

The Power of IPE for Researching Energy and Natural Resources

Written by Jesse Salah Ovadia

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JESSE SALAH OVADIA, APR 24 2014

Whereas much of traditional political science is focused on research into the state, the strength of international political economy (IPE) is its ability to analyze phenomena such as globalization, poverty and development. In the past few years, IPE scholars have begun paying increased attention to energy and natural resources. The ability of IPE scholars to understand energy and extractive industries through a lens that examines both the economic and political aspects of power offers great potential for analysis of a topic of increasing importance which has previously been ignored as a subject of analysis in and of itself.

Since IPE is a sub-section of International relations, one of the most important annual events for IPE scholars is the International Studies Association (ISA) conference (I first attended the event five years ago in New York). Energy and natural resources was at the time just beginning to register on the radar as an issue on its own beyond the traditional focus on energy security and inter-state conflict over resources. By my count, ISA 2009 had 29 panels or panels with papers about energy or natural resources. In addition to the papers on energy security, topics covered included the oil curse, natural resources and peacebuilding, and renewable energy. While this was an impressive total, it was just the beginning of what has now become an important new trend.

At the most recent ISA in Toronto, there were about 20 percent more panels than five years ago. However, there were by my count at least 75 panels related to energy or natural resources, not including the two full-day workshop sessions on energy that occurred the day before ISA 2014 began. Although there were still many energy topics of a fairly traditional nature relating to energy security and the effects of resource competition on great power relations, there was more analysis of energy and peacebuilding, resources in Africa, extreme energy, renewable energy, biofuels, energy governance and transparency, multinational oil companies, peak energy and the global political economy, and, in my view most importantly, the role of energy and natural resources in development.

The invitation-only workshop on the Global Political Economy of Energy prior to the ISA was entirely premised on the need to recognize the IPE of resources as a new and increasingly important subfield. The new research network founded by the organizers of this workshop will be launching its own website next month.

In addition to the new interest seen through the ISA, several new books and special issues of journals have been devoted to the new importance of energy and natural resources in international relations – particularly in IPE – with many more planned for the future. Two new interdisciplinary journals have launched in the last year devoted to energy and natural resources. *The Extractive Industries and Society* is devoted specifically to studying the impacts of oil and mining, while *Energy Research & Social Science* has a similar mandate to encourage research on the human and social elements of energy production.

Finally, this week in Edinburgh, the Centre for African Studies will hold their annual conference on Mining and Political Transformations in Africa, part of a growing trend of workshops and conferences devoted to the very salient question of natural resources in Africa. Resources and energy have always been closely related to the questions of economic development and imperialism. As such, they have special relevance for Africa and the rest of the Global South, and particularly the political economy of the south.

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The time has come to give the study of energy and natural resources their due in international political economy. IPE provides crucial tools for analyzing the role of energy and resources not only on society but more specifically on the global system. New perspectives and a more comprehensive understanding are needed of energy, and particularly carbon energy, on global politics and the global economy. Within these emerging perspectives, historically grounded approaches to energy and capitalism can, and will, have far-reaching impacts on debates about our energy futures.

About the author:

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