).

10. What Rivers State felt in regard to federal neglect, the Ogoni experienced in regard to Ijaw domination. While several Ogoni were influential federal and state politicians, they were incapable politically of exacting resources for the Ogoni community. In the 1980s only 6 out of 42 representatives in the state assembly were Ogoni (Naanen 1995, p. 77). It needs to be said however—and it is relevant for an understanding of state violence against the Ogoni—that the Ogoni have fared *better* than many other minorities in terms of political appointments: in 1993 30% of the Commissioners in the Rivers State cabinet were Ogoni (the Ogoni represent 12% of the state population) and every clan has produced at least one federal or state minister (Osaghae 1995, p. 331) since the civil war. In this sense, it is precisely that the Ogoni *had* produced since 1967 a cadre of influential and well-placed politicians (including Saro-Wiwa himself) that their decision to move aggressively toward self-determination and minority rights was so threatening to the Abacha regime (Welch 1995).

Kano, Northeastern States and the Ibo heartland, East Central State). Between 1970 and 1980 it received in revenues one fiftieth of the value of the oil it produced. In what was seen by the Rivers minorities as a particularly egregious case of ethnic treachery, the civilian Shagari regime reduced the derivation component to only 2% of revenues in 1982, after Rivers State had voted overwhelmingly for Shagari's northern-dominated National Party of Nigeria. The subsequent military government of General Buhari cut the derivation component even further at a time when the state accounted for 44.3% of Nigeria's oil production.

Standing at the margin of the margin, Ogoniland appears (like Chiapas in Mexico) as a socio-economic paradox. Home to six oilfields, half of Nigeria's oil refineries, the country's only fertilizer plant, a large petrochemical plant, Ogoniland is wracked by unthinkable misery and deprivation. During the first oil boom Ogoniland's 56 wells accounted for almost 15% of Nigerian oil production¹¹ and in the past three decades an estimated \$30 billion in petroleum revenues have flowed from this Lilliputian territory; it was, as local opinion had it, Nigeria's Kuwait. Yet according to a government commission, Oloibiri, where the first oil was pumped in 1958, has no single kilometer of all-season road and remains "one of the most backward areas in the country" (cited in Furro 1992, p. 282). Few Ogoni households have electricity, there is one doctor per 100,000 people, child mortality rates are the highest in the nation, unemployment is 85%, 80% of the population is illiterate and close to half of Ogoni youth have left the region in search of work. Life expectancy is barely 50 years, substantially below the national average. In Furro's survey of two minority oil-producing communities, over eighty per cent of respondents felt that economic conditions had deteriorated since the onset of oil production, and over two-thirds believed that there had been no progress in local development since 1960. No wonder that the systematic reduction of federal allocations and the lack of concern by the Rivers government was, for Ogoniland, part of a long history of "the politics of minority suffocation" (cited in Ikporukpo 1996, p. 171).

If Ogoniland failed to see the material benefits from oil, what it *did* experience was an ecological disaster—what the European Parliament has called "an environmental nightmare." The heart of the ecological harms stem from oil spills—either from the pipelines which crisscross Ogoniland (often passing directly through villages) or from blowouts at the wellheads—and gas flaring. As regards the latter, a staggering 76% of natural gas in the oil producing areas is flared (compared to 0.6% in the US). As a visiting environmentalist noted in 1993 in the delta, "some children have never known a dark night even though they have no electricity" (*Village Voice* Nov. 21st 1995, p. 21). Burning 24 hours per day at temperatures of 13,000-14,000 degrees Celsius, Nigerian natural gas produces 35 million tons of CO₂ and 12 million tons of methane, more than the rest of the world (and rendering Nigeria probably the biggest single cause of global warming). The oil spillage record is even worse. According to Claude Ake there are roughly 300 spills per year in the delta and in the 1970s alone the spillage was four times than the much-publicized Exxon Valdez spill in Alaska. In one year alone almost 700,000 barrels were soiled according to a government commission. Ogoniland itself suffered 111 spills between 1985 and 1994 (Hammer 1996, p. 61). Figures provided by the NNPC document 2,676 spills between 1976 and 1990, 59% of which occurred in Rivers State

11. According to the Nigerian government, Ogoniland currently (1995) produces about 2% of Nigerian oil output and is the fifth largest oil-producing community in Rivers State. Shell maintains that total Ogoni oil output is valued at \$5.2 billion before costs!

(Ikein 1990, p. 171), 38% of which were due to equipment malfunction.¹² Between 1982 and 1992 Shell alone accounted for 1.6 million gallons of spilled oil, 37% of the company's spills worldwide. The consequences of flaring, spillage and waste for Ogoni fisheries and farming have been devastating.¹³ Two independent studies completed in 1997 reveal total petroleum hydrocarbons in Ogoni streams at 360 and 680 times the European Community permissible levels (Rainforest Action Network 1997).

In almost four decades of oil drilling, then, the experience of petrolic modernization in Ogoniland has been a tale of terror and tears. It had brought home the worst fears of ethnic marginalization and minority neglect: of northern hegemony, of Ibo neglect, and of Ijaw local dominance. The euphoria of oil wealth after the civil war has brought ecological catastrophe, social deprivation, political marginalization, and a rapacious company capitalism in which unaccountable foreign transnationals are granted a sort of immunity by the state.

ARTICULATING Ogoni: GEOGRAPHY AND COLLECTIVE WISH IMAGES

The blame for this terrible state of affairs [in Nigeria] must be laid squarely at the door of the major ethnic groups....Ethnicity must be adopted as the base for our national development.

Ken Saro-Wiwa, 1989

The hanging of Ken Saro-Wiwa and the Ogoni Nine in November 1995—accused of murdering four prominent Ogoni leaders who professed opposition to MOSOP tactics—and the subsequent arrest of nineteen others on treason charges, represented the summit of a process of mass mobilization and radical militancy which had commenced in 1989. The civil war had, as I have previously suggested, hardened the sense of external dominance among Ogonis. A “supreme cultural organization” called Kagote, which consisted largely of traditional rulers and high ranking functionaries, was established at the war's end and in turned gave birth in 1990 to MOSOP. A new strategic phase began in 1989 with a program of mass action and passive resistance and a renewed effort to focus on the environmental consequences of oil (and Shell's role in particular) and on group rights within the federal structure. Animating the entire struggle was, in Leton's words, the “genocide being committed in the dying years of the twentieth century by multinational companies under the supervision of the Government...” (cited in Naanen 1995, p. 66).

A watershed moment in MOSOP's history was the drafting in 1990 of an Ogoni Bill of Rights (Saro-Wiwa 1992). Documenting a history of neglect and local misery, the Ogoni Bill took head on

12. The oil companies claim that sabotage accounts for a large proportion (60%) of the spills, since communities gain from corporate compensation. Shell claims that 77 of 111 spills in Ogoniland between 1985 and 1994 were due to sabotage (Hammer 1996). According to the government commission, however, sabotage accounts for 30% of the incidents but only 3% of the quantity spilled. Furthermore, all oil-producing communities claim that compensation from the companies for spills has been almost nonexistent.

13. A spill in 1993 flowed for 40 days without repair, contaminating large areas of Ogoni farmland. Petroleum residues appear in the rivers at levels of 60 ppm and in the sediments around the Bonny terminal reach lethal levels of 12,000 ppm. In the ecologically delicate mangrove and estuarine regions of the delta, oil pollution has produced large scale eutrophication, depletion of aquatic resources and loss of traditional fishing grounds (see NNEST 1991, p. 44; Benka-Cocker and Ekundayo 1995) which now threaten customary livelihoods.

the question of Nigerian federalism and minority rights. Calling for participation in the affairs of the republic as “a distinct and separate entity,” the Ogoni Bill outlined a plan for autonomy and self-determination in which there would be guaranteed “political control of Ogoni affairs by Ogoni people...the right to control and use a fair proportion of Ogoni economic resources...[and] adequate representation as a right in all Nigerian national institutions” (Saro-Wiwa 1990, p. 11). In short, the Bill of Rights addressed the question of the *unit* to which revenues should be allocated—and derivatively the rights of minorities. Largely under Saro-Wiwa’s direction, the Bill was employed as part of an international mobilization campaign. Presented at the UN sub-Committee on Human Rights, at the Working Group on Indigenous Populations in Geneva in 1992 and at UNPO in the Hague in 1993, Ogoni became—with the help of Rainforest Action Network and Greenpeace—a *cause célèbre*.

Ken Saro-Wiwa played a central role in the tactical and organizational transformations of MOSOP during the 1990s. Born in Bori as part of a traditional ruling family, Saro-Wiwa was already, prior to 1990, an internationally recognized author, a successful writer of Nigerian soap operas, a well-connected former Rivers State commissioner, and a wealthy businessman. Saro-Wiwa was also President of the Ethnic Minorities Rights organization of Africa (EMIROAF) which had called for a restructuring of the Nigerian federation into a confederation of autonomous ethnic states in which a federal center was radically decentralized and states were granted property rights over onshore mineral resources (Osaghae 1995, p. 327). Under Saro-Wiwa, MOSOP focused in 1991 on links to pro-democracy groups in Nigeria (the transition to civilian rule had begun under heavy-handed military direction) and on direct action around Shell and Chevron installations. It was precisely because of the absence of state commitment and the deterioration of the environment that local Ogoni communities, perhaps understandably, had great expectations of Shell (the largest producer in the region) and directed their activity against the oil companies after three decades of betrayal. There was a sense in which Shell *was* the local government¹⁴ (*Guardian* July 14th 1996, p. 11), but the company’s record had, in practice, been appalling. In 1970, Ogoni representatives had already approached Rivers State government to approach Shell—what they then called “a Shylock of a company”—for compensation and direct assistance (a plea which elicited a shockingly irresponsible response documented in Saro-Wiwa 1992). Compensation by the companies for land appropriation and for spillage have been minimal and are constant sources of tension between company and community. Shell, which was deemed the world’s most profitable corporation in 1996 by *Business Week* (July 8th 1996, p. 46) and which nets roughly \$200 million profit from Nigeria each year, by its own admission has provided only \$2 million to Ogoniland in 40 years of pumping. Ogoni historian Loolo (1981) points out that Shell has built one road and awarded 96 school scholarships in thirty years; according to the *Wall Street Journal*, Shell employs 88 Ogonis (less than 2%) in a workforce of over 5000 Nigerian employees. Furthermore, the oft-cited community development schemes of the oil companies only began in earnest in the 1980s and have met with minimal success (Ikporukpo 1993). In some communities, Shell only began community efforts in 1992 after 25 years of pumping, and then providing a water project of 5000 gallons capacity for a constituency of 100,000! (*Newswatch* Dec. 18th 1995, p. 13).

In an atmosphere of growing violence and insecurity, MOSOP wrote to the three oil companies

14. Prior to the cessation of operations in 1993, Shell was the principal oil company operating in Ogoniland, pumping from five major oilfields at Bomu/Dere, Yorla, Bodo West, Korokoro and Ebubu.

operating in Ogoniland in December 1992 demanding \$6.2 billion in back rents and royalties, \$4 billion for damages, the immediate stoppage of degradation, flaring and exposed pipelines, and negotiations with Ogonis to establish conditions for further exploration (Osaghae 1995, p. 336; Greenpeace 1994). The companies responded with tightened security while the military government sent in troops to the oil installations, banned all public gatherings, and declared as treasonable any claims for self-determination. Strengthening Ogoni resolve, these responses prompted MOSOP to organize a massive rally—an estimated 300,000 participated—in January 1993. As harassment of MOSOP leadership and Ogoni communities by state forces escalated, the high point of the struggle came with the decision to boycott the Nigerian presidential election on June 12th 1993.

In the wake of the annulment of the presidential elections, the arrest of democratically elected Mashood Abiola and the subsequently military coup by General Abacha, state security forces vastly expanded their activities in Ogoniland. Military units were moved into the area in June 1993 and Saro-Wiwa was charged with, among other things, sedition.¹⁵ More critically, interethnic conflicts exploded between Ogoni and other groups in late 1993, amidst accusations of military involvement and ethnic warmongering by Rivers State leadership. A new and aggressively anti-Ogoni military governor took over Rivers State in 1994 and a ferocious assault by the Rivers State Internal Security Task Force commenced. Saro-Wiwa was placed under house arrest, and subsequently fifteen Ogoni leaders were detained in April 1994. A series of brutal attacks left 750 Ogoni dead and 30,000 homeless; in total, almost 2000 Ogonis have perished since 1990 at the hands of police and security forces. Ogoniland was in effect sealed off by the military. Amidst growing chaos, Saro-Wiwa was arrested on May 22nd 1994 and several months later he and eight others were charged with the deaths of four Ogoni leaders with whom there had been increasingly rancorous and conflictual relations.

In spite of the remarkable history of MOSOP between 1990 and 1996, its ability to represent itself as a unified pan-Ogoni organization remained an open question, particularly for Saro-Wiwa. There is no pan-Ogoni myth of origin (characteristic of many delta minorities), and a number of the Ogoni subgroups engender stronger local loyalties than any affiliation to Ogoni nationalism. The Eleme subgroup has even argued, on occasion, that they are not Ogoni. Furthermore, the MOSOP leaders were actively opposed by elements of the traditional clan leadership, by prominent leaders and civil servants in state government, and by some critics who felt Saro-Wiwa was out to gain “cheap popularity” (Osaghae 1995, p. 334). And not least the youth wing of MOSOP, which Saro-Wiwa had made use of, had a radical vigilante constituency which the leadership were incapable of controlling. What Saro-Wiwa did was to build upon over fifty years of Ogoni organizing and upon three decades of resentment against the oil companies, to provide a mass base and a youth driven radicalism—and it must be said an international visibility—capable of challenging state power.¹⁶

15. The history of events since June 1993 are detailed in Human Rights Watch (1995), UNPO (1995) and the UN Mission (1996).

16. Following the MOSOP precedent, a number of southeastern minorities pressured local and state authorities for expanded resources and political autonomy: the Movement for the Survival of Izon/Ijaw Ethnic Nationality was established in 1994, the Council for Ekwerre Nationality in 1993 and the Southern Minorities Movement (28 ethnic groups from five delta states) has been active since 1992. The Movement for Reparation to Ogbia (MORETO) produced a charter explicitly modeled on the Ogoni Bill of Rights in 1992. These groups directly confronted Shell and Chevron installations (Human Rights 1995; Greenpeace 1994) and in turn have felt the press of military violence over the last

What sort of articulation of Ogoni identity and political subjectivity did Saro-Wiwa pose? It was clearly one in which geography figured centrally: territory and Nature were the building blocks upon which ethnic difference and indigenous rights were constructed. And yet it was an unstable and contradictory sort of articulation—to return to Stuart Hall’s lexicon. First, there was no simple Ogoni “we,” no unproblematic unity, and no singular form of political subject (despite Saro-Wiwa’s ridiculous claim that 98% of Ogoni’s supported him). MOSOP itself had five independent units—an object of bitter dispute in itself—embracing youth, women, traditional rulers, teachers and churches. It represented fractious and increasingly divided “we,” as the open splits and conflicts between Saro-Wiwa and other elite Ogoni confirms (Ogoni Crisis, 1996)¹⁷ Second, he constantly invoked Ogoni culture and tradition yet he also argued that war and internecine conflict had virtually destroyed the fabric of Ogoni society by 1900 (1992, p. 14). His own utopia then rested on the re-creation of Ogoni culture—insofar as Africa’s tribes are “ancient and enduring social organizations” (1995, p. 191)—and suffered like all ur-histories from a mythic invocation of the past. Third, ethnicity was the central problem of post colonial Nigeria—the corruption of ethnic majorities—and its panacea (the multiplication of ethnic minority power). To invoke the history of exclusion and the need not simply for ethnic minority inclusion but as the basis for federalism, led Saro-Wiwa to totally ignore the histories and geographies of conflict and struggle among and between ethnic minorities. And not least, the narrative of Ogoni exclusion and internal colonialism proved also to be partial (and exclusionary). Compared to many delta minorities the Ogoni have fared well (with 12% of Rivers State population, the Ogoni accounted for one third of the state’s commissioners). The Ogoni produce roughly 4% of Rivers State oil currently; two other small minorities with no political representation account for 68%.

Coursing through the Ogoni story is, in short, a much more complex sort of social movement than the post-development literature might admit. Ogoni struggles represented a sort of hybrid political identity which was the continuation of a colonial hybridity. In both cases the articulation of a sense of community, of a singular and authentic identity and of a boundedness provided to be unstable, provisional and often contradictory. This internal instability was embodied in the leader’s own central plank—for an autonomy in which Ogoni culture might flourish when by his own admission that traditional culture was all but dead by 1900.

* * * * *

four years. The point is simply that MOSOP was a flagship movement for a vast number of oil producing communities and threatened to ignite a blaze throughout the oil producing delta.

17. Saro-Wiwa was often chastised by Gokana (he himself was Bane) since most of the Ogoni oil was in fact located below Gokana soil. In other words, on occasion the key territorial unit became the clan rather than the pan-Ogoni territory.

To the form of the new means of production which in the beginning is still dominated by the old one (Marx), there correspond in the collective consciousness images in which the new is intermingled with the old. These images are wish images and in them the collective attempts to transcend as well as to illumine the incompleteness of the social order of production. There also emerges in these wish images a positive striving to set themselves off from the outdated—that means the most recent past. These new tendencies turn the image fantasy, that maintains its impulse from the new, back to the ur-past. In the dream in which every epoch sees in images the epoch that follows, the latter appears wedded to elements of ur-history....Its experience which have their storage place in the unconscious of the collective produce, in their interpenetration with the new, the utopia that has left its trace behind in a thousand configurations of life...

Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*

I have tried to suggest that there is necessarily a geographical content to the contraflows within capitalist modernity and within post-development as one expression of such a countercurrent. Rather than starting with the ambitious claims of new social movements as alternative politics, or alternative knowledges and or alternatives to modernity, I have started from a much more conventionally Marxist position, namely, of base and superstructure. In what sense then can the likes of the Ogoni movement and its development vision be grasped as “products of the superstructure belonging to the inception of industrial production” (Benjamin cited in Cohen 1993, p. 42)? My starting point is Walter Benjamin’s assault on conventional—that is functional—base/superstructure thinking and his (like Althusser somewhat later) psychoanalytic recognition that ideas and practices can take on the distorted form of dreams because they are doubly formed by material forces and the collective unconscious. Benjamin’s great insight was to recognize that the collective unconscious—the need to give the new imagistic form—can shape the material reality because of the collective symbolic need to “shape the new and unknown forces with the help of elements from prehistory” (Cohen 1993, p. 43):

In addition, these wish images manifest an emphatic striving for disassociation with the outmoded—which means, however, the most recent past. These tendencies direct the imagistic imagination which has been activated by the new, back to the primeval past....These images are wish images and in them the collective seeks both to sublimate and to transfigure the incompleteness of the social product and the deficiencies in the social order of production (Benjamin, cited in Cohen 1993, p. 43-44).

The rejection of the most recent past for the Ogoni was the monstrous marginalization and wreckage wrought by the arrival of the petroleum industry and transnational capital. The imagistic imagination activated by the shock of the (petrolic) new harkened back to an Ogoni tradition to transfigure a social product (a corrupt and venal form of ethnic federalism) and the deficiencies of the social order of production (the slick alliance between oil companies and the Nigerian state).

In my rendering, the history of Ogoni tradition and its transfiguration into the Ogoni Bill of Rights demanded an act of geographical and natural imagination. First, in an *empirical sense*, the very idea of Ogoni tradition and culture was explicitly spatial and environmental—an Ogoni territory (Saro-Wiwa 1992, p. 11) consisting of six territorially rooted claims and three local government areas. Indeed, the term tradition (*doonu kuneke*), as Saro-Wiwa emphasized, meant honoring the land (1992, p. 12). The fact that the heart of the new was a land-based resource—petroleum—

pumped from within the territory and with immediate consequences for it (environmental contamination), made these empirical geographies points all the more compelling. Geography as place mattered. Second, geography/Nature was central in an epistemological and ontological sense in that MOSOP argued that rights and entitlements stemmed from this territory and this environment [Saro-Wiwa 1992, pp. 92-93]. Land and identity conferred inalienable rights—states of being—in other words. Third, geography was *normatively implicated* in the sense of the “autonomy” posited in the Ogoni Bill of Rights: autonomy within an ethnically (and hence geographically) reconfigured Federation (“in a true federation, each ethnic group no matter how small is entitled to the same treatment...” as the Ogoni Bill of Rights put it). Here a particular environmental space confers equality and autonomy normatively speaking.

In a curious way I am suggesting the Saro-Wiwa, a dialectical figure if ever there was one, seemed to express something of what Benjamin called the “dialectical optics” of modernity (the ancient and the new) and the fundamental coordinates of the modern world. In the same way that Buck-Morse (1989, pp. 210-212) has expressed Benjamin’s dialectical image in the Parisian production cycle as a sort of matrix generated by two coordinates—dream-waking, and petrified and transitory nature—in which the fossil, the ruin, the fetish and the wish image are its constituent parts, so much of what Saro-Wiwa articulated can be understood in almost identical terms. The fossil is represented in the relics of Ogoni historical culture which leave a trace in the present—the palaces of the elites and their artifacts of power. The fetish as the arrested form of history—the reified form of the new nature in which future potential lies—was embodied in the phantasmagoria of the modern industrial planning and construction: the oil refineries and petrochemical plants. The wish image is the dream form of that potential embodied in the fetish, namely the oil revenues—control over “at least 50% of Ogoni resources” as specified in the Ogoni Bill of Rights—and the “full development of Ogoni culture” (Bill of Rights, 1990, p. 95). And the ruin in which wish images of the past appear as rubble—the semantic and material parts of tradition. As Benjamin saw it, *in toto* the ruin, the wish image, the fetish and the fossil represent a dialectical image—a utopia at a standstill.

I can confidently say that it is still possible to return to ‘the local culture’...in short to re-create societies that have been destroyed by European colonialism....or by even more destructive ‘black colonialism.’ And that what we need to do is examine each society critically, identify the motive spirit of its being... (Saro-Wiwa, 1995, p. 191).

Like all dialectical images, however, the potential contained within them—the moment of awakening—is always in danger. I have tried to emphasize how the articulations of discourse and political identity deployed by Saro-Wiwa compromised his utopian imagery.

The first danger is taken from Benjamin himself when he says that tradition itself is never safe. Tradition will always be interpreted and read in a variety of ways. Indeed at the heart of the struggles *within* MOSOP and the Ogoni community was the very content of this tradition itself. Ogoni “traditional” elites employed tradition to gain access to the state; Ogoni elders sought to protect gerontocratic rule; Ogoni youth built a tradition (dating back to the 1970s) of militancy and of radical separatism. And not least, the Nigerian state sought to employ tradition to convert ethnic difference—the narcissism of minor difference as Freud called it—into genocidal conflict. In other words, Saro-Wiwa’s efforts to reconstruct an Ogoni tradition—as a singular experience from a multiplicity of kingdoms, lineages, languages and histories—was replete with dangers, contradictions

and subversions. And the second danger builds upon Poulantzas's insight and the ways in which tradition—the ur-history which runs through the dialectical image—is geographically fetishized, which compromises the moment of awakening and endangers the utopia itself. Here, I have tried to highlight the Janus-faced character of invoking culture as ethnicity and ethnicity as identity politics. In this regard there is a paradox: namely, the retelling of Ogoni history and indeed of Nigerian history by Saro-Wiwa actually obscures history, or more properly the social relations between historical groups. Territory—as the repository of identity—is assumed to be fixed, the natural ground for local histories as Coronil (1996, p. 77) says. History is territorialized at the same time that the histories of various spaces are hidden. In Saro-Wiwa's articulation, ethnicity is both the cause of Ogoni internal colonialism—the “ethnic majorities”—and the means to the Ogoni utopia (ethnic autonomy). As a result, in Saro-Wiwa's account, some of the historical relations between and within the problematic entity called the Ogoni are actually occluded (in the name of a purported Ogoni territoriality and ethnic unity) and various spaces (for example of kingdoms which stand ambivalently toward any sense of pan-Ogoniness—are hidden. Space is naturalized and history territorialized. The result is an account in which exclusion, boundedness—rather than what Said calls “contrapuntal perspectivism” (1993)—tends to prevail. Running through the Ogoni story is the danger of a territorial essentialism and a fetishism of geography which is never adequately resolved. Indeed I would suggest, following Laurent Berlant (1991), that geography is embedded with the Ogoni cause, as it is within nationalisms of many sorts, as a part of what she calls the “National Symbolic.” That is to say, it (geography) becomes part of the order of discursive practices “whose reign within a national space produces....the ‘law’ in which the accident of birth within a geographical political boundary transforms individuals into subjects of a collectively held history” (Berlant 1991, p. 60). As Berlant notes, the National Symbolic aims to create what she calls a “national fantasy” in which a national culture becomes local—typically images, narratives, monuments and so on which circulate within the personal and collective consciousness. Nigeria as a national fantasy failed in fact to localize this fiction of citizenship and subjectivity among the Ogoni (and many other minorities); Saro-Wiwa and MOSOP attempted to create an alternative “national” fantasy by localizing the “national symbolic” within the boundaries of a non-unified Ogoniland. Whether national or local fantasies, these symbolic domains are shot through with geography and the wish images of place and territory.

Every society constructs a self identity in part in relation to the construction and representation of others, and partly with respect to Nature as it construes it. Running through such identity formation and construction of Nature is, necessarily, quite specific culture traditions, histories and geographies. I have tried to show how in this case of Africans representing themselves, in part, through other Africans is an ethnocentric style—the language is Coronil's (1996, p. 78)—which is not (like Orientalism or Occidentalism) linked to the West global power, but to the history of postcolonial Africa. Mbembe's (1992) notion of the postcolony as a plurality of spheres and arenas in which the postcolonial subject has to bargain, improvise and adopt fluid identities is helpful because it suggests a more hybrid way of thinking about geopolitical categories outside of the circumference of Orientalism or Occidentalism. I part company, however, quite radically with Mbembe's suggestion that this hybridity only produces connivance and a popular toying or playing with power. Nine Ogoni were hung not for connivance or play but for confronting state legitimacy on the most sensitive of terrains: the *geographical terrain* on which, as one of the first post colonial leaders of Nigeria, Obafemi Awolowo, put it, “Nigeria is not a Nation...[but] a mere geographical expression.”

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The Berkeley Workshop on Environmental Politics is funded by the Ford Foundation, the Hewlett Foundation, the Institute on Global Conflict and Cooperation, the MacArthur Foundation, and the Rockefeller Foundation.

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