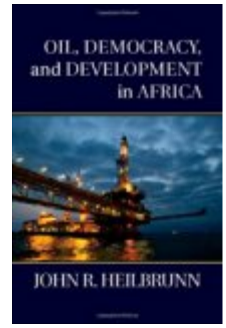
H-Net Reviews in the Humanities & Social Sciences

John R. Heilbrunn. *Oil, Democracy, and Development in Africa.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014. 279 pp. $90.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-107-04981-9.



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The last decade of the twentieth century and the first five years of the twenty-first saw a more or less solid consensus that there existed a resource "curse" which afflicted nations with an abundance of oil. The decade since has seen that consensus erode. A growing bevy of studies, both qualitative and quantitative, cast doubt on a deterministic relationship between oil wealth and a host of political outcomes: democracy, development, civil conflict, regime survival, and still others. Some of these studies posit conditional relationships between oil and those outcomes. Others argue that there is no relationship or, if there is one, that it is a beneficial effect of oil.

John R. Heilbrunn's new book ***Oil, Democracy, and Development in Africa*** joins the conditional relationship camp, suggesting that if we can understand conditions on the ground on the "day before" a country discovers oil, we can understand much of the likely trajectory once oil comes on line as a revenue source. Heilbrunn's argument is close to my own (***Hard Times in the Lands of Plenty: Oil Politics in Iran and Indonesia*** [2007]), but where I focus on regime durability he explores differing regime types and economic outcomes. And, rather than focus on the effect of oil's timing on state building, Heilbrunn analyzes the degree of state building prior to oil to explain later dynamics. Here the argument echoes one advanced by Terry Lynn Karl (***The Paradox of Plenty: Oil Booms and Petro-States*** [1997]), drawing in fact on her concept of the petrostate. However, it departs from that similar framework to suggest that different phases of oil producer status bear different institutional fruit over time. Beginning with the divergent trajectories of Chad and Ghana, he draws on in-depth analysis of a number of sub-Saharan Africa's petrostates from the inception of those oil sectors.

Chapter 2 outlines the argument, which places the bulk of initial conditions on colonial legacies. Colonial powers that implanted more expansive bureaucratic capacities in their African territories left them with greater tools to be put toward negotiating resource contracts effectively with multinationals and greater capacity to manage the resulting revenues. This chapter develops the colonial legacy hypothesis with historical data from states largely organized by former colonial rulers: French, Portuguese, British, etc. Chapter 3 traces the involvement of oil companies in Africa's oil sector, from international oil companies (IOCs) to developing countries' national oil companies (NOCs) over the twentieth century. Chapter 4 breaks African oil exporters' trajectories into distinct phases: emerging, mature, and declining, arguing that initial conditions shape state responses through these three periods. Chapter 5 explores the relationship between stateness and the producer-company contractual relationship, and chapter 6 examines the net effect on democracy.

The unique contribution of this book is its analysis of an emerging dissensus over the "curse" of oil and the processes that led to divergence. Rather than take success stories as exceptions (see for example Karl's ***The Paradox of Plenty*** on Indonesia), Heilbrunn uses them, similarly to Thad Dunning (***Crude Democracy: Natural Resource Wealth and Political Regimes*** [2008]) and my ***Hard Times in the Lands of Plenty***, to craft coherent explanatory frameworks for multiple oil outcomes. This is commendable, and as the study of resource politics matures in social science, we need more efforts to trace causal pathways leading to positive as well as to negative outcomes.

The book comes up short in two areas: methodological and theoretical. Methodologically, while a wide array of cases, and episodes from cases, come into play to illustrate sub-dynamics of the main argument, it is not always clear what Heilbrunn's rationale is for selecting any particular case over others. The book proceeds from case to case without an overarching rationale for selection, which raises the risk of anecdotal selection based on how a case fits with the argument. A presentation of all the cases that fall into the book's domain, along with brief discussion of how they measure on the key initial variables as well as their status during each of the phases of oil sector development, would have helped significantly in clarifying the suitability for individual cases in each section. Again, while the author's effort to draw on a wide array of episodes from different cases is laudable, absent the systematization of the whole sample readers could reasonably worry about selection bias.

Theoretically, some of the conceptual scaffolding to periodize oil production runs close to tautology. Most centrally this arises in the discussion of "mature producers." How do we know the effects of being a mature producer without knowledge of the positive outcomes that are hypothesized to accrue? Table 4.1, for example, would have benefited from the inclusion of some indicators for bureaucratic capacity or government effectiveness. Given the centrality of state capacity in Heilbrunn's conceptual framework, it is important to be able to separate out categories, such as mature producers, from their effects.

One of the book's central contentions is that "African hydrocarbon exporters are developing economically and their politics reflect an impetus toward democracy" (p. viii). Yet the last substantive chapter notes, accurately, that of the eleven African petrostates covered in the book, by 2013 only two were "free" according to Freedom House and only one other even partly free (p. 186). Again, to make the case that oil is a net democratic force in Africa, it would have been more compelling to show that over time these African petrostates are moving in that direction more quickly, or more durably, than their oil-poor counterparts.

This effort to show, first, that Africa's resource politics are not all gloomy and, second, that we can understand the processes that lead to divergent outcomes is an important one. As econometric evidence continues to accumulate, calling the resource curse into question, qualitative scholars ought to proceed afoot, presenting causal narratives with carefully crafted comparative analysis.

But we should do so with an equally careful eye to methodology and to theory formation and testing. Given the substantive importance of natural resources in the futures of the developing world, concrete policy implications must rest on as solid a scientific foundation as it is feasible to craft.