ABSTRACT

The central purpose of this paper is to understand the main features of the relationship between oil and the emergence of conflict. Contrary to common accounts that explain conflict by the sole presence of oil activities, a framework based on the notion of 'place' as a as socially constructed and power riddled entity is used to analyse the case of the Ecuadorian Amazon. This analysis shows that the conflict in the Amazon, although heavily influenced by the presence of oil, cannot be properly understood without taking into account the interactions between several actors such as indigenous populations, colonists, the Ecuadorian state, oil multinationals, international NGOs, and processes such as the spread of globalisation. It is then concluded that the arguments that use oil and its properties to *a priori* explain conflict are very limited. These properties are only acquired by oil in the complex process of construction of particular places, and therefore an approach which studies the specificities of the context is needed in order to accurately understand conflict.

The Construction of a Place of Conflict: Oil and Conflict in the Ecuadorian Amazon

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Introduction

In 1967, large oil reserves were discovered in the Amazon region of Ecuador, the most Western, remote and isolated area of the country, covered by the most bio-diverse rainforest in the world and home to a number of indigenous peoples. The discovery of oil initiated more than three decades of oil exploration and drilling in the region from which the Ecuadorian government has obtained a large amount of resources.

However, this flow of resources has been coupled with intense conflict in the area. Indigenous populations have mobilised and accused oil companies of contaminating their lands, deteriorating the environment, provoking serious health problems and disrupting their way of life. A large flow of migrants, the unclear positioning of the Ecuadorian state, and the intervention of international environmental organisations, among other factors, have contributed to complicate a situation which does not seem to have an easy solution.

The notoriousness of oil in conflicts all over the world which resemble the case of the Ecuadorian Amazon has led to the construction of a generalised argument that links the presence of highly valued natural resources with conflict. In this paper, however, I will try to distance myself from this sometimes deterministic perspective and study the conflict in the Ecuadorian Amazon through a framework that sees the region as a 'constructed place of conflict' in whose production several factors intervene. This framework will allow me to consider oil as a key element in the process, but at the same time pay attention to other features that have a defining impact in the construction of the Ecuadorian Amazon as a specific place of conflict. All of them will have to be taken into account if the dynamics of the region have to be properly understood.

In order to do this, I will proceed in two sections. First, I will briefly review the existing theories linking natural resources and conflict and I will outline a conceptual framework based on the concept of 'constructed places' as a way to analyse conflict. Second, I will study the case of the Ecuadorian Amazon using this conceptual framework and trying to understand the nature of conflict in the region.

Conceptual framework

Natural resources and conflict

The impact of natural resources on social processes has been a focus of attention in the social sciences for a long time. The relationship between resources and development, for instance, has been thoroughly studied under different approaches by economists and political scientists since the mid-20th century. This research has produced strong evidence that resource-wealthy states perform worse, in terms of economic development, than those which are poor in natural resources. Although there is much disagreement about its reasons, there is generalised consensus about the existence of what has been called the 'resource curse' (Ross 1999).

A parallel expression of this resource curse is the notion of a link between natural resources and conflict. The idea was already present in technocratic thinking after the oil crisis of the 1970s, and in 1987 the Brundtland Report already accepted it as common sense (Dalby 2003, p.2). In the late 1980s this argument appeared in the terms of a discussion of 'environmental security', which stated that environmental degradation might become a cause of warfare as scarcity drives desperate people to fight for the remaining resources. Following this line of reasoning, the last 15 years have seen a large amount of both theoretical and empirical academic work on the subject which has contributed to enrich the argument (Dalby 2003, p.2).

In America, for instance, the so-called Toronto School tried to establish plausible causal links between environmental scarcities and social responses which would lead to conflict (see Homer-Dixon 1999 and Homer-Dixon and Blitt 1998). Its work discovered several political factors which make the existence of the link possible, such as the presence of weak states with inadequate capacities for resource management, appropriate infrastructure provision and conflict resolution. In Europe, the large ENCOP research project linked environmental conflicts to development problems and the spreading influence of commercial societies, arguing that it was in

the poverty ridden marginal lands of developing countries where environmental conflict was more likely (Dalby 2003, pp.4-5. See Baechler 1999). Throughout the 1990s political ecologists have also devoted attention to the subject, focusing on the political economy of resources and particularly on the relationship between local resources and the global economy (see Peluso and Watts 2001, and Kaplan 2000). From this perspective, the impact of capitalistic forms of extraction on traditional modes of subsistence is a crucial element explaining conflict in resource abundant areas (Watts 2003b; Dalby 2003, p.5; Sawyer 2001).

All these efforts provide useful insights for understanding the relationship between natural resources and conflict. However, they seem to have lost prominence in front of a new argument put forward by Collier and his Development Research Group at the World Bank in the late 1990s which has become central in the debate in the recent years. Collier (2000, p.4) argues that civil wars are not caused by grievances, that is by inequalities in the distribution of resources (which derive from their scarcity), but by greed. It is the feasibility of predation of the income generated through natural resources that acts as an incentive for certain groups to rebel in order to appropriate that income. This 'economic theory of conflict' has led to the concept of 'resource wars', which contributes to present certain conflicts as a direct consequence of the existence of natural resources (Collier 2000, p.4; Watts 2003a, p.5).

Of course, the econometric analysis on which this approach is based identifies other characteristics which make civil war more likely, such as ethnic and cultural homogeneity, low income per capita and slow economic growth (Collier 2000, p.9). Moreover, further developments of this perspective have sophisticated the argument by including a distinction between different kinds of natural resources and different types of conflicts (see Ross 2002).

However, this approach is limited in several respects. First, with its focus on the possibility of predation of natural resources it ignores the role of multinational companies, the state and actors other than the 'rebel' groups (Pearce 2002, p.3). Second, it overlooks specific characteristics of different types of resources other than the possibility of predating them (Watts 2003a, p.5). Finally, it disregards the insights provided by political ecologists and other social scientists which point at the importance of particularities of the context in understanding the dynamics of conflict.

In relation to the second of these points, Watts (2003a, pp.30-31) identifies eight properties of oil which show its effects over a whole series of actors and processes at different levels. Although I see this as an improvement over the model presented by Collier, I believe that this de-contextualised presentation is also guilty of attributing *a priori* powers to oil. This is not to say that oil does not play a key role in certain conflicts. However, I maintain that this role arises from a complex series of interactions between actors and processes which can only be ascertained after a careful study of a specific context. Not doing so and assuming that the properties of oil are universal can lead to disregard the complexity and specificities of each conflict and naively try to explain them only in terms of oil.

Resources, actors and power in constructed places

Consequently, my aim in this paper is to study the specific case of the Ecuadorian Amazon conflict without *a priori* assumptions about the impact of oil. In order to do so, I will now delineate a framework which focuses on the notion of 'place' as a social construction. This will allow me to identify the different actors and processes that converge in the place and thus analyse their complex interrelations as a way to understand conflict.

Space and place have been given much attention by the social sciences in the last few years. Several disciplines such as geography, anthropology and political ecology have explored these concepts under different approaches and with diverse objectives, giving place to a wide and varied literature. In this paper, however, I am not going to try to make a thorough formulation of a theory of 'place', which would require in itself more attention than I could devote to within the limits of this work. I will only try to elaborate the concept in order for it to be useful in studying the case of the Ecuadorian Amazon.

Escobar (2001, p.143) argues that the current interest in 'place' is the continuation of a long tradition that runs in opposition to the main practice of Western thought which has predominantly regarded 'space' as the absolute, unlimited and universal. According to Casey (2002, p.1), the mainstream sees 'space' as a parameter of an objectified world. Space is regarded as a homogenous media, a sort of planiform field where events and people are located. It becomes a kind of grid (Gupta and Ferguson 1992, p.7) which constitutes a level playing field on which its specific points are

indistinguishable from one another, acting solely as position markers (Casey 2002, p.1).

This view of space reaches its zenith with the actual process of globalisation, in which global capital and international markets are regarded as characteristics of this space which apply to all of its points equally (Casey 2002, p.1). Paradoxically, it is precisely the process of globalisation which has brought renewed attention to an alternative spatial conception focused on the notion of 'place'. May (1995, p.194) argues that globalisation has led to a fragmentation of contemporary identities, leading people to search for old certainties and to construct a more stable identity based on place. However, this 'place' cannot be interpreted as a point in the grid of a universal space. Gupta and Ferguson (1992, p.10) provide an example when they talk about the construction of identities by the large number of migrants, displaced people and refugees of our globalised world. For these people, their identities are not based on a lived place which they are experiencing physically, but on remembered or imagined homelands. This leads to "the partial erosion of spatially bounded social worlds and the growing role of the imagination of places from a distance" (Gupta and Ferguson 1992, p.11). The practical implication of this argument is that 'place' cannot be only understood in strictly physical and geographic terms. On the contrary, it must be seen as socially constructed and connected to a wider series of flows, processes and happenings at other levels (May 1995, p.195). However, the physical and geographic characteristics of the site do have an influence, as they are the raw material on which the construction of the place occurs. The physical site is lived, remembered, and imagined by different people and affected by a number of processes, and it is from the interaction of all theses elements that the place is constructed.

The workings of this process of construction of place was the object of attention of Lefebvre, who saw each place as being constituted by three different fields[1]: *physical* (nature), *mental* (formal abstractions about place), and *social* (the place occupied by sensory phenomena, including products of the imagination such as projects and projections, symbols and utopias). These fields cannot be separated but constitute

[1] In fact, Lefebvre's work, just as that of Gupta and Ferguson, focuses on the term 'space' rather than 'place', although they refer to the former in the same sense that I have given to the latter here. Even though I acknowledge that the use of the term 'space' does not necessarily imply that it is not socially constructed, for clarity's sake in this paper I refer to 'space' as a universal homogenous media and to 'place' as socially and specifically constructed. The distinction serves to define my conception of 'place', although I insist that this can also be applied to 'space' as other authors have.

an evolving unity produced through their dialectical interaction, a conflictual process of creation (Merrifield 1993, pp.122-123). This is a key element of my conception of place. Place is a changing reality which, although with elements of the physical world, is socially constructed and thus has a political dimension that can make it conflictual. This brings in power as an important feature of place construction: Who has the power to make places? By what means? Who contests this?

However, in a framework in which places are constructed through a dialectical interaction of the physical, the mental, and the social, power cannot only be understood as an asset which some actors have and others do not, as the previous questions would suggest. A certain degree of agency which allows the actors to exercise power in different ways (see Lukes 1974) must definitely be granted. However, power must be also seen as an impersonal social force which shapes places through diverse mechanisms (see Foucault 1980). This is necessary in order to understand the 'place' as a the site where the characteristics of 'space' take a definite form. I referred earlier to global capitalism as being one of the features of space which, in mainstream Western thinking, is seen as universal and absolute. Yet in fact, the existence of global capitalism does not mean anything unless we look at its specific consequences, at the concrete shape that it adopts in a particular place. In doing so, we realise the influence that global capitalism exercises in constructing the place, with which it can be concluded that global capitalism is exercising (or acting as if it had) some kind of power.

A corollary of this influence of processes happening at different levels is that place as a constructed entity is deterritorialised and cannot be equated to 'the local' (Escobar 2001, p.152).

To sum up, place will be regarded here as a socially constructed reality in which the physical location, different actors in the site and in other locations, and social processes at different levels contribute to its production in a political process riddled with power. In such a process, a natural resource such as oil can be seen as affecting the place both through its physical characteristics and through processes and actors that it brings to the site. It will depend on all these elements and their interactions that the nature of the construction of a given place can be seen as conflictual.

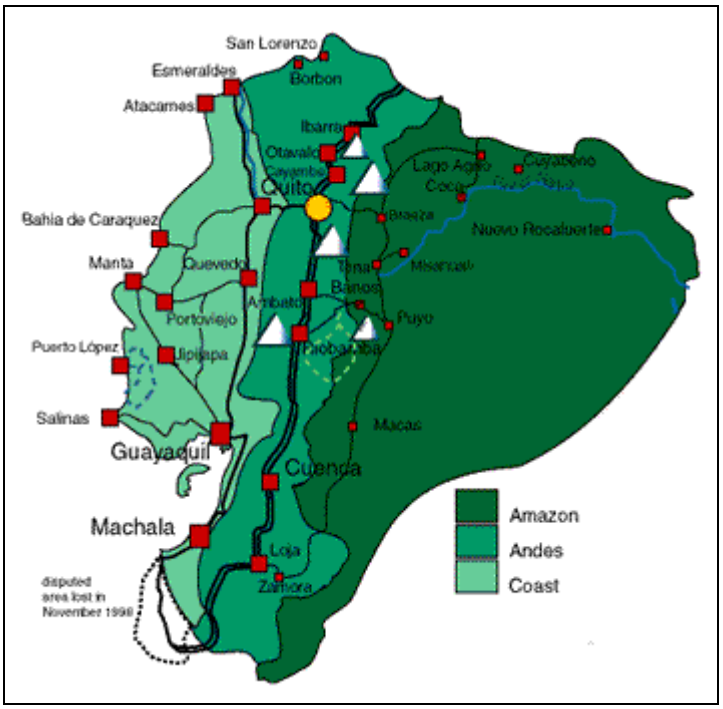
The construction of a place: the Ecuadorian Amazon

In this section, I will present the Ecuadorian Amazon as a constructed place in order to understand its conflict. I will do so by describing some of the main elements, actors and processes which conform the Ecuadorian Amazon. Although each of these elements is presented separately, the intention is for each of them to build on the previous ones so that the interconnections and complexities of the situation become clear and a sufficient understanding of the region is achieved.

Physical and demographic characteristics

The Ecuadorian Amazon covers an approximate area of 120,000 squared kilometres West of the Andes Mountain Range and bordering with Colombia to the North and Peru to the South (see Map 1). It is mostly covered by humid tropical forests which offer an extraordinary and unique biological diversity (Ecuaworld 2003b; Hicks et al. 1990, p.ix)

Map 1: Ecuador



According to the 2001 census, there are 548,419 people currently living in the Amazon Region of Ecuador. Although its population density is about 30 times lower than for the rest of the country, it has an annual population growth rate of 3.2%,

considerably higher than the Ecuadorian average of 2.1% and mainly due to migration from other areas (INEC 2002).

These physical characteristics have a key influence in determining how the Amazon is constructed as a place, as local populations have developed a way of life which is tightly linked to the nature of the rainforest. Moreover, the mystique of this largely uninhabited and biodiverse environment has been a central element in attracting the attention of people all over the world to this area.

Indigenous peoples

Another crucial element of the Ecuadorian Amazon is that its traditional dwellers are indigenous peoples pertaining to a number of tribes, of which the most significant are the Siona Secoya, Cofan, Huaorani, Quichua, Shuar and Ashuar (Ecuaworld 2003b). Their combined populations accrue to approximately 100,000 or 120,000 people.

The first Spanish settlements in the region had the form of Jesuit missions and date from the mid-seventeenth century (Ecuaworld 2003a, p.8). However, the Spanish conquest affected the Amazon only marginally, and the native peoples were able to retain their relatively stable life styles and cultures. The flow of colonists and commercial enterprises which would seriously impact the region are a phenomenon of the late 19th and mainly 20th century (CONFENIAE 2003; Hicks et al. 1990, p.6).

Economy and oil

Local indigenous peoples in the Ecuadorian Amazon have always had simple economies in which the main activities are itinerant farming, hunting and fishing, and gathering (Schniter 2000; Hicks et al. 1990, p.10). However, the region began to draw the attention of outsiders when it became evident that its territory was the source of valuable economic products. A developed industry dedicated to the extraction of rubber was present during the first two decades of the 20th century, but it collapsed in the 1920s. Soon after that, Shell began oil exploration activities, and by the 1930s the Ecuadorian state had secured state monopoly over all non-cultivated lands (Watts 2003a, p.2)

However, Shell left the country in the 1950s after lack of commercial finds, and it was not until 1967 when Texaco discovered large reserves and the Ecuadorian Amazon

became the site of oil activities. After a few years of confusion and unclear policies, in 1971 a military dictatorship took hold of the country, and started building its development policy around the flowering oil industry. That same year a Law of Hydrocarbons was passed, and the Ecuadorian State Petroleum Corporation (Corporación Estatal Petrolera Ecuatoriana - CEPE), which would become the major actor in oil activities in the country, was founded in 1972. Several concessions to work with CEPE were given to foreign companies, and the following year Ecuador joined the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) (Oilwatch 2003; Ecuaworld 2003a, p.33-34).

The changes of the early 1970s had a big impact in the country. Foreign exchange proceeding from exports have become the key element of the Ecuadorian economy, and oil is now the country's most important export. In the last 10 years, it has accounted for between 43% and 66% of total exports, and it also contributes to more than 50% of the state's budget. Notwithstanding that the Amazon is the source for 99.6% of the oil extracted by Ecuador, the state only spends between 3% and 4% of its budget in the region, which in addition presents one of the highest rates of poverty in the country (Oilwatch 2003).

In terms of employment generation, the Amazon has not benefited much from oil extraction either. As a 1990 World Bank report recognized,

> The petroleum industry is basically an economic "enclave" with few backward or forward employment generation linkages. Factor inputs, including materials and labor, predominantly are imported into the region, and skilled, as well as semi-skilled, labor live almost exclusively in petroleum camps during their "shifts" in the region, leaving their families, and most indirect employment generation potential, outside the region. (Hicks et al. 1990, p.3)

In all these features some of the main elements of how the Ecuadorian Amazon is constructed as a place begin to emerge. From an initial situation in which only indigenous peoples lived in the region, we see how the discovery of natural resources brought in other actors. As will be shown below, each of them has particular interests in the Amazon which shape their specific views of the place.

The Ecuadorian state

The key role of oil in the Ecuadorian economy has also had a deep impact on the Ecuadorian state. While past export 'booms' based on cacao and bananas had been managed by and for private interests in the Coastal region, petroleum is controlled by the state. This has strongly contributed to transform the social landscape (Ecuaworld 2003a, p.37). The prevalence of an ideology of state-led economic development and nationalist integration with oil at its core promoted the notion that indigenous peoples had to adopt identities as citizens of an homogenous nation. This took place under a corporatist state model which tried to incorporate indigenous communities by granting them benefits as long as they were organised within state-sanctioned organisations (Perreault 2003, pp.66-67).

However, the corporatist state began to get eroded in the 1980s, coinciding with the return of democracy to the country. The global ascendancy of neo-liberalism also took hold of Ecuador as it had to face economic crisis and indebtedness. State policy changed dramatically and abandoned subsidies and support programmes, leading to opposition from labour, political parties and the growing indigenous movement (Perreault 2003, p.69).

The shift from the corporatist state to the neo-liberal state did not increase the efficiency and reliability on the government though. Kimerling (1996, p.61), for instance, describes the nature of the present Ecuadorian state in the following way:

> Democratic institutions remain fragile and underdeveloped, and a strong executive dominates the government. The courts have become increasingly politicized, inefficient and corrupt. … Political and economic power is concentrated in the hands of a small elite, and the majority of Ecuadorians are excluded – in practice if not by law – from meaningful participation in the political system. Most governmental decision-making is characterized by secrecy and accountability of public officials is limited.

The incorporation of the Ecuadorian state to the construction of the Ecuadorian Amazon can then be said to have been triggered by the discovery of oil. Oil can also be held responsible for producing a perverse effect in the state's already deficient degree of accountability, as it became a source of income from which it had absolute control (Sawyer 2000). However, the previous discussion has also shown that oil is

not the only force at work in determining the form of the Ecuadorian state and its participation in the Amazon, and that these other forces also contribute to provoke the effects that are usually attributed to oil. As it was argued in the conceptual framework, wider processes such as the ascendancy of neo-liberalism also determine the shape and interests of the state. Moreover, the agenda for the construction of a homogeneous national project in an area mainly populated by indigenous people is as important in understanding the policies of the state toward the Amazon as the presence of oil.

Oil companies

Foreign oil companies have been present in Ecuador since the beginning of oil exploration in the Amazon. However, the role they have played goes beyond that of mere business partners and is linked to the nature of the Ecuadorian state. The heavy dependence on oil of Ecuador's economy, the corruption of state officials and their lack of accountability, and the neo-liberalist thrust of the 1980s led to an expansive engagement with foreign oil companies which had to be attracted at any price. The result of this policy was a sort of alliance between these companies and the state through which the latter would try to offer the most profitable conditions for the extraction of crude. If this is added to the fact that oil is located in an area largely occupied by indigenous people, often marginal to the Ecuadorian state, it is understandable that low environmental standards and null protection from the impact of oil activities were granted by the government in the Amazon (Sawyer 2001; Kimerling 1996).

As a result, oil companies are not neutral actors anymore. They engage in the construction of the Amazon seeing it as a source of cheap oil, and that confronts them to the inhabitants of the region, who see them as invaders who disrupt and extract richness without giving anything in exchange. Sawyer (2001) describes how Texaco operated in Ecuador via "a subsidiary-of-a-subsidiary-of-a-subsidiary-of-a-subsidiary" in order to avoid legal responsibilities by the parent company. Profit-making drives the actions of oil companies, and when unrestricted by a concomitant state and unclear regulation such as in Ecuador they will try to reduce their costs as much as possible irrespective of effects for which they are not liable.

However, as actors in the Amazon they have had to confront local populations once these have chosen to mobilise for their interests. The form of this encounter varies in

specific cases and ranges from lip service to true engagement. In this respect, the form of organisation and mobilisation and the intervention of external actors is key, as will be shown below.

In any case, this exemplifies the point made above about the role of power in the construction of place. The differing points of view of the various actors about the Amazon converge in the region, where they interact and compete. In this interaction, an alliance between oil companies and the state is made because of their shared view of the Amazon as a source of oil from which they can benefit. Moreover, the financial and enforcement means of these actors give them a powerful position which allows them to exercise a strong influence in defining the 'place' according to their interests. In this sense, it is illustrative to see how after years of ignorance about the fate of the region, now the Ecuadorian government shows a definite interest in incorporating and securing it and its oil into its national programme. This is exemplified both by its engagement in a border war with Peru in 1995-1996, and by the mass diffusion in national media of a propagandistic sentence which says: 'Ecuador has always been, is, and will be an Amazonian nation'.

Migration

The presence of indigenous peoples in the Ecuadorian Amazon is prominent in all accounts of the region. However, as I stated above, the majority of the population in the area are migrants arrived from other parts of the country during the 1970s and 1980s, in their majority non-indigenous peasants searching for land. Migration to the Amazon responds basically to two factors. First, to a high rate of population growth in Ecuador at a point in which no land was available in other regions. Second, to a specific policy pursued by the Ecuadorian state to encourage settlement in the Amazon. In fact, colonisation was the main element of the land reform initiated by the government in the 1970s (Hicks et al. 1990, p.7).

This can be linked to the nature of the state portrayed above: the political class would not go against the interests of the landowning elite by promoting land redistribution of large states in other parts of the country, and thus the mostly unpopulated Amazon presented itself as a perfect 'escape valve' (Hicks et al. 1990, p.16). The process of migration was also favoured by oil activity. The opening up of roads in the rainforest was the channel that colonists used to reach the hard-access area and install their settlements.

Another example of the carelessness with which the process of ‘migration encouragement’ took place was that the state did not seem to take into account the hardships of the terrain for people who were not used to live in the area. For instance, poor soils with propensity to erosion was one of the difficulties that colonists found in their new settlements, making it difficult to even be able to use their new lands productively for self-subsistence (Hicks et al. 1990, p.17).

The case of the migrants further shows the complexities in the construction of the Amazon as a place. While they share the concerns of indigenous peoples regarding the activities of oil companies in the region, they confront the efforts of the Amazonian tribes to get land titles of their ancient territories, which would restrict the access to land of migrants. The alliances between different actors are therefore not invariable, but they depend on the issue at stake and the specific circumstances of the confrontation.

Environmental degradation, health effects and cultural loss

The rainforest of the Amazon region of Ecuador is usually regarded as an extremely fragile system which can be easily destroyed by careless use (Hicks et al. 1990, p.ix). In fact, it seems that many of the processes described above are effectively contributing to such a deterioration.

Uncaring oil extraction is regarded as a major source of environmental decay. Sawyer (2001) recounts how in its 20 years of operation in the Amazon Texaco “detonated thousands of pounds of dynamite” and “regularly dumped the chemical muds and industrial solvents essential for drilling, and the sludge and formation waters that surfaced from oil reservoirs along with crude, untreated into these pits”. These and other practices destroyed landscapes and soils and contaminated waters. Beyond the environmental consequences in themselves, they also had an effect on people’s health, as they now have to rely on contaminated water, soils and air for their subsistence (see CESR 1994). Moreover, for indigenous peoples of hunters, gatherers and farmers whose culture is embedded in the surrounding environment all these developments have a serious effect on their way of life and culture (see the worrying case of the Huaorani tribe in Kimerling 1995).

This illustrates how the construction of the Ecuadorian Amazon as a place becomes conflictual. The divergence of points of view about the 'place' has practical implications which seriously affect the very essence of the way of life and core interests of some of the actors. For instance, the actions of the oil companies and the state in pursuit of their view of the region as a source of oil inevitably disrupt the traditional indigenous way of life. It is from this fundamental confrontation of views about the Amazon that conflict emerges, and this remains a key issue even when negotiations take place at the level of distribution of oil revenues (more on this below).

Mobilisation and organisation

In front of all these events, and given the increasing abandonment by the neo-liberal state, the people of the Ecuadorian Amazon began in the late 1970s and 1980s to organise and mobilise in the defence of their interests (Perreault 2003, p.66). Many organisations which had been created under the tutelage of the corporatist state had to learn to live without its support in this new stage. As a consequence, they experienced a double process through which, on the one hand, they had to go back to their localities and close problems in search for an identity and sense of purpose, and on the other, look for partners with similar interests in order to survive. The confluence of these interests among diverse indigenous groups led to the progressive construction of a unitary indigenous movement and identity first in the Amazon, with the creation in 1980 of the Confederation of the Indigenous Nationalities of the Ecuadorian Amazon (CONFENIAE), and later on in the whole of Ecuador, with the birth of the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE) in 1988. This tendency went even further with the birth in the 1990s of Pachakutik, a so-called movement which in fact functions as an indigenous political party (Perreault 2003, p.70).

This process of mobilisation allowed the indigenous people of the Amazon to engage effectively with the state. Thus in 1992, a group of Amazonian indigenous tribes started a process of demands and protests in order to obtain recognition, titling and protection of their native lands, one of their most prominent demands given the massive arrival of migrants and oil companies to the region. After a march to the capital Quito which gained intense media coverage they obtained title deeds to rainforest lands (Sawyer 1997, pp.66-67).

However, this does not mean that their problems were solved for good. The unaccountable nature of the Ecuadorian state means that the effective enforcement of agreements and laws does not always take place. Yet there are advancements over previous situations, and the force of indigenous claims is demonstrated by the attention granted from the state and by the concessions they obtain.

The analysis of mobilisation in the Ecuadorian Amazon shows the dynamism of the construction of a place of conflict. In the 1970s, the presence of a corporatist state distributing benefits to local populations was able to keep the conflict in a low intensity phase which looked very different from that of the late 1980s and 1990s. The force of the indigenous movement has dramatically affected the balance of forces, and some conquests, like the adoption of a new constitution which recognises the specific rights of indigenous peoples, have contributed to change the character of the conflict. It is within this framework that the changes in the relationship between indigenous peoples and oil companies, from ignorance to negotiation, has to be understood.

In all these developments it is extremely important to take into account the role of external institutions and organisations which provide support to the local organisations be it financially, pressuring the government, or amplifying their claims sometimes at a global scale (Perreault 2003, p.83). Again, this responds to the effects of wider global processes in the construction of the place. The global spread of interest in the environment has been a key element in the incorporation of external organisations to the construction of the Ecuadorian Amazon. Although these organisations (international institutions, NGOs, etc.) can in general be said to support local populations, it is necessary to understand that they have their own agendas and views about the Amazon, and thus they do not only back up local understandings of the place, but engage with them and affect them.

Although I have focused here on the organisational activities of indigenous groups, Amazonian migrants also form part of this web of relationships which they use to exercise influence. Sawyer (2001) reminds us, for instance, that the majority of the 30,000 inhabitants of the Ecuadorian Amazon who in 1993 filed a lawsuit against Texaco in the United States were non-indigenous migrants to the region.

Conflict management initiatives

One of the consequences of the mobilisation of local populations and the emergence of conflict has been the search for negotiated solutions by the different actors participating in the construction of the Ecuadorian Amazon. Some oil companies, for instance, have tried to reach agreements on economic compensations with specific communities. Another initiative at a broader scale is the Population, Energy and Environment Programme (EAP), a World Bank led scheme which tries to bring together the different stakeholders in the region in order to produce guides of conduct and programmes which will allow for "the integration and development of hydrocarbon projects in a way compatible with the sustainable development of the Amazon region" (ESMAP 2002, p.1).

Although it presents itself as a forum in place to overcome the conflict of the region, the EAP must also be seen as part of the processes which interact in the construction of the place, and thus riddled with power. This leads to the realisation that the EAP initiative is constituted as a forum with a biased agenda in which the presence and development of hydrocarbon projects are given for granted, reflecting the position of the Ecuadorian state and the oil companies. However, it also reveals the effect of wider processes such as globalisation and its associated spread of capitalism (Graham-Gibson 1996).

This point of view signals a key feature of the conflict for the construction of the Ecuadorian Amazon, namely that it takes place at two different levels. The first, more visible level, is that which has to do with the consequences of oil activity in the region. At that level, the conflict is both about environmental degradation and the distribution of oil generated revenues. This is the level at which oil companies and the Ecuadorian state intend to engage with other actors and make concessions.

However, there is a second, hidden level of conflict, which consists of an irreconcilable difference in the conception of the environment and development. Whereas indigenous people and most migrants in the Ecuadorian Amazon wish to be able to live out of the produce of their lands and see the environment more as a source of identity than as a source of income, oil companies and the Ecuadorian state share the view that the main goal of development is economic growth and that the maximisation of revenues through oil extraction constitutes a non-negotiable activity.

All the actors in the region have their own position in respect to the two levels of conflict, and use the means at their reach in order to advance it. However, and in spite of the conquests of indigenous peoples and migrants, the state and oil companies have been able to exercise their power in order to bias the negotiation agenda toward the issues on which they are willing to make concessions. In this way, they have succeeded in constructing the Ecuadorian Amazon as a place in which oil activity will keep being a defining feature in the future.

The discussion about the construction of the Ecuadorian Amazon as a place of conflict can be said to be very much influenced by the presence of oil. However, as I have shown above, oil does not determine the form of conflict on its own. It is the interaction between oil, the Ecuadorian state, oil companies, indigenous peoples, migrants, external organisations and processes occurring at other levels that define the specific form of the conflict and its dynamics. If the nature of the status of indigenous peoples in Ecuador and the national project of the Ecuadorian state are not taken into account, for instance, the conflict could be thought to be only about the distribution of the revenues of oil. This is the conclusion that would be reached under the framework proposed by Collier which focuses exclusively on the possibility of predation of resources. However, the analysis of the case in terms of the construction of a place of conflict has shown that there is another dimension of the conflict which, even if it is also very much influenced by oil, needs to take into account other factors in order to be properly understood.

Conclusions

This paper has used the case of the Ecuadorian Amazon in order to analyse the relationship between natural resources and conflict. It has done so by rejecting the *a priori* argument that natural resources, and specifically oil, have intrinsic properties which drive and explain conflicts. The analysis of the case study through a framework which sees the place of conflict as a socially constructed entity riddled with power has shown that the view that conflicts can be explained by the feasibility of predation of natural resources is very limited. Although the possibility of predation is one aspect to take into account, seeing the conflict as happening in a complex constructed place brings in several other factors which are crucial in defining and understanding it.

This is not to say that the presence of oil in a certain place does not have any relationship with the emergence of conflict. It is to say, however, that oil, as a defining element of the place, *acquires its properties in the process of construction of the place itself*. It is the confluence of wider processes such as the existence of a global capitalist economy based on oil, the existence of an unaccountable state, the presence of oil companies acting under unclear regulations, and the presence a marginalised people living in a remote area, which can explain why in the context of the Ecuadorian Amazon oil can be a factor in occasioning conflict. Yet my point is that it is this collection of elements which, in a specific constructed place, imbue oil with a series of properties which allow us to relate it to conflict.

The problem occurs when such analyses lead to attribute *a priori* properties to oil without taking into account the specific circumstances in which oil showed those properties. This leads to the appearance of reductionist approaches which try to explain conflicts solely by the presence of oil or other natural resources, with which the complexity and specificities of the context are lost and the understanding of the conflict is reduced. In this respect, I believe a framework based on the construction of places, as this paper has shown, is useful in order to apprehend these complexities and provide an accurate picture of the conflict.

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