

Petro-Democracy: Oil, Power and Politics in Niger

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Abstract

In 2008, Niger signed an oil contract with China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) over the Agadem oil block located in the far eastern region of Diffa; and in 2011, they inaugurated the country’s first and only oil refinery near Zinder, the second biggest city, situated in the country’s south-east. While the inauguration had been planned as a major celebration to mark the coming of oil, it soon became a highly contested political event. That day, with new President Mahamadou Issoufou coming from the capital Niamey (located in the west of the country) to Zinder to mark the occasion, youths set alight tire street barricades and clashed with police. The protests turned into violent riots some days later with youth clashing with security forces in the streets, burning down a police station and looting a bank. Two people were killed and several were injured.

Using in-depth ethnographic material collected over 13 months of fieldwork from 2011 to 2014 within the methodological framework of the extended case method, the book takes the event of the oil refinery’s inauguration as point of departure. Based on the tradition of the Manchester School, but reformulated in light of contemporary social theory, the extended case method is used to extend out from the ethnographic description of the inauguration to the historical processes and structural conditions that made the celebration and contestation possible in the first place: first, to the colonial and postcolonial entanglements in the quest for Niger’s natural resources, and then to political conflicts that

were played out on the public political stage after the signing of the oil contract in 2008. The main section of the book then focuses on the political arena that formed in Zinder around the inauguration. It shows the political work that turned the opening ceremony into a highly contested event and thereby contributed to making oil into a social and political reality, reconstructing social and political difference and reinforcing patterns of domination. In the next step, abstracting from the ethnographic material, the historically sedimented patterns of domination in Nigerien politics and society are analyzed and placed in relation to the politics of the oil infrastructure. Doing so enables an understanding of how the spatial dispersion of the petro-infrastructure in Niger over different administrative regions produced and connected different publics. Furthermore, it makes visible how local historical narratives of repression and marginalization were stitched together to reconfigure collective identities. Finally, the transformation of Niger into an oil state is analyzed, mainly focusing on the period from the beginning of oil production in 2011 until the time of writing in 2018, to understand how entanglements of Western and Chinese economic, political and military forces shape such a development. The empirical findings are then used to theorize on the signficatory, temporal, material, and spatial dimensions of an oil state in the making, arguing that oil acts as a catalyst that transforms meshwork-like structures or dynamic systems from one state to another. In the case of Niger, a formerly authoritarian uranium-based state was transformed into a petro-democracy.

Keywords: Oil, protest, social movements, civil society, African politics and the state, China in Africa, capitalism; assemblage.