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International Relations Theories: Energy, Minerals and Conflict

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1. Introduction

IR theories seek to identify key regularities and patterns of interaction in the realm of international politics and to provide parsimonious models to explain the nature and underlying structures of that interaction. These theories generally have, whether implicitly or explicitly, a normative dimension – they say something about how international politics should be conducted and what the world should look like. IR theories have traditionally been seen as competing and incommensurate, as representing alternative ‘paradigms’, and their historical evolution often involves critiquing the perceived flaws of alternative theories. The traditional division of IR theories, which was common in the Cold War period, was between realism, liberalism and Marxism/structuralism. Since the end of the Cold War a dominant new theoretical approach is that of social constructivism, which emerged as a critique of both realism and liberalism (or more precisely neo-realism and neo-liberalism) and filled a gap with the decline of the intellectual appeal of Marxism. However, this radical dimension has been increasingly filled by a variety of theories – critical theory, feminist IR theory, historical sociology, post-structuralism. The overall picture is currently quite complex with an array of differing methodological, explanatory and normative theoretical approaches.

Despite this profusion of theoretical approaches and the clear and evident importance of energy in international relations, it is striking that there has been limited direct application of IR theories to understanding energy- and mineral-related conflicts and modes of collaboration and competition. As Brenda Shaffer (2009, 18) points out, the principal journal in international relations and security studies, International Security, has only published eight articles devoted to energy in its 30 year history (for these exceptions, see Lieber 1992 and Paarlberg 1978). Admittedly, journals like Foreign Affairs, Foreign Policy, International Affairs and Washington Quarterly do often have energy-related articles but these journals are primarily policy-related rather than theoretical journals. Nevertheless, most of the IR literature on energy issues, particularly as related to explaining the potential for conflict and cooperation, is implicitly theoretical, with the main arguments and policy prescriptions underpinned by certain fundamental theoretical assumptions. This section will seek to identify these underlying theoretical assumptions in the existing literature and how, implicitly or explicitly, the key IR theories provide the principal alternative frameworks for understanding the causes of international conflict and cooperation in the energy realm.

This section will initially follow the traditional tripartite division; realism, liberalism and Marxism/radicalism as this does, I believe, neatly illustrate the key differing analytical frameworks with regard to international energy politics. This will be followed, though, by consideration of some alternative theoretical approaches, most notably constructivism and
historical institutionalism, which can be potentially productive in developing the project’s overarching theoretical framework.

2. Realism, neo-Realism and Geopolitics

Realism is often seen historically as the dominant IR theory and this is certainly correct in terms of the study of security, conflict and war. This is reflected in the fact that *International Security*, as noted above the flagship IR journal, is dominated by realist and neo-realist authors. Classical realism includes the key early and mid-twentieth century scholars who developed a notion of the ‘tragic’ nature of international politics, arguing that there was a radical difference between politics within a state and politics between states since inter-state politics lacks any overarching sovereign arbiter who is able authoritatively to repress the inexorable drive for power and the natural human tendency towards aggression (for key texts, see Carr 1946; Morgenthau 1960; Neibuhr 1960). The logical consequence is that the international realm is characterised by anarchy, distrust and the ever-present prospect of war. Much of realism’s initial momentum and subsequent popularity came from its critique of inter-war liberalism (or so-called idealism) and the optimism expressed by many liberals that international relations could be transformed through developing international law and international institutions such as the League of Nations (see especially Carr 1946). In 1979, Kenneth Waltz provided a more rigorous and parsimonious model of realism, known as neo-realism, whose main assumptions were that the international system is anarchical, that the structure of the system is determined by the distribution of power between states (the balance of power), and that the internal nature of the state (i.e. whether it is democratic or authoritarian) has no material structural impact on international relations (Waltz, 1979).

Realism’s theoretical principles draw from deeper historical traditions of thinking about international politics and these help to explain the theory’s popularity and theoretical dominance. This includes the tradition of *realpolitik* developed from Machiavelli onwards, which prioritises the interests of the sovereign, and where the key goal of statesmen seeking to preserve international stability is to contain the ineluctable drive for power by states, and the conflicts this inevitably produces, through the preservation of a durable balance of power. As Kissinger has described, this was the foundation of the European order in the 18th and 19th century (Kissinger 1964). It was an approach to international politics he also sought to resurrect to develop his own foreign policy principles when he was a highly influential US Secretary of State in the 1970s (Kissinger 1979, 1982). Another tradition which realism draws from is that of geopolitics which includes the work of people like Mahan (1890), Mackinder (1919), Haushofer, (2002) Harold and Margaret Spout (1971), and Lipschutz (1989). This tradition draws from geography as well as IR and strategic studies and highlights the spatial dimensions of state power and identifies a continued international struggle for influence and control of critical geographical and geopolitical spaces, whether that be the Eurasian ‘heartland’ favoured by Mackinder or the international sea lanes promoted by Mahan.
Much of the literature on the politics of international energy adopts implicitly a realist and geopolitical theoretical approach, even if this is rarely explicitly developed. The key underlying assumptions and arguments of those who adopt this approach can be reduced to the following:

- Access to and control of natural resources, of which energy is the most critical, is a key ingredient of national power and national interest
- Energy resources are becoming scarcer and more insecure (drawing often from the ‘peak oil’ thesis and the ‘resource curse’ and ‘resource wars’ literature)
- States will increasingly compete for access and control over these resources
- Conflict and war over these resources are increasingly likely, if not inevitable.

A good illustration of this general approach can be seen in the work of Michael Klare who has written prolifically on the international politics of energy and is probably the best-known and most popular writer in the field of IR and energy (see Klare 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2008). The core arguments of his various books are essentially realist and can be distilled to:

- In the post-Cold War period, with the end of the ideological clash between socialism and capitalism and the rise of new economic powers, international relations is increasingly focused on gaining or maintaining access to and control of valuable natural resources, which is inextricably linked to the post-Cold War shifts in the balance of power. This is a major source of conflict between the most powerful states: US, China, Russia, EU, Japan, India…etc
- Natural resources, most notably oil, is becoming increasingly scarce due to rising demand in Asia and the prospect of ‘peak oil’.
- Much of the world’s supply of oil, and much of its new supplies such as in Central Asia and Africa, are located in weak, fragile states with multiple inter-state disputes and conflicts and where political and religious extremism is rising. Oil wealth has the paradoxical effect of making these states more powerful international actors, due to their control of vital resources, but also more dysfunctional, more ‘dissatisfied’, revisionist, authoritarian and anti-Western. A link is to be found between resource wealth and the post 9/11 growth of radical Islam and the threat of international terrorism.
- International conflict over oil and other natural resources is thus becoming more and more likely.

This general overarching thesis is undoubtedly a powerful and persuasive framework which captures the political imagination of many analysts and policy-makers, and which needs to be taken into account even by those who might disagree with the underlying assumptions. Such an approach feeds, for example, the concerns of the Chinese leadership see that the insecurity of the Malacca straits, and the prospect of a military embargo of its oil supplies, represents a fundamental threat to China’s core national interests; similarly, it underlay the concerns of the US Congress that CNOOC’s bid for UNOCAL in 2005 would, if successful, represent a critical threat to US national interests and its energy security. It is a theoretical frame which suffuses military planning, such as that of the Pentagon or the PLA or the Russian armed
forces, and promotes national defence strategies which incorporate policies to defend perceived vulnerable energy supply sources and transportation routes. It also feeds into more alarmist policy and journalistic accounts of international relations where there has been a burgeoning literature about the new ‘Great Game’ in Central Asia, which pits Russia, China and the West in a zero-sum game for control over the region’s energy resources (see Blank 1995; Karasac 2002; Rasizade 2002; Jafar 2004). Similarly, the emergence of a renewed ‘scramble for Africa’ which focuses on the increased global interest in the natural resources of Africa, most notable of which is oil, and which has made this region regain strategic importance and which has incited great power competition (Morris 2006; Taylor 2006; Frynas and Paulo 2007). This realist-driven energy conflict approach also suffuses Western concerns over the rise of China, the fears of Chinese expansion in Central Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the prospect of increased conflict between China and its regional neighbours, Russia, Japan and India.

Despite the evident power and attractiveness of such realist-driven analyses of international energy politics, critics have identified significant shortcomings and weaknesses in these accounts. The most critical of these include:

- The over-emphasis on the strictly military dimensions of power. Some of these criticisms have emerged from within the realist tradition. For example, the neo-realist Robert Gilpin has been highly influential in highlighting the economic factors which are critical to national power and how, for example, multinational corporations are key components of a country’s overall national power (Gilpin 1976, 1987). Susan Strange can also be considered to be broadly realist in that she emphasises the primacy of states in the international system (even if firms also play a major role) but argues that the power of states is driven by four dimensions of power - military, production, finance and ideas – and that any country’s international standing and relative power must be assessed across these four dimensions (Strange 1991, 1994). The role of ‘ideas’ in global politics has been further popularised by Joseph Nye and his argument that there are ‘soft’ as well as ‘hard’ dimensions of power, and that the attractiveness of national culture and ideology are critical facets of national power (Nye 2004). Nationally-related ideological constructs, such as the ‘Washington Consensus’ (neo-liberalism), the ‘Beijing Consensus’ (authoritarian state capitalism) or the ‘European social model’ (social democratic capitalism) are examples of this soft power competition.

- A linked area of criticism is that realism tends to be too state-centric. This is an area where most of the alternative theories converge in critiquing realism. In terms of international energy politics, this involves a criticism that too much attention is accorded to states and inter-state competition and too little attention to the autonomous role of transnational actors (such as the transnational oil and mining companies) and of local actors (local and sub-national communities affected by or seeking to gain control of mining activities). These critics argue that it is this more complex and nuanced interaction between the transnational/national/local which is often left out of realist-inspired accounts.
• A further common criticism is that realism tends to be overly deterministic. The assumption that resources are scarce and that inter-state conflict is inevitable are generally taken as given in these accounts. The widespread challenges to the ‘peak oil’ thesis, the role that technological innovation plays in relieving scarcity, the potential for substitutability – these are dimensions which are rarely articulated in realist analyses. The role of international markets and regional and international institutions in managing and diffusing conflicts are discounted. The prospect that countries might seek to avoid war, and are not driven inexorably towards conflict due either to natural aggression or the inexorable logic of the ‘security dilemma’, are also similarly often ignored. This is, for example, a core argument of the social constructivist approach which sees that there are varying and differing ways in which states and international actors can decide to interact and that they do not necessarily have to operate within the rigid realist constraints of anarchy; to use the famous title of an article by Alexander Wendt, ‘Anarchy is what states make of it’ (Wendt 1992) and there can be more cooperative alternatives, such as has developed in the context of the European Union.

3. The Liberal tradition

The liberal tradition in International Relations can be usefully viewed as a conscious critique of the realist approach to international politics and its allied traditions of realpolitik and geopolitics. Liberal internationalism developed through its explicitly anti-realist explanations for the causes of World War 1 – that the tragedy and slaughter of WW1 was precisely due to the fact that states blindly pursued realist policies, such as secret diplomacy, the obsession with the balance of power, the ignoring of public opinion, and the failure to develop international legal norms and institutions. At its core, the liberal tradition in IR rejects the realist assumption of a radical disjunction between domestic and international politics and that different moral and practical principles apply in these two realms. Fundamental liberal principles, most notably the obligation to respect individual autonomy (human rights) and that political institutions should be developed institutionally to respect those rights (democracies), are seen to apply equally to international as well as domestic politics. A key argument of liberal IR is that democracies conduct foreign policy differently than authoritarian regimes and that democracies most notably do not fight wars against one another, the so-called ‘democratic peace’ thesis (Russett 1993). Liberals reject, in this regard, the deterministic and pessimistic realist view of international politics (as being a form of ‘tragic’ politics) and argue that progress can and should be made; universal human rights can be promoted and defended; countries can shift from being authoritarian to democratic states; and that it does make a difference if international politics is conducted between democracies; that regional and international institutions and regimes can be developed which are conducive to increased cooperation; that global prosperity can be attained if markets are left open and trade is liberalised; and that anarchy can be overcome and war avoided.

As noted above, some of the historic drivers of realism were themselves a counter-reaction to the perceived moralism and excessive optimism (idealism) of liberal exponents of
international politics. There is thus a continual dialogue and debate between realists and liberals with, at times, some shifts in position to accommodate their respective critiques. Such a partial compromise on the liberal IR tradition can be seen in the ‘neo-liberal’ or liberal institutionalist approach which emerged in the 1970s and 1980s and which accepted the realist assumption of anarchy but nevertheless argued that regimes and institutions, based on liberal principles of transparency and legally binding norms, could lead formerly antagonistic actors to adopt cooperative behaviour and promote positive-sum results (Keohane 1984, 1986; Baldwin 1993). Regime theory was the main conduit for this institutionalist turn and which sought to articulate more precisely the transmission mechanisms whereby international economic cooperation could stimulate political cooperation (Krasner 1983; for early application of liberal institutionalist theory applied to the energy field see Keohane 1978). The European Union became the main liberal institutionalist paradigm of the ways in which a regional institution could overcome state sovereignty through economic and political interdependence (the ‘spillover’ or functionalist thesis) and thus reverse the realist-driven propensity for inter-state war and make war ‘inconceivable’ in Europe (Haas 1958).

In terms of international energy politics, the liberal approach can be implicitly or explicitly be seen to inform two major sets of work; the first could be categorised as the liberal quest to expose the ‘dark underbelly’ of the international energy industry; the second as the liberal policy prescriptions of ‘what needs to be done’ so as to generate a more open and cooperative set of arrangements in the international management of the international energy industry. As noted above, liberal approaches tend not to make a hard and fast division between international and domestic politics or between economics and politics, so there tends to be much overlap or blurring of the borders between liberal IR and comparative politics and between economics and politics/IR. This means that this section also overlaps with some of the comparative politics theories and economic theories which are covered more fully in differing sections of this report.

*The ‘Dark Underbelly’* involves an exposition, from a predominantly liberal perspective, of a number of the perceived embedded illiberal practices and perversions of the politics, economics and international relations of the energy industry. These include:

- The ‘resource curse’ literature which exposes the poor developmental records of resource-rich developing states and the factors which contribute to this, such as the ‘Dutch disease’ and the failure to develop other sectors of the economy. (See economic theory section for further development of this).
- The ‘rentier state’ and the consolidation of neopatrimonial authoritarian regimes in resource-rich states which are seen to undermine civil society, accentuate the repressive functions of the state, and prohibit the development of democratic states with constitutional restraints on executive power. (See comparative politics theory section for further development of this).
- The ‘resource wars’ which are generated by the predation of natural resources and the breakdown of neopatrimonial states into warring factions whose primary incentive is the capture of rents (the ‘greed’ rather than ‘grievance’ explanation for
the ‘new wars’). This also feeds more generally into the political economy of ‘new wars’ literature (Kaldor, Munkler, Dannreuther 2007). (See comparative politics section for further development of this).

Academic and populist syntheses of these various strands can be seen, for example, in the very widely-read *The Bottom Billion* (2007) by the former World Bank economist, Paul Collier, who argues that many of the poorest on the planet suffer from living paradoxically in formally resource-rich countries but which suffer from poor economic performance and poor governance (resource predation) and where there is a strong likelihood of their citizens being sucked into debilitating and poverty-inducing civil wars (resource wars). Another populist variant of this is found in the New York columnist, Thomas Friedman (2004) who identified the ‘First Law of Petropolitics’ which is that ‘the higher the price of crude oil, the more free speech, free press, fair elections, and independent judiciary, the rule of law and independent political parties are eroded’. This can be seen as the classic statement of the causal linkages between oil wealth and illiberalism.

The more explicitly IR dimension of this liberal exposure of the ‘dark underbelly’ is in identifying the ways in which Western or other oil-dependent countries, companies and individuals are complicit or alternatively ‘turn a blind eye’ to these illiberal practices. This is seen in all of its complex manifestations in, for example, an in-depth World Bank study of corruption in the petroleum sector by McPherson and MacSearraigh (2007). Ken Silverstein (2009) has exposed some of the shady world of the secret ‘oil’ fixers, traders and dealers, while another investigative journalist, Nicholas Shaxson, has written about the ‘dirty politics’ of oil in Africa, describing for example the complex and longstanding ‘special relations’ between the oil company, ELF, the French Secret Services, and influential parts of the French establishment with the oil-rich state of Gabon and its corrupt leader, Omar Bongo. Robert Vitalis (2007) has provided an in-depth historical study of US-Saudi relations and how racist labour relations were transplanted from the US to the ARAMCO-controlled oil fields in Saudi Arabia. These examples of ‘secret alliances’ and ‘special relationships’, to use the denunciatory language of liberal internationalism, can be expanded to include many other cases: pre-revolutionary Iran and the US/UK; pre-Chavez Venezuela and the US; Nigeria-UK; Burma and France (and now Burma and China); Russia and Central Asia and the Caucasus; Mobutu’s Zaire and France; South Africa prior to the 1990s with the UK and the US…etc

The ‘What needs to be done’ provides the reverse side of the ‘dark underbelly’: identifying the liberal prescriptions required to overcome the cumulative effects of these illiberal practices and institutions within the international energy realm. These prescriptive policy-driven recommendations come from multiple sources: dispassionate neo-classical economists, activist-scholars, international financial institutions, and campaigning NGOs such as ‘Global Witness’, ‘Revenue Watch’ and ‘Publish what you Pay’. A good example of this latter category is the International Crisis Group which has an energy security programme which produces multiple reports highlighting how ‘from Latin America to the Caucasus and from Africa to the Middle East, energy issues are among the root causes of both civil and
interstate conflict’. These reports always include a set of recommendations which the EU, the US, and international institutions are urged to adopt. These normally conform to fairly classical liberal prescriptions:

- Transparency and the need to develop transparency measures to avoid the ‘secret’ deals which underpin the illiberal practices noted above. It is a key liberal principle that openness of information is an essential precondition for ensuring political participation. As Terry Karl (2005) notes, ‘civil society is useless without information’. The ‘Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative’ is the most notable international policy instrument in this regard, which was an initiative of the British government, having initially been proposed by the NGO Global Witness and the campaign of the Open Society Institute ‘Publish what you Pay’. It has been signed by about 20 countries who have committed themselves to publish oil company payments and government revenues so as to reduce corruption and increase transparency and accountability.

- International regulation so as to limit and deter illicit trade and practices which help to foster conflict. A key example of this is the so called ‘Kimberley Process’ which sought to overcome the problem of ‘conflict diamonds’ widely seen to be a root cause of conflicts in many parts of Africa, and which required the global diamond industry to commit itself to the introduction of a universal diamond certification process.

- Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). This is a burgeoning area of responsibility for companies which Frynas (2009, p. 6) defines as having three dimensions: a) companies have a responsibility for their impact on society and the natural environment, sometimes beyond that of legal compliance and the liability of individuals; b) that companies have responsibility for the behaviour of others with whom they do business (i.e. supply chains) c) that business needs to manage its relationship with wider society, whether for reasons of commercial viability or to add value to society. International oil and mining companies have been particularly under international pressure in this regard due to their environmental impact and through having frequently to operate in conflict-ridden regions where there is widespread insecurity and conflict, an often disenfranchised sub-national region in conflict with the national government, and local communities which fail to gain the expected benefits from the mining operations. As a consequence, oil and mining companies have been among the leading companies championing CSR. They have developed corporate codes of conduct and social reporting, which include not just IOCs but also NOCs such as Petrobras and India Oil and Kuwait Petroleum. Such companies have also embraced a number of initiatives, such as the UN Global Compact which sets out ten principles in relation to human rights, labour, the environment and anti-corruption. They have also initiated, funded and implemented significant community development schemes.

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1 For the International Crisis Group energy security programme, see http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=4407&l=1
• Good governance. A common theme in these liberal-inspired prescriptive recommendations is that the promotion of good governance is critical if deeply-rooted illiberal practices of ‘rent seeking’ and the perversions of the ‘rentier state’ are to be overcome (Campbell 2002). This involves, at times, a recognition that all the best international efforts at promoting CSR or introducing transparency measures are likely to be impotent unless the national sovereign authority itself has legitimacy and applies principles of good governance (see the conclusions of the multi-stakeholder research project, Mining, Minerals and Sustainable Development, MMSD 2002). Policy prescriptions for the promotion of good governance can vary from the highly ambitious/idealist: such as Mary Kaldor’s demand for ‘substantive democracy, [by which] we mean genuine political equality… a democratic culture of social relations, underpinned by fair, transparent and accountable procedures’ (Kaldor, Karl and Said 2007, 279) to the more narrow specific recommendations about the appropriate ways to manage oil and stabilization funds so as to manage better commodity price fluctuations (Fasano, 2000; David, Ossowski et al 2001).

• Promotion of regional and international energy regimes and institutions. A common assumption is that the development and enlarged membership of liberal international energy regimes, such as the IEA or the Energy Charter Treaty (rather than the illiberal cartel of OPEC) facilitates international cooperation. It is often suggested that China, for instance, should join the IEA or Russia ratify the ECT. There are often proposals for regional energy cooperative institutions, such as those proposed for South Asia or for North-East Asia to bring together Russia, China and Japan into a mutually beneficial rather than competitive energy relationship (for example, Srivastra and Misra 2007). The EU is itself often a target of this; that its energy policies are insufficiently liberal and institutionalised and that the key solution to its energy security concerns is through further liberalisation of energy markets.

• Economic liberalisation. It is fairly obvious but a key liberal assumption underlying these various prescriptions is that most of the illiberal practices and institutions which underlie the multiple conflicts in the international realm derive from imperfect markets. If international energy were liberalised and principles of comparative advantage where properly instituted then energy and minerals would be provided at not only the most economically efficient way but also without the compulsion of geopolitical competition and the conflicts and wars that ensue from that (for a recent example, see Goldthau and Witte 2009).

4. Marxist/Radical Approaches

Marxist-inspired radical approaches to IR, such as dependency theory, structuralism and more recently critical IR theory, can themselves (much as with realist and liberal IR theories noted above) be helpfully viewed as seeking to provide substantive critiques of the dominant IR theories of realism and liberalism. For those in this radical tradition, realism is seen to be almost self-evidently flawed since its explanations of international behaviour assume no potential for radical change and thus explicitly condone the structural injustices of the
international status quo. Liberalism is more challenging since, like the radical approach, it
does offer policies for change and reform, based seemingly on altruistic and benign universal
moral principles, but for radicals these policy prescriptions (such as those noted above)
actually implicitly perpetuate the underlying deeply unjust structures of international power
and domination. For those in the classical Marxist tradition, this is because liberalism
supports rather than condemns global capitalism. For dependency theorists, economic neo-
liberalism only serves to consolidate rather than dismantle the domination of the North and
the oppression of the South. For critical IR theorists, liberals take a ‘problem-solving’
approach, to use Robert Cox’s (1981) term, which means relying on technical solutions to the
resolution of problems (such as Corporate Social Responsibility), rather than asking more
profound questions of the moral and political legitimacy of the contemporary international
system, such as the radical implications of the privatisation of national welfare in the hands of
foreign multinationals.

A good example of a radical approach to international energy issues can be seen in Ray
Hinnebusch’s recent textbook on *The International Politics of the Middle East* (2003). In this
book, Hinnebusch argues that the Middle East economies ‘exhibit many of the classic
features of dependency’ which include dependence on a few basic export commodity, most
notably oil; the failure to process these raw materials into finished high-value goods, thus
making their economies dependent on the core; the political salience of dependency links
between local economically dominant classes and the core, which detaches these elites from
the local populations and inhibits the development of national economies; and a western-
financed and supported military-security structure which represses challenges to these
dependent core-periphery relations. For Hinnebusch, the modern history of the Middle East is
a perpetual struggle between local indigenous forms of resistance, such as the radical Arab
nationalist anti-imperialist struggles in the 1970s, and Western states and multinationals who
have continually succeeded in repressing these attempts at national autonomy, most notably
through the triumph of neo-liberalism in the 1980s and the subsequent collapse of Soviet
Union which left the US as the unchallenged hegemon in the Middle East.

This radical anti-Western critique of international relations has undoubtedly been a powerful
ideology which has inspired much of the drive for independence and autonomy in the Global
South. It provided the intellectual foundation for many of the developments of the 1960s and
1970s related to the international oil and mineral industries: the rise of resource nationalism,
the policies of nationalisation, the creation of OPEC and other attempts at mineral cartels, the
intellectual sources for the Brandt Report and the promotion of NIEO. It has again implicitly
underpinned the revival of these policies in the 2000s, if now in the defence of authoritarian
state capitalism rather than Marxist or socialist radicalism. International oil and mineral
companies find themselves increasingly challenged as conduits of the interests of the core
(whether defined as their shareholders or their home states) rather than the national
developmental goals of the states in which they operate. In Russia, a narrative has
successfully been constructed whereby the privatisation of the oil and gas industries in the
1990s, and the perceived Western support for the liberal oligarch-dominant Russian state of
that period, was part of a general Western plot to weaken the power of the Russian state and
its traditional great power status role in regional and international politics. Re-nationalisation has thus been popularly been viewed among Russians as a necessary step to the reconstruction and strengthening of the state. Similarly, the Chinese government and the state oil companies see the Western strategies to limit their international energy and mineral investments, such as the enforced CNOOC withdrawal of its bid for UNOCAL, as part of an overarching strategy which seeks to prevent China’s ‘peaceful rise’ and to preserve Western economic and political hegemony. In the South more generally, and particularly with countries with continuing strong memories of imperialism and colonialism, neo-liberal economic prescriptions can very effectively be portrayed as an instrument for continued domination of the North over the South.

Such radical critiques of the way that the liberal international economic order entrenches and helps to perpetuate certain historically constructed economic structures also contributes, in various diverse ways, to some interesting and considerably more nuanced recent contributions on the politics of energy and minerals. These contributions come from diverse disciplinary backgrounds, but with a particular concentration in political and economic geography, and utilise a variety of theories and methodologies – critical theory, post-structuralism and Foucauldian analysis (Watts 2004; Barry 2006), action-network theory (Barry 2006; Mitchell 2009), global production network analysis (Bridge 2008). These analyses are only ‘radical’ in a loose sense and are generally far removed from the rather crude simplifications of the traditional dependency or world systems approaches. But what they do have in common is dissatisfaction with the ‘resource curse’ or ‘resource dependency’ approach which, as noted above, is at the centre of the liberal analysis of the sources of conflict in the international energy realm. They generally do not deny that this ‘resource dependency’ thesis captures some of the causes of resource-related conflict, but they argue that it critically fails to identify some of larger complexities and inter-connections which link energy and minerals to the shifting dynamics of global capitalism.

The main areas of dissatisfaction with the liberal approach exemplified by the ‘resource dependency’ thesis include:

- That this approach gives too great a causal determinism to oil. In its crude form, you get bald statements by, for example, the influential political scientist, Michael Ross that ‘oil hinders democracy’ or ‘undermines gender equality’ (Ross, 2001, 2004). Clearly, Ross’s thesis is more complex than that but what this general approach does is provide a simplified notion that it is the very possession of oil which distorts the normal course of development and not a complex set of historical, social and political relations which construct the conditions within which a country seeks to benefit from its resource wealth. It also tends to lead to rather simplistic prescriptions of the quasi-magical powers of ‘good governance’. A similar critique can also be given to the rather simplified notions that the struggle over minerals is the cause for the millions dead in Central Africa.
- That the emphasis on resource dependency directs too much emphasis on states and particularly on the perceived perversions and maladies of the resource producing states. What a number of these critics note is that there is a striking absence of the
firm in these analyses and, if they are included, they are often presented as almost passive actors without the power to resist the resource-producing states. Gavin Bridge (2008) provides, in contrast, a highly detailed analysis of the multiple actors who are involved in what he calls the ‘hydrocarbon commodity chain’ from natural production, to extraction/production, refining, distribution and then finally consumption and carbon capture. Utilising a global production network analysis, he identifies four types of ‘oil firms’: a) vertically integrated oil companies b) independent producers c) independent transporters, refiners and distributors and d) oil-field service companies. Through identifying these various firms, he seeks to bring back ‘agency’ to the oil firm, how it is engaged in complex negotiations and bargaining not only with states but also with other firms. Through this analysis, he highlights how the oil global network extends all the way from the producer to the consumer and involves complex bargaining between the two; and that firms are engaged at all the points on this ‘commodity chain’ and are themselves in complex negotiations and bargaining with producer states (particularly at the beginning of the chain which is securing the rights to exploration/production) as well as with other firms. This work naturally draws from an extensive literature on the global oil industry (such as Turner, 1978; Binndemann 1999; Noreng, 2002; Mommer 2002; Marcel 2006 and Andrews-Speed 2008),

- That the liberal approach tends not only to marginalise the role of the firm but also the role of local and sub-national communities. One of the emphases of traditional dependency theory – the salience of ‘enclaves’ in global capitalism – is something particularly taken up by those studying the oil and gas industry in Africa and elsewhere (Ferguson, 2005; Yessenova 2007). In many resource-rich African states, there are small territorial enclaves of mineral extraction, protected by private armies and security firms, in conditions of more generalised civil war and the collapse of the state. The complex social and political realities of these ‘enclaves’ provide powerful illustrations of the inter-linkages between international and national companies, national states, foreign states, sub-national regions and local communities. The geographer Michael Watts has looked at this with particular attention to the Niger Delta and identifies the following actors, agents and processes: ‘as not only the IOCs, NOCs and the service companies but also the petrostates, the engineering companies and the financial groups, the shadow economies (theft, money laundering, drugs, organised crime), the raft of NGOs (human rights, CSR groups, monitoring agencies), the research institutes and lobby groups, the landscape of oil consumption, and not least the oil communities, the military and paramilitary groups, and the social movements which surround the operations of, and the shape and functioning of, the oil industry narrowly construed’ (Watts, 2009; see also Watts 2001 and 2004). Ricardo Soares de Oliveira, who has also written extensively on oil and politics in West Africa (2007), has done interesting analogous research on the Angolan NOC, Sonogal, and how it has remained an ‘enclave’ of competence in a state which has otherwise imploded; however, the national company has not unfortunately contributed to national ‘capacity building’ but has ended up being at the service of the presidency and its rentier ambitions. Dunning and Wirpsa (2004) provide a good case study of
how the local/national/international intersect through an analysis of the entry of US oil companies into Columbia in the 1980s; how this triggered local guerrilla attacks on these installations; how this led to a shift in US policy towards providing counter-insurgency support to the Columbian state so as to protect its vital energy supplies from Latin America; and how this only fed into and exacerbated the civil conflict.

- Finally, there is a more ambitious contribution by Timothy Mitchell (2009) who seeks to provide an account of the various ways in which fossil fuels have moulded the forms of democracy, or lack of democracy, over the course of the twentieth century. Thus, he contrasts the critical differences between coal, where the labour struggles of miners contributed in Europe and elsewhere to the emergence of the modern welfare state and social democracy, to oil where labour has been more effectively repressed due to the lesser capacity of labour ‘to paralyse energy systems and build a more democratic order’ (p. 413). Like other contributors in this broad area, he also criticises the tendency to focus just on the production end of the spectrum and not at the use of fossil fuels and, in this regard, he brings out the peculiarities of the ‘carbon-heavy form of middle class American life’ and how this helps to define some of the core features of American democracy.

5. Returning to the Analytical Framework

The three broad theoretical approaches – realism, liberalism and radicalism – are often viewed as contrasting and incommensurate paradigms of understanding international relations. But they can also be seen as potentially complementary since each of these differing theories tends to focus on particular elements and dimensions of the international system and exclude other parts. The theories can therefore potentially be combined in a more syncretic manner and which thereby offers a more holistic, if less parsimonious, conceptualisation of international relations.

This can be illustrated by looking at how these different theories prioritise certain variables of the project’s analytical framework at the expense, to a certain extent, of others. Realism tends to prioritise, in terms of independent variables, the salience of the geopolitical distribution of power, the geographical location of resources, and the value of resources (perceived and actual) but tends to give lesser attention to state-company relations and state capacity. Realist theory also tends to emphasise structure rather than agency and is generally sceptical about the transformative power of regional and international institutions and the other intervening variables identified in the analytical framework, with the partial exception of traditional great power diplomacy. In terms of the dependent variables, realism focuses primarily at global and regional geostrategic tensions and conflicts, and the inter-state conflicts that emerge from these, and pays less attention to local and economic/commercial conflicts and to cooperative and collaborative arrangements.

Liberalism, in contrast, focuses considerably more attention and gives greater weight to agency and the transformative potential of the various identified intervening variables – transparency measures, legal frameworks and norms, regulatory and market measures, and
the role of regional and international institutions. In terms of the independent variables, priority tends to be given to state capacity and state-company relations, with a lesser explanatory attention given to the geographical location of resources, the geopolitical distribution of power and the value of the resources. In terms of dependent variables, the focus again contrasts with that of realism in that its focus is more at the cooperative/collaborative end of the spectrum, with the roots of conflict seen to reside primarily in the area of domestic/local conditions (the resource curse) rather than at the global and regional level of inter-state conflict. The Marxist/radical tradition has, paradoxically, more congruence with realism than with liberalism in its broad explanatory framework: it again emphasises structure over agency, with particular attention on the geopolitical distribution of power and the geographical location of resources, and is similarly sceptical with realist analyses about the prospects for regional and international cooperation; but, unlike realism, it tends to be more sensitive to state-regime-firm-local linkages and is more ambitious in seeking to identify the connections between the various levels of conflict in the spectrum set out in the dependent variables.

This mapping of the different theoretical traditions to the project’s analytical framework is clearly a rather crude exercise which does not do justice to the subtleties and complexities of many of the individual studies within these broad traditions. But what it does at least do is illustrate that the different theories are often seeking to explain differing dimensions of the issue and prioritising different variables for understanding the causes of conflict and cooperation in relation to access to oil, gas and minerals. There is no a priori reason that a synthetic inter-theoretical approach cannot be adopted to provide a more holistic conceptualisation of the overarching intellectual framework for the project. This needs also to be assessed in the light of the other theoretical contributions – the economic theories and the comparative politics theories – which are being developed within the project and their potential inter-connections with these IR theoretical traditions.

6. Connecting to WP3

In terms of looking forward to WP3, one of the key research objectives identified by this work-package is to provide causal explanations of how issues relating to access to oil, gas and minerals migrate from the commercial and economic to the geopolitical and geo-strategic. The IR theories identified above are generally rather weak in identifying such transmission mechanisms and in providing a more dynamic account of how patterns of conflict/cooperation change and are transformed over time. This reflects a common criticism of IR theories that they tend to be ahistorical and too focused on ‘current affairs’. This again is rather a crude representation and ignores the main individual accounts which do critically include this. For example, the article identified above by Dunning and Wirpsa (2004) nicely illustrates how a relatively innocuous set of commercial decisions – US oil companies investing in the oil industry in Columbia – led eventually to indirect military intervention by the US and contributed to the deterioration in an internal civil conflict. But, as a whole, this is an area where traditional IR theories can rightly be seen to be weak.
Two recent theoretical innovations with IR, admittedly drawn from theories first developed in other disciplines, can potentially help in filling this gap. The first is securitization theory, which draws from social constructivism; and the second is historical institutionalism, which draws from historical sociology. Neither of these theories have been explicitly applied to international energy or mineral politics.

Securitization theory was first developed by Barry Buzan and Ole Waever in their book *Security: An New Framework for Analysis* (1998) which adopted a social constructivist approach to the study of security by arguing that security threats are not objectively ‘out there’ in a positivist sense but only come into being through a process of inter-subjective construction. The key intellectual move was to shift away from seeking to determine what security is (the traditional realist security studies approach) to focusing on what security does or how it is constructed. As such, they define security as ‘the move that takes politics beyond the established rules of the game and frames the issue either as a special kind of politics or above politics’ (p. 23), a process they define as ‘securitisation’. In this approach, any public issue can be located on a spectrum ranging from the ‘non-politicised’ to the ‘politicised’ to ‘securitised’. An issue is defined as being ‘securitised’ when it is perceived and framed as an existential threat, which underlines its importance and urgency in dealing with it. The central research focus is identifying the process through which something becomes securitised (and de-securitised) and two elements are particularly important here:

- **securitising actors.** Who is it who successfully presents an issue as a security issue? In theory, anyone can be a securitising actor but, in practice, it is those with authority and social power usually derived from their position, who do this successfully and popularise a security discourse. The media can be seen as such an actor as well as political leaders and government bureaucracies.

- **securitization move.** However, not every presentation of something as an existential threat is successful and automatically leads to securitization. An issue is successfully securitised ‘only if and when the audience accepts it as such’. They key question is therefore identifying the process by which the broader audience is convinced by certain securitising actors that an issue truly represents an existential threat which puts it above the normal political processes. Examples of this can be seen with various attempts to make AIDS or climate change ‘security’ issues. Clearly, it also applies in relation to oil, gas and minerals where the perceived threat of ‘peak oil’ or ‘peak minerals’ or ‘China as a threat to global energy and mineral security’ can and are securitised by various securitising actors.

Historical institutionalism as a theoretical approach has a number of areas of convergence with social constructivism in that it is an approach which also seeks to chart the process through which certain critical shifts in international politics emerge and are then incorporated into international practice. In the IR social constructivist literature, this includes analysis of certain normative transformations in international behaviour, such as the delegitimisation of imperialism, the postwar security culture in Japan, and the emergence of international human rights regimes and the changing norms on intervention (Finnemore 2003). But historical
institutionalism also draws from historical sociology, which provides broader macro-historical studies of how certain crucial developments, such as the differing trajectories of states’ processes of democratisation, are linked to certain differences in initial conditions, such as state formation processes (Moore 1966). In contrast to social constructivism, there is a harder-edge historical materialist dimension to historical sociology.

The particular potential utility of historical institutionalism lies in its ability to offer a more historically sensitive account of the elements of change and continuity over time. These include:

- the role of *critical junctures* and the associated notions of path dependence and positive returns. The notion of critical junctures and the associated model of path dependency is drawn originally from economics; the most famous instance is that of the QWERTY keyboard, which David (1985) argued illustrated the ways in which certain technologies can achieve an initial advantage over alternative technologies and can prevail over time despite the potential greater efficiency of these alternatives. The key insight here is the idea that there are certain events, which might be quite seemingly insignificant and contingent at the time, subsequently set in path courses of action which become difficult to reverse.

- The ways in which *positive feedback* ‘lock in’ specific developmental trajectories. These involve, as Thelen (1999) argues, two processes incorporating self-reinforcing positive feedback. The first which has been particularly developed in Douglass North’s (1990) work on the history of economic institutions is how, once institutions are created, they establish powerful inducements that reinforce their stability and where actors adapt their strategies in ways which also strengthen and consolidate them. Over time, the dynamics unleashed mean that it becomes more and more difficult to reverse the decisions made at the original critical juncture. The second feedback process is the distributional effects of institutions, which reproduce and magnify particular patterns of power distribution. This involves a recognition, as in neo-realist analyses, that institutions are not just neutral arenas but ones in which certain actors are strengthened relative to others, which in turn consolidates and entrench particular institutional arrangements.

- The analytical focus on institutions. These can be understood in a relatively broad fashion as not just formal institutions, such as OPEC or the IEA, but also as looser regimes and social practices which involve ‘sets of rules that stipulate ways in which states should cooperate and compete with each other’ (Mearsheimer 1994/5). This incorporates potentially much less formal ‘institutions’ or ‘sets of rules’ about how states, oil companies and other critical actors engage in the international energy realm. For an example of historical institutionalism being applied to an informal institutional arrangement, the Middle East peace Process, see Dannreuther (2010).
These two approaches offer some additional potential explanatory application to understanding the transmission mechanisms for how energy- and mineral-related issues can migrate from the commercial and economic to the political and geostrategic realms, a key research objective of WP3.
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