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Crude Entanglements

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Living with Oil in Ecuador

Thanks to social science funding from the NSF, we are researching how energy policy and resource extraction affect communities. As we conclude the first year of the three-year, NSF-sponsored collaborative research project we lead, "The Impact of Oil Extraction, Regulatory Policy, and Environmental Practice on Native Amazon and Afro-Ecuadorian Communities," we pause to reflect on what this research grant has allowed us to accomplish so far and to highlight how NSF social science funding contributes to a deeper understanding of how people in spaces of energy resource extraction live energy policy decisions. We focus on the effects of regulatory changes on the relationships between government, petroleum industry, and oil-afflicted communities in Ecuador, from both a social and environmental point of view.

Daily Life near the Oil Complex

Personnel of the heavy-crude pipeline work to stabilize the hillside after a landslide fractured the pipeline in Winchele, outside of the city of Esmeraldas in 2013. Approximately 5,000 barrels of heavy crude oil were spilled into the Winchele River. Photo courtesy Gabriela Valdivia

The coastal city of Esmeraldas is home to an oil refinery processing 110,000 barrels of crude daily, whose construction in the 1970s displaced a largely low-income, Afro-Ecuadorian community. Residents report frequent skin rashes and respiratory ailments; some believe these problems are linked to the presence of the nearby refinery, others to the poor quality of basic services such as potable water, sewage treatment, and garbage collection. Struggles facing local residents are hardly limited to inadequate infrastructure. A fire on the evening of February 26, 1998, caused by a spill from a pipeline rupture, resulted in extensive damage to nearby neighborhoods. People along the shores of the Teaone River, nearby the refinery, woke up to the smell of gasoline, screaming neighbors, and a giant, oil-fueled wall of fire that engulfed the river. Many residents returned to the scorched shores of the Teaone, unable to afford a more suitable space to live. Oil spills are not uncommon; the most recent one was reported on June 10, 2014, when 300 barrels of oil were spilled five miles off the coast. Meanwhile, hundreds of state-sponsored billboards throughout the city announce that "oil improves your community, health, and education," a reminder of how the state is using oil funds to build schools and health centers and pave city roads.

In the Ecuadorian Amazon, in a Waorani village within oil concession block 21, lives Perenco, a child named after the Anglo-French oil company who operated the block. His name is a reminder of the relationships established between residents and multinational companies. Perenco the company often provided daily meals, health care and transport to families in order to maintain amicable relations—a practice common among multinationals in the Ecuadorian Amazon. In 2009, when Ecuador renegotiated oil contracts, several multinationals left. The state company, Petroamazonas, became the main operator in the block, raising questions about how community relations would change. On Saturday June 14, 2014, President Correa appeared in his weekly television program wearing feathers and face-paint to celebrate the strengthening of state-Waorani relations. Moi Enomenga, a well-known Waorani leader, presented him thousands of Waorani signatures that supported opening the Yasuni National Park to oil extraction, despite being ancestral territory and home to Waorani in voluntary isolation. The event brought to the fore the contradictions of oil extraction. While oil extracted from Waorani territory brings great wealth to the nation, in Waorani communities already engaging with the oil complex, employment is sporadic and low paying, health care inconsistent, education sub-par, and potable water and sanitation still lacking.

How the broader society hears and understands these sorts of events, whether in Ecuador or elsewhere, speaks volumes about the ways in which we are increasingly disconnected from the impacts of a modern life that depends on high levels of fossil fuel consumption. Around the world we are witnessing shifts in governmental regimes, sometimes promising an intensification of conventional energy extraction, other times promising cleaner and better energy resources to offset some of the negative socio-environmental impacts of energy dependence. How these changes on the extractive side of the energy equation affect those who

inhabit such spaces is often overlooked in the calculation of costs and benefits.

Collecting Data on Life with Oil

Like other countries in South America, Ecuador has recently sought to reduce its dependency on foreign direct investment and imported energy by reasserting sovereignty of national resources. Our research takes place in three Waorani communities in the Ecuadorian Amazon, a high-profile site of oil extraction, as well as in the city of Esmeraldas, home to one of the largest Afro-Ecuadorian populations in the country and the nation's main oil refinery. In year one, NSF funds allowed us to train and employ two research teams (five people in Esmeraldas, five in the Amazon) in ethnographic data collection. Our methodology is diverse and interdisciplinary. The teams acquired experience in quantitative social surveys and qualitative methodologies, such as conducting focus groups, key informant interviews, participant observation, time-allocation studies, household socioeconomic surveys, sensorial diaries, and participatory mapping and photography. These methods were used to collect information on the biosocial and cultural impacts of oil development—from public health, to diet, daily life, labor patterns, consumption patterns, to the more subjective visceral perceptions of oil, from sensory inputs to feelings of risk. The goal is to characterize how the new regulatory energy framework in Ecuador intersects with the daily routines and activities of local communities. Year two of the award involves data processing and analysis, and year three involves dissemination of findings and an exchange event with a US community that resides nearby a refinery. The goal of this latter event is to generate cross-hemispheric dialogue regarding the experience of living with oil.

A label for "Purified Water" lies in one of Texaco's petroleum waste pits near the oil town of Lago Agrio. In the northern Ecuadorian Amazon, family water wells sometimes fill with black crude oil when it rains. Photo courtesy Matt Goff

In June 2014, we concluded the first year of this research, which entailed expert interviews and four months of simultaneous field data collection in Esmeraldas and the Amazon. The concluding event for this first year illustrates the broader impact of the grant and allows us to represent the ethical, scientific, and political contributions of this work. On June 13, 2014, our research team publicly presented preliminary results based on the first year of data collection in a public colloquium titled Contemporary Ethnography in Ecuador: Everyday Life with the Oil Complex in Esmeraldas and the Amazon, hosted by the Development, Environment, and Territory Department at FLACSO-Ecuador. This event reflects two fundamental contributions of cultural anthropology to the intersection of public and scientific spheres: (1) local capacity building, and (2) innovation in knowledge production. The first sphere underlies the significance of local expertise and professional development, where local ethnographers assist in dissemination as well as data collection and are recognized as experts. This was a transformative and empowering experience for our field team. They spoke about how the methodology and ethnographic methods helped shape their consciousness. For example, one of our ethnographers pointed out that, according to the latest national census, over sixty percent of the Esmeraldeño population does not have access to basic public services (e.g., drinking water, sewage, garbage collection) and more than half is not formally employed. He also highlighted the diversity of informal livelihood strategies that dominate the local economy. He asked: why is it that in the city that houses the most important oil refinery in the nation, people have to live under these conditions? His question illustrates that structural inequalities remain strong during the shifting terms of energy government in Ecuador, leading some groups of people to live in subpar conditions. Participating in this project changed not only their thinking but also how to imagine themselves as citizens and actors within regulatory frameworks.

Second, our field team actively participated in methodological critiques. They worked through the challenges of how to represent the daily entanglements of oil through surveys, focus groups, and diaries. Rich conversations developed through this experience, where the field team who collects, analyzes, and synthesizes information is also the subject of the research. One of our Amazon ethnographers sought to explain how mixed methods aim to represent the complexity of Waorani life, which often escapes the rationalization and disciplining of quantitative surveys. Such reflections are pressing today in Ecuador, as Waorani ancestral land rights are under scrutiny during the expansion of the oil frontier into Yasuni National Park, the largest protected area in Ecuador and considered the most biodiverse forest on the planet. Our ethnographers questioned *and* were publicly questioned on how they represented their experiences and introduced their subjective views into the analysis of living with oil. In the June colloquium, their responses shook the grounding of these questions. As one Esmeraldas ethnographer stated: "we didn't consciously know that living with oil was something that could be thought through—we just assumed, and were told, that this is how life is."

A Voice that Counts

Reflecting on this colloquium and the four months of data collection, our team developed a voice that counts, a voice that can question and likely change the terms of debate about the consequences of living with oil. This, to us, is the hallmark of engaged anthropology: our research project not only empirically measures the impacts of oil extraction on local economic and sociocultural behaviors, but it also entails the articulation of personal experiences and imaginations of oil in expressive forms to translate worlds of oil into words. Personal narratives of living with oil can capture ambiguity, acquiescence, contradiction and confusion; they are crucial to constructing the experiential meanings of a range of events, from immediate destruction to the long-term violence associated with energy production. Our research responds to recent calls in the social sciences for sociocultural analyses of energy production that generate stronger empirical and theoretical accounts of "the experience of the political economy of oil." It demonstrates the need to listen to local, personal stories not just as a component of the human experience in the contemporary energy landscape, but also for laying bare what is at stake as energy production moves forward in Ecuador and around the globe. While our study is about the oil complex, the findings are not limited to this form of energy. Alternative and so-called greener mass energy

production have similarly uneven implications on local populations.

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