Petro-urbanisms: Urban Futures on the Oil Frontier
Reflections on the LSE Cities Urban Uncertainty Workshop Series
July 8, 2014

Panelists: Andrew Barry (Department of Geography, UCL), Chloé Buire (Department of Geography, Durham University), Nelida Fuccaro (Department of History, SOAS), ThienVinh Nguyen (Department of Geography, UCL), Gisz Weszkalnys (Department of Anthropology, LSE), Matt Wilde (Department of Anthropology, London School of Economics)

Chair: Jonathan Silver (LSE/Durham University)

In his opening remarks, Jonathan Silver introduced the Urban Uncertainty project at LSE Cities as an investigation of how future uncertainty shapes cities and everyday urban life. The starting assumption of the project is that uncertainty towards the future is of central importance to how cities are lived, planned, governed, and inhabited currently. Yet, both theoretical and empirical exploration is still necessary to full comprehend what this means. For Silver, the workshop, entitled, “Petro-urbanisms: Urban Futures on the Oil Frontier,” contributes to this exploration, and is part of a parallel research project involving himself, Sobie Kaker, and Austin Zeiderman, the project head. Focusing on three different geographical regions, the research project engages with global concerns of the uncertain future, and Silver sees the empirical work presented in the workshop series as interrelated and building broader conversations. He welcomed the workshop contributors, whose research all converged on how planetary-scale urbanization is directly linked to the hydrocarbon economy and global infrastructures of oil; in particular, this theme was chosen to open discussion on how urban futures are deeply intertwined with the contestation over oil resources.

The first speaker, Matt Wilde presented a paper entitled “Political Subjectivity and Uncertainty of Oil in Venezuela,” on working-class political activists in Valencia, Venezuela, and their ideas of formación – or an ideological or moral formation – and its links to the particular anxieties oil has generated in the national imaginary. Wilde narrates a conversation excerpt from his fieldwork in which a respondent portrays a life without formación as ‘dirty water’. Wilde conceptualizes his activist informants, who are mainly supporters of Chávez (Chavistas), as heavily concerned with the ‘moral, intellectual, and ideological formation of persons,’ or formación. Though sharing the Chavez vision for a socialist Venezuela, grassroots activists believed it could only be realized through individual adoption of moral fortitude. Wilde put forth the argument that scant attention had been paid to grassroots activists’ notions of the self in the context of the Venezuelan political
landscape. Tracing Venezuelan history, Wilde argued that past political leaders had closely associated themselves with the ‘magical’ properties of oil and it had come to serve as a foundational myth for the nation-state. During the 1940s and ‘50s, Venezuelan middle-classes (especially those who worked for American oil companies) embraced American styles of consumption. However, subsequent oil corruption scandals and related political murders generated anxieties about oil, which was increasingly seen as a corrosive force to both the economy and morality – ultimately leading to its nationalization. This ‘resource curse,’ Wilde argued, has been internalized by ordinary Venezuelans, and operates as a form of cultural intimacy; respondents believed that country was lacking in moral substance, and the Chavez discourse of moral and religious redemption is a response to this. He concluded that activists’ narratives highlight the uncertainties oil produces, which in turn creates a form of cultural intimacy: a despair over and hope in oil’s transformative potential.

Gisa Weszkalnys continued the conversation on the resource curse and oil in the everyday imagination, through a case study of São Tomé and Príncipe, entitled “Petro-Urbanism Arrested.” She described how oil had been speculated since the 1970s with contracts signed for offshore exploration in the 1990s – the latter period is the focus of her research. Examining what she terms as the ‘politics of anticipation,’ Weszkalnys argued that even though the presence of oil is inconclusive, people in São Tomé talk about its promise, holding up Dubai as the aspirational model. Though there are few visible signs of oil, the number of banks has increased in speculation of future oil wealth; additionally, the rise of urban developments can be potentially linked to oil. The most definitive sign of the oil economy, according to Weszkalnys, is the National Oil Agency, funded by the World Bank. Responsible for overseeing policy in the oil sector, agency as argued by Weszkalnys embodies notions of good governance and the World Bank’s decision to promote natural resource extraction despite the many detrimental effects. For Weszkalnys, anticipation is the agency’s modus operandi. The agency is one of a number of infrastructures built in response to São Tomé’s future oil; furthermore, legal, bureaucratic, and legal infrastructures have been established to support the notion that São Tomé is exemplary, and could possibly defeat the resource curse. Deliberately modeled after the Brazilian and Norwegian oil agencies, Weszkalnys argued that São Tomé’s version reflects the logic of capitalist expansion, with both its successes and failures – it is a device to both facilitate the flow of oil, but also to prevent it from turning into a resource curse. She concluded that even in the face of disappointing oil explorations by companies, the ‘politics of anticipation’ is a strong temporal orientation towards oil that is more than simply waiting.
Nelida Fuccaro’s presentation offered a historical perspective on the temporal politics of oil in the Middle East (predominantly the Persian Gulf). Counter to the previous two presentations, her work, she argued, looks at a period when oil was considered a certainty and the future. Fuccaro focused on two themes of oil pasts: 1) urban imaginaries created by oil; and 2) the reading of a particular form of petro-urbanism and violence – with an interest in how petro-urbanism has been represented as a contrasting experience, a ‘paradox of plenty’. She reflected on ‘oil as a way of life,’ and how oil could be both empowering and disempowering simultaneously; Abadan in Iran, exemplifies this paradigm, according to Fuccaro. She described its ex-novo emergence as an oil city, ultimately destroyed during the Iraq-Iran War; during its life, Abadan was violent and fractured, mixed and cosmopolitan. A historical understanding of Abadan, Fuccaro argued, gives insight into modern urban development in Iran as it has served as a blueprint. Equally important, Abadan as a petro-urbanism allows an understanding of the ‘delirious’ post petro-urbanism seen in Dubai and Kuwait. In this region, urban pasts of oil have been layered over by the frenzy of the present. Oil company towns were historically either linked to colonial ideals of separation or conveyed the ethos of American industrial towns; Fuccaro queried whether the infrastructure of ‘artificial towns could ever form a ‘real’ urbanism’. She argued that prior to nationalization, the towns were symbols of segregation, but after, oil urbanism became an important device for state-building. Additionally, she criticized the theory of the rentier state, through which the image of the oil city is made very impersonal, and a shell for industrial development. In contrast, she found that the way that oil was actually perceived and lived was through a ‘great expectation’ that outweighed the curse that it was supposed to bring.

In a presentation entitled, “Baku-London: The Oil City Relation,” Andrew Barry traces the making of Baku through the presence of BP. Following a period of post-Soviet chaos in Azerbaijan, the arrival of BP promised a new level of certainty in Baku and a revitalization of the old city. Barry described the city as one in transition, and how oil has marked the geography, including a ring of palaces, dated from each subsequent phase of oil exploration starting from the 1900s and abandoned Soviet housing that has been taken over by oil dissidents. The new ‘clean,’ post-Soviet industry is what Barry terms as ‘visibly invisible,’ and appears not through visible on-shore structures but through its documentation; the BP pipeline, is thus associated with a vast knowledge production in its quest to maintain a non-polluting, socially conscious image. He contrasted the different spaces in the city, marking the differing periods of economic development and reconstruction, but also the differing spaces of knowledge production, as Baku becomes home not only to oil consultants and managers but also to dissidents who contest BP’s activities. He also
reflected on the urban violence that often emerged on the streets of Baku in response to the political corruption of the current regime. Barry conceptualized this period as one of certainty (for some of the population), as oil brings development, but also acknowledged the complex urban political geography in Baku. Barry mapped Baku’s relationship to London, an oil city in a different sense, namely one of oil financing; he cited how recent protests in London targeted particular urban locations where such financing occurs, drawing attention to how financing often adversely affected cities such as Baku. He concluded that a mirroring of London infrastructure takes place in Baku – with the visible presence of bankers, consultants, and campaigning NGOs, and oil patronage of the arts; however, in London, the urban local politics of Azerbaijan is not visible in the same way.

ThienVinh Nguyen introduced work in progress focusing on the urban governance over oil in Sekondi-Takaradi in Ghana. She introduced literature she sought to contest, such as grand narratives on African oil politics; these included the ‘resource curse’ and a corrupt state elite working with foreign oil companies. Nguyen argued, drawing on Fucarro, that African oil politics took the city for granted, and instead proposed a study of the city through two strands: 1) the city as multiple urbanisms; and 2) the city encompassing local governance structures that enter into a dialogue with national oil aspirations and international companies. She gave a background to the Jubilee Oil Fields and the promise of huge returns in Sekondi-Takaradi as well as the national oil governance structure, modeled after Norway. Detailing her research plan, Nguyen intended, after embarking on fieldwork, to interview both non-state and state actors, especially since many new migrants had arrived to Sekondi-Takoradi in anticipation of oil wealth. She also talked through research questions focusing on the aspirations of local governing bodies in relation to oil, and how different groups worked with and against the state in order to realize their own visions.

In the final presentation Chloé Buire, examined how the idea of the state comes to life through the practices of people living in Luanda, Angola. Though she shared the same critique as Nguyen on the ‘ungovernable’ African oil city/state, she did clearly differentiate Luanda from the situation in Ghana as having a much more fragile civil society and local governance structures. Focusing on the last ten years of urban development after the end of the civil war, she theorized three encounters that defined the idea of the post-civil war state, using Lefebvre’s theory. Buire conceptualized the first encounter, which she termed the ‘dramatic encounter,’ through a vignette of a family forced from the city center to a peripheral resettlement called Panguila. This served as a metaphor for Buire of the tabula rasa approach of the state in the name of reconstruction and emergency. Over
the years, the resettlement has transformed through auto-construction, which for Buire illustrates the second mode of, this time ‘invisible,’ encounter. Since the state is absent, Buire argued that the residents have taken charge themselves through a local housing society; she argued that the ‘consolidation from below’ parallels the actions of the state and its discourse on the settlement. Ironically, as the state sends more evictees to the resettlement, residents are also contracted to build the new infrastructure and housing that takes the place of their old homes. She followed with the third mode of encounter, a ‘re-conception’ of the city, occurring through a new discourse of legitimacy, which includes promises of social housing. In some ways, Panguila is a statement of the government’s ability to provide housing for the people, but also of the failures where many evictees are sent to Panguila only to find their houses already sold or occupied. She concluded by returning to her vignette, where Panguila, originally seen as a site of disjunction, is now seen as a site of possibility by other members of the family who choose to move there to consolidate political power.

The discussion raised interesting questions of how oil shapes future aspirations of both elites and ordinary residents in an urban setting. Questions posed included understanding how to build geographies of oil from a methodological point of view; whether the double discourse of oil can be mirrored onto the double discourse of the city (degeneration vs. possibility); the different temporalities of oil, in terms of the economies of expectation produced before oil has even arrived, and what happens when oil runs out; and inverting assumptions of where power comes from in shaping oil futures. Other emergent themes included how different local actors attach themselves to locally mobilized projects and/or protest movements; to move beyond ‘mis-planning’ and really understand local processes; and how oil is used to justify planning and policy exceptions by governments.

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