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A moral economy of oil: corruption narratives and oil elites in Ecuador

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ABSTRACT

In oil-dependent nations, the governance of national oil reserves and the redistribution of oil rents are often widely-perceived as moral endeavours, necessary for achieving a minimum just distribution of resources. Struggles over oil policies and rents among powerful oil industry actors in private and public companies, public institutions, banks and unions are embedded in this moral economy. Thus, in moments of political-economic crisis, oil elites often attempt to persuade the public to perceive them as principled oil managers and their elite competitors as morally corrupt in order to legitimate new or renewed claims on oil. In Ecuador, I explore such a moral economy of oil. First, I detail the corruption narratives that oil elites have used in distinct historical conjunctures to shape moral perceptions of the actors who manage oil reserves and rents. Second, I detail a conjuncture in the early years of the Rafael Correa regime, when indigenous groups in the northern Amazon tried to leverage ancestral claims to oil-rich territories to form an indigenous-owned oil company called Alian Petrol. Traditional oil elites publicly denounced Alian Petrol as immoral. I build on classical theories of moral economy by signalling how elites exploited stereotypes of ethnic difference, contrasting the particularity of indigeneity with the universality of technocratic, mestizo authority, to cultivate moral expectations about continued elite control of oil resources and rents. This case allows us to consider how and when elites foster ethnic difference to actively shape moral economies of oil in postcolonial contexts.

We hope they understand that the epoch of petroleum piracy has passed, that Ecuador will be no one's colony ... that our natural resources are not prey to audacity and corruption.

– Ecuadorian President Rodríguez Lara (1972–1976), cited in Martz (1987: 107)

The national bourgeoisie, which takes over power at the end of the colonial regime, is an under-developed bourgeoisie ... Networking and scheming seem to be its underlying vocation.

– Frantz Fanon (2004: 98)

Introduction

Bribery and nepotism have long plagued the global oil industry (Ades and Di Tella 1999; Humphreys et al. 2007); however, in recent years, oil-related corruption in Latin America

has become the object of heightened public and legal scrutiny (Gudynas 2017; Villavicencio 2017). In 2017 alone, this scrutiny led to legal charges against dozens of oil managers and ministers in the region's main oil-producing countries, including Venezuela, Brazil, Mexico, Colombia and Ecuador.

Public concern regarding oil corruption has piqued amid declining state revenues from oil sales. Although this decline largely resulted from a collapse in international oil prices between 2014 and 2016,¹ political opposition parties, media and public opinion have widely associated declining revenues with the illicit activities of oil managers and policy-makers. Subsequently, political opposition parties have won elections and taken political control in several Latin American petro-states.²

In this essay, I explore the strategic uses that competing oil elites – including politicians, CEOs, lobbyists and union leaders – make of corruption narratives to influence policies and politics. In the Ecuadorian context, I observe distinct moments of political-economic crisis in which oil elites have told stories in the public sphere about themselves as principled managers of national resources and about their competitors as morally-suspect, in order to legitimate their claims to control both oil policies and the broader petro-state apparatus. For example, in distinct conjunctures, nationalist state officials have characterised foreign companies as parasitic, corrupt threats to the nation. This is a strategy to justify nationalist policies and power. In contrast, conservative voices have signalled instances of illicit activity in national companies to legitimate their own moral authority over oil reserves (Valdivia and Lyall forthcoming). I argue that such corruption narratives, used to foster perceptions of morally legitimate and illegitimate claims on oil resources, are embedded in a particular moral economy of oil.

'Moral economy,' as developed by Thompson (1971, 1991) and Scott (1976, 2000), refers to the limits of inequality that a social group or class will endure before it revolts against morally unacceptable economic conditions (also, see Edelman 2005, 2012; Götz 2015; Karandinos et al. 2014; Orlove 1997; Palomera and Vetta 2016). That is, for Thompson and Scott, moral economy refers to an implicit social contract of unequal exchange between classes that manifests over time as custom (Guerrero 1991). In Ecuador and other Latin American petro-states, elites have cultivated expectations that oil resources ought to ensure for all citizens a minimum level of development (i.e., public works, employment and welfare programmes) (Coronil 1997; Valdivia 2008; Valdivia and Benavides 2012). When falling oil revenues generate crises in redistribution, subsequent protests and/or electoral shifts tend to unfold in moral terms. While the case of the Ecuadorian oil sector reflects classical notions of moral economy, it also diverges from them in important respects, making us consider the effects of ethnic difference on the constitution of postcolonial moral economies.

¹Between 2009 and 2014, the international benchmark oil price WTI (West Texas Intermediate) hovered between \$70 and \$120. Between 2014 and early 2016, the price collapsed, dropping to \$27 per barrel and generating fiscal, financial and political impacts in oil-dependent states.

²Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff was impeached in 2016 for acts of bribery and kickbacks in the national oil company, Petrobras; yet, there is no evidence that Rousseff knew of these transactions. The political Right mobilised discontent related to economic malaise to wrest control of the presidency from Rousseff on corruption charges. They have subsequently liberalised the oil sector, divesting from national oil companies and improving terms for private and foreign companies. Similarly, in 2017, Ecuadorian Vice-President Jorge Glas of the left-leaning 'Citizens' Revolution' movement was sentenced to six years of prison for bribery in oil-related ministries and public companies under his authority. Although there is clear evidence that Glas' uncle received bribes, Glas was sentenced on circumstantial evidence. The Ecuadorian government has since fostered alliances with the political Right.

I trace the outlines of a moral economy of oil in Ecuador in three stages. First, I illustrate elite uses of corruption narratives in several conjunctures, beginning with the 1972 shift to military dictatorship and nationalist oil governance. Over the following 45 years of oil export, political and industry elites have used corruption narratives in critical moments – in implicit reference to unfulfilled expectations of oil-driven development – to facilitate shifts in oil policies and to gain control over the petro-state. In the following two sections, I detail a particular conjuncture in 2008–2009. In the early years of the Rafael Correa regime, indigenous groups in the northern Amazon tried to leverage their ancestral claims to oil-rich territories to form an indigenous-owned oil company called Alian Petrol. Oil elites, however, publicly denounced Alian Petrol as immoral. Elites were able to mediate moral claims about who should manage the nation's oil, despite widespread participation in illicit activities among this elite class, by performing and projecting into the public sphere modernising, mestizo authority – specific articulations of ‘whiteness’ or *blanquitud* (Echeverría 2007, 2010) – against stereotypes of anti-modern indigenous alterity. Thus, building on classical theories of moral economy, I underscore how elites in Ecuador fostered ethnic difference to cultivate expectations about ongoing elite control and distribution of resources, I conclude that oil corruption becomes a periodic object of public and legal scrutiny during crises of redistribution, as oil elites influence moral perceptions of rent control and distribution in order to maintain their privileged access to oil-generated wealth and political power. This case allows us to consider specifically how domestic oil elites reify and foster ethnic difference in postcolonial contexts to shape moral economies.

I draw on multiple periods of ethnographic research between 2014 and 2018 in communities that participated in Alian Petrol. I analyse their business plans, as well as interviews with the businessmen, engineers and politicians who participated in the proposals. In addition, I draw on interviews with former union leaders, industry consultants and current top-level managers of an Ecuadorian national oil company. Due to the sensitive nature of research in the oil sector, I have concealed the identities of some informants.

A moral economy of oil in Ecuador: historical conjunctures

In 2010, the Ecuadorian Minister of Foreign Relations reflected on corruption:

It was practically cultural in this country. Before, we were not surprised. We said, “OK, he steals, but he does public works projects, so if he creates public works projects, [then] corruption is not important”. It was accepted, [but] we do not accept it. (*Pais en vivo* 17 December 2010)

The Minister questioned a common aphorism about public sector corruption: ‘*roba, pero hace obras*’ (he steals, but he creates public works). This adage seems to communicate resignation; however, it is often enunciated in a sardonic tone, as a criticism of rulers that encapsulates a threat: ‘We might endure your thievery, but only while you generate minimum benefits to the non-ruling classes’. In other words, the phrase is an expression of a moral economy.

Contemporary writings that reference moral economies tend to use the term loosely to characterise the norms, values and social obligations that shape economic relations (Lanegger 2016; Olivier de Sardan 1999; Sayer 2007), often citing the term in conjunction with

Polanyi's (1944) notion of the 'embedded' economy (Bolton et al. 2012; Sanghera and Satybaldieva 2007). Other scholars recover the specific meaning of moral economy developed by Thompson (1971, 1991) and Scott (1976, 2000) (for example, Edelman 2005, 2012; Palomera and Vetta 2016; Wolford 2005). Thompson, and later Scott, developed the category of moral economy to understand popular revolts. Specifically, Thompson explored the origins of eighteenth century food riots in urban England and Scott analysed 1930s peasant revolts in Southeast Asia. These authors posited that local uprisings among worker and peasant classes, respectively, were motivated in defence of commonly-held perceptions of a moral right to basic subsistence. Thus, moral economy equally informs a 'sense of right and entitlement' and, when basic conditions are not met, a 'sense of justified outrage' (Scott 2000: 188). Within such an economy, an implicit moral threshold of material redistribution mediates the relations of exploited groups with states, capitalists, landlords and other market actors, and motivates class or subaltern political mobilisation in moments of crisis.

In moments of crisis in the oil sector, Ecuadorian citizens have rarely been resigned to the whims of the complex, international market dynamics that shape oil prices, state revenues and public spending (Baffes and Kshirsagar 2016; Bridge and Le Billon 2017); rather, they have consistently risen up and laid moral blame with political actors and oil managers during critical conjunctures in the oil sector and in rent redistribution. Valdivia has explored the question of 'moral responsibility' (2008: 472; Valdivia and Benavides 2012) in Ecuadorian oil politics, concluding that oil feeds common expectations of ever-expanding citizenship rights.³ In this section, I trace the outlines of a moral economy of oil in Ecuador in terms of the corruption narratives that have been effectively used in moments of discontent with rent redistribution.

Among oil elites, the political strategy of morally condemning oil managers has been used to facilitate shifts in oil policies and politics. Its use echoes back to the very beginning of commercial oil production in Ecuador. In 1972, the military regime that took power opened special tribunals to investigate oil concessions granted under a prior government that were reportedly 'neither economically sensible nor technically sound' (Martz 1987: 58). One special tribunal ruled that former president Carlos Arosemena had acted 'contrary to the norms of honesty, integrity and impartiality' but that his acts were not criminal. Rather, the tribunal declared that it was 'obligated to make the record of his behavior clear, so that he [could] be *sanctioned by the national conscience*' (cited in Martz 1987: 57–58, italics added). Thus, as the new military regime set out to consolidate its power and chart a nationalist direction for the nascent oil sector, it subjected a former president and his oil policies to public moral condemnation.

More recently, as neoliberal governments of the 1990s opened up the Ecuadorian oil sector to foreign companies in response to falling oil production and state revenues (Sawyer 2004), oil workers' unions denounced privatisation in moral terms (Valdivia 2008). Then, as international oil prices began to rise in the early 2000s, union leaders increasingly framed privatisation as unjustly diverting national wealth to foreign companies, and they invoked the state's 'moral responsibility toward the nation: to govern petroleum, the people's resource inheritance, and its rents, for the benefit of

³I follow these authors in deducing popular expectations regarding oil-fuelled development from the discourses of successful political leaders and from political upheavals correlated with downturns in rent redistribution.

Ecuadorians' (Valdivia and Benavides 2012: 70). In 2002, for example, union leaders formally denounced the privatisation of the oil sector to the state's Anticorruption Commission, claiming that the government had 'provoked a fall in the production of oil, which in the year 2001 alone meant a loss greater than 300 million dollars' (*La Hora*, 2 July 2002). That is, corruption came to refer not only to specific illicit transactions, but also to policies that led to losses in state oil revenues and to diminished rent redistribution.

In this context, foreign companies developed corporate social responsibility programmes to improve moral perceptions of privatisation (Billo 2015); yet, popular calls for recovering oil reserves from foreign companies for the national oil company continued to grow. During his brief time as Minister of Economy in 2005, Rafael Correa joined calls to suspend a contract with the US oil company Occidental Petroleum on a technicality.⁴ The state reclaimed reserves from Occidental that would generate over \$15 billion USD in revenues over the following decade (*El Comercio*, 26 November 2015), and Correa rode nationalist sentiments into a successful 2006 presidential bid. In 2007, he consolidated a self-proclaimed 'post-neoliberal' government – what he referred to as the 'Citizen's Revolution' (Becker 2013; De la Torre 2013).⁵

As president, Correa repeatedly claimed that transnational oil companies had generated systematic corruption in the oil sector, as he attempted to justify his own policies. In particular, he referred to Texaco as 'corrupt and corrupting',⁶ and he spearheaded a public relations campaign called 'The Dirty Hand of Chevron' (in 2001, Chevron purchased Texaco). Correa brought prominent political figures and Hollywood celebrities, such as Rigoberta Menchú, Danny Glover and Mía Farrow, into the Amazon to have their photos taken at former waste sites left by Texaco in the 1970s and 1980s, and he publicly denounced the government of Jamil Mahuad (1998–2000) for having colluded with Texaco by absolving the company of responsibilities for environmental remediation (Ofrias 2017). Amid widespread moral indignation with corporate-friendly, neoliberal oil policies, Correa forced what he referred to as 'sovereign' contract renegotiations with private companies, framing new contracts as the re-assertion of public control over national resources (Lyll and Valdivia forthcoming). Under the so-called 'service contracts' that his government negotiated, the state no longer shared a percentage of rents with foreign companies, but rather paid companies a fixed price per barrel. In consequence, fluctuations in oil prices would impact state revenues and spending directly. The high oil prices from 2007 to mid-2014 fuelled a threefold increase in state revenues. Subsequently, Correa's popularity reached record levels for an Ecuadorian president (CEDATOS 2015). Propaganda proliferated that featured Correa's face illuminated within an angelic glow.

⁴Occidental transferred shares to a Canadian company without the Ecuadorian state's permission.

⁵President Correa came to office amid anti-neoliberal, anti-establishment sentiments that stemmed from a 1999 banking crisis and, more broadly, from a series of discredited, corrupt neoliberal presidents. Prior to Correa, Ecuador witnessed seven presidents in ten years (Becker 2010).

⁶In 1964, a consortium of Texaco and Gulf Oil began exploration in the Ecuadorian Amazon. In 1972, the Ecuadorian state created a national oil company, the Ecuadorian Petroleum State Corporation (CEPE in its Spanish acronym), to engage in exploration, extraction, transport, industrialisation and commercialisation. In 1977, CEPE replaced Gulf and became the majority partner in the CEPE-Texaco consortium, which dominated oil extraction in the Amazon until Texaco's concession expired in 1992. In 1993, 30,000 inhabitants of the northern Amazon sued Texaco for contamination (Kimberling 2005; Valdivia 2007).

Yet, while this new contractual arrangement with oil companies enabled the state to accrue revenues as prices rose, it also exposed state budgets to shortfalls were a drop in oil prices to occur. Following the mid-2014 collapse in oil prices and the subsequent reduction in public spending, the conservative political opposition re-appropriated the use of corruption narratives, drawing widespread attention to several cases of oil-related corruption, in order to morally discredit Correa and his policies.

In 2017 Lenín Moreno, who had been Correa's vice-president from 2007 through 2013, became president, as Correa's handpicked successor. During his campaign, Moreno vowed to continue Correa's programme of state-driven development; however, once elected, Moreno dramatically pivoted against Correa to escape being associated with growing perceptions of moral corruption. Moreno cultivated his own image as an 'anti-corruption' activist and a responsible custodian of national resources. He denounced the Correa administration as a 'mafia' that squandered oil wealth on kickbacks for oil contracts, over-priced infrastructure projects and irresponsible oil-for-loan contracts with China. Moreno characterised Correa in biblical terms as 'the beast' and demanded judicial action against officials who had been in his administration, including Moreno's own vice-president, Jorge Glas, who was sentenced to six years of prison in 2017. Thus, Moreno consolidated his moral authority, enjoying approval ratings of over 60 per cent in his first year in office. He has since fostered alliances with the political Right and adopted fiscal austerity measures.⁷

In the preceding account of moral narratives and vicissitudes in oil rent redistribution since the 1990s, I highlighted two main conjunctures in which Ecuador pivoted from neo-liberal towards post-neoliberal regimes and then from post-neoliberal towards conservative rule. In each conjuncture, political and industry elites attempted to position themselves as moral managers of national resources. The moral economy in the historical conjunctures traced above reflects Thompson's and Scott's accounts of moral economies, but it also diverges from them in important respects. First, this case demonstrates that moral economies may refer not only to local groups, but also to 'broad social fields' (Palomera and Vetta 2016: 415). That is, 'revolts' manifest not only in local settings of protest, but also on a national, electoral scale. Second, a right to oil-based development differs from the right to basic subsistence that Thompson and Scott describe. However, if we understand that a moral economy is rooted in expectations of redistribution, then this distinction becomes less significant. Finally, an important distinction that I explore in the following sections is that expressions of moral indignation regarding oil management tend to emerge at first not from among the poor, but rather from among competing sectors of the oil elite. State, corporate, union and other oil sector elite mediate moral claims about oil (mis)management not only through their privileged access to the media, but also via their privileged capacities to project moral authority in this exclusive, technical sphere of knowledge and power. In the following sections, I elaborate on this aspect of a moral economy of oil in a postcolonial context through the example of a challenge to the established field of oil elites that was posed by an indigenous oil company.

⁷Unlike other South American nations that have witnessed the decisive revival of conservative governments in recent years, Moreno narrowly defeated the conservative candidate, Guillermo Lasso, in 2017; however, Moreno's political-economic policies increasingly drifted towards conservative positions in 2018.

Alian Petrol: the rise and fall of an indigenous oil company

As international oil prices rose in the early 2000s, frequent indigenous protests in the northern Ecuadorian Amazon called for greater distribution of oil rents for local and regional infrastructure and economic development. In this conjuncture, conditions of possibility emerged for indigenous groups in Ecuador and other oil-producing countries in Latin America to challenge the established field of oil elites and to demand rights to produce oil in their territories. First, Latin America was witnessing a shift in territorial governance or a so-called ‘territorial turn’ (Erazo 2013; Offen 2003), whereby governments increasingly recognised certain indigenous territorial rights and autonomies.⁸ Second, a strengthening or ‘thickening’ of civil society networks (Fox 1996), including social movements and NGOs, accompanied and amplified protests in contested indigenous territories of resource extraction. In Ecuador, during the government of Lucío Gutiérrez (2003–2005), some indigenous communities and regional organisations in the northern Amazon gained clout through uprisings that halted oil production and forced concessions from companies and the state (Perreault and Valdivia 2010; Valdivia 2008).⁹ Third, oil-producing nations witnessed attempts among some indigenous groups to capture hydrocarbon rents through indigenous service companies that offered transportation, catering services, cleaning and other auxiliary services to foreign and domestic oil companies. Finally, indigenous-oriented development programmes in Latin America aimed to address indigenous poverty by encouraging such entrepreneurialism – a development paradigm often referred to as ‘development with identity’ in institutional contexts or ‘multicultural neoliberalism’ among critical scholars (Laurie et al. 2003; McNeish 2008). In turn, these four factors – indigenous territorial rights, increased indigenous power and visibility, indigenous entrepreneurial organisation and institutional support for such entrepreneurialism – shaped several attempts in Bolivia, Peru and Ecuador to form indigenous oil and gas companies (Perafan and Moyer 2006).

For example, from 2000 to 2003, members of the Ecuadorian Amazonian indigenous movement CONFENAIE set out to form a natural gas company (Fontaine and Le Calvez 2010). In a meeting with other indigenous oil and gas companies in Calgary, Canada, they developed a joint proposal to form *Amazonía Gas*, which obtained a \$250,000 USD grant from the Inter-American Development Bank and was endorsed by both Ecuadorian President Gustavo Noboa (2000–2003) and the national indigenous movement CONAIE (Fontaine and Le Calvez 2010). This project did not advance for reasons I explore later; however, in following years, other actors supported similar large-scale, indigenous initiatives in Ecuador.

⁸In the United Nations, the territorial turn can be traced through a series of statements on indigenous rights. The 1957 Indigenous and Tribal Populations Convention recognised indigenous social, religious and cultural rights. This convention was replaced in 1989 with the International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention 169, which laid out concrete land rights, including the right not to be forcibly displaced; to be consulted about invasive economic activities on indigenous lands; and to receive compensation for such activities. Ecuador ratified this treaty in 1998. The non-binding 2007 Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples describes rights to self-determination and territorial control that indigenous groups should possess.

⁹Although indigenous groups are often associated with anti-oil politics in popular media and academic work (for example, Gudynas and Acosta 2011), the range of positions that indigenous groups, individuals and leaders have taken during 45-years of oil exportation in the Ecuadorian Amazon has included resistance, negotiation and active participation (Cepek 2018; Ramírez-Cendrero et al. 2017; Wilson and Bayón 2018).

In 2005, the Indigenous Business Corporation of Ecuador (CEIE) formed, with funding from USAid and the US National Endowment for Democracy (NED). Raúl Gangotena, former director of the Quito Chamber of Commerce and Ecuadorian ambassador to the US, joined with Fernando Navarro, a businessman and director of the Chamber of Commerce, along with three indigenous leaders from the Andes, Ángel Medina, Mariano Curicama and Lourdes Tibán. In 2006, the group secured a \$67,955 grant from NED to draft a business model for indigenous companies in large-scale and extractive industries. On the outskirts of the Andean city of Riobamba, the group held a 3-day workshop with 40 Ecuadorian indigenous leaders, leaders of indigenous-held oil and gas corporations based in Alaska, and several Ecuadorian businessmen. They developed a business model to bring together foreign companies, national and foreign investors, and thousands of indigenous families as investors. According to the model, each indigenous family would invest \$1000 into a trust, in monthly payments of \$16.70, and the poorest families would have access to private credit and, potentially, support from multilateral institutions to meet their payments. Although the largest share of revenues would be paid to the state, indigenous investors would receive dividends and, in the long-term, indigenous people would also be trained to manage these companies.

In an interview, Gangotena argued that such indigenous participation in the nation's key economic sectors was the only way to resolve enduring ethnic inequalities. In a separate interview, Navarro explained that foreign investors would be interested in the model as a strategy for entering Ecuador on favourable terms with the state and indigenous communities alike, ensuring stable regulatory conditions, contracts and social relations. In other words, such a scheme would prevent the state from imposing regulatory changes or forcing contract re-negotiations and it would curb local resistance to extractive activities, as indigenous communities would defend their own dividends. Navarro and Gangotena envisioned brokering deals between indigenous groups, private capital and the state in oil, mining and hydroelectric projects. First, however, they sought to implement their model through the purchase of the cement company *Cemento Chimborazo* from the state bank *Banco de Fomento*.

Navarro enlisted the help of a personal contact, an owner of a lobbying firm for oil and mining companies, to gain audience with Correa at the beginning of his presidency in 2007. Navarro argued in this and other meetings with officials that the origin of poverty in Ecuador was the limited number of property owners. In universities, public events and indigenous communities, he cited the ideas of Peruvian theorist De Soto (2000), who writes that access to formal private property rights is the key to enabling the poor to accumulate capital. Subsequently, Navarro argued that the proposal to make indigenous families investors in large-scale, extractive industries coincided with Correa's pro-poor political discourse.¹⁰

Navarro and Gangotena simultaneously tried to form an indigenous oil company to develop an oil field called 'Pungarayacu'. This initiative failed to gain traction, due to geological and organisational challenges, but word spread about the model. Concurrently,

¹⁰It may seem curious that a businessman would coincide with a self-proclaimed revolutionary leftist, but Navarro and Correa shared similar neo-institutional visions. Neo-institutional economists differ from neoliberal economists by granting importance to the role of institutions for ensuring inclusive economic growth. De Soto (2000) argues that incorporating the poor into formal property both lessens inequality and encourages growth. Correa often cites neo-institutionalist Joseph Stiglitz, who similarly argues that institutions must foster equality to ensure growth.

Amazonian indigenous leaders who had championed *Amazonía Gas* had been working on several short-lived proposals for indigenous-owned hydrocarbon companies (for example, *Amazonía Link*, Amazon Energy and Sacha Petrol). Indigenous leader Rafael Alvarado oversaw the formation of Sacha Petrol in 2005, under the auspices of the CONFENIAE, and the following year recruited communities in oil block 12, formerly operated by Occidental Petroleum (Wilson and Bayón 2018). Working with a lawyer from Quito, Alvarado first recruited three indigenous Kichwa communities (Playas del Cuyabeno, Pañacocha, Puka Peña).¹¹ In turn, they enlisted partners in universities, contacted Canadian indigenous energy firms, and, in 2007, began lobbying Correa by delivering letters to the presidency.

Over the course of 2007, the project lawyer contacted Navarro's well-connected, better-funded group. They joined together and recruited three more indigenous Kichwa and Shuar communities (Taikwa, Charap, Chontaduro). Adopting the name Alian Petrol, referring to '*Alianza Indígena*' or 'Indigenous Alliance', they re-formulated the language and content of the original, USAid-funded business proposal. They characterised the company as a cooperative to appeal to Correa's leftist discourse.¹² They proposed gradually including all of the 150,000 indigenous households that comprised the CONFENIAE, and investing a portion of oil rents into education, housing, basic services, employment and other projects for indigenous populations throughout the Amazon. The new proposal emphasised that indigenous oversight would minimise environmental contamination. In fact, the project's chief technical designer recalls meeting with one of Navarro's cousins, the international president of the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), to obtain an environmental certification for the company.

In 2008, Alian Petrol's project organisers met with legislators and with Vice-President Lenin Moreno to detail the structure of the company and demonstrate the commitment of a former Houston-based petroleum consulting firm, Knowledge Resources. In December, Correa called Navarro and Gangotena into a cabinet meeting and asked them to explain the model. According to Gangotena, Correa was convinced that 'this is the only way mining is going to be possible', as he anticipated indigenous resistance to government plans to promote open-pit mining projects.

However, the general manager of the national oil company, Petroamazonas, advised Correa not to cede control over subterranean resources to indigenous sectors. According to organisers and legislators involved in the project, Wilson Pastor warned Correa that such renunciation of state control would set a dangerous precedent. In private, he argued that indigenous groups would be technically incapable of sustaining production and revenue flows. Yet, in public, Pastor and other state officials launched an effective public relations campaign to characterise the leaders of Alian Petrol as *morally corrupt*, rather than as technically incapable. The newspaper *La Hora* reported that Pastor had told the entire public sector that Alian Petrol was making 'false promises' (12 April

¹¹These indigenous groups did not conceive of oil as their heritage (Adunbi 2015), but as state property. Yet, a number of factors shaped decisions to embrace the proposal for an indigenous oil company. These included aspirations to break with a history of exploitative economic relations in the region, such as the rubber, gold and skins trades in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; aspirations for social and ethnic mobility; aspirations to prevent non-indigenous workers from entering their territories and pairing with indigenous women; and aspirations to generate jobs and build schools close to home, so that youth might avoid migration (Lyll 2017; Lyll and Valdivia 2018).

¹²The new proposal defined a distribution of oil revenues favouring the state (56.3 per cent), but that designated 22.2 per cent to the trust fund and 21.5 per cent to non-indigenous partners and investors.

2008) to indigenous communities (see also, *El Diario* 12 May 2008). In *El Universo*, representatives of Petroamazonas denounced the ‘particular interests’ of leaders of Alian Petrol (15 October 2008). *Ecuador Inmediato* published the headline ‘Government Denies Any Relation with the “Supposed Business Alian Petrol” that is Tricking Amazonian Communities’ (8 April 2008).

Petroamazonas officials extended their smear campaign to indigenous and mestizo communities in the Amazon, framing the indigenous leaders involved in Alian Petrol as ‘corrupt’ and ‘subversive’.¹³ In response, the community president of Playas del Cuyabeno, Bercelino Noteno, complained in a letter to a regional Kichwa organisation, ‘They have always marked us as manipulative, blackmailing, scrounging Indians’ (3). In a letter to the Minister of Strategic Sectors, Noteno requested an investigation and added ‘we will echo one of the goals of the Citizens’ Revolution: Combat corruption in all of its forms; we ask ourselves if in reality we Indians have that right’. Noteno received no reply.

Meanwhile, residents of Playas del Cuyabeno, accompanied by residents from several neighbouring indigenous communities, mounted an armed resistance, sequestering three barges of oil equipment and facing off against military personnel to prevent Petroamazonas from opening operations in the Pañacocha oil field (Lyll 2017; Wilson and Bayón 2018). However, hundreds of military reinforcements squashed their challenge by force. In turn, state actors negotiated with these communities, compensating them with public works projects, including public services and modern schools, that community leaders had previously hoped to pay for with their own oil production. Noteno both celebrates this outcome and recalls the personal attacks he endured:

I used to say, ‘I want to have a High School here so that the young people could prepare themselves, could study without leaving for far away’ ... Now they come from other communities, even mestizos – now they have their children studying here ... The same people who said that my proposal was corrupt.

Thompson (1991) observes that moral economies are defined, re-defined and expressed through conflict – that is, in the tense and uneven ‘balance of class or social forces’ (340). In this case, oil elites in the public sector dispelled the Alian Petrol claim on oil flows and rent redistribution in Pañacocha through specific forms of contestation, including the circulation of corruption narratives, as well as physical force and negotiation.

In this section, I have detailed the rise of an indigenous oil company in the transition between neoliberal and post-neoliberal governance and the subsequent use of corruption narratives in national media and local spaces by public sector oil elites, who sought to delegitimise indigenous claims and re-establish particular expectations regarding who should control oil rents and how they should be distributed under the Correa regime. In the final

¹³Rumours circulated locally that Alian Petrol may have been corrupt; however, illicit activities in relation to the state in this region are not always maligned. The mayor of the municipal government, for example, has been widely-accused of stealing funds, but residents often justify such actions by explaining that if the mayor demands funds from the central government to steal, then at least some funds will be used for public works to benefit the population. Anthropological studies have opened up the legal category of corruption to explore such contextual and political terrains on which actors justify legally unstable transactions (Gupta 2012; Jauregui 2016; Nuijten and Anders 2007; Torsello and Venard 2016), describing the cultural embeddedness of transactions that may be illegal, but culturally appropriate (Olivier de Sardan 1999; Smith 2010) and problematising universal definitions of corruption (Rose-Ackerman and Palifka 2016; Anand et al. 2004). Here, I am less concerned about legal or cultural meanings of illicit transactions than I am about the public uses of corruption narratives for de-legitimising indigenous claims to oil.

section, I analyse this moment in terms of how elites fostered ethnic difference to cultivate moral expectations about ongoing elite control and distribution of oil rents.

Indigeneity and whiteness: performances of moral authority

I divide this final section into three subsections, as I discuss the performances that have enabled certain subjects and not others to project moral authority over national oil rents and their redistribution. By performance, I refer not to an open field of production of social identities, but rather the ‘ritualized production’ of identities that is ‘reiterated under and through constraint’ (Butler 1993: 95; also, see Canessa 2012). First, I signal indigenous performances of environmental stewardship and ancestral right that both underscored indigenous claims to oil-rich territories and, simultaneously, morally undermined their claims to produce oil. Second, I detail the profiles and performances of domestic oil elites in the Correa administration, who deflected the Alian Petrol challenge and subsequently consolidated their own control over oil policies and contracts as seemingly apolitical, disinterested technocrats. Finally, I observe that many of these mestizo oil engineers, who became top-level managers and ministers under Correa, have since been convicted of illicit activities in the oil sector. My aim is to further sketch a moral economy of oil in terms of the performative reproduction of a dominant class that exercises moral authority over oil resources, often despite illicit activities within this class.

Indigeneity and oil

Gangotena argues that state oil officials convinced people in the media, the government and communities in the Amazon that indigenous leaders involved in Alian Petrol were ‘either being used by crooks or [were] themselves crooks’. Such narratives, suggests Gangotena, were couched in stereotypes of indigenous people, who are ‘not supposed to be part of big business; they need to be passive and protected’. Opponents of the Alian Petrol proposal, he concludes, drew on notions of indigeneity as anti-modern and environmentalist. These are the same stereotypes that indigenous leaders involved in Alian Petrol had themselves used to make the underlying territorial claims upon which Alian Petrol was based. The Alian Petrol business proposal posits territorial claims in the following terms:

The Indigenous Nationalities are historical and political entities, that have in common; their own identity, history, language, and culture; they live conserving their primary forests in patrimonial and ancestral territories constituted through their own institutions and traditional forms of social, economic, legal, political, exercise of internal authority, and autonomy ... (6–7).

Since the 1990s, indigenous peoples in Ecuador and across much of Latin America have increasingly produced such essentialised representations of indigeneity in order to justify claims to territories in the name of environmental stewardship and ancestral right (Erazo 2013; Yeh and Bryan 2015). Some researchers qualify this performativity as strategic (Tsing 2007; Yeh 2013), but others decry it as self-negation (Cusinaqui 2015). Indeed, the complicity of some indigenous groups in reproducing essentialised indigeneity in exchange for rights and resources may be a quintessential ‘dilemma of difference’ (Radcliffe 2015). Wolfe (1994) goes further to suggest that ‘repressive authenticity’ precludes indigenous

sovereignty (also, see Povinelli 2011; Simpson 2014), as indigenous groups struggle for recognition *within* state sovereignty and spatial ontologies, rather than against them (also, see Mollett 2016; Wainwright and Bryan 2009). In the northern Ecuadorian Amazon, indigenous views of the oil industry are diverse and often ambivalent (Cepek 2018); the industry has generated environmental contamination and rapid socioeconomic change, as well as income and diverse forms of compensation. Nonetheless, indigenous groups often strategically deploy one-dimensional representations of the ‘ecologically noble savage’ (Redford 1991), as they enter into negotiations with the state and oil companies.

In turn, where Indigenous groups have leveraged territorial rights to claim subterranean resources in Ecuador and elsewhere, suspicions often arise in public and legal spheres regarding the spectre of ‘corrupt chiefs’ (Watts 2008: 16). Conklin and Graham (1995) explain that in the Brazilian Amazon, ‘[w]hen native leaders’ actions failed to meet outsiders’ expectations, each group was left shadowed by public perceptions of hypocrisy and corruption’ (706) (also, see Capps 2016; Comaroff and Comaroff 2009; De Alessi 2012; Morris 2016). In Ecuador, the *Amazonía Gas* project mentioned earlier dissipated in large part because some indigenous leaders accused project leaders of secretive management (Fontaine and Le Calvez 2010). The Pungarayacu proposal, also mentioned earlier, was met by deep suspicion within the indigenous movement. Alian Petrol advanced further than these other initiatives, but subsequently Wilson Pastor subjected it to moral scrutiny in the national media and among communities in the northern Amazon. If the promise of natural resource abundance is national development, then the legitimate managers of such resources – it seems – are widely expected to embody symbols of development and progress, not conservation and tradition. Thus, indigenous subjects, who are often represented – or represent themselves – as ‘the unsullied moral integrity that modern progress undermines’ (Wade 1999: 75), are precluded from legitimising their claims to be moral managers of oil resources and rents. In the next subsection, we see how particular mestizo subjects in Ecuador exploited ethnic difference to project their own moral authority over the oil sector during the Correa regime.

Oil elites and the performance of progress

The former general manager of Petroamazonas, Wilson Pastor, intervened to ensure that the oil field Pañacocha would not be given over to Alian Petrol. Pastor represents a generation of domestic oil elites who accumulated industry contacts and experience between 1972 and 1991, when production was dominated by the public-private consortium CEPE-Texaco. According to former CEPE mid-level managers interviewed for this paper, a group of middle-class, mestizo engineers and managers rose through the ranks in CEPE. By 1991, when the state did not renew Texaco’s contract and the sector opened to other foreign companies, former mid-level CEPE workers dispersed into mid- and top-level positions in foreign companies. Importantly, the privatisation of the sector led to the channelling of oil rents not only to foreign firms, but also to domestic engineers and managers: the nation’s emergent oil elites. In turn, after several decades in the sector, engineers like Wilson Pastor, Carlos Pareja Yannuzzelli and Marco Calvopiña, consolidated political power under Correa, occupying various positions as managers and ministers. They re-designed the legal framework for the hydrocarbon sector and spent much of Correa’s decade in office directly negotiating and granting oil contracts.

Correa was widely reported to have sought apolitical, technocratic profiles for these top-level positions. The engineers who occupied these positions projected a practical knowledge and a cultural *habitus* forged through years of engagement with players in the international oil industry, including buyers, lenders, foreign ministers and oil company representatives. Echeverría (2007, 2010) argues that the performance of capitalist knowledges and European culture among such domestic elites in the Global South is what constitutes whiteness or *blanquitud*.¹⁴ Performances of capitalist knowledges and subjectivities vary across time, space and industries. In the Ecuadorian context, Pastor was able to consolidate his authority as a seemingly apolitical technocrat with postgraduate credentials from France and ties to foreign oil companies, having acted as general manager and operations manager of US-based Triton Energy and the China National Petroleum Corporation, respectively.

In turn, Pastor contrasted the radical proposal to cede the Pañacocha field to Alian Petrol with his technical designs for Petroamazonas' operations in Pañacocha. In the same interview for *Ecuador Inmediato* in which Pastor dismissed Alian Petrol as a sham, he characterised the future state management of Pañacocha in terms of cutting-edge technologies, efficiency and social responsibility. Production in this field would involve 'clean technology and the best practices of the modern oil industry' (4 September 2008). Pastor readily dismissed the particularity of Alian Petrol as immoral, drawing a contrast with his modern, technical management. That is, he contrasted widespread perceptions of the particularity of indigenous alterity, supposedly limited to local practices and traditions, with a style of modern, technocratic management that could be construed as universal.

Wilson Pastor and Carlos Pareja quickly accrued exceptional powers under Correa. As Minister and Vice-Minister of Non-Renewable Resources, respectively, Pastor and Pareja were largely responsible for re-writing the industry's legislative framework in the form of the 2010 Hydrocarbons Law, which included opening the sector to direct contracts. That is, companies no longer had to compete for contracts. Thus, Pastor, Pareja and other top-level bureaucrats were empowered to sign contracts with even new, inexperienced domestic oil companies (Villavicencio 2017). (By contrast, Alian Petrol had committed to contracting service companies through public competitions among bidding companies). The new legal framework also flouted constitutional requirements that the oil sector be subject to independent institutional oversight from a 'Hydrocarbons Superintendence'. In turn, Pastor and several bureaucrat-elites directly negotiated dozens of contracts with little or no oversight.

Subsequently, oil elites and their family members moved fluidly between public institutions, private companies and legal and consulting firms, forming companies and leveraging social ties to win direct contracts. Following the election of Lenin Moreno, many of Correa's managers of national oil companies and ministers, such as Alex Bravo, Galo Chiriboga, Marco Calvopiña and Carlos Pareja, along with dozens of advisors and family members, were convicted of kick-backs or other illicit activities that had been made possible by direct contracts. Pastor has not come to trial, but he is under investigation for – among other things – signing contracts that benefited family members.

¹⁴Echeverría drew from Fanon's (2004) analysis of domestic elites – 'tradesmen, agents, dealers, and shipping agents' (100) – who consolidated privileged social positions as professional intermediaries in colonial Algeria.

For example, immediately after receiving contracts from Pastor, the company Ivanhoe hired Pastor's brother as its general manager; the company Gente Oil hired Pastor's daughter as a vice-president; and the company Edinpetrol ceded stocks to a law firm where Pastor's nephew soon became a partner (Villavicencio 2017). Despite evidence of widespread illicit activities, however, public sector oil elites under Correa had been able to consolidate moral authority over the oil sector for a decade through their performance of technocratic expertise, until a political-economic crisis exposed them to public and legal scrutiny.

Illicit activities in the field of oil elites

Among industry analysts, there is anecdotal evidence of widespread, hidden illicit activities in the broader field of oil elites that continues during and beyond moments of heightened public and legal scrutiny of the sector. In particular, analysts refer to a cadre of lawyers, diplomats and businessmen who sell political influence to foreign oil companies, as 'lobbistas' or lobbyists, although lobbying is illegal in Ecuador.

It can be difficult to study the oil lobby due to its illicit status, but I met with a longtime diplomat and lobbyist, who I refer to as Juan, in an exclusive men's club in Quito. Juan participated in each of the contracts for which Pastor is being investigated, but Juan himself is not under investigation. Instead, he continues to quietly facilitate deals. He performs his position as an intermediary in particular ways. Juan spoke to me in perfect English and casually mentioned personal ties to international business and financial elites and top-level political actors from the last three decades. He explained euphemistically, 'Lobbyist is a dirty word – here, it means you are a thief – but I do lobbying in the good sense. I know people and I get them together and I make a fee'. Juan spoke with me because he was hopeful that proposals for indigenous oil, gas and mining companies might gain traction under Moreno and he wanted to recruit me, a researcher with ties in indigenous communities:

I believe that in this moment, we could put together a scheme ... If you can bring together communities ... we could do the other job, which is contacting the mining or petroleum industries and putting a plan together and going to the president and saying, 'Señor Lenin, we have this project' and I think he would take it ... We could put something together with relative ease.

I signal this anecdote, despite my limited data on the oil lobby, to highlight the conditions of 'relative ease' with which Juan manages to blend into the infrastructure of oil transactions, as he forms companies and wins contracts through political contacts.

In this section, I have observed how indigenous subjects, who contradicted stereotypes of the noble savage by engaging in extractive industries, faced moral suspicions *a priori*. In turn, I described the performance of moral oil management under Correa. Pastor and other emerging oil elites from his generation projected technocratic subjectivities – 'the best technicians' as one former CEPE worker explains – along with cultural proximity to the global oil industry. With his claims to responsible management, rooted in the universality of technical knowledge, Pastor was readily able to juxtapose in the media and other spaces of power, his technical competence and the supposed immorality of Alian Petrol. Such claims to technical competence served to veil widespread illicit activities

among public sector oil elites, who fostered ethnic difference to cultivate moral expectations supporting continued elite control of oil resources and rents.

Conclusions

In many oil-dependent nations distributions of rights over oil resources and rents are objects of continuous struggle between the state, national and foreign companies, money-lenders and unions (Bridge and Le Billon 2017; Mitchell 2011). The stories these interest groups tell of themselves in the public sphere become important for legitimating their claims to oil and de-legitimizing competing claims. Given the central role that oil often plays in collective aspirations for development (Coronil 1997; Valdivia 2008), the management of the oil economy and the redistribution of oil rents have frequently become a matter of intense public scrutiny and moral concern in Latin America, particularly in conjunctures of price booms or busts. Oil actors have, in multiple contexts, cultivated perceptions of the moral failings of competing actors to legitimate shifts in distributions of resource control and rents in moments of crisis.¹⁵

In the case of Ecuador, I have argued that the ability of political-economic elites to legitimate their claims over oil rights and over the broader petro-state apparatus in moral terms is rooted in a widely-shared moral economy of oil. ‘Moral economy’ (Scott 1976; Thompson 1971) refers to the limits of inequality that a social group endures before it revolts against morally unacceptable conditions (also, see Edelman 2005, 2012). Moral demands for adequate oil management and, in turn, rent redistribution in Ecuador respond to historical expectations that national oil resources should generate a minimum level of continuous national development (Lu et al. 2016; Valdivia 2008; Valdivia and Benavides 2012). In turn, ‘revolts’ have manifested on a national scale in terms of shifts in oil policy and electoral-political preferences. From this case study, I suggest two sets of conclusions regarding how and when domestic oil elites actively shape moral economies of oil in postcolonial petro-states.

First, not all social actors are equally positioned – within hierarchical public spheres (Fraser 1992) – to define moral expectations regarding the management and redistribution of national resources. In postcolonial contexts like Ecuador, representations of indigenous difference like that of the ‘ecologically noble savage’ (Redford 1991), which are required of indigenous groups to claim territory, preclude indigenous groups from asserting moral authority over the production and redistribution of oil rents. By contrast, under the Correa regime, domestic mestizo elites performed particular articulations of ‘whiteness’ (Echeverría 2007, 2010), positioning themselves as ostensibly disinterested, expert technicians. This granted them moral authority and lent credence to the stories of corruption they told. This case demonstrates how oil elites have fostered ethnic difference to reinforce expectations about elite control and redistribution of national resources – even in spite of their own illicit activities.

Second, this study re-affirms that illicit transactions proliferate in the oil industry (Gudynas 2017; Humphreys et al. 2007; Villavicencio 2017), but it also suggests that domestic elites tend to cultivate public concerns about the morality of oil managers in particular, delimited moments of crisis, such as declines in oil prices or production. In critical

¹⁵This dynamic can be observed in diverse contemporary contexts beyond Ecuador, from Brazil to Saudi Arabia.

moments, elites shape moral concerns in the public sphere in ways that enable shifts in control *among* dominant classes, but prevent or limit the possibilities that subaltern groups might seriously challenge elite control over the production and redistribution of national resources.¹⁶

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¹⁶To further illustrate the correlation between crisis and corruption narratives, independent journalist Fernando Villavicencio denounced many cases of oil corruption during the Correa administrations, but his studies drew few observations from mainstream media. He was persecuted by politicians for defamation and fled to Peru. Once the oil sector entered into crisis, Villavicencio returned to Ecuador and became a folk hero. He presented his research on television, over the radio and to members of the National Assembly. However, Villavicencio had once also denounced the company Sertecpet for winning contracts while President Moreno's brother, Edwin, worked for the firm, and little attention has been paid to that case. If history is a guide, one might not be surprised if particular oil elites signal Sertecpet to renew or make new claims on oil during a future political-economic crisis.

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