

Macalester College

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Response to Michael Watts. Whither
Development?: The Struggle for Livelihood in the
Time of Globalization.

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Response

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Let me start by noting what a pleasure and inspiring opportunity it is to be commenting on the scholarship of Michael Watts. When I embarked on my field research for my master's thesis in the West African nation of Mali in 1991, I carried three texts with me into the field. These books were Paul Richards' *Indigenous Agricultural Revolution* (1985), Piers Blaikie's *the Political Economy of Soil Erosion in Developing Countries* (1985), and Michael Watts' *Silent Violence: Food, Famine and Peasantry in Northern Nigeria* (1983). While the books by Richards and Blaikie were fairly compact, Michael Watts' tome added considerable heft to my baggage (so I showed real commitment in lugging it along). At the time I was not familiar with geography as a field of study, but rather was a student of natural resources management. It was Richards, Blaikie, and Watts who brought me to geography, and in particular to an interdisciplinary subfield known as political ecology. Only later would I learn in my Ph.D. studies what a pivotal figure Michael Watts had been in my chosen discipline and subfield.

My comments today are broken into three parts: 1) an assessment of Dr. Watts' contribution; 2) a critique of a few of his propositions; and 3) an extension of where I think one could go with several of the ideas in his essay.

Professor Watts has a fairly consistent track record of shaking up the conventional thinking in my field. For example, in a 1983 essay entitled "On the Poverty of Theory: Natural Hazards Research in Context," he launched a blistering critique of cultural ecology and traditional hazards geography (subfields in geography which had tended to look at local environmental management and natural disasters in isolation). His insistence that we account for the influence of broader political economy on local human-environment interactions ushered in the then emerging field of political ecology. Once again, in 1996, Michael Watts and his co-author Dick Peet published an edited volume, *Liberation Ecologies: Environment, Development, Social Movements*, which marshaled an outpouring of post-structural political ecology research. Given Michael Watts' track record of rocking the boat, it came as no

surprise to me that he used this essay to question a number of prominent ideas regarding oil and development in Nigeria.

By way of summary and synthesis, I believe one of most important points we can take away from Michael Watts' essay is that conflict in Nigeria's delta region is less about oil itself, and more about who has the power—the provincial or national government—to divide up the proceeds from this resource. To put it in the terms of James Scott's lecture, "Vernaculars Cross-Dressed as Universals: Globalization as North Atlantic Hegemony," this is a struggle between a national scale development project (and the interests at that level) and the development aspirations and interests of a sub-national region. Oil complicates a reconciliation of interests at different scales, but it is not the initial cause of the problem. In order to arrive at these conclusions, Watts deftly critiques a few of the mainstream interpretations of the situation in Nigeria.

First, Dr. Watts argues that the categories we typically use to identify different political actors seem to break down in the context of Nigeria. We often want to classify armed groups as insurgents or thugs, but this distinction is meaningless in the Delta, where they frequently are a bit of both. Furthermore, we often think of insurgents as working in opposition to the government, but in the Delta certain insurgents are funded by different elements of the government. In sum, the typical categories do not apply.

Second, Professor Watts questions the unique qualities ascribed to oil by Collier (2007) and Ross (2003). Ross suggests that oil cannot be looted, yet this is a common occurrence in the Nigerian Delta where local people tap or bunker large pipelines. Ross further claims that offshore oil cannot be obstructed, yet this happens with regularity in the Bight of Benin, where armed groups board platforms and take hostages. Again, the typical categorization does not apply.

Third, Watts critiques a prominent concept in the development literature, a problem known as the "resource curse," which suggests that the abundance of a particular natural resource often creates more problems than benefits for a nation's political economy. Truth be told, I always found the resource curse idea to be refreshing because it served as a nice counterbalance to the Malthusian discourse of environmental security. Environmental security is a body of literature most closely associated with the Canadian political scientist Tad Homer-Dixon, which sees resource scarcity—often driven by over-population—as a major driver of conflict. In my view, the environmental security per-

spective has led to some preposterous claims and policy prescriptions.¹ For example, in July of 2007, a group of geologists at Boston University reported that they had discovered a huge underground lake in Sudan. They went on to suggest that drilling wells in Sudan would relieve the ethnic tension because “much unrest and misery in Darfur is due to water shortages.”²

Clearly, just “adding water” will not resolve such a conflict. Critics of the environmental security approach, including Michael Watts, rightly point out that scarcity is often socially constructed, having little or nothing to do with population pressure.³ Moreover, conflicts over scarce resources are often a symptom (rather than a cause) of underlying tensions, and that resource abundance is just as likely as resource scarcity to be the subject of disputes. This is all to say that, in my rush to reject the environmental security argument, I perhaps far too easily accepted the idea of the resource curse. Michael Watts’ essay has pushed me to reconsider my perception of the resource curse concept. Essentially, his critique of this idea resembles some facets of the one that has been leveled against environmental security, i.e., conflicts over resources are often a symptom (rather than a cause) of underlying tensions.

I have two minor quibbles with Michael Watts’ essay. First, I would argue that he uses a conception of the resource curse idea that is overly narrow. He borrows this particular conception from Collier who sees it as “dependence upon primary commodity exports...substantially increasing the risk of civil war.”⁴ In addition to the civil unrest aspect of the resource curse, many also identify a second dimension, sometimes known as “Dutch Disease,” which focuses on the simplification of a national economy that may occur because of over-reliance on a small set of commodity exports.⁵ As an illustration, Nigeria used to have one of the more dynamic manufacturing sectors in West Africa. It was also largely self-sufficient in food production. However, as the oil industry grew more prominent, both manufacturing and agriculture atrophied.⁶ Common explanations of this second dimension tend to focus on the decisions within a government or national economy that lead to this problem. More specifically, the argument is that there is a tendency in government and the business sector to gravitate to the easy money rather than investing in other sectors of the economy.

When we broaden our conception of the resource curse idea to include the simplification of national economies, it becomes strikingly apparent that we often ignore the external dimension of this problem. Focusing on the external dimensions of the resource curse problem forces us to examine the external structures that have led a country to concentrate on the export of a certain commodity and ask why a place cannot seem to diversify beyond this particular product. In other words, in many instances there is an *external* as well as an *internal* side to a country's over-reliance on one or two exports, and we need to be thinking about both dimensions. In my own research, one of the phenomena I study is export-oriented cotton production in the West African nation of Mali.⁷ Mali has been the leading cotton producer in sub-Saharan Africa in recent years. This, unfortunately, is also one of Mali's few exports, accounting for a massive share of foreign exchange and 30–50% of government revenues. However, it is no accident that Mali produces cotton for the external market. It was introduced during the French colonial period (as it was in northern Nigeria), and farmers were encouraged to grow it in order to pay head taxes.⁸ During the 1980s and 1990s, World Bank-imposed structural adjustment policies further led Mali to obsessively focus on its export orientation, namely, to emphasize cotton production. In sum, I believe Watts' use of Collier's narrow conception of the resource curse problem leads us to focus overly much on the internal dynamics of this issue.

Now let me outline my second minor concern with the essay. Professor Watts is very good at making us leery of commodity determinism, specifically, imbuing oil with special transformative power. I agree that oil has no innate powers. It was just black stuff in the ground a few hundred years ago. It was only after humans discovered a use for oil that it became a so-called natural resource. We could say the same for many other natural resources that we dig up out of the ground in Africa, including gold, diamonds and copper. All were useless until we created an application or desire for them. In some instances, such as the case of diamonds, humans not only created a desire for them but went to great lengths to insure that they would be scarce and therefore expensive.⁹ In his essay, Michael Watts is effective at deconstructing the commodity determinism surrounding oil. As discussed earlier, none of the so-called unique qualities of oil described by Collier and Ross seem to hold in Nigeria. However, I wonder if oil is not different because it is the lubricant, or primary energy source, of modern industrial societies? Put slightly differently, and relating to my last point, most resource

extraction efforts have a specific dynamic within the country, as well as a life and meaning outside of the country. We can think about the dynamics of oil production in Nigeria; its geography, how its revenues are shared, and whether it may be looted or its production obstructed. But examining the head of the camel inside of the tent can only take us so far. I would argue that it is the rest of the animal, outside of the tent, at this particular point in history, that may make oil somewhat unique. As Watts notes, "In the long march toward the modern world system, mass commodities of various sorts...have been its beasts of burden." In the early to mid-20th century, a constellation of interests in the United States (the oil complex) emerged to engineer a petroleum-based form of development.¹⁰ This system prospered and grew to the point where it became the ubiquitous form of development around the world. Oil, therefore, may have special powers, not because of its particular qualities and the way its extraction is organized within Nigeria, but because of its use and meaning within the larger global economy.

My final comments have to do with how I would like to extend this essay. Put differently, if we were guitar players and this were a jam session, this is how I would riff off the piece Michael Watts has just played. I would like to extend his essay in two ways.

First, what are the implications of this detailed case study of the situation in Nigeria for other countries that are dependent on the export of one or two primary commodities? This is important as a large chunk of Collier's "bottom billion" live within the context of a national economy that could be characterized as such. To use Andre Gunder Frank's terminology, these are economies that were underdeveloped during the colonial period by being made to produce a few commodities for the core, today's Global North.¹¹ In many cases, this orientation has only been reinforced by the policies of global financial institutions like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF).¹² Consequently, I would argue that we need to consider development alternatives for economies that are dependent on the export of one or two primary commodities. I can think of at least two possibilities (although I am sure there are many others): a) a trust fund approach and b) a return to policies of import substitution.

The trust fund approach has been tried in a few countries, both less and more developed. A good example of a less-developed nation that

has pursued this approach is the Micronesian island state of Kiribati. With a population of 90,000 people spread over 34 islands, Kiribati had a per capita income in 2004 of \$950. While most of the population (80%) is engaged in a subsistence-based farming and fishing economy, the country also has significant phosphate deposits, which it is mining and exporting. Since 1956, the proceeds from phosphate extraction have been placed in a trust fund that is invested off shore by two London-based account managers.¹³ The returns on this fund are used to finance government services, including healthcare and the development of a communication and transportation infrastructure between the islands. What this means is that most residents in Kiribati are free to continue living a subsistence lifestyle, yet still have access to sustainably financed government services. A similar situation has occurred in Norway (a developed country example) in which proceeds from the natural gas industry have been placed in a trust fund that subsidizes government service provision.¹⁴ Both cases represent situations where non-renewable resources (phosphate and natural gas) have effectively been converted to a renewable resource (a self-sustaining trust fund) which provides for ongoing investments in a country's human capital.

According to influential policy reports in the early 1980s, African policies of import substitution were tried and largely failed in the 1960s.¹⁵ However, my sense is that we need to revisit these attempts and begin experimenting with them again (a view shared by a small but growing number of economists¹⁶). By import substitution, I am referring to state-led attempts to diversify the local economy and build up local manufacturing so that a country wouldn't have to import all of its goods and could break out of a cycle of dependency. Perhaps we could even have such policies supported by the international financial institutions, a sort of reverse structural adjustment (an idea that doesn't seem so wild after hearing Ravi Kanbur speak on "The Co-Evolution of the Washington Consensus and the Economic Development Discourse"). While I could perhaps imagine this happening in a place like Mali, which is overly dependent on cotton production, I struggle to see it occurring in a place that produces oil because of the enormous external pressure to keep producing this commodity. This leads me to my second and final extension, or riff, on Michael Watts' article.

If we think about the tensions between globalization and development in various parts of the world, I would argue that the oil complex is a beast with many heads. We see one face of this hydra in Nigeria and yet another in the United States. The connective tissue of this

animal is a group of oil companies that operate around the world. A petroleum-based form of development emerged in the United States in the 20th century. We built spatially diffuse suburbs, fueled by federally backed housing loans for largely white middle-class families.¹⁷ The government invested massively in a specific form of transportation infrastructure, the federal highway system, which fueled auto-based inter-urban travel. Because of ring roads around cities, it also facilitated an increasingly diffuse urban form. The government and petroleum-related interests, such as auto companies, then largely dismantled public transportation in all but the largest American cities through buyouts and unfavorable subsidy structures.¹⁸ While one could plausibly argue in the 1950s that, as the saying goes, what was good for General Motors was good for America, the same cannot be said for oil companies.

Cheap oil was like a new drug being introduced on the market. It is said that people initially turn to drugs to escape an uncomfortable reality. Protracted drug use then changes human biochemistry in a way that leaves the user craving more. I am not an expert on the social pathologies that initially led us to turn to cheap oil, but it seems that a solid argument could be made for racism as at least one casual factor (in the sense that it is a repelling force that works against people living and travelling together). Whatever the initial cause, cheap oil, like an addictive drug, did change the basic spatial form of our society to the point where Americans feel they cannot survive without this commodity. We now have an urban form characterized by dispersed low-density suburbs, large roads, limited sidewalks, and little to no public transportation. Most Americans literally cannot function without access to cheap gasoline. This addiction has had grave consequences for us and the rest of the globe.

Yet we have been in crises before and were able to change. Eighteenth and 19th-century America was built on another form of cheap energy, human slavery. The trafficking in African lives of two centuries ago had devastating consequences for the African continent and it led to a perverse and unsustainable form of development in the United States. We are still living with the legacy of this era. Just as some contemporary politicians defend the American way of life (code for U.S. car culture), many 19th-century American politicians defended human slavery as part of the southern way of life. Then, for a variety of reasons—perhaps most importantly the changing economics of slavery—we changed, adopting an increasing sense of basic human rights and our common humanity as well as a growing public awareness of

the consequences of slavery in Africa. The change was not pretty, a brutal civil war was fought, and we have never adequately dealt with the legacies of this system. But we did change, and we now have our first African-American president.

We are now at another pivotal moment in history when we have an opportunity to change. There is an increasing public awareness of the environmental and social consequences of our addiction to oil. While global warming was once considered a dubious concern of “crackpot scientists” and left-wing ranters, it is now increasingly perceived as a real problem by the American public.¹⁹ While less widely understood, I also believe that the American public increasingly appreciates the consequences of oil addiction vis-à-vis security issues and development in oil-producing states. Far more important, however, are the changing economics of petroleum. The high cost of energy, when combined with rising environmental and social awareness, is a potent combination for change. We have an opportunity. We have a choice. We can continue our addiction to oil, to spew ever-increasing carbon emissions, to foster the not-so-benevolent agency of oil companies in other parts of the world, and to fight a global war on terror, which is not unrelated to our oil addiction. Or we can change the way we produce energy, the way we organize ourselves spatially, the way we relate to each other, and the way we move from one place to another. These are profound changes and they will not be easy. However, as we develop at home (and I very much view such changes as development), we will begin to change our relationships with the rest of the world, and reduce the burdens of our pathological behavior. I have always resisted the false dichotomy of development at home versus abroad. If you take away anything from this Roundtable, I hope it is an understanding that our development and development in other parts of the world are inextricably linked.

Notes

1. Tad Homer-Dixon 1994.
2. BBC 2007.
3. e.g., Peluso and Watts 2007.
4. Collier 2007, p. 21.
5. e.g., Gylfason 2001.
6. e.g., Nyatepe-Coo 1994.
7. e.g., Moseley 2005, 2008.
8. Roberts 1996.

9. Hartwick 1998.
10. Yergin 1991; and Roberts 2004.
11. Andre Gunder Frank 1979.
12. Carney 2008.
13. Gibson-Graham 2004.
14. Bantekas 2005.
15. World Bank 1981.
16. Brutton 1998.
17. Jackson 1985; Duany et al. 2000; and Sugrue 2005.
18. Saint Clair 1986.
19. Selin and VanDeveer 2007.

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