

The Greed and Grievances of Canada and Nigeria

Written by Cosanna Preston

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Through a comparison of oil governance in Nigeria and Canada as it relates to the two marginalized communities within these oil-wealthy countries: the Ogoni, of Rivers State in the Niger Delta and the Lubicon Cree of Northern Alberta, the main thesis of this paper argues that even in countries as different as Nigeria and Canada, once they have been stripped of factors that are external to oil production and focusing only on the most vulnerable peoples and regions, oil governance conflicts with marginalized communities through a structural violence unconvincingly justified by an economic benefit for the greater public good. In making this comparison the examination of oil governance necessarily includes three parties as identified by discourse theorists Abiodun Alao & 'Funmi Olonisakin (2000) and James Fearon (2005): the governments, the communities and the industry.

The basis of this comparison is informed by the correlation between resource wealth and conflict which recently manifested through the discourse of the political economy of war. While the precise conclusions and articulations remain heavily debated, the correlation is essentially informed by two generalizations. The first being that resource-wealthy states, particularly oil-wealthy states, suffer from a 'resource curse' where the obscene amounts of money generated from these extractions actually cause more harm than they do good (Shaxson, 2005). The second is that there is an economic dimension to civil conflict, particularly those civil conflicts which occur in resource-wealthy countries. Once thought of as irrational violence blinded by grievance, scholars now suggest that these civil wars are precluded by careful analyses of the situation at hand, which incorporates the economic benefit and/or the existing grievances against the government in determining whether or not to enter into armed conflict (Malone & Nitzschke, 2005). As David Malone and Heiko Nitzschke (2005) explain citing David Keen, "far from being irrational, violence often serves both political and economic functions for combatants, civilians, and external actors. Keen saw many of these conflicts as 'the continuation of economics by other means'" (p. 3).

My response to such a conclusion, and indeed my thesis, was informed by a class I once took which focused on precisely the debate of this discourse and its applicability to African resource conflicts. The class encouraged us to ask: how do we change it? How can Africa begin to foster leaders that exercise good governance over their resource management in a manner that is accountable and beneficial to their people? The question is enormous and it was not the purpose of my thesis to provide an answer. However, the questions motivated my attempt to further understand the problem behind the question, to prod the current discourse and elicit a fuller understanding of resource management and its contribution to armed conflict.

As this class was taught at a Canadian university, students would consistently mention Canada as an ideal, an exception to the resource curse. 'Look at us,' students would say, 'our country runs off resources and we don't see the type of conflict here that African countries experience. We have oil, and yes there are problems, but nothing like there are in Nigeria or Angola.' The suggestion is true on one hand; Canada certainly has not suffered the same abysmal state governance experienced by numerous resource-touting African countries. In contrast, Canada is a thriving first-world country, a lender not a borrower, and a leader of international protocols. But at the same time, there is a nagging notion that all is not well in Canadian *resource* governance, that if one could just articulate it, we might see that Canada shares more of the resource curse than first meets the eye, and thus we could open a new chapter in the discourse of the political economy of resource wars.

My thesis claims to begin that new chapter, in doing so we must first have a brief understanding of the communities

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in question.

The claim is based in the definition of 'violence' and 'conflict' as advanced first in the 1960s and then again in the mid-1990s by Johan Galtung, the founder of the International Peace Research Institute in Oslo, which houses the Centre for the Study of Civil War. He explains that, violence is not limited to direct physical and psychological harm executed by an identifiable assailant on a subject. Rather "violence is present when human beings are being influenced so that their actual somatic and mental realizations are below their potential realizations" (1969, p. 168). He cites examples such as tuberculosis: In the eighteenth century this disease was unavoidable as it was quite difficult to fight. Now, however, we have the medical technology available to fight the disease; yet the communities in the two case-studies discussed here continue to be traumatized by it. Thus the potential exists that a person need not suffer from tuberculosis, but this is not the reality in these communities. As Galtung argues, "when the potential is higher than the actual it is by definition *avoidable* and when it is avoidable than violence is present" (p. 169).

This definition serves Galtung's attempt to understand violence in order to attain peace. For if we are to understand the full armed conflict we must also understand and find a way of expressing the situation that exists before the first bomb or gun shot. For Galtung, these preconditions are defined as 'structural violence', which he claims, can be just as harmful as personal violence (violence caused by direct assault). In order to understand this concept I will quote him at length as he articulates the difference between the two forms:

Violence with a clear subject-object relation [personal violence] is manifest because it is visible as *action*. It corresponds to our ideas of what *drama* is, and it is personal because there are persons committing the violence. It is easily captured and expressed verbally since it has the same structure as elementary sentences in (at Indo-European) *languages*: subject-verb-object, with both subject and object being persons. Violence without this relation is structural, built into structure. Thus, when one husband beats his wife there is a clear case of personal violence, but when one million husbands keep one million wives in ignorance there is structural violence. Correspondingly, in a society where life expectancy is twice as high in the upper as in the lower classes, violence is exercised even if there are no concrete actors one can point to directly attacking others, as when one person kills another. (p. 173)

Thus when people are starving, if it is objectively avoidable; when the distribution of education, literacy, health and *political decision making power* remains uneven—as we see in Ogoniland and at Little Buffalo (the Lubicon community)—violence is being committed.

Linking violence to conflict, Galtung (1996) considers structural violence to be an instigator of latent conflict, where conflict is defined as "attitudes/assumptions + behaviour + contradiction/content" and contradiction is the "incompatible goal-states in a goal seeking system" (p. 71). Both case studies embody this definition of conflict. The *attitudes* and *assumptions* held by the government, industry and communities combined with the execution of these attitudes and assumptions through their *behaviour* in the historical *content* of political alienation and disregard by the dominating powers for alternative worldviews has resulted in precisely the structural violence theorized by Galtung which is sustained because the government and industry have a "vested economic interest in the conflict's perpetuation" (Malone & Nitzschke, 2005, p.5). Thus I aim to push the discourse of the political economy of civil war to support this wider definition of conflict with particular consideration of the existence of such structural violence in resource management, specifically of oil.

This was demonstrated by:

-The forceful displacement of oil-community members from their traditional lands;

-Standards of living that are far below the national averages;

-Aggressive government actions characterized by violence and manipulation when contentions are raised by these marginalized groups;

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-A disregard (with the exception of superficial appeasement measures) for environmental surroundings

The implications of these points utterly disregard the communities' cultural identities and existence.

Thus, while the Nigerian and Canadian economies continue to benefit from oil revenue injections, the communities of the Ogoni and Lubicon slip further and further into destitution. Indeed I argue that both communities ultimately suffer from the structural violence imposed upon them by governments, which have chosen to place oil revenues, i.e. the health of the economy, above the health and welfare of select citizens. In other words, the economy has become an ends in itself rather than a means to an ends: a healthy functioning citizenry.

In Ogoniland this is best illustrated by a general death rate and infant mortality, which are high, even by Third World standards, with life expectancy below 50 years and healthcare and education remaining extremely under-funded (Naanen, 1995). In Little Buffalo the detriments of the oil industry's environmental destruction resulted in a welfare rate jump from 10 per cent to 90 per cent in just four years (Goddard, 1991).

We can also see it in the discussion of corruption and conflict of interest as they apply to both countries. This discussion is especially important to articulate the comparative strength of these two case studies as it resides in the governance structure. Nigeria is known for its corruption with elites scraping over a piece of the national cake, while the oil-communities are neglected and degraded. Yet, the country has at least undertaken an anti-corruption campaign. Though perilous and problematic in its own right, it does serve as a preliminary recognition of the state erosion encompassed in corruption.

The Albertan oil sector, however, operates in complete contrast. It prides itself in transparency and efficiency hiding its questionable practises in categories of 'conflict of interest' but let us pause and examine what this means. Conflict of interest includes Members of the Legislative Assembly creating legislation that directly affects oil fields, in which Members often have a *personal* investment. It includes court judges who are often former oil-company lawyers, yet are somehow fit to hear community concerns against their former employers (Laird, 2002). It includes regulatory boards that neglect the oil companies operating without the required licensing, allowing the province to accrue wealth while a community suffers (Barnsley, 2005). In Nigeria such dealings would be shamed by the international community and potentially the Nigerian government as *corruption*; in Canada it is brushed aside as unfortunate conflict of interest. In both cases, the communities suffer but only in Nigeria is it considered problematic.

The reason for such horrendous destitution and deviant behaviour is precisely the contradiction outlined by Galtung (1996) in his description of conflict as "incompatible goals...in a goal seeking system" (p.71). As it applies to this paper the incompatible goals are the different uses of land envisioned by the Ogoni and Lubicon on one hand, one of dependence, harmony and protection; and the Nigerian and Albertan governments on the other, the land as nothing more than an extraction source. Both of these visions, however, are embedded in the government-favoured neo-liberal system promoting the ultimate goal of capital accumulation. For this reason the governments can continue their oil extraction dismissing the Lubicon and Ogoni concerns as nothing more than barriers to progress.

As a result the Ogoni have surfaced as a "potent symbol of environmental destruction" (Clifford, 2002, p.396) while the Lubicon are a reminder to Canadians that our stereotypical politeness and diplomacy do not extend to everyone within our own borders. As John Goddard noted in 1991, "state sponsored subjugation of native peoples is generally thought of in Canada as a barbarity that happens elsewhere" (p.86) but as the UNHRC ruling indicates in their urgent call for Canada to stem the tide of the Lubicon's destruction, the fact of the matter is that their "political, social and economic reality...closely resembles that of Third World countries that have recently come out of Western colonial systems" (Shore, 1994, p. 41). Nigeria is such a Third World country.

Certainly, the stories of the Lubicon Cree and the Ogoni are testament to what can happen when historically-marginalized groups assert land claims on resource-rich territory. Both face an interdependent team of corrupt government and industry officials whose interactions effectively build a two-against-one relationship within the tri-party oil governance system. Furthermore, this duo's primary concerns with the economy or bottom line encourage legislation and policy which necessarily conflicts with the worldviews held by the oil-communities in question. While a

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basic conflict of values is not enough to support an argument for structural violence, the resulting community degradation which influences human beings “so that their actual somatic and mental realizations are below their potential realizations” (Galtung, 1969, p. 168) certainly gives rise to such a claim.

We can therefore conclude that there are serious concerns about oil extraction that extend beyond the resource’s role in perpetuating and instigating fully armed civil conflict. Rather, as this paper has shown, oil extraction plays a significant role in the perpetuation of latent conflict primarily fought by the government and industry through structural violence. Indeed the governments’ choice to promote oil development at the expense of oil-communities’ well-being, particularly those who have been historically marginalized, and thus retain less societal leverage, is undeniable. Further, the strategies the respective governments employ to address the community concerns such as development policies, security measures and negotiations equally circumvent the root conflict hoping to stifle complaints will maintaining the profit margin.

Considering these conclusions, I turn to Shore (1994) who suggests that peace cannot truly exist unless there is an absence of structural violence in all communities. In citing Galtung’s theories he argues that in the Lubicon and Ogoni cases “war is not just death and destruction in military action but ‘deaths or deprivations which [are] the product of social institutions where the knowledge [exists] to prevent them” (p. 40). Thus oil instigates conflict even where militaries may not be involved. Shore himself likens the oil governance situation in Canada to a “war without bullets” (p. 41) where the “weapons of choice” are law and policy for the government, and for industry: access to the legal system via money and political leverage. The result as Hill (1995) describes it is auto-genocide: a process where a minority group are positioned to accept “deals” offered by the government. These include offers of fast-cash, quick fixes, or surface-level environmental relief and appear to resolve the situation, but in reality the long-term effects mean the destruction of culture as they are forced to conform to the Western ideologies of progress and commodified land.

As the late Ken Saro-Wiwa, once leader of the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) (1992) summarizes:

It is a sad irony of our history that none of the areas providing this greatest source of our national wealth has ever had the privilege of having a strong voice in the processes of law-making in this country. The result has always been that no attention has ever been paid to the fate of the poor people who bear the full weight of the national economic burden on their backs (p. 47).

It is this incredible suffering in exchange for oil revenue accumulation which motivates my call for a widening of the discourse surrounding greed and grievance in the political economy of natural-resource wars. In expanding the discourse to the structurally violent beginnings of armed conflict—the situation that exists *before* the first bomb or gun shot—we can perhaps come a little closer to answering those questions asked by the idealistic university students. And perhaps we can come a little closer to fostering leaders that exercise good governance over their resources in a manner that is accountable and beneficial to their people.

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(A Conference Summary)
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