

Through the Story of a Road and a Pipeline: The Formation of Commodity Frontiers and Modern States

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Through the Story of a Road and a Pipeline: The Formation of Commodity Frontiers and Modern States

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The concept of the ‘ecology of oil’ specifies historically and geographically the relations and processes of exploitation and domination of nature, and of the human-nature interaction, by capital and the nation state. It contextualises the historical creation of an ‘oil field’ with a distinctive spatial and social order,¹ bringing about geographical transformation on the basis of the modern industrial order of crude oil production. As Myrna Santiago notes with respect to the oil exporter Mexico, this entire order of oil production creates an image of “industrial progress” that in the early twentieth century was perceived as “a landscape of drastic man-induced metamorphosis, where men replaced ecosystems with industry and urbanization”.² Although Santiago focuses on how the formation of an oil-based production structure altered nature, the forms of land tenure and of work in the case of Mexico, I seek to carry her project a step further and underscore how such structural social and material transformation became constitutive of the ‘national’ form of rule and how the nation state became the modern political-regulative mechanism through which such transformation was possible in Mosul, in northern Iraq. Using the concept of the ‘ecology of oil’, I explore the transformation of the tribally ruled agro-pastoral human-nature interactions, in order to understand how this transformation became constitutive of the formation and consolidation of national rule and order.

This paper underscores the formation of the Mosul oil frontier with a focus on the emergence of a modern relationship of national rule, geography and socio-ecology as a regulative mechanism for the development of the ecology of oil. It explores through the instance of Mosul the relationship between political centralisation and national-administrative domination of geography; and the incorporation of nature in the world market in the form of a nationally ruled commodity frontier.

The main argument of the paper is that the formation of an oil frontier in Mosul presumed a new relationship between local communities and nature. This, in turn, was made possible by a new relationship between geography and power (that is, between space and state). In other words, the rule of the nation state in the specific case of Mosul both presumed an alienated form of interaction with nature embedded in the remaking of the region as an oil frontier incorporated into the capitalist world economy and enabled the process of such alienation in the process of its consolidation. In this respect, I explore two distinctive yet mutually constitutive processes through which the socio-ecology of oil was developed in relation to changing forms of political rule. Firstly, the construction of spatial mechanisms for national-bureaucratic control over social and physical geography within the emerging national space. I illustrate this through an instance of road construction in Mosul, which provided

¹ Myrna Santiago, *The Ecology of Oil: Environment, Labor, and the Mexican Revolution, 1900-1938*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, pp.4-6.

² Santiago (2006), p.102.

modern forms of spatial integration under an all-penetrating autonomy of the nation state as opposed to the ‘dis-autonomy’ of tribal rule. Secondly, the creation of the value-producing crude oil cycle – i.e. extraction, production and transportation of crude oil, as a space integrated into the interstate system. I demonstrate this process through the prism of oil-pipeline construction, focusing on how it became constitutive of the consolidation of the nation-state system in the broader region.

Through these two examples this paper will show how, on the one hand, nationalisation of geography and integration of agro-pastoral ecology into the national domain of control and rule, and on the other the integration of locally specific agro-pastoral relations with nature into the value-based socio-ecological relations of oil extraction and transport, became co-constitutive. Both roads and pipelines became instruments of the transition to the ‘civilized mode of life’ in the formation of a new administrative, commercial and spatial order characterised by the ‘national’ political rule over social and physical geography, and the spatial-economy of oil extraction.

Road-Making and National Control of Tribal Social-Ecology in Mosul, 1918-1935

The period from British occupation to the independence of Iraq proved how the League of Nations’ idea of national self-determination was dismissive of the cultural and historical legacy and socio-ecological texture of the region.³ It was more about creating a bureaucratic, regulatory and spatio-material order with the nation-state system, rather than granting the right to independent self-rule to all peoples. The formation of a new political space as a ‘nation-state’ meant a distinctive form of rule within, and of affiliation with, a bounded space. Mosul’s social, economic and physical geography had been an integral part of a broader region characterised by agro-pastoral (re)production rooted in what Sarah Shields calls “the circulation mode of affiliation”. This mode had been sustained under Ottoman imperial rule within the context of locally autonomous forms of indigenous rule – i.e. either in the form of emirates or tribal rulership, despite the Ottoman centralisation efforts of the nineteenth century. The League of Nations’ conception of the nation state and imagining of ‘national’ community, which was based on a European taxonomy emphasising a singular ethnicity and language, posited an incongruity with the socio-ecological and cultural fabric of the region and, thereby, became a mechanism of domination over the rights of many peoples. Nation-state formation became a process of producing a new mode of affiliation with space.⁴

This new mode of affiliation was at the same time situated in a process of the emergence of what Santiago calls the ‘ecology of oil’. This process entailed the formation of a new mode of interaction with ecology in which both nature and people were abstracted from their historical context and redefined through the category of the ‘nation state’ and oil. As captured by the

³ Although Arabs constituted the majority of the whole ‘Iraqi’ population; in the north, i.e. the Mosul Vilayet of the Ottoman Empire, Kurds made up 55% of the population and Turkmens, Christians, Jews and Yezidis formed another 22%. See Gareth Stansfield and Liam Anderson, *Crisis in Kirkuk: the Ethnopolitics of Conflict and Comprise*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009, p. 25.

⁴ Sarah Shields, ‘Mosul, the Ottoman legacy and the League of Nations’, *International Journal of Contemporary Iraqi Studies*, 3:2 (2009), pp. 218, 229-230.

concept of 'state nature', one of the historically distinctive aspects of the nation state form was not only territorial boundedness, but also political centralisation and national-administrative domination of nature within the context of the capitalist world economy. In the process of incorporation of nature and human-nature interaction within the nation-state realm, nature was separated from its local context through diverse practices such as national programmes of road-building, privatisation of communal nature and exercise of legitimised monopoly in the use of violence to police the human-nature interaction.⁵

The predominant presence of the tribal population and tribal-based forms of local rule constituted one of the urgent challenges of creating a national administration.⁶ The initial British approach towards the tribes and tribal rule in the immediate years following the occupation of Mosul was to obtain the support of the local rulers and to ensure order through their leadership.⁷ Yet the social meaning of the monarchy centred in Baghdad from 1921 to 1939 was diametrically opposite to that of a tribal chief or *shaikh* – i.e. the indigenous rulers of the agro-pastoral geography. The former represented the formation of a unified sovereign-legal realm of a bounded national space, while the latter represented a fragmented customary realm of multiple communities.⁸ In this context, the consolidation of local Kurdish tribal influence began to threaten the British programme in Kurdish districts,⁹ and the precarious attitude of British officials stirred local uprisings in many parts of Southern Kurdistan.¹⁰ The British view was gradually modified away from using the large Kurdish confederations and influential rulers as instruments for creating indigenous sovereign rule towards retaining smaller tribal units and safeguarding tribal chiefs as a transitory phase for a shift to a bureaucratic form of administration.¹¹ It presumed that the decentralised and weak nature of the Ottoman Empire left these communities in a disordered state in which internal communal security became the only option for survival. Thus the British imagined the national community of Iraq as a network of distinctive tribal communities whose interrelations were to be regulated by nation-state rule. At

⁵ Mark Whitehead et al., *The Nature of the State: Excavating the Political Ecologies of the Modern State*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, pp.2-7, 14, 43.

⁶ Toby Dodge, *Inventing Iraq: The Failure of Nation Building and a History Denied*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2003, p.62.

⁷ Gertrude Lowthian Bell, *Mesopotamia: Review of the Civil Administration*, London: H.M. Stationary Office, 1920, pp.59-60; and M. R. Izady, 'Kurds and the Formation of the State of Iraq, 1917-1932', in Reeva Spector Simon & Eleanor H. Tejirian (eds), *The Creation of Iraq, 1914-1922*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2004, p.105.

⁸ Hanna Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq: A Study of Iraq's Old Landed and Commercial Classes and of its Communists, Ba'athists, and Free Officers*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1978, pp.27-8.

⁹ Bell (1920), p.64.

¹⁰ Şekroye X. Mihoyî, *Irak Kurdistanî'nda Kurt Ulusal Kurtulus Mucadelesi*, Stockholm: Apec-Tryck, 2006, p.17.

¹¹ Dodge (2003), pp.76-7; Zeynep Arikani, 'British Legacy and Evolution of Kurdish Nationalism in Iraq (1918-1926): What Significance the 'Mosul Question'?' *Centro Argentino de Estudios Internacionales*, Working paper 16, 2011, p.16.

the same time, tribes were reimagined in relation to the nation-state formation.¹² In order to ensure their integration into the nation, a divide and rule policy towards tribes was adopted.¹³

Therefore, on the eve of the rise of nation states in Mesopotamia, the contradictory feelings of becoming united while losing local political influence in the Kurdish populated region, the rejection by various influential rulers of Kurdish tribal formations of a singular centralised sovereign rule, the process of struggle against occupation and against the rule of any other nation during the 1920s and 1930s and the eventual pacification of the tribal chiefs and *Shaikhs*, transformed the political context of the Ottoman *Vilayet* of Mosul. It had been an administrative unity of various socio-culturally distinctive communities interacting within a unified agro-pastoral social-ecology. Now it became a politically and geographically conscious unit with respect to the Kurdish ethnic character of the region as opposed to Arab rule, which was becoming the political façade of the modern ‘integration’ of these formations into the new ecology of oil. In other words, the ecology-based interactions among culturally diverse people began to transform into politically conflicting interactions among ethnically and religiously emphasised ‘majorities’ and ‘minorities’, whose numbers were established through the ways in which ‘national’ borders were set up.

The close attention of John Cadman, the Director of the Iraqi Petroleum Company (IPC) – which is the joint multinational company composed of the British Petroleum Company, Royal Dutch-Shell, the Compagnie Française des Pétroles and the Near East Development Corporation – to the revolts in Sulaimaniya and other districts gives a clear picture of how the institution of ‘national self-determination’ in Iraq was simultaneously a means for instituting the modern order of oil-based capital accumulation. Although the main operations of the Company were located in Kirkuk, unsettled and disordered conditions in other towns (*liwas*) had direct repercussions in Kirkuk. Thus socio-political control over the whole of the concessionary area was a major necessity for the Company.¹⁴ According to the yearly confidential reports of the Company, by the mid-1930s the Kurds of “Northern Iraq” had been pacified to the desired degree. One reason behind the “very correct attitude” of the Kurdish tribes was explained in the Confidential Report of 1936 as the construction of motor-roads and the establishment of police posts in the region that rendered many tribes impotent and under control. Further, establishing settled administrative structures in the *liwas* of Kirkuk, Arbil, Sulaimaniya and Mosul forced *ashirets* not to take any risk of losing their material wealth – i.e. crops, cattle or villages. Therefore instituting the bureaucratic and spatial apparatuses of the nation-state system regularised and controlled all the ‘traditional’ tribal ‘anomalies’. Motor-roads and police posts became a successful means, for instance, for dealing with and ending the tribal bandits who used to hold up caravans and take protection fees.¹⁵

¹² For an analysis of how various forms of communities were imagined as constitutive of modernity see Michael Watts, ‘Antimonies of Community: Some Thoughts on Geography, Resources and Empire’, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 29:2 (2004). He underscores particularly how the communities were construed within the complex of Nigerian oil complex, i.e. a configuration of community, state and firm.

¹³ Sa’ad Jawad, *Iraq and the Kurdish Question 1958-1970*, London: Ithaca Press, 1981, p.8; Mihoyi (2006), p.21; Bell (1920), pp.64-5)

¹⁴ *Confidential Liaison Annual Report*, 1938, Iraq Petroleum Company Limited Files, BP Archives, the University of Warwick (IPC, BP, Warwick).

¹⁵ *Confidential Liaison Annual Report*, 1936 & 1938, IPC, BP, Warwick.

In his memoir on the operations of the Anglo-Persian Company in Persia, John Cadman reflects on the importance of road making with the following sentences:

The country in which petroleum operations were to be conducted was, as I have said, wild, rugged, and mountainous. It had to be made accessible; opened for the transport of the apparatus- frequently very heavy- of petroleum operations; and rendered safe and habitable, not for nomads but for men accustomed to the civilization of distant parts of the earth. The undertaking, as it may be imagined, was of formidable magnitude. Heavy machinery and cumbersome apparatus- to say nothing of the swift conduct of industrial affairs- need good roads, not the tracks which are adequate to nomads and their four-footed transport.¹⁶

As Cadman notes, roads and road making became an important spatial mechanism for creating a safe and accessible ecology of oil connecting the “uncivilized” parts to the “civilization of distant parts of the earth”. While the inaccessibility of the mountains geographically and historically constituted one of the conditions of possibility for the political and economic autonomy of pastoral nomads,¹⁷ roads built through mountains created the conditions of national-bureaucratic rule over the entire social-geography. They became among the basic means and symbols for bringing the ‘uncivilized’ world under the social order of ‘Progress’ as a common world destiny. Road engineers such as Archibald Milne Hamilton were the technical ‘missionaries’ and pioneers in expanding this social order and uniting the whole world through the conquest of nature.¹⁸

Road making was an important and effective form of centralised control in a few respects. First, modern means of transport were a necessary strategic means of securing military control. Just as the Kizil Rabat-Kifri-Kirkuk railway had been built for the purpose of silencing Southern Kurdistan during the revolts of 1919, as Arnold Wilson stated; in the late 1920s and early 1930s, road making became an instrument for maintaining order. The increase in the number of police posts in the late 1920s was made possible by motor-roads.¹⁹ Second, roads enabled the Government to break the social-ecologically based dominance of tribes over the northern geography replacing the mules as the ecologically embedded means of transport. Mule caravans that were connected to camel caravans in the deserts and *keleks*²⁰ in the rivers had been constitutive of “the whole movement-in-space”, in Braudel’s words,²¹ as a central pattern of regionally integrated agro-pastoral forms of social reproduction. After the army and aerial bombardment, roads became the immediate forms of appearance of the spatiality of the nation-state system, becoming constitutive of a ‘movement from space’ as a central pattern of commodification of oil and oil-based products. They became the central spatial mechanism for

¹⁶ John Cadman, ‘Middle East Geography in Relation to Petroleum’, *The Geographical Journal*, LXXXIV, September 3 (1934).

¹⁷ Arash Khazeni, *Tribe & Empire on the Margins of Nineteenth Century Iran*, Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2009, pp.76-7.

¹⁸ Jessica B. Teisch, *Engineering Nature: Water, Development, and the Global Spread of American Environmental Expertise*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011, pp.8-9.

¹⁹ Mihoyi (2006), pp.20 & 49.

²⁰ Locally specific forms of rafts that were made of goat and ship skins and timbers.

²¹ Fernand Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism 15th-18th Century: The Perspective of the World*, translated by Sian Reynolds, London: Collins, 1984, pp. 475.

politically recreating the geography as a nation-state space, while at the same time legitimating nation-state rule by serving the idea of modern material progress.

Hamilton's experience of his appointment for the construction of the Rowanduz Road in 1928 enables us to understand the historical and spatial meaning of building a nation state in a concrete way. He was one of the engineers serving the British Mandatory Administration in "building up the Kingdom of Iraq". In 1928, he was assigned by the Government of Iraq to build this new highway over the mountains of the north-east frontier, with the foremost objective of pacifying the Kurdish tribes. Hamilton explained the nature of his appointment as follows:

About midsummer, I was notified that I was transferred to Kurdistan, where the need for the pacification of the Kurdish tribes-people and for the introduction of Government influence urgently demanded road-building. There, among the mountains of the north-east frontier, I was to take part in the construction of a new highway called the Rowanduz Road which would eventually lead from Iraq to the plateau of North Persia and the Caspian Sea, passing through rugged inaccessible highlands said to be inhabited by brigands and rebels, who had been a constant source of trouble to the Administration.²²

When Hamilton asked the chief engineer in Kirkuk, Major Perry, the reasons for constructing the roads in that tough geography, he reflected:

There are two reasons, trade and administration. You know that all great nations, past and present, have found roads essential for maintaining law and order. Once highways have penetrated a region the wildest people are pretty sure to become peaceful simply by copying *civilized modes of life*. Moreover, empires that rely purely on military conquest usually fail to hold their people together for long. Of course it remains to be seen whether roads will be appreciated out here as they are in the West. A few have already been built in these mountainous regions, notably near Kirkuk and Mosul, and have already begun to show something of their pacifying influence. So now an extensive road programme has been laid out, the chief of the proposed schemes being the building of this Rowanduz road which incidentally should bring much more commerce to Iraq.²³

Thus in Mosul, road building became one of the earliest means for creating a new socio-spatial order of nation-state rule. It became transformative of "the physical conformation" between the ecology and local tribal autonomy.²⁴ As Hamilton's narrative reveals, roads became one of the spatial mechanisms that constricted the space of tribal rule while enlarging the space of nation-state rule, consolidating 'national' access to, and control over, the social ecology. They would provide modern forms of spatial integration under the all-penetrating autonomy of the nation state as opposed to the "dis-autonomy" of tribal rule.²⁵ The transition to the "civilized mode of

²² Archibald Milne Hamilton, *Road through Kurdistan: The Narrative of an Engineer in Iraq*, London: Faber and Faber, 1937, pp.56-7.

²³ Hamilton (1937), p.73, italics added.

²⁴ Khazeni (2009), pp.87-8.

²⁵ Hamilton (1937), pp.81, 91, 105-109.

life”, as conceived by Major Perry, signalled a new administrative, commercial and spatial order characterised by the ‘national’ political rule of social and physical geography, and the spatial-economy of oil extraction.

The practices of centralisation and control of nature simultaneously instituted the very socio-historically specific material substance of the nation state, and transformed nature into a totality of resources integrated within the process of capitalist production, accumulation and reproduction. Extraction of underground resources (i.e. oil), in turn, became the financial source of commercial, administrative and spatial undertakings. On the one hand, the ‘ruralised’ hinterland lost its centrality in favour of the reproduction of the towns and cities and exchange relations. Through the privatisation of communal interactions with nature, the hinterland became a controlled and regulated domain of nation-state rule. On the other hand, the relationship of the city to nature was redefined with respect to the exploitation of nature as a resource for modern-industrial development. The degree of technological conquest of nature and separation of the city from the hinterland, in turn, became one of the main constituents of the notion of ‘national progress’.²⁶ Thus the consolidation and mediation of the national-bureaucratic control and management of the entire social and physical geography became constitutive of the production of the ecology of oil.

At the same time, both the use of legitimised means of violence and road-building in Southern Kurdistan materialised both the project of homogenisation/singularisation of political rule over the whole nation-state geography and of differentiation not only of the relationship between the ruler and the ruled and, but also of modern subjects.²⁷ A secret report noted that the Iraqi Government centred in Baghdad would be regarded by Kurds and other non-Arab communities, who were emerging as ‘the minorities’, as an Arab Government with Pan-Arabic national ideals.²⁸ As such, the modern times of the region would be an arena of political struggles among these modern forms of ‘communities of majority and minority’. Thus the dynamic relationship between tribal uprisings against the central-national rule and the pacification and incorporation of tribes into the national domain paved the way for the transformation of multiple local kinship-based identities to a unified regional language-based identity in the context of modern national rule. The unified Kurdish opposition that was beginning to develop against Arab rule in Northern Iraq signalled the politicisation of language and its emergence as a modern dialectical antithesis of the dominant national rule.

Connecting Mosul Oil to the Mediterranean, Consolidating the Nation-state System in the Levant

The Secretary of the British Scientific Instrument Research Association portrayed pipelines as “the main artery through which flows the liquid stream on which the very life of the Company

²⁶ Teisch (2011), pp.: 1, 14-15.

²⁷ Manu Goswami, *Producing India: From Colonial Economy to National Space*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2004, pp.104-105.

²⁸ ‘Iraq During the Year 1942’; ‘Iraq During the Year 1943’, in *Reports, Annual, Iraq-RAF Intelligence Soviet Activities*, 1931-1946, File No: 162461, IPC, BP, Warwick.

depends”.²⁹ In the instance of the Mosul oil industry, the pipeline became even more critical for the Company, as Mosul’s geographical location was remote from the sea. Although the Persian Gulf was nearer to the Kirkuk oilfields than the Mediterranean by a distance of two-hundred miles, the Suez Canal charges upon oil tankers made it more profitable to construct the extra miles of pipeline to secure a direct Mediterranean route.³⁰ Thus, especially with the discovery of the Baba Gurgur field (the largest oil field in Kirkuk), the longest pipeline system in the world was constructed. As pointed out by the Company in *A Brief Account of the Development of the Pipeline System between Northern Iraq and the Mediterranean Coast*, the pipeline system was both an outcome and a necessary condition for the development of the oil fields.³¹ The expansion of the pipeline system provided the physical link between the extractive frontier of the IPC and European markets. Thus pipelines provided a new means of integration between Mosul, the Levant region and Europe in relation to the crude oil economy.

In their works on the relationship between extractive industries, transportation and the capitalist world economy, Stephen Bunker and Paul Ciccantell locate transportation in relation to value formation.³² They conceive transport as a part of the process of production, as it is the condition for realisation of both exchange value and use value. Although transport does not shape the use value, it shapes the material and spatial structure of use-value production – i.e. the commodity frontier. It mediates between space as a topographically differentiated condition of natural production and expanded reproduction of capital, on the one hand; and space as an obstacle to exchange or to the realisation of value due to its location on the other. The necessity of such mediation based on technology shapes the geographical and material structure of the extractive industry. The space of transport emerges as another frontier that is integrated to and mediates the frontier of extraction and the centres of valorisation of value or accumulation. To use Bunker’s words, transport systems are not only capital-intensive and cost-creating investments, but also “state-forming instruments to articulate dispersed site-specific raw material sources with concentrated centers of industrial production, capital accumulation, and political power”.³³ They underline the division between the development of transport technology and the lease of ‘national’ space for their engineering as a significant dimension of the interaction between the central and peripheral spatial formations of the world economy.

²⁹ John W. Williamson, *In a Persian Oil Field: A Study in Scientific and Industrial Development*, London: Ernest Benn Limited, 1927, pp.88-9.

³⁰ Saule Omarova, ‘Oil, Pipelines, and the “Scramble for the Caspian”’: Contextualizing the Politics of Oil in Post-Soviet Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan’, in P. S. Ciccantell & S. G. Bunker (eds). *Space and Transport in the World-System*, Connecticut and London: Greenwood Press, 1998, p.179.

³¹ Henry Dobbs, ‘Mosul Oil and the Pipe-line’, Reprinted from *The Nineteenth Century and After*, The Anglo-Persian Oil Company Limited, 1930, p.1; J. A. W. Sparks, *A Brief Account of the Development of the Pipeline System between Northern Iraq and the Mediterranean Coast, and Supplement to above- Controversial Aspects of the Development of the Pipeline System*. IPC- Mosul Pet. Co., 1967, p.1.

³² Stephen G. Bunker, & Paul S. Ciccantell, ‘Introduction: Space, Transport, and World-Systems Theory’, in P. S. Ciccantell and S. G. Bunker (eds), *Space and Transport in the World-System*, Connecticut and London: Greenwood Press, 1998; ‘Creating Hegemony via Raw Materials Access: Strategies in Holland and Japan’, *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)*, 26, 4 (2003), pp.339-80; *Globalization and the Race for Resources*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005.

³³ Stephen G. Bunker, ‘Matter, Space, Energy, and Political Economy: The Amazon in the World-System’, *Journal of World-Systems Research*, IX, 2 (2003), p.240.

The geographical position of the Mosul oil frontier historically required the incorporation of the Levantine region into the material geography of the oil industry to link the Mosul fields to the Mediterranean ports via pipelines. The old port cities of the Levant that had been commercial entrepôts for the textile and wool trade between Europe and Mesopotamia, Iran and India in the *longue durée*, began in the first half of the twentieth century to redevelop as oil-exporting terminals connecting the extractive frontiers to oil markets. The Levantine cities had long engaged with Mosul as a part of a broader agro-pastoral regional economy by means of caravans. Caravans had been the ecologically and historically specific means of the *movement in space* embedded in agro-pastoral production enabling the socio-ecological integration of the wider region. In the first half of the twentieth century, the long historical role of the Levant as a geographical link between the agro-pastoral regional economy of Mesopotamia and Europe was recreated by oil and internalised into the historical plane of the capitalist world economy. Oil pipelines emerged as the modern means for the *movement from place* – i.e. from the oil frontier to the centres of the world economy.

Pipeline transportation is a high-cost technology-intensive investment. It is peculiar to petroleum products and, once built, its route cannot be changed or moved. Yet it creates considerable economies of scale, as the variable costs associated with it are low. These characteristics necessitate, firstly, an immense amount of financial capital to undertake such an investment, strengthening the monopoly position of the company or the consortium that conducts such an operation. Secondly, they augment the cost of any interruption to the flow of oil. These consequences gain more significance if the pipeline crosses ‘national borders’, as the calculations of economic profitability intertwine with ‘national’ political stability.³⁴ The construction of a trans-desert oil pipeline between the Mosul frontier and the Mediterranean Sea articulated and moulded these peculiarities of pipeline transport in historically and geographically specific ways. The selection of the route and the terminal port to construct the initial pipeline was situated in a complex balance of political, geographical and technical-economic dynamics. The importance of political security of the pipeline system in a colonially ruled territory increased the urgency of defining and stabilising the national political and geographical planes of rule, so that a regulative regime based on concessions could be established.

The preliminary investigations of the IPC focused on the ports of Tripoli and Haifa to terminate the pipeline in 1930. Tripoli was part of French Mandate of Syria and Haifa was part of British Mandate of Palestine. The construction of the pipeline depended on political agreements among the mandatory powers and mandated states, and the security of the flow of oil was dependent on establishing political stability and security. Reflective of this, a note enclosed by John Cadman to his letter to Arthur Henderson, the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs in British Foreign Office, paid careful attention to political and economic calculations for each possibility. The Tripoli route seemed to be financially more profitable. However, the Company was concerned with the problem of political insecurity that could result in interruption

³⁴ Omarova (1998), pp.179-81; Jeff Makhholm, *The Political Economy of Pipelines: A Century of Comparative Institutional Development*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2012, p.4.

to the flow of oil. For the IPC, unlike Iraq, Syria as a French mandate had not yet achieved “national coherence”. Cadman expresses this concern in the letter writing:

The Minutes of the Permanent Mandates Commission of the League of Nations for the past five years are a record of almost continuous disturbances in Syria, punctuated by periods of strife in which many thousands of lives have been lost, and the conduct by the French of their Mandate has been the subject of criticisms by the Mandates Commission as recently as July, 1929. If there existed in Syria a National Government with an Organic Law such as that existing in Iraq, the negotiations for a pipeline across Syria would be more difficult, but would afford, when concluded, greater security. It is true that the Turkish Petroleum Company’s Convention with Iraq was concluded before the Organic Law came into force, and was ratified by the Assembly at a larger date, but the circumstances in Syria in 1930 are scarcely analogous to those in Iraq in 1924.³⁵

Thus Cadman suggested that a national political form of rule integrated completely in the inter-state system would be much more convenient for capital in securing the commodity flow than would instable mandate rule. These considerations of the Company were also filtered by an understanding of the strategic and commercial interests of the British and French Governments in their respective mandates, which would increase especially if the construction of the pipeline was to be accompanied by railway construction along the route. Eventually, the Company suggested a negotiation between the British and French Governments to reconsider the San Remo Agreement “for the adjustment of outstanding questions between Iraq, Palestine and Syria.” In other words, the Company was suggesting the formation of indigenous rule in the French mandate of Syria.

Such an agreement, the letter continued, “would serve to provide a firm basis on which to inaugurate an era of active economic development of the countries lying between the Persian border and the Mediterranean.” The proposed keynote of such an agreement would be the construction of the oil pipeline and, if possible, railway, to be managed by an independent company to facilitate the maintenance of the “open door” policy as well as commercial accumulation. Such a scheme of simultaneous construction of a pipeline and railway could gather local support, as it would create economies in construction, maintenance, water supply, communication and policing for the convenience of both pipeline and railway. Since the management of the existing railways created financial difficulties for the local governments, commercial control and management of such an undertaking would be preferable for them as well. The scheme proposed by the IPC to the British Government, therefore, envisaged the expansion of the ‘nationally’ ruled modern state system to the whole geography between oil frontier and the Mediterranean by incorporating Syria as well. In turn, it projected the production of national geo-bodies as spaces for commercial undertaking of transport in particular relation to oil. Thereby, “the most fertile parts of Syria” and “the most populous parts

³⁵ *Note on Possible Alignments of a Trans-Desert Pipeline System from Iraq to the Mediterranean*, Appendix to the Letter from John Cadman to Arthur Henderson, Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Foreign Office, 20 March 1930, in *Iraq Petroleum Company- Concessions and Pipeline*, 15701/1930-25/11/1930, File No: 63292, The Anglo-Persian Oil Co Ltd, BP, Warwick.

of Iraq”, in Cadman’s words, were going to be reunified through this commercial undertaking.³⁶ In this temporal-spatial context, transportation of oil became a ‘state-forming instrument’ in relation to *frontier making* in Mesopotamia.

From this letter onwards, we can find in the IPC’s historical archives several letters exchanged in the later parts of 1930 between the British High Commissioner for Iraq, the Colonial Office and the IPC with a stamp of “secret” on them. In a secret letter from F. H. Humphrys to Mr. Wilson (dated 14 November 1930), the British Government demonstrated its support for the Company’s proposal with a caveat. Since the Government of Iraq sought the Haifa route, for political and economic reasons,³⁷ it was argued that Iraqi resentment against the Tripoli route would eventually hinder the interests of the IPC. Since in that year the IPC asked for a revision of the terms of their concession, the Iraqi Government conditioned the revision on the construction of the pipeline to Haifa. At this juncture, given French support of the IPC’s proposal, the balance of political and economic dynamics convinced the IPC to make a compromise through a revised proposal of the construction of a two-pipeline system.³⁸ To subsequently convince the Iraqi Government of the importance of construction of a branch line to Tripoli, in turn, became a matter of giving ‘mandatory advice’ to Iraq. In a secret telegram (dated 21 November 1930) the Secretary of State for the Colonies suggested to the High Commissioner for Iraq that “to refrain from informing the Iraqi Government of their views on a matter upon which not only the economic prosperity, but possibility the whole political future of the country depend, would be difficult to reconcile with their mandatory responsibility.” Within a four-day interval, the High Commissioner responded to the Secretary of State for the Colonies informing him that he had “hitherto succeeded in restraining Iraq Government from doing anything foolish” and induced them to accept a settlement on lines based on a negotiation with the IPC. After a year-long engagement, the Mediterranean Pipelines Limited Company was incorporated with a registered office in Toronto in 1931,³⁹ and the transit concessions concluded with the Governments of Syria, Lebanon, Transjordan and Palestine for the construction of about 1,200 miles of trans-national pipeline in the desert. The Company’s shareholder structure was the same as the IPC.⁴⁰

Through the pipeline concessions the whole region between the Persian border and the Mediterranean Sea was incorporated under the value regime regulated by the concessions that were defined with respect to the production cycle of oil. The transport concessions regulating the transit of oil complemented the concessions regulating the extraction and production of crude oil. The concessions signed in 1931 with Palestine, Syria and Lebanon, respectively,

³⁶ Letter from John Cadman to Arthur Henderson, 1930, 20 March 1930.

³⁷ According to Dobbs, Iraq believed that the Haifa route would certainly secure the construction of an accompanying railway, “since between the Euphrates and the Jordan the line would traverse an almost uninhabited desert, and without a railway its construction and maintenance would be difficult.” Also, Haifa route would be a source of income through the Anglo-American trade with Persia. Moreover, the pipeline and railway could provide political security in the desert corridor extending from Iraq to Palestine against the threatening ambitions of desert tribes of Nejd.

³⁸ Iraq Petroleum Company Limited Files 1930, The BP Archives, the University of Warwick.

³⁹ Canadian Law provided the most profitable context.

⁴⁰ ‘Mediterranean Pipelines Limited- Agenda,’ 26 November 1931, Meeting of Directors, Paris, in *Iraq anad Iraq Petroleum Negotiations*, 12/01/1931-20/11/1931, File No: 72542, The Anglo-Persian Oil Co. Limited, BP, Warwick..

constituted almost identical conditions for constructing, maintaining, operating and regulating the pipelines, and were to be in place for a long period comparable with the duration of extraction concessions – i.e. seventy-five years. No fees for the transit of oil were specified, due to the Barcelona Transit Convention and in anticipation of the benefits of the pipelines to the national economies. The concessions exempted the IPC from any form of taxes on petroleum exported through the ports and any form of customs on incoming equipment and materials. Yet they provided a wide-ranging scope of rights to construct any form of spatial-material undertaking including terminals, ports and harbours; to install any form of modern communication means; to use all forms of transport; to lease land; to exploit nature for obtaining the necessary building materials, including soil and timber and to use water resources. Against this, the rights of local populations to protect indigenous social reproduction patterns and interactions with ecology were disregarded.⁴¹

While pipeline transportation and concessions shaped the post-mandate configuration of the nation-state system throughout the region, the emerging forms of ‘national politics’ shaped, in turn, both the spatial configuration of oil transport and its technological-material development. Configuration and reconfiguration of both the spatial and material organisation of oil transportation mediated the materially and geographically fixed spatiality of crude extraction with the process of territorially bounded spatial formation of the nation-state system in the Levant. Eventually the whole region was incorporated into an inter-state system and the world economy politically through nation states and socially through frontiers of oil production and transport. The Levant and Mosul were reintegrated as distinctive yet unified ‘nationally demarcated’ geographical-material planes of oil production. They were reformed as national geo-bodies, such as Iraq and Syria, differentially integrated in the world economy in relation to the production cycle of oil.

Conclusion

At an evening meeting of *the Society* on 11 June 1934, the Iraqi Prime Minister Ja’far Pasha Al Askeri, echoed the feelings among the local modern bureaucratic-ruling elite in the following statements:

Sir John (Cadman) was very kind and considerate. You have heard what he said about the friendly relations that now exist, and I do not believe that nowadays we can isolate the different countries from each other. The world is gradually growing smaller and smaller... The world is so small that we have to work together more and more rather than to regard each other as separate nations or countries. I believe your great economist, Adam Smith, was right when he spoke of the division of labor.⁴²

⁴¹ Alfred Bonn , ‘The Concessions for the Mosul-Haifa Pipe Line’, *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 164 (1932), pp.116-23; Stephen Longrigg, *Oil in the Middle East: Its Discovery and Development*, London: Oxford University Press, 1954, pp.86-9.

⁴² Cadman (1934), pp. 213.

Ja'far Pasha's words reflect well the process of internalisation of Iraq both as a 'separate nation' and as a commodity frontier integrated into the 'small' world-historical division of labour and nature. Exploring the production of the oil frontier in Mosul, thus, demonstrates a geographically specific historical chapter of how the world-historical division of labour and nature was configured through the political-territorial division of social and ecological geography.

The story of the production of Mosul as an oil frontier, which this paper has tried to reflect with instances of construction of a road and pipeline-system, was a multi-dimensional story historically written by the interactions between capital, geography and nature. At the same time it became a story of state-making on the axes of specific patterns of regulation and configuration of 'nationally' inscribed physical and economic geography and socio-ecological order. The abstraction of nature and configuration of space as a flow system of crude oil production created a historically distinctive and geographically specific set of concrete social and material relations of commodity production. In turn, it configured the ecological and economic materiality and spatiality of the nation state. These relations defined new patterns of integration with the wider region, the Levant, and a complete integration into a differentiated capitalist world economy.

A socio-historical examination of the 'oil nation of Iraq' from the turn of the second half of the twentieth century onwards would reveal how the national socio-ecology of oil undermined the nation state itself and 'unimagined' this oil nation. It would show how securing access to oil revenues amplified, to use Michael Watts's words, the "sub-national political institution-making" and, thereby, how politics became "a massive state-making machine" in relation to autonomy over oil.⁴³ The present political turmoil in the region reflects the disintegration of the early twentieth-century national boundaries and continuing processes of state making and national imagining differentiated through ethnically and religiously fragmented lines. The historical roots of these new forms of political fragmentation are hidden in the relationality between the socio-ecological alienation of people from nature and socio-political alienation of people from people in the formation of an oil frontier and oil nation. While the big oil companies have projected their story of transforming ecologically embedded communities of the Third World from "primitive and traditional" people into modern developing states to a global mass audience, this "imaginatively sterile petrofiction" of "the drama of oil history" was possible due the inadequate focus on the interaction between the socio-ecological and geo-political elements of the oil encounter.⁴⁴

⁴³ Watts (2004), pp. 210.

⁴⁴ Amitav Ghosh, 'Petrofiction: The Oil Encounter and the Novel,' in *The Imam and the Indian*, Delhi: Ravi Dayal, 2002, pp.138-9.

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The mutually reinforcing relationship between 'commodities' and 'empires' has long been recognised. Over the last six centuries the quest for profits has driven imperial expansion, with the global trade in commodities fuelling the ongoing industrial revolution. These 'commodities of empire', which became transnationally mobilised in ever larger quantities, included foodstuffs (wheat, rice, bananas); industrial crops (cotton, rubber, linseed and palm oils); stimulants (sugar, tea, coffee, cocoa, tobacco and opium); and ores (tin, copper, gold, diamonds). Their expanded production and global movements brought vast spatial, social, economic and cultural changes to both metropolises and colonies.

In the Commodities of Empire project we explore the networks through which such commodities circulated within, and in the spaces between, empires. We are particularly attentive to local processes – originating in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean and Latin America – which significantly influenced the outcome of the encounter between the world economy and regional societies, doing so through a comparative approach that explores the experiences of peoples subjected to different imperial hegemonies.

The following key research questions inform the work of project:

- 1) The networks through which commodities were produced and circulated within, between and beyond empires;
- 2) The interlinking 'systems' (political-military, agricultural labour, commercial, maritime, industrial production, social communication, technological knowledge) that were themselves evolving during the colonial period, and through which these commodity networks functioned;
- 3) The impact of agents in the periphery on the establishment and development of commodity networks: as instigators and promoters; through their social, cultural and technological resistance; or through the production of anti-commodities;
- 4) The impact of commodity circulation both on the periphery, and on the economic, social and cultural life of the metropolises;
- 5) The interrogation of the concept of 'globalisation' through the study of the historical movement and impact of commodities.

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