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Resource nationalism

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Abstract: This entry introduces the concept of 'resource nationalism' as a political discourse about how a state and its population should manage and distribute profits derived from natural resources, usually positing that the people of a given country, rather than private corporations or foreign entities, should benefit from the resources of a territorially-defined state. Early scholarship on resource nationalism focused on the oil industry and state-based elites, but new critical research examines resource nationalist scripts articulated by a diverse range of elite and nonelite, and state-based and non-state-based actors, and about a wide range of natural resources beyond oil. This research shows how the very concepts of 'nation' and 'resources' are discursively produced through political uses of resource nationalism.

Keywords: resource nationalism, natural resources, territory, state, oil, geopolitics

Resource nationalism is a political discourse, or 'nationalist script,' about how a state and its population should manage and distribute profits derived from natural resources. As with all nationalist scripts, resource nationalism can take many forms in different contexts. Yet in most cases, the central logic of resource nationalism is that the people of a given country, rather than private corporations or foreign entities, should benefit from the resources of a territorially defined state (Koch and Perreault 2019, pp. 611-612). The resources that are the target of resource nationalism's concern can range from fossil fuels like oil, gas, or coal to metals and rare earths like gold, silver, copper, uranium, and lithium to gems, timber, fish, and more (Rutland 2022). Just as the resources themselves are diverse, so too are the proponents of resource nationalism. Nationalist scripts asserting that a field of oil or a deposit of gold is 'ours' can be deployed by political elites and ordinary people alike. And sometimes these actors work together to decide a country's extraction policies, and other times they fight over different visions of how the nation should benefit from natural resources – and who will carry the costs.

Resource nationalism is remarkably diverse and dynamic. Yet for many years, academic studies of resource nationalism were mostly limited to applied economic and policy analyses, especially concerning the oil industry. The focus on oil is largely due to the historical trajectory of the industry's global development, whereby large Western companies moved early to develop oil fields and major extraction sites in the Middle East and South America. Some leaders in oil-rich countries felt that the profits from oil sales were not being shared adequately and tried to renegotiate contracts to get better terms for the host countries. In other cases, they simply took over and nationalized the foreign oil production. A handful of countries moved early to nationalize oil (the USSR in 1918, Bolivia in 1937, Mexico in 1938), but the most dramatic expropriation of a foreign-controlled oil company was when the Iranian government took over the Anglo-Persian Oil Company in 1951 and transformed it into the National Iranian Oil Company (Yergin 1991).

The Iranian takeover of Anglo-Persian was a dramatic and revolutionary move, which taught private oil producers and policymakers that 'resource nationalism' was a force to be reckoned with and sparked fears of a 'domino effect' in other countries. At the height of the Cold War, when communist and socialist political leaders were advocating for the nationalization of private property and many industries, Western leaders and their capitalist allies began to fear that a nationalist surge could lead to their foreign operations being taken over. It is for this reason that much of the early writing about resource nationalism approached it as a serious risk, which

businesspeople needed to evaluate and predict as part of any resource extraction enterprise (e.g. Park et al. 1976).

Scholars approach resource nationalism much more broadly today, moving well beyond the study of oil and the traditional focus on state and corporate elites. Instead, a 'critical approach to resource nationalism,' advanced by Natalie Koch and Tom Perreault (2019, p. 614), does not take the 'nation' or 'resources' for granted. Rather, it investigates how these very concepts are politically constituted through rhetorical and material practices, including cultural and historical identity narratives, their social and territorial expressions in and beyond the state, the spatial variation of resources in a given country, political traditions surrounding activism and populism, and ties to global networks including multinational corporations, consulting companies and international activist networks.

In recent years, critical research on resource nationalism has flourished in the social sciences, including scholarship from the fields of geography, political ecology, anthropology, sociology, and environmental studies. Most of this new research is deeply empirical, and scholars of resource nationalism draw from a wide range of methods that is just as likely to include textual analysis from a desk as interviews and ethnography in distant field sites. By examining the multiple, co-existing narratives of resource nationalism in a particular context or about a particular extraction site, this research shows how the political geographic building blocks of nationalism – the 'nation,' 'state,' 'territory,' and 'sovereignty' – are concepts that actors with and without economic and political privilege advance together. They likewise co-produce the social use value that transforms a simple material thing into a 'resource,' even when their positions vary on how that value should be realized (Perreault 2021).

Critical research on resource nationalism expands beyond traditional state-based frames about the actors involved in producing resource nationalism, showing how differently positioned actors outside political office also mobilize resource nationalist scripts, ranging from voting publics to private companies, union leaders, or Indigenous activists working across borders. Yet in doing so, this work also takes the state seriously by showing how state territory, institutions, and legal frameworks create both the opportunities and constraints of resource nationalist discourse. As a discourse articulated within the prevailing Westphalian state system, resource nationalisms might occasionally challenge the hegemony of the territorial state, but these scripts almost uniformly affirm the dominant geopolitical architecture of a world divided between discrete nations with territorial homelands – some of which are rich with resources that might be claimed as belonging to the 'nation.'

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