Petro-Violence: Community, Extraction, and Political Ecology of a Mythic Commodity

Michael Watts

Oil, more than any other commodity, illustrates both the importance and the mystification of natural resources in the modern world.

(Coronil 1997: 49)

I want to offer some thoughts on the violence that so often attends particular sorts of resource extraction and, quite specifically, the extraction of petroleum—arguably the most important resource of the twentieth century. In exploring what I shall call petro-violence, my purpose is not to offer a sort of commodity determinism—petroleum is more violent than coal, or oil extraction breeds Muslim radicalism (Iran) but copper breeds evangelical cronyism (Zambia). I take seriously the idea that the biophysical properties of nature, of a natural resource, matter in both material and analytical ways. It is both difficult and artificial to distill out the narrowly defined biological and geophysical properties of “crude” or “raw” petroleum from the social relations (institutional practices, ideological associations and meanings, forms of extraction, production and use) of petroleum. Petroleum is a commodity not only saturated in the mythos of the rise of the industrial West but also indisputably one of the most fundamental building blocks of twentieth century hydrocarbon capitalism. I do believe, however, that a commodity-focus (particularly on a part of nature that has the ideological and practical significance of “black gold”) offers a way of thinking about the intersection of environment and violence. I want to consider both ecological violence perpetrated upon the biophysical world and social violence—criminality and degeneracy associated with the genesis of petro-wealth.

As Daniel Yergin (1991) details in his encyclopedic account of the industry The Prize, the entire history of petroleum is replete with criminality,
corruption, fabulous wealth, and the worst of rapacious frontier capitalism. Power politics, ruthless exploitation, and thuggery have always been oil's defining characteristics, and imperialism is its defining moment. It is to be expected then that in an age of unprecedented denationalization and market liberalization, the mad scramble to locate the next petrolic El Dorado continues unabated. As oil prices climb from the catastrophic collapse of the mid-1980s—when the foundations of the oil-states were rocked by the spectacle of a barrel of oil costing less than $8—the ravenous appetite of the oil majors continues.

Petro-violence is in fact rarely off the front pages of the press. The Caspian basin, for example, reaching from the borders of Afghanistan to the Russian Caucasus is a repository of enormous petro-wealth. Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and the southern Russian provinces (Osetia, Dagestan, Chechnya), have become, in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union, a zone of extraordinary civil conflict and war as the San Francisco Chronicle puts it (August 11, 1998: A8). Oil companies jockey for position in an atmosphere of frontier vigilantism, and petroleum has become central to what the Azerbaijani President calls "armed conflict, aggressive separatism and nationalism." In Colombia, leftist guerrillas blew up the Cano Limón pipeline, and Occidental Petroleum, in a long running battle with indigenous populations, was confronted with the prospect of five thousand U'wa Amerindians committing mass suicide if their "tribal lands" became the site of oil extraction (The Economist June 6, 1998: 34). It is surely not too much of a stretch to also see the black and sticky residues of Middle East petroleum in the wreckage of the bombings in Dar es Salaam and Nairobi. Mr. bin Laden, a son of a contractor who became fabulously rich overnight from the oil rents generously distributed by the Saudi monarchy, may or may not have been responsible in some way for the bombings. The very idea of a fatwa against the United States, however, can only be understood in relation to the geopolitics of oil and the radically destabilizing consequences of the circulation of petro-dollars within the Muslim world. After all, what began in Iran in 1973 with the Shah's drive to modernity ended with massive bloodletting and revolution in 1979.

These instances of petro-violence raise the question of the analytical boundaries of this chapter and of the reach of oil in examining violence. I shall concentrate here on the point of production (on extraction narrowly construed) and its immediate social and environmental consequences in particular. But this local focus cannot be rigidly demarcated from the crucial consequences of oil rents on the state, on national political discourse, and on the broad rhythms of accumulation. In fact, it is this broader landscape of petro-politics and petro-accumulation that is crucial to understanding the violence of local production and the centrality of the issue that concerns me here: How is petroleum as a natural resource constitu-
ative of political violence in which narratives of environmental justice or compensation for the costs of ecological distribution are fused with or attached to debates over citizenship and the nation? (See Guha and Martínez-Alí 1998.)

Two sorts of argument are made in this chapter. One is comparative, speaking to oil exploitation in two different locations (Nigeria and Ecuador) and the political outcomes at the level of the community and the national body politic: each case releases different forms of violence over ostensibly similar objects of struggle (the nation, citizenship, and indigenous identity). The other is theoretical and turns on how one might think about the specific qualities and properties of a natural resource. Here it is crucial to distinguish three levels at which the theory is operating. One is that oil speaks to a general set of questions about extraction and the sorts of violence that might be typically attached to these sets of activities. There is, then, a class of questions that address extraction and violence in general (of which one case is oil). Another level pertains to rents and the rents that come to play a key role in national and local politics. In the oil case, rent is derived from the capitalist extraction of minerals and is obviously not unique to it (i.e., it could be an agricultural rent or a rent derived from other sectors). In other words, a part of the oil story turns on a class of phenomena pertaining to rents and rentier activities and how both relate to violence and the environment. Oil concerns me here, but it might easily have been silver and the activities of the Hunt brothers. The final level pertains to the natural resource and to the biophysical particularities and political and discursive peculiarities of oil: it is finite; it is a black and sticky fluid that is pumped from the ground and transported from the point of production in pipelines; in much of the South it is invariably a national resource with territorial attributes (state landed property); oil is inseparable from the largest forms of transnational capital; and not least oil has its own mythos rendered through its fantastic wealth, its all-encompassing power, and as the lifeline to hydrocarbon civilization.

My entry point is the much publicized struggle by the Ogoni people (a small ethnic society occupying a Lilliputian territory in the oil-rich Niger delta in southeast Nigeria) against Shell and the staggering ecological devastation wrought by the company since 1958 when pumping began. It is also the story of their onetime leader Ken Saro-Wiwa and his efforts to create a space of autonomy and self-determination enshrined in an Ogoni Bill of Rights and in a mass political movement (the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People [MOSOP]). Saro-Wiwa and eight others were hanged following a show trial at the hands of a military tribunal; nineteen other key Ogoni leaders were placed in detention and were only released following the return to civilian rule in 1999. Since 1991 Ogoniland has been the site of mass violence (intra- and intercommunity as well as between the
state security forces and the Ogoni), and since 1995 it has been under military occupation. Even the return to civilian politics under President Obasanjo in 1999 has not changed the overwhelming sense of siege under which the entire Niger Delta lives (Human Rights Watch 2000).

My argument is roughly as follows: the Ogoni struggle is a response to the violence perpetrated upon the environment by the slick alliance of state and capital. It is an effort by a Nigerian ethnic minority (an “indigenous people”) to simultaneously construct representations of other Nigerians as “ethnic majorities” and of themselves as minorities and indigenous people. The struggle also is about political rights and entitlements on which alternative histories and geographies are constructed. Environment (that is to say the particular biological and geophysical properties of what the Ogoni take to be their territory) is of course central to both of these constructions. In my view the Ogoni struggle for recognition is part of an incomplete decolonization of Africa, an effort to redeem something from the carapace of reformist nationalism and to maintain the imaginative liberation of an African people. The Ogoni struggle to identity themselves and others in relation to themselves turns, in large measure, as I shall argue, on articulations of history and geography, on nature and biology.

This brings me to a second point, namely Poulantzas’s (1978) observation that “national unity or modern unity becomes a historicity of a territory and a territorialization of a history.” Markers of identity may become themselves commodities in the way that the histories of interrelated peoples become spatialized into bounded territories. “Since these spaces appear as being produced naturally, not historically, they serve to root the histories of connected peoples in separate territories and to sever the links between them” (Coronil 1996: 77). There is sort of double movement at work as histories of space are obscured and as social relations between societies are occluded. It is an affliction which effects the Nigerian state as much as it does the Ogoni themselves.

I wish to explore the case of the Ogoni in a comparative light, however, specifically with regard to the events surrounding oil exploration and production in the Upper Amazon, in the Ecuadorian Oriente in particular. There are both interesting similarities and points of departure in these two examples that I shall try to highlight. The comparison also provides a powerful vehicle for exploring the violence that surrounds oil and delving into what Coronil calls the “mystification” of natural resources in the modern world.

Oil, Nature, and Violence in the Nigerian Delta

If the recent history of Nigeria has been the tale of petroleum (Watts 1994; Khan 1994), then Ogoniland has simultaneously been at its center and at its periphery. A history of geological exploration, its historic territory of underdevelopment, Ogoni detestations, Ogoni were among the roads that were paved with deeply Benjamin (1993) Walter Benjamin’s dreams. One world commodify; the other petro-commodifying commodity that frame concern with utopia.

The Ogoni are divided into three subgroups of people is distributed in creeks, waterways, Delta. Located about some 50,000 square kilometers in an area known as Ogoniland—over 1,000 of the largest wells. Ogoniland is farming and agriculture. The huge Boma is a terminologically complex term among the slave trade and the forces at Kono in 1914 (1995) but elsewhere within Calabar Province.

As Ogoniland during the 1930s, the hands of the first Ogoni bore fruit with the In 1951, however.

1. For a more detailed account; the fullest accounts begin Lewis (1996); and is Petro-Boom in Nigeria.
2. Ogoniland consists spects of the Ogoni lives.
and at its periphery. The great paradox of Ogoniland is that an accident of geological history—the location of more than ten major oil fields within its historic territory—yielded not petro-modernization but economic underdevelopment and an ecological catastrophe. Ken Saro-Wiwa and the Ogoni detested the modern because they could not get enough of it. The Ogoni were angry because they could neither afford the cars nor use the roads that were the icons of petro-success. In this sense, the Ogoni story is deeply Benjaminian. Throughout his Parisian production cycle (Cohen 1995) Walter Benjamin employed two alternative vocabularies as a way of investigating base-superstructure relations through the language of dreams. One was phantasmagoria, driven by the phantom capitalist commodity; the other was shock. In Ogoniland it was the phantasmagoria of petro-commodification (of wealth without effort) and the shock of modernity that frame the rise of MOSOP and what Benjamin himself, in his concern with utopias, called “the moment of awakening.”

The Ogoni are typically seen as a distinct ethnic group consisting of three subgroups and six clans. Their population of roughly 500,000 people is distributed among 111 villages dotted over 404 square miles of creeks, waterways, and tropical forest in the northeast fringes of the Niger Delta. Located administratively in Rivers State, a Louisiana-like territory of some 50,000 square kilometers, Ogoniland of one of the most heavily populated zones in all of Africa. Indeed, the most densely settled areas of Ogoniland—over 1,500 persons per square kilometer—are the sites of the largest wells. Ogoniland’s customary productive base was provided by fishing and agricultural pursuits until the discovery of petroleum, including the huge Bomu field, immediately prior to Independence. Part of an enormously complex regional ethnic mosaic, the Ogoni were drawn into internecine conflicts within the delta region—largely as a consequence of the slave trade and its aftermath—in the period prior to arrival of colonial forces at Kono in 1901. The Ogoni resisted the British until 1908 (Naanen 1995) but thereafter were left to stagnate as part of the Opobo Division within Calabar Province.

As Ogoniland was gradually incorporated within the colonial state during the 1930s, the clamor for a separate political division grew at the hands of the first pan-Ogoni organization (the Ogoni Central Union) that bore fruit with the establishment of the Ogoni Native Authority in 1947. In 1951, however, the authority was forcibly integrated into the Ibo-domi-

1. For a more detailed account of Ogoniland and its relation to oil, see Watts (1997); for the fullest accounts of oil and Nigerian political economy see Khan (1994); Ikein (1990); Lewis (1996); and Forrest (1995). I have written at length on the relations between the petro-boom in Nigeria and the shock of modernity that it precipitated (see Watts 1994).

2. Ogoniland consists of three local government areas and six clans that speak different dialects of the Ogoni language. MOSOP is, in this sense, a pan-Ogoni organization.
nated Eastern Region. Tremendous neglect and systematic discrimination, raised longstanding fears among the Ogoni of Ibo domination. Politically marginalized and economically neglected, the delta minorities feared the growing secessionist rhetoric of the Ibo and led an ill-fated secession of their own in February 1966. Isaac Boro, Sam Owonaro, and Nottingham Dick declared an illegal Delta Peoples Republic but were crushed and subsequently, in a trial that is uncomfortably reminiscent of the Ogoni tribunal in 1995, condemned to death for treason. Nonetheless, Ogoni antipathy to what they saw as a sort of internal colonialism at the hands of the Ibo continued in their support of the federal forces during the civil war. While President Gowon did finally establish a Rivers State in 1967—which compensated in some measure for enormous Ogoni losses during the war—the new state recapitulated in microcosm the larger “national question.” The new Rivers State was multiethnic but presided over by the locally dominant Ijaw, for whom many of the minorities felt little but contempt. In Saro-Wiwa’s view (1992), the loss of 10 percent of the Ogoni people in the civil war was rewarded with a betrayal by federal authorities: they provided no postwar relief, seized new on-and offshore oil fields, and subsequently sold out the minorities to dominant Ijaw interests.

Traces of Ogoni “nationalism” long predate the oil boom, but they were deepened as a result of it. Ogoni fears of what Saro-Wiwa called “monstrous domestic colonialism” (1992), were exacerbated further by federal resistance to dealing with minority issues in the wake of the civil war and by the new politics of post-oil boom revenue allocation. Rivers State saw its federal allocation fall dramatically in absolute and relative terms. At the height of the oil boom, 60 percent of oil production came from Rivers State, but it now receives only 25 percent of that rent. The population of East Central State is about 25 percent of that of Rivers, but its oil production is minuscule one-fifth the production of the Rivers minority. About 30 percent of the civilian Shagari, as a result, had to seek relief for Shagari’s inept administration even further afield, in the federal capital of Nigeria’s oil province.

Standing at landfills for toxic waste in Mexico, rivers in Pakistan, and Nigeria’s oil refineries, the experts of the chemical plant or factory are the experts. During the mid-1970s, at least 15 percent of the population of the Port Harcourt metropolitan area, according to a government study, was exposed to dioxin, according to a government study, was exposed to dioxin, “one of the most toxic substances known to science.”

If Ogoni youth have been forced to fight for their lives in the wars of the past fifty years, they have also been forced to fight for their lives in the more recent wars of development, and more recently for the right to develop.


5. What Rivers State felt in regard to federal neglect, the Ogoni experienced in regard to Ijaw domination. While several Ogoni were influential federal and state politicians, they were incapable politically of exacting resources for the Ogoni community. In the 1960s only six out of forty-two representatives in the state assembly were Ogoni (Naanen 1995: 77). It needs to be said, however—and it is relevant for an understanding of state violence against the Ogoni—that the Ogoni have fared better than many other minorities in terms of political appointments. In 1993, 30 percent of the Commissioners in the Rivers State cabinet were Ogoni (the Ogoni represent 15 percent of the state population), and every clan has produced at least one federal or state minister (Osaghae 1995: 83; 1) since the civil war. In this sense, it is precisely that the Ogoni had produced since 1967 a cadre of influential and well-placed politicians (including Saro-Wiwa himself) that their decision to move aggressively toward self-determination and minority rights was so threatening to the Abacha regime (Welch 1995).

6. According to the United Nations, 80 percent of Nigerians live in the South-South State. Shell maintains that the oil pipelines run through 10 percent of the area.
Petro-Violence in Nigeria and Ecuador

Standing at the "margin of the margin," Ogoniland appears, like Chiapas in Mexico, as a socioeconomic paradox. Home to six oilfields, half of Nigeria's oil refineries, the country's only fertilizer plant, a large petrochemical plant, Ogoniland is wracked by unthinkable misery and deprivation. During the first oil boom, Ogoniland's fifty-six wells accounted for almost 15 percent of Nigerian oil production, and in the past three decades an estimated $50 billion in petroleum revenues have flowed from this Liliputian territory. It was, as local opinion had it, Nigeria's Kuwait. Yet according to a government commission, Oloibiri, where the first oil was pumped in 1958, has no single kilometer of all-season road and remains "one of the most backward areas in the country" (Furro 1992: 282). Few Ogoni households have electricity; there is one doctor per 100,000 people; child mortality rates are the highest in the nation; unemployment is 85 percent; 80 percent of the population is illiterate; and close to half of Ogoni youth have left the region in search of work. Life expectancy is barely fifty years, substantially below the national average. In Furro's survey of two minority oil-producing communities, over 80 percent of respondents felt that economic conditions had deteriorated since the onset of oil production, and over two-thirds believed that there had been no progress in local development since 1960. No wonder that the systematic reduction of federal allocations and the lack of concern by the Rivers government was, for Ogoniland, part of a long history of "the politics of minority suffocation" (Ikpokukpo 1996: 171).

If Ogoniland failed to see the material benefits from oil, what it did experience was an ecological disaster—what the European Parliament has called "an environmental nightmare." The heart of the ecological harms stem from oil spills—either from the pipelines that crisscross Ogoniland (often passing directly through villages) or from blowouts at the wellheads.  

State, but it received only 5 percent of the statutory allocation (roughly half of that received by Kano, Northeastern States, and the Ibo heartland, East Central State). Between 1970 and 1980, it received in revenues a minuscule one-fiftieth of the value of the oil it produced. In what was seen by the Rivers minorities as a particularly egregious case of ethnic treachery, the civilian Shagari regime reduced the derivation component to only 2 percent of revenues in 1982, after Rivers State had voted overwhelmingly for Shagari's northern-dominated National Party of Nigeria. The subsequent military government of General Buhari cut the derivation component even further at a time when the state accounted for 44.3 percent of Nigeria's oil production.

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heads—and gas flaring. As regards the latter, a staggering 76 percent of natural gas in the oil-producing areas is flared (compared to 6 percent in the United States). As a visiting environmentalist noted in 1993 in the delta, “some children have never known a dark night even though they have no electricity’” (Village Voice November 21, 1995: 21). Burning 24 hours per day at temperatures of 13,000–14,000 degrees Celsius, Nigerian natural gas produces 35 million tons of carbon dioxide and 12 million tons of methane, more than the rest of the world (and rendering Nigeria probably the biggest single cause of global warming). The oil spillage record is even worse. According to Claude Ake there are roughly 300 spills per year in the delta, and in the 1970’s alone the spillage was four times the much publicized Exxon Valdez spill in Alaska. In one year alone, almost 700,000 barrels were soiled according to a government commission. Ogoniland itself suffered 111 spills between 1985 and 1994 (Hammer 1996: 61). Figures provided by the Nigerian National Petroleum Company (NNPC) document 2,676 spills between 1976 and 1990, 59 percent of which occurred in Rivers State (Ikein 1990: 171), 38 percent of which were due to equipment malfunction.7 Between 1982 and 1992 Shell alone accounted for 1.6 million gallons of spilled oil, 37 percent of the company’s spills worldwide. The consequences of flaring, spillage, and waste for Ogoni fisheries and farming have been devastating.8 Two independent studies completed in 1997 reveal total petroleum hydrocarbons in Ogoni streams at 360 and 680 times the European Community permissible levels (Rainforest Action Network 1997).

In almost four decades of oil drilling, then, the experience of petro-modernization in Ogoniland has been a tale of terror and tears. It has brought home the worst fears of ethnic marginalization and minority neglect: of northern hegemony, of Ibos neglect, and of Ijaw local dominance. The euphoria of oil wealth after the civil war has been displaced by ecological catastrophe, social deprivation, political marginalization, and a rapacious company capitalism in which unaccountable foreign transnationals are granted a sort of immunity by the state.

7. The oil companies claim that sabotage accounts for a large proportion (60 percent) of the spills because communities gain from corporate compensation. Shell claims that 77 of 111 spills in Ogoniland between 1985 and 1994 were due to sabotage (Hammer 1996). According to the government commission, however, sabotage accounts for only 30 percent of the incidents but only 3 percent of the quantity spilled. Furthermore, all oil-producing communities claim that compensation from the companies for spills has been almost nonexistent. 8. A spill in 1993 flowed for forty days without repair contaminating large areas of Ogoni farmland. Petroleum residues appear in the rivers at levels of 60 ppm and in the sediments around the Bonny terminal reach lethal levels of 12,000 ppm. In the ecologically delicate mangrove and estuarine regions of the delta, oil pollution has produced large-scale eutrophication, depletion of aquatic resources, and loss of traditional fishing grounds (Benka-Cocker and Ekundayo 1995) that now threaten customary livelihoods.
The hanging of Ken Saro-Wiwa and the Ogoni nine in November 1995—accused of murdering four prominent Ogoni leaders who professed opposition to MOSOP tactics—and the subsequent arrest of nineteen others on treason charges represented the summit of a process of mass mobilization and radical militancy that had commenced in 1989. The civil war had, as I have previously suggested, hardened the sense of external dominance among Ogonis. A "supreme cultural organization" called Kagote, which consisted largely of traditional rulers and high-ranking functionaries, was established at the war's end and, in turn, gave birth in 1990 to MOSOP. A new strategic phase began in 1989 with a program of mass action and passive resistance on one hand and a renewed effort to focus on the environmental consequences of oil (and Shell's role in particular) and on group rights within the federal structure on the other hand. Animating the entire struggle was, in Leton's words, the "genocide being committed in the dying years of the twentieth century by multinational companies under the supervision of the Government..." (cited in Naanen 1995: 66).

A watershed moment in MOSOP's history was the drafting in 1990 of an Ogoni Bill of Rights (Saro-Wiwa 1992). Documenting a history of neglect and local misery, the Ogoni bill questioned Nigerian federalism and minority rights. Calling for participation in the affairs of the republic as "a distinct and separate entity," the bill outlined a plan for autonomy and self-determination in which there would be guaranteed "political control of Ogoni affairs by Ogoni people... the right to control and use a fair proportion of Ogoni economic resources... [and] adequate representation as of right in all Nigerian national institutions" (Saro-Wiwa 1990: 11). In short, the Bill of Rights addressed the question of the unit to which revenues should be allocated—and derivatively the rights of minorities. Largely under Saro-Wiwa's direction, the bill was employed as part of an international mobilization campaign. Presented at the UN Subcommittee on Human Rights, at the Working Group on Indigenous Populations in Geneva in 1992, and at UNPO in the Hague in 1993, Ogoni became—

Ken Saro-Wiwa played a central role in the tactical and organizational transformations of MOSOP during the 1990s. Born in Bori as part of a traditional ruling family, Saro-Wiwa was already, prior to 1990, an internationally recognized author, a successful writer of Nigerian soap operas, a well-connected former Rivers State commissioner, and a wealthy businessman. Saro-Wiwa also was President of the Ethnic Minorities Rights Organization of Africa (EMIROAF) that called for a restructuring of the Nigerian federation into a confederation of autonomous ethnic states, in which an historically powerful federal center was to be radically decentralized and
states were granted property rights over on-shore mineral resources (Osaghae 1995: 327). Under Saro-Wiwa, MOSOP focused in 1991 on links to pro-democracy groups in Nigeria (the transition to civilian rule had begun under heavy-handed military direction) and on direct action around Shell and Chevron installations. It was precisely because of the absence of state commitment and the deterioration of the environment that local Ogoni communities, perhaps understandably, had great expectations of Shell (the largest producer in the region) and directed their activity against the oil companies after three decades of betrayal. There was a sense that Shell was the local government (Guardian July 14, 1996: 11), but the company’s record had been appalling: it had failed the test as company patron to the region. In 1970, Ogoni representatives had already demanded Rivers State government to approach Shell—what they then called “a Shylock of a company”—for compensation and direct assistance (a plea, incidentally, that elicited a shockingly irresponsible response documented in Saro-Wiwa 1992). Compensation by the companies for land appropriation and spillage has been minimal and are (and remain) constant sources of tension between company and community. Shell, deemed the world’s most profitable corporation in 1996 by Business Week (July 8, 1996 46) netting roughly $200 million profit from Nigeria each year, by its own admission has provided only $2 million to Ogoniland in forty of pumping. Ogoni historian Looloo (1981) points out that Shell has built one road and awarded 96 school scholarships in thirty years. According to the Wall Street Journal, Shell employs 88 Ogonis (less than 2 percent) in a workforce of over 5,000 Nigerian employees. Furthermore, the oft-cited community development schemes of the oil companies only began in earnest in the 1980s and have met with minimal success (Ikorukpo 1993). Shell only began community efforts in 1992 after twenty-five years of pumping and then provided a water project of 5,000 gallons capacity for a constituency of 100,000 (Newswatch December 18, 1995: 13).

In an atmosphere of growing violence and insecurity, MOSOP wrote to the three oil companies operating in Ogoniland in December 1992 demanding $6.2 billion in back rents and royalties, $4 billion for damages, the immediate stoppage of degradation, flaring, and exposed pipelines, and negotiations with Ogonis to establish conditions for further exploration (Osaghae 1995: 336; Greenpeace 1994). The companies responded with tightened security while the military government sent in troops to the oil installations, banned all public gatherings, and declared as treasonable any claims for self-determination. Strengthening Ogoni resolve, these responses prompted MOSOP to organize a massive rally—an estimated 300,000 people. MOSOP leader was the high point of the presidential elections.

In the wake of a democratically elected government coup by General Sani Abacha and Saro-Wiwa was critically injured in late 1993, and the government expressed a willingness to torture Ogonis. The Rivers State government, placed under his control, detained in April 1994 over 30,000 homeless and disappeared at the hands of the military forces. He was sentenced to death on April 22, 1994, and sentenced to death in the deaths of four objections and on April 22, 1996. In 1996, his ability to represent an open question of origin (characterized Ogoni subgroup) and Ogoni nationalism and that they are not, in the words of federal and civil servants, Saro-Wiwa was the youth wing of MOSOP, the constituency that was built on a coalition of forces and driven radicalism--the challenges of understanding its identity in the context of complicated national events.

9. Before cessation of operations in 1993, Shell was the principal oil company operating in Ogoniland, pumping from five major oilfields at Boro/Dere, Yoriba, Bodo West, Korokoro, and Ebubu.
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300,000 participated—in January 1993. As harassment of MOSOP leadership and Ogoni communities by state forces escalated, the high point of the struggle came with the decision to boycott the Nigerian presidential election on June 12, 1993.

In the wake of the annulment of the presidential elections, the arrest of democratically elected Mashood Abiola and the subsequently military group by General Abacha, state security forces vastly expanded their activities in Ogoniland. Military units were moved into the area in June 1993, and Saro-Wiwa was charged with, among other things, sedition. More critically interethnic conflicts exploded between Ogoni and other groups in late 1993, amidst accusations of military involvement and ethnic war-mongering by Rivers State leadership. A new and aggressively anti-Ogoni military governor took over Rivers State in 1994, and a ferocious assault by the Rivers State Internal Security Task Force commenced. Saro-Wiwa was placed under house arrest, and subsequently fifteen Ogoni leaders were detained in April 1994. A series of brutal attacks left 750 Ogoni dead and 30,000 homeless; in total, almost 2,000 Ogonis have perished since 1990 at the hands of police and security forces. Ogoniland was in effect sealed off by the military. Amidst growing chaos, Saro-Wiwa was arrested on May 22, 1994, and several months later he and eight others were charged with the deaths of four Ogoni leaders with whom there had been increasingly rancorous and conflicted relations.

In spite of the remarkable history of MOSOP between 1990 and 1996, its ability to represent itself as a unified pan-Ogoni organization remained an open question, particularly for Saro-Wiwa. There is no pan-Ogoni myth of origin (characteristic of many delta minorities), and a number of the Ogoni subgroups engender stronger local loyalties than any affiliation to Ogoni nationalism. The Eleme subgroup has even argued, on occasion, that they are not Ogoni. Furthermore, the MOSOP leaders were actively opposed by elements of the traditional clan leadership, by prominent leaders and civil servants in state government, and by some critics who felt Saro-Wiwa was out to gain “cheap popularity” (Osgahae 1995: 334). The youth wing of MOSOP, which Saro-Wiwa had used, had a radical vigilante constituency that the leaders were incapable of controlling. Saro-Wiwa built on over fifty years of Oginorganizing and on three decades of resentment against the oil companies, to provide a mass base and a youth-driven radicalism—and, it must be said, an international visibility—capable of challenging state power.11

11. Following the MOSOP precedent, a number of southeastern minorities pressured local and state authorities for expanded resources and political autonomy: the Movement for the Survival of Ijaw/Ekwerre Nationality was established in 1994, the Council for Ekwerre Nationality in 1995, and the Southern Minorities Movement (twenty-eight ethnic groups
Fighting for El Dorado: Ecuador and Nigeria Compared

In November 1993 a Philadelphia law firm filed a $1.5 billion class action suit for forty-six plaintiffs from the oil-producing Oriente region of Ecuador on behalf of 30,000 Ecuadorian citizens against Texaco Inc. The heart of the action was a claim of corporate irresponsibility. Specifically cited were serious illnesses and ecological destruction attributable to the oil company, serious water contamination, and the consequences of twenty years of drilling that “caused widespread destruction of the Amazon rainforest and have endangered the lives of tens of thousands of people” (cited in Hvalkof in press: 31). Oil exploration began in the Oriente with the collapse of the rubber economy during the 1920s.12 By the 1930s the Ecuadorian state has secured state monopoly over all noncultivated lands, American companies were active across the region, and by 1939 a regional company town had been named “Shell” (still in existence). The oil frenzy commenced in the 1960s. Texaco began its operations in 1967 and in a short time had established an enormous infrastructure including several hundred miles of pipeline. In the last twenty-five years, 300,000 colonists have entered the region bringing overnight boomtowns. The Oriente, which is home to a complex array of Indian communities, had been converted (like the Nigerian delta) into a geopolitical landscape of “blocks” (i.e., concessions). Close to thirty companies operate concessions in conjunction with the Ecuadorian state and the national petroleum company. By the 1990s Ecuador was an oil nation: petroleum accounted for at least half of national export earnings and two-thirds of the state’s budget (figure 8.1). Ecuador was a member of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) until the early 1990s when pressures to service its debt and its low quota—a reflection of falling oil prices—compelled the Ecuadorian government to withdraw from the organization. What is indisputable is that the discovery of petroleum in Ecuadorian territory, marked by relative isolation and ethnic complexity, marked sort of a Faustian pact in which oil was traded for progress, wealth, and modernity.

The Oriente has a somewhat sordid and violent history of extraction prior to oil of course. The Upper Amazon is most closely associated with the horrors and barbarism of the Putamayo incident just prior to World War I (see Taussig 1987). The Indians of the Putamayo area on the

Figure 8.1. Total Crude Oil Output and Percent Oil Exports Value of Total Exports Value (per Year) NIGERIA and ECUADOR: 1970–1997

The border between Colombia and Ecuador, was subject to horrifying torture and violence by rubber companies and their subcontracts in search of the original “black gold” (rubber was coined black gold in advance of the post oil boom). The legacy of the rubber barons continues, and local Indians and contractors (now involved in logging, cattle raising, and coca production) deploy debt bondage and labor peonage with Indian workers. The violence of rubber and the conditions of actual or near slavery shaped the production history of the region that the advent of oil did nothing to reduce. The early companies fomented conflicts between Huaorani, Colombia, and Ecuador, and Shell was involved in a number of violent incidents between Indians and the company as early as the 1940s. During the 1980s, the pressure for debt service coupled with a neoliberal agenda among a series of civilian governments placed new pressures on opening new concessions reflected in the reform of the Ecuadorian hydrocarbon law in 1982. In 1988 ARCO and two other companies were involved in prospecting and drilling in Block 10 in Pastaza Province, which became the site of a long and ongoing struggle. ARCO, working with the state land-titling agency, ran into immediate conflicts with Indian communities whose indigenous claims superseded the concessions. So began a long struggle between Indian organizations, federations and communities, and the oil companies that brought a class action suit five years later.13

13. The details of this case, which was rejected in 1994, subsequently appealed, and currently pending, is analyzed in Sawyer (in press).
The parallels to Nigeria are striking, of course. Oil was discovered in the early part of the century in the Niger Delta (ca. 1908), but it was only in the 1950s that commercial deposits were opened up. The vast majority of the on-shore reserves are located in the delta, a region of tropical rain forest and deltaic agro-fishing communities comprising some of the highest population densities in Africa. Like Ecuador, the Nigerian State nationalized the oil industry and has operated historically through complex joint ventures between the Nigerian National Petroleum Company and the oil companies Shell, Elf, Gulf, and Agate in particular and concessional arrangements in which the companies have a substantial autonomy. In Nigeria most oil and the largest concessions are owned by Shell (in sum, 40,000 square kilometers, three times more than their nearest rival), unlike Ecuador, where the major concessions are controlled by ARCO and Texaco. The delta also has a history of earlier colonial (and precolonial) violent “extraction”: namely, slavery and rubber between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. Violence has fundamentally shaped interethnic relations and has often been played out in the colonial period by claims over local political administrative structures (Native Administrations in the colonial vernacular). A number of the delta communities resisted colonial rule in the early part of the century, and a number harbored secessionist intentions which typically resulted in violent clashes. Oil was a central ingredient, of course, in the civil war in which the Eastern region (Biafra) did secede from the Federation in 1967 (Watts 1996).

Massive waste, corruption, and ecological devastation in oil-producing communities was matched by none of the rewards of petro-development—Ogoniland is, in this regard, Nigeria’s Chiapas. The oil bust produced a right and proper resentment among oil-producing communities across the delta. Bristling resentments inevitably were wrapped up with the shift to civilian politics in the early 1990s. Nigeria has been ruled for over thirty of its thirty-eight-year independence by military governments. The Ogoni Bill of Rights and its legal case against Shell came to embody the same explosive tensions as did the Texaco case in Ecuador. Oil had lubricated a struggle over the very nature of citizenship (Watts 1996; Sawyer in press). Nigeria, then, is like Ecuador, only more so.

Nature of Petroleum: Faustian Spectacle of Illusion and Deceit

The spectacle, said Guy Debord in his Lettrist text The Society of the Spectacle, "is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images." (Debord 1978: paragraph 4)

14. The history of the Nigerian oil industry is covered in more detail in Watts (1999); Khan (1994); and Iken (1990).
It is surely incontestable that the social relation of wealth unleashed by the oil booms of the 1970s was a spectacle of Debordian proportions. Images and narratives of unbounded wealth and prosperity conveyed an overwhelming sense that the *élan vital* because modernization had been discovered. A new dawn of modern prosperity and development, and the ambition and drives that were their handmaidens, had arrived for the lucky few. El Dorado had been located and it was an oil well.

But how and why does violence figure into this spectacle of oil and petro-ambition? Why is petroleum extraction such a violent endeavor? What about its physical and social properties? Why does it generate such explosive consequences among the oil-producing communities? In both Ecuador and Nigeria, oil became the basis for important forms of political mobilization—"indigenous" or Indian communities in one case, "ethnic minorities" in another—and for forms of engagement and mobilization that were brimming with violence. In one case, Nigeria, this violence assumed quite extraordinary forms (military occupation, extrajudicial killings, and perhaps a thousand deaths in Ogoniland over a five-year period). In Ecuador (and one might add Peru and Colombia) there has been a long-running struggle marked by popular protests and sporadic violence. In turn, this raises another question: Why did the two cases differ in some important ways with respect to petro-violence?

I want to start with the question of oil and its properties, and to use the great Polish journalist Ryszard Kapuscinski’s account, *The Shah of Shahs*, of the fall of the Shah as a window into the myths that surrounds "black gold." The Shah’s extraordinary drive to modernize Iran during the 1970s was deeply etched into his own insecurities and megalomaniacal character. One cannot fail to recognize, however, the commonalities between the Pahlavi vision and the bristling oil nationalism that saturated the political atmosphere in Caracas or Lagos or Riyadh during the 1970s. Here is Kapuscinski’s meditation on oil and its atmospherics:

Oil creates the illusion of a completely changed life, life without work, life for free…The concept of oil expresses perfectly the eternal human dream of wealth achieved through lucky accident. . . . In this sense oil is a fairy tale and like every fairy tale a bit of a lie.

(Kapuscinski 1982: 35)

[Oil] is a filthy, foul smelling liquid that squirts obligingly up into the air and falls back to earth as a rustling shower of money.

(Kapuscinski 1982: 34)

Oil fills us with such arrogance that we begin believing we can easily overcome such unyielding obstacles as time. With oil . . . I [Shah Pahlavi] will create a second America in a generation!

(Kapuscinski 1982: 35)
Oil is a resource that anesthetizes thought, blurs vision, corrupts... Look at the ministers from oil countries, how high they hold their heads, what a sense of power.

(Kapuscinski 1982: 35)

And oil's relation to the Mosque? What vigor, glory and significance this new wealth has given its religion, Islam, which is enjoying a period of accelerated expansion and attracting new crowds of faithful.

(Kapuscinski 1982: 35)

Oil kindles extraordinary emotions and hopes, since oil is above all a great temptation. It is the temptation of ease, wealth, fortune, power. [But] oil, though powerful, has its defects.

(Kapuscinski 1982: 34–35)

Kapuscinski, as a journalist, is acutely sensitive to the political and ideological ether that the oil boom generated in Iran and to the consequences of what seemed, all too briefly, to be the prospect of unimaginable wealth. Running through his observations, however, is a larger theme of how oil as a resource, as a form of extraction and transformation, as a form of wealth, and as a system of meanings are all related. I want to identify eight properties of oil to begin to address, with deliberate provocation, what one might call "the nature of petroleum."

Oil is money ("black gold"). As surely the most global and commercially negotiable of commodities, "Oil is money," as the Chair of ARCO once put it (all oil transactions are conducted in dollars). It is instantaneous wealth, despite the fact that its powers, in a sense, are quite mysterious. Oil as money/value typically creates an ambition and enervation, what one oil commentator called the élan vital of growth, appropriate to the magnitude of oil wealth (for example, the Shah's "White Revolution" or "La Gran Venezuela" of President Perez).

Petro-State and Nation: The central idea is taken from Ricardo Hausman (1981) that oil creates specific forms of state landed property. This means, among other things, that nationalized petroleum produces a state (as the owner of the means of production) that (i) mediates the social relations by which oil is exploited (concessions, joint ventures, and so on) and (ii) is simultaneously granted access to the world market. State landed property necessarily converts oil into a theater of struggle in which its national character, its power, its possibilities, its defects are on display.

Petro-Imperialism: Oil and the state's dependence on imperialist powers - its dependence on the "trickery and good living" of purchasing national oil contracts always means a struggle over oil revenues - is the very core of the petro-state. Petro-states are those states that industrialize in order to become imperialist powers.

Petro-Fetishism: The paradox that oil is a commodity with an infinite price. People buy oil to avoid the cost of the world economy; the world economy is the price of oil. Money creates the bust. Wealth is space. The popular imagination is divided between events and more


16. As Fine (1984: 284) says, extractive development "depends upon the nature of the ownership of landed property and how it relates to the accumulation process. In other
which its national qualities are paramount—an “oil nation,” “our oil,” and so on.

2. Petro-Imperialism (The Faustian Pact): Oil is unavoidably an engagement with some of the largest and most powerful forces of transnational capital who show up on the local doorstep and with all the contradictions of participating in the world market (boom and bust). Exploitation of oil is, in effect, a pact, a social contract—a Faustian bargain—in which a national project (modernity, development, civilization)—is purchased at the expense of sovereignty, autonomy, independence, tradition, and so on. The militarization of oil monies (through the world market) and the localization of oil revenues by the state embody this pact. This is what the founder of PEC when he said that, “Oil can bring trouble.”

3. Evacuative Despoliation (Liquid Mobility): The territorial quality of oil—its enclave character—and the fact that it has limited local linkage effects (oil is labor extensive and typically evacuated by pipeline from the source) produces a peculiar sort of double movement. On one hand, wealth literally flows out—its lost value that flows to the horizon of local territories—and, on the other, it is a sort of subterranean threat to the environment. The pipelines that run through the middle of Ogoni villages are the perfect embodiment of the double movement of evacuation/loss and despoliation/threat.

4. Hyper-Centralization (“Rentier” States): Oil has a radically centralizing effect. Petro-dollars rush into the exchequer and simultaneously increase the state’s dependence on one global commodity. Rents become the basis of politics—this is what Karl (1997) means when she says that public expenditure “displaces” statecraft. Oil rents irrigate the body politic as a way of purchasing some form of state legitimacy or quiescence. Public contracts always massively inflated in a way that cost overruns are politically desirable—the more costly the better—become the metric of political choice. The state office degenerates into a prebend, hence the common refrain that Petro-states are especially corrupt, “flabby,” or fractured.

5. Petro-Fetishism/Petro-Magic (The El Dorado Effect): Oil creates a world of illusion. People become wealthy without effort creating fabulous waste and fiscal madness (Venezuela’s factories with nothing in them, Nigerian iron and steel produced at costs seven times more than the prevailing market price). Money is ephemeral, here today gone tomorrow (boom turns to bust). Wealth that scorches the fingers signifies the loss of the soul. In the popular imagination, oil produces all manner of extraordinary magical events and mythic properties (in Nigeria, the trade in body parts; in

Footnote: It concerns the conditions under which capital has access to the land for the purposes of production and accumulation... It potentially depends upon a whole host of factors and conflicts over them, and the balance of economic and political power are related in the form taken by the leases.
Ecuador, new forms of evangelicalism; in Venezuela, fantastic syncretic cults). Among the politicians, bureaucrats, and ruling classes, oil is equally mythic: it "to propels [us] into the twentieth century," as President Carlos Perez put it.

Valorization of Space (Territorial Identities): Because oil has a point of origin and is unavoidably a national commodity (a patrimony), it is to be expected that the transformative potential of oil (how the oil is to be sown in the economy, as Coronil (1997) describes it in Venezuela) invites a debate over who has claims over the resource itself. Here the valorization of territory turns on the contradictions between state-imposed spaces (the concession) and local/indigenous territorial rights (Ogoni land or the Huaroni Ethnic Reserve). The fact that these two territorial claims embody different property claims and rights (national versus customary law) necessarily instigates a debate over how the parts constitute the whole, how the regional and local relate to the national. Oil seems to always invoke the spatial lexicon in which the nation figures prominently. To the extent that oil production is located on lands populated by minorities, territorial disputes are inevitably about identity, rights, and citizenship.

"Monoeconomy/Monopoly" (The Dutch Disease): Oil produces what Karl (1997) calls the "petroization" of society. The political economy mimics a sort of company town, and oil rents reinforce particular patterns of class power. Access to state petro-dollars underwrites a political class, a nomenklatura whose influence is often coupled to regional and ethnic political machines. The boom within the "monoeconomy" produces depressive effects—what economists call the Dutch disease—in other non-oil sectors, such as the collapse of agriculture and of other forms of state revenue generation (i.e., tax collection), which further deepens the "monoeconomic" and monopolitical tendencies.

Petro-Violence

Ideas and deeds only exist in dialectical relationship. So does violence, which is a habitus..., at once structured and structuring: structured because the idea of violence results from historical events, stored as the memory of past deeds, of past encounters, of past frustrations; and structuring because the idea of violence results from historical events, stored as the memory of past deeds, of past encounters, of past frustrations; and structuring...
because the idea of violence informs human actions, determines the acceptability, even the banality of violence, if not the ability to erase the scandal of its occurrence.

(Dumont 1995: 277)

How might these eight properties of oil speak to the question of violence? One can plausibly argue that the strategic significance of oil to North Atlantic industrial capitalism, coupled with the almost unimaginable wealth and power of the oil industry (Shell, after all, has sales in excess of the GNP of at least 127 poor countries), would, in and of themselves, suggest that violence is an expression of the crudest forms of geopolitical power. This is surely not an unimportant observation. The oil companies in Ecuador and Nigeria had substantial autonomy and license to do what they wanted and without recourse; they had the backing of the military and indeed deployed their own security forces. Their operations were congruent with a long lineage of local demonic capitalists (whether rubber barons or slavers) and acted rather like authoritarian local governments. In the space created by a history of prior violence, petro-violence emerges as a sort of culture of terror and a space of death (Taussig 1987). I think there is much more to be explained, however, than the might of petro-capital and the hegemony power of a slick alliance. Here I return to the properties of oil itself.

Strategic and economic powers of oil actually heighten and amplify the centrality, or perhaps more accurately the visibility, of the state in public life (therefore of claims over nation and citizenship) and of transnational capital in society (therefore of claims of sovereignty and accountability). As a result, oil sharpens, in a way that few other natural resources and forms of extraction can, the claims that oil-producing communities in particular have over oil, though the wealth that oil represents animates these concerns throughout the body-politic. Because oil is state property, the relationship of oil producers (and citizens generally) to the state necessarily becomes an object of debate. What I, following Stuart Hall (1996), call forms of articulation often become the basis for exercising these political claims over national patrimony (“the national oil body”). Articulation is employed here in the double sense endorsed by Hall: as a way of rendering an identity (discursive coherence) and of linking that identity to a political subject and project (interpolation). The unity between these two sorts of articulations, in Hall’s view, encompasses the process by which an ideology finds its subject (rather than how a subject locates and articulates an essentialized set of ideas or thoughts. This task always entails the positing of boundaries and edges in an always provisional and contingent way (see Li 1997, 1996). Put differently, oil, as a subterranean, territorial resource that is highly centralized as property around the state, necessarily channels claims over na-
ture ("our oil") into a sort of "rights talk" (Fraser 1996). The "rights talk" speaks to three questions: (1) local identity, territory and the rights that stem from them, (2) relations between local political and territorial claims and forms of governance (decentralization, participation, autonomy), and (3) links between various identity politics (Indian culture or minority tradition) and notions of citizenship (what we are owed or entitled to). Underlying all three is a notion of a nation-state, on which discussions of community, citizenship, and rights ultimately turn. It is no accident that so much of the rhetoric of oil raises questions of the nation (or the social body) or of national development (the Great Civilization of Iran and La Gran Venezuela, for example). Here is Coronil (1997) on the Venezuelan case:

[ Petro]money throughout this century was the universal equivalent that embodied the promise of universality. In exchange for the nation's money, the state promised to bring modernity to Venezuela. . . . To sow the oil condensed this aspiration, the exchange of the nation's subsoil for international money was justified in terms of the nationalist project. . . . The Faustian trade of money for modernity did not bring the capacity to produce but the illusion of production. (390–391)

Oil, then, simultaneously elevates and expands the centrality of the nation-state as a vehicle for modernity, progress, civilization, and at the same time produces conditions that directly challenge and question those very same, and hallowed, tenets of nationalism and development (the national development project). It is as if oil confers on the state a sort of visibility and a set of expectations associated with all modern states, namely, to respond to the needs and rights of its citizens in the name of development and democracy. And yet the process of accumulation engendered by oil exploitation through the slick alliances in its various iterations—the Faustian pact—reveals the state and the nation to be sham, decrepit, venal, and corrupt notions. At the very same time, oil unleashes through the territorial, economic, and social processes of oil development a set of claims and identity-making that minimally hold the nation-state accountable to its modernist tenets (it promulgates a debate over the shift from subject to citizen), and more radically may challenge the very idea of the nation itself (what is this entity called Nigeria?), posing alternative forms of ethno-nationalism (the Ogoni Bill of Rights) and political relations (Indian confederations).

The question is how these tensions and contradictions are dealt with. In Ecuador one could argue that violence was present but constrained, and these contradictions contributed to a national discussion (still in progress) of a constitutional nature and to the debate over neoliberal reform and agrarian reform in particular (Sawyer 1997). In the case of Nigeria, it produced mass violence at stake in the controversy of oil, a "national strategy" (her term). In Ecuador, the lack of any constitutional talk, but talking about this is dangerous. In the case of the 1960s and citizenship.

What is striking about the ARCO affair (1996), is the existence of the political and file as intimately nationalized by oil. The unit block or concessions, the unit, namely the larger political power entities (CONAHO of Indian identity) fell in two senses: (1) a lack of any notion of an Indian transnationalized (Comisión Ecológica) and (2) why we read about the Action Network.

To make a link to oil, thickening civil society at the point (in which the demos and nation-state are mediated by oil), a notion of standing in the struggle for more, but the Ecuador created by oil and the animosity in the struggle at the point.
duced mass violence and a slide into chaos and anarchy because what was at stake in the contradictions was the very existence of a fragile nation itself, a “national symbolic” as Laurent Berlant (1991) calls it that was a “fantasy” (her term). It could easily be understood as such. In comparison to Ecuador, the lack of federated organizations of minorities and the lack of any constitutional precedent over minority rights made the prospects of talking about this national fantasy in the public sphere almost impossible. Indeed from the vantage point of the state (the military), it was extremely dangerous. In the Nigerian case, this harkened back to the bloody civil war of the 1960s and was read as a call for succession, not a debate over citizenship.

What is striking in reading Sawyer’s (1997, in press) detailed account of the ARCO affair in Ecuador or the popular book Savages by Joe Kane (1996), is the extent to which the renewed push for oil in the 1980s galvanized the politics of Indian nationalities. The Oriente became a theater, ultimately national in scope, that solidified and deepened the federal quality of oil. The unit of oil exploration and extraction is geographical (the block or concession) that does not correspond with another territorial unit, namely the Indian “tribal” or indigenous lands (territorio)—which in the case of Ecuador had a constitutional standing. Property is immediately at issue, then, but property as a social relation is immediately attached to a local identity (the Huaorani case as described by Kane) and ultimately to a larger political project embodied in the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities (CONAIE) founded in 1980. The story of articulating a variety of Indian identities within the space of Ecuadorian nationalism is complex in two senses: (1) because the likes of ARCO strenuously attempt to divide any notion of an Indian consensus—indeed it assists in the creation of oppositional groups and (2) because local Indian concerns are rapidly transnationalized as they are picked up by a national green movement (Acción Ecológica) and inserted into the international green networks, hence why we read about their plight in New Yorker magazine and why Rainforest Action Network among others take up their cause.

To make a larger claim, then, the Ecuadorian case has the effect of thickening civil society in part because there is a constitutional reference point (in which Indian nationalities could be discussed), a sense of nation and nation-state (robust enough to accommodate the contradictions generated by oil), and a degree of organization (sufficient to give their claims standing in the public arena). All of this is, of course, far from resolved, but the Ecuadorian case reveals something about the structural tensions created by oil and the points at which violence might occur. Intercommunity animosity is manufactured by the oil companies, and guerrillas struggle at the point of production, as increasingly mobilized Indian communi-
ties confront recalcitrant and militarized company installations and pipelines often at the periphery of state surveillance and control. It also suggests why in this case state action was mediated by the complex popular alliances (most especially the indígena-campesinos alliance formed in 1994 around the Movilización Por La Vida demanding that the new Ley de Desarrollo Agrario be annulled) that formed around a rethinking of the oil nation and its project.  

Here of course Nigeria stands as a striking counterpoint. The centrality of state (and company) violence, however, does not rest solely on the existence of a military junta (the Abacha regime) which was, without question, one of the most brutal in the history of Nigerian post-colonial development. The oil-producing communities had experienced almost forty years of systematic exploitation, marginalization, and neglect. The property and "rights talk" stimulated by the Ogoni case represented precisely the possibility of what actually existed as a legitimate entity in Ecuador: namely, some form of confederation of minorities. Saro-Wiwa encouraged this proliferation of minority groups with their own Bill of Rights (for example, MORETO, the Council for Ekwerre Nationality, and MOSIZEN) in communities that contributed much more to the national oil pool than did the Ogoni fields (which ironically by the 1990s were of limited importance). Nigeria's shallow history of nationalist construction (hastily fabricated in 1914 but in effect three regional systems that were nominally integrated as Nigeria in 1960), a brutal civil war against a secessionist oil-producing region (Biafra) in the 1960s, and a much more fragile sense of "nation-state"ness collaborated to produce a situation in which a seemingly local case of oil-inspired identity politics, cast in large measure as a green movement (compensation for past ecological damages), represented a massive political threat. Saro-Wiwa had simply pointed out that the emperor had no clothes. Nigeria was, as Obafemi Owolowo put it, "a mere geographical expression." What the oil-producing minorities represented, then, not only threatened the slick alliance (compensation from Shell, a share of federal revenues) but also exploded the national fantasy: The very idea of Nigeria and what it might mean to be a Nigerian (as a citizen rather than a subject) (Mamdani 1996).

18. This is a complex story that involved new alliances between regional, local, and national peasant and Indian groups around the agrarian reforms. It also was precipitated by neoliberal reforms that had the effect of vastly increasing oil prices in Ecuador in 1994. This is again an instance of how the link between the nation (nación) and the national patriarchy (patría) embodied in oil is exercised by the fact that citizens now have to pay more for something that is legitimately theirs, and from which they have not benefited. This story is told brilliantly in Sawyer's dissertation, chapter 8-10. She concludes that this struggle by indigenous communities "reconfigured a prevailing law for the first time in Ecuadorian history" (189).

In my rendering into the Ogoni territory, geography, and tradition and civil war on the territory (Saro-Wiwa was killed and three local leaders were killed), as Saro-Wiwa notes. The fact that the demimonde—pumpers and the consequences for it—epistemological points at the center to the epistemological points at the center. Third, geographic positioning in the nation, hence geography, thus ethnic group relations, the Ogoni Bill of Rights, and autonomy, normal.

Yet it was another to Stuart Hall's national unity, and to the groups that claim that 98 percent of the population are independent units (women, traditions, and companies) in between Saro-Wiwa and the Ogoni. Saro-Wiwa concluded that war against the Ogoni society was not just on the re-creating and enduring the country like all ur-historic individuals, but that the ethnic majority's actions against power. To involve the...
by rendering, the history of Ogoni tradition and its transfiguration in the Ogoni Bill of Rights was nonetheless very much about resources, geography, and nature. First, in an empirical sense, the very idea of Ogoni and culture was explicitly spatial and environmental—an Ogoni territory (Saro-Wiwa 1992: 11) consisting of six territorially rooted claims to three local government areas. Indeed, the term tradition (doonu) as Saro-Wiwa emphasized, meant honoring the land (1992: 12). The fact that the heart of the modern was a land-based resource—petroleum pumped from within the territory and with immediate consequences for it (environmental contamination) made these empirical geographic points all the more compelling. Second, nature was central in an ontological sense; MOSOP argued that rights and entitlements stemmed from this territory and this environment (Saro-Wiwa 1992: 92–93). Land identity conferred inalienable rights, states of being, in other words, and geography was normatively implicated in the sense of the autonomy it conferred on the Ogoni Bill of Rights: autonomy within an ethnically (and hence geographically) reconfigured federation. "In a true federation, each ethnic group no matter how small is entitled to the same treatment," as the Ogoni Bill of Rights put it. Here a particular space confers equality and autonomy, normatively speaking.

Yet it was an unstable and contradictory sort of articulation—to return to Stuart Hall’s lexicon. There was no simple Ogoni “we,” no unproblematic unity, and no singular form of political subject (despite Saro-Wiwa’s claim that 98 percent of Ogonis supported him). MOSOP itself had five independent units—an object of bitter dispute in itself—embracing youth, men, traditional rulers, teachers, and churches. It represented a fragile and increasingly divided “we,” as the open splits and conflicts between Saro-Wiwa and other elite Ogoni confirm (Ogoni Crisis, 1996).19 Saro-Wiwa constantly invoked Ogoni culture and tradition, yet he also argued that war and internecine conflict had virtually destroyed the fabric of Ogoni society by 1990 (Saro-Wiwa 1992: 14). His own utopia then rested on the re-creation of Ogoni culture—because Africa’s tribes are “ancient and enduring social organizations” (Saro-Wiwa 1995: 191)—and suffered the same fate as all ur-histories from a mythic invocation of the past. Paradoxically, ethnicity was the central problem of post-colonial Nigeria—the corruption of ethnic majorities—and its panacea—the multiplication of ethnic minority power. To invoke the history of exclusion and the need for ethnic minority inclusion in a new federalism, led Saro-Wiwa to totally ignore the histories

19. Saro-Wiwa was often chastised by Gokana (he himself was Bane) since most of the Ogoni oil was in fact located below Gokana soil. In other words, oil on occasion the key territorial unit became the clan rather than the pan-Ogoni territory.
and geographies of conflict and struggle among and between ethnic minorities. The narrative of oil and the slick alliance could not paper over the contradictions within the Ogoni movement and within Saro-Wiwa’s vision.

Conclusion

The manner in which the mythic, magical, and biophysical properties of oil enter into these violent struggles—how oil is talked about, framed, and given meaning—is ultimately an empirical question: which is to say, one needs to examine carefully the historical and cultural local context of oil. In Nigeria, and I suspect in Ecuador, too, oil’s liquid and subterranean properties and the fact that it is in many respects invisible, flowing through pipelines or being burned as gas, contributes to the popular understanding of petroleum as socially polluting, magical, and all-powerful. Oil is invariably attached to debates over the legitimate sources and use of wealth (a recurrent theme in television soap operas, dime novels, and mobile theater [Watts 1994]) and not surprisingly its power to tarnish and turn everything into shit (oil is “the devil’s excrement,” as a past president of Venezuela put it). In this sense oil as resource, to take something from Walter Benjamin, becomes a sort of wish image.20

Violence in and around the environment is profoundly wrapped up with the properties of that which is exploited. The “green” content of the political mobilization that may be either a cause or a consequence of violence invariably ends up taking on a number of other colors and hues. It is the mythic, magic, and national properties of oil (its wealth, its value, its magical powers to transform) coupled with its subterranean and territorial nature that seem to elevate petro-violence to the point where profound questions of state, nation, and citizen are posed by it and where structural violence is perpetrated in its name.

20. I have explored this idea in Massey and Allen 1998. Susan Buck-Morse refers to the wish image in Benjamin as follows: “In nature the new is mythic because its potential is not yet realized; in consciousness the old is mythic because its powers were never fulfilled. Paradoxically collective imagination mobilizes its powers for a revolutionary break from the recent past by evoking a cultural memory reservoir of myths and utopian symbols from a more distant un-past. These collective wish images are nothing else but this” (1989: 116).