Chapter 12

“Western” and “Chinese” Oil Zones: Petro-Infrastructures and the Emergence of New Trans-territorial Spaces of Order in Niger and Chad

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Introduction

After the end of the Cold War in 1989 and the rise of China as a global player in the world, Africa has increasingly moved centre stage in a “scramble for oil” between Western and Chinese oil companies (Ghazvinian 2007; Klare and Volman 2006; Yates 2012). This scramble was fuelled by high oil prices on the world market and political instability in the Middle East. It shifted attention to hitherto under-explored regions in Africa. By this process many African countries became, or were close to becoming, new oil-producing states. Two of these new oil producers are the landlocked countries of Chad and Niger. These two countries fall into the later group of African states in which Western and Chinese companies started to produce and refine oil in spite of their political instability and the high costs of installing oil infrastructure. Chad started to produce oil in 2003 under a consortium composed of ExxonMobil, Chevron and the Malaysian Petronas. The consortium built a pipeline of more than one thousand kilometres to transport the oil from the southern Chadian oil region of Doba to Port Kribi on the Cameroonian Atlantic Coast. Shortly afterwards, in 2006, ExxonMobil and Petronas abandoned oil exploration in neighbouring Niger, judging the estimated oil reserves in this equally landlocked country to be economically unprofitable.

In 2007 the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) signed contracts with the Chadian government to extract oil and to build a joint-venture refinery for national consumption and export near N’Djamena, Chad’s capital. The foundation was laid for this upstream and downstream integrated project in 2008 and the refinery was put into operation in 2011. One year after the conclusion of the contract between the CNPC and the Chadian government, in 2008, the CNPC signed a Production Sharing Agreement (PSA) with the Nigerien government and, in 2011, inaugurated a joint-venture oil refinery near Zinder, Niger’s second biggest city, situated in the east. In both countries, the CNPC agreed to construct a blueprint oil refinery with a capacity of 20,000
bpd within the national territories, an endeavour ExxonMobil had not been interested in. With this history, the two case studies offer an opportunity to compare “Western” and “Chinese” African oil engagements. We argue in this chapter that the approaches differ to such a degree that one can speak of the instalment of different “oil zones”, which carry varying spatial, economical and political implications.

Our notion of “oil zones” builds in particular on the spatial ordering dimension of the concept of assemblage that has flourished in the social sciences within the last decade and resulted in countless publications. From assemblage theory we take the idea that assemblages constitute entities whose particular properties emerge from the interaction between heterogeneous parts (Deleuze and Guattari 1987; DeLanda 2006). Whereas each part of the assemblage is self-containing and has a vital force, the grouping as such enacts a causal power or “agency of assemblage” (Bennett 2010, chap. 2) that exceeds the sum of the single components. Further, we take the idea that assemblages are trans-territorial spaces of order that are neither global nor national but emerge as new types of ordering, transcending the nation-state on the one hand and coexisting with it on the other (Sassen 2008). The trans-territorial space production of “oil zones” might be best expressed by the oxymoron “Global Territories” (Opitz and Tellmann 2012) in order to point to the (dis)connections between (distant) places through infrastructures, technologies, borders, fences and security practices, as well as discursive movements of ideas, theories, models and narratives. The concept of “oil zones” thus enables us to look at specific places in Niger and Chad, like the oil extraction sites that are disconnected from their immediate surroundings by fences and military guards, but at the same time connected with distant places in Africa and beyond (United States, Europe, China) through pipelines, specific means of transport and the conversion of crude oil into new products. It also helps us to analyse the particular and quite different forms of (dis)connection between places on a global scale in relation to the ideas, scientific theories and economic models that bring forth these very (dis)connections.

Assemblage theory has recently also penetrated research on oil. Here, the concept of assemblage has been taken up in order to point to oil as a specialized formation that produces particular properties like standardization processes (Barry 2006), a particular form of democracy (Mitchell 2011) or a regime of accumulation (Watts 2012). Especially Watts is of interest for our argument due to his focus on capital accumulation. In his work on the political economy of oil in Nigeria, Watts has theorized the “oil assemblage” as a regime of accumulation and a mode of regulation held together by the global oil infrastructure. The main feature of this structure, within a neoliberal petro-capitalist