The Politics of Natural Resources: The “Resource Curse” and Beyond

MPhil Module
POLIS, Michaelmas Term 2021

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Time: 3-5 pm Friday, starting on 8th October 2021

Description

This module introduces students to the key concepts, theories, and issues in the politics of natural resources. Resource-rich states have experienced various political problems, including authoritarianism, civil wars, and international aggression, which have been attributed to the very presence of resource wealth. These issues are collectively called the “resource curse” and have received much scholarly attention since the turn of the century.

This course reviews the development of this literature and seeks to go beyond it, discussing how we can connect it to the broader scholarship on resource politics. It does so by extending the scope of the theory on three grounds: timeframe, issues, and resources. When did the political impact of natural resources begin? What other issues do they lead to? Is it just about oil? If not, what distinguishes resources with political impacts from those without?

The aim of this module is to give students the tools to understand how the geological, geographical, historical, and social settings of a country can affect its politics. It also aims to help them develop the ability to critically analyze contemporary political issues and sometimes think outside the box in explaining their causes.

Course organization and expectations

The course will consist of seven seminars of 1.5 to 2 hours in length. The purpose of the seminars is to have a student-led discussion of assigned readings each week, which will be oriented around the set question listed in this guide. Regular attendance and participation, though not formally assessed, are mandatory. If for any reason you cannot make a seminar, be sure to contact the module convenor in advance. Each session (after the first one) will be led by student discussants, which will be selected in the first session.

Students will be expected to make one presentation. Starting on the second class, discussion leaders will be asked to start the discussion through a brief reflection essay (of 2-3 double-spaced pages) about the required readings for the week. The essay discusses the readings, answers an initial discussion question set by the course instructor (see the reading list for each week), and formulates a few additional questions related to the readings to be discussed in class. The essays should be analytical and critical; it should not be a mere summary of the readings. Presenters’ questions are meant to provoke debate among class participants. Each presentation should last no longer than 10 minutes to allow for collective discussion. Please assume that everyone will have read your essay and will be ready to engage with your reflections and questions. Reflection essays should be emailed in word or pdf format to all seminar participants (including the course instructor) at 11:59 pm on the day before our class sessions.
In the reading lists that follow, there are two kinds of readings. One is required readings; students are expected to come to class having done those readings. The other is further readings, which are included for students who may want to read further on the topic and may also be useful when writing the assessment essays.

Assessment will be based on a 3000-word essay at the end of the term. This will be due on Friday 3 December.

**Week 1: Prehistory – Colonialism and natural resources**

Discussion question: What was the role of natural resources in colonial rule?

Required readings:

Further readings:

**Week 2: Rentier states and the Middle East**

Discussion question: Is rentierism unique to the Middle East?

Required readings:

Further readings:
Smith, C.G. “The Emergence of the Middle East.” *Journal of Contemporary History* 3.3 (1968): 3-17.

**Week 3: Democracy**

Discussion question: Does oil hinder democracy?

Required readings:

Further readings:

**Week 4: Civil war**

Discussion question: Do natural resources cause civil wars?

Required readings:

Further readings:
**Week 5: Anti-mining movements**

Discussion question: Why do people resist mining projects?

Required readings:

Further readings:

**Week 6: International conflicts**

Discussion question: Does oil cause international conflicts?

Required readings:

Further readings:

**Week 7: Not so “natural” resources**

Discussion question: What political roles does aid, military bases, canals, or tax havens play, and how are they different from the role of oil?

Required readings:
Ashgate, 2008, Chapter 1.


Further readings: