

Understanding Niger Delta's violence from a World-Ecology perspective

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ABSTRACT: The conflict in the Niger Delta region (Nigeria) has become one of the most environmentally and humanly devastating contexts on the African continent since the 1960s. The network of different actors involved in this context forms a complex web in which multiple and asymmetrical dynamics and interactions can be identified. From Jason Moore's World-Ecology perspective (2015), the article suggests that this complex interaction should not be understood as a mere postcolonial episode in the context of globalisation, but as a historical network of relations. This network, in which human and extra-human natures are intertwined, is key to understanding the process of capital accumulation in the region and the resulting *capitalogenic violence* since the 16th century. Against this background, the article also attempts to counter the tendency to interpret violence and social resistance in the Niger Delta region as mere criminal phenomena or from narratives such as the "resource curse" that has simplified the multidimensionality of violence. In this sense, the paper analyses the different forms, strategies and meanings through which local resistance movements have tried to safeguard and re-appropriate their livelihoods and the commons in recent decades in the face of the growing presence of multinational oil corporations.

KEYWORDS: Violence, Niger Delta, World-Ecology, Oil, Capitalism.

Revista de Estudios en Seguridad Internacional, Vol. 7, No. 1, (2021), pp. 29-43.
<http://www.seguridadinternacional.es/revista/>

ISSN: 2444-6157. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.18847/1.13.4>

INTRODUCTION

Violence in the Niger Delta has been deemed by the literature on conflict analysis as an “intractable conflict” (Owolabi & Okwechime, 2007), due to the persistence, severity and complexity of its dynamics. Located in the southernmost part of Nigeria and covering an area of some 70,000 square kilometres, the Niger Delta is the largest river delta in Africa and the third largest in the world. It comprises nine oil-producing states and is home to about 40 ethnic groups speaking 250 languages and dialects (Niger Delta Regional Development Master Plan, 2006). Since the 1960s, which coincided with Nigerian independence, the existence and extraction of oil have become one of the central elements in the economic and political life of the country, and in particular of this region. Nowadays, oil revenues account for 80 percent of the federal budget, 95 percent of export receipts and 90 percent of foreign exchange earnings (Babatunde, 2020).

The extraction and commercialisation of oil, however, has led to environmental devastation in the Niger Delta. According to Kew and Phillips (2007: 159–60), 1.5 million tons of oil have been spilled into the Niger Delta over the past 50 years, making the region “one of the five most polluted locations on earth”. Likewise, since the finding of the oil, conflicts between petroleum multinationals, private security companies, state and federal authorities and “militias” and armed groups have followed one after the other. This web of actors thus highlights a complex interconnection between violence and oil resources in the region (Watts, 2006). Despite attempts and strategies to resolve the dispute, the Niger Delta continues to be one of the most volatile African contexts today, with multiple forms of violence affecting all of its communities and groups.

The dominant narratives that have explained this conflict, however, have tended to understand violence in the Niger Delta simplistically. On the one hand, they tend to confine the understanding of the conflict to the post-colonial context, with the discovery of oil. On the other hand, such discourses tend to interpret the nature of the violence as an essentially criminal phenomenon, whose main perpetrators are a set of local militias of disaffected youths, in what represents a context-adapted version of the so-called “resource curse” narrative (Collier, 2007).

This article attempts to confront these two main postulates from the perspective of “World-Ecology”, as proposed, above all, by Jason Moore (2015). This perspective can be understood as “an open discussion that seeks to understand capitalism as a world system based on the appropriation of nature to ensure a continuous process of accumulation” (Molinero-Gerbeau, Avallone & Moore, 2021: 5). From this perspective, in the first part, the article understands violence in the Niger Delta not as a recent phenomenon, but as a new phase in the historical process of accumulation of cheap nature, energy and lives. In the case of this Nigerian region, the slave trade or the palm oil trade must be understood as part of a long-standing process of accumulation that has been going on for centuries. Following Moore’s approach, the article problematises the understanding of nature and humanity as two distinct units, in which nature is conceived as a mere object, or environmental devastation as a mere externality of human action (see also Torrent, this special issue). The text presents the interaction between the complex web of actors of all kinds and nature as a symbiotic and interdependent relationship that affects each other. This relationship, it is argued, results in a “capitalogenic violence” in which different impacts and responsibilities must be distinguished.

The second part of the text discusses the dominant discourses that criminalise political resistance to the presence of oil multinationals or the role of the state. Despite attempts to promote some policies that guarantee respect for the human and environmental rights of

local communities, it is argued that such policies do not challenge the process of accumulation and expropriation of resources. There is, therefore, no supposed curse of natural resources, but rather the constant commodification and dispossession of these resources in the hands of global actors and chains. It is this dynamic that explains the consolidation of the militarised and securitised strategy of the state and private security companies contracted by oil multinationals as the main response to local resistance and protest. In short, the article advocates for interpreting the complex meanings of local resistance as part of a strategy of re-appropriation of resources, as various authors have argued (Obi, 2010; among others).

HISTORICAL CAPITALIST ACCUMULATION, NATURE AND POWER IN THE NIGER DELTA

Much of the literature that has analysed the conflict in the Niger Delta considers the discovery of oil in 1956 as a turning point. Whether from a criminalising perspective of resistance and violence, as in the case of the “resource curse” narrative (Collier & Hoeffler, 1998; Ross, 1999), or from other more critical views, the growing presence of multinational oil companies since then, starting with the pioneering Shell-BP, has tended to be seen as the beginning of a scenario in which oil extraction becomes the main locus of interaction between transnational and local actors. In many cases, this analysis is also accompanied by a narrative that considers the fragility of the Nigerian post-colonial state as a central feature in explaining the conflict.

This view, however, does not help us understand the complexity of the conflict. Understanding the late 1950s as the origin of the violence in the Niger Delta is problematic in three ways. First, it reduces the conflict to what we might call a mere postcolonial episode. Secondly, it places an excessive focus on internal actors for their new protagonism in this new decolonised context. Finally, it ignores elements of the country’s history and the insertion of the continent, and of this region in particular, in the context of global capitalism as a whole. It is true that the literature that has analysed African conflictivity in recent years has emphasised the need to understand the colonial legacy, and even the Atlantic slave trade, as relevant to the present in many African contexts. However, the literature on the Niger Delta abounds in analyses that fall into this short-term reductionism.

In this sense, Jason Moore’s World-Ecology perspective offers us relevant elements to go beyond this limited vision of the temporality of conflict in this region. Far from being something recent, the author warns us, “the processes that have turned our breakfasts, our cars and our working days into a world-historical activity have their origins in the ‘long’ 16th century (1451-1648)” (Moore, 2015: 22). This “longue durée” of historical capitalism, as he claims, highlights the relationship between cyclical movements (the phases of capitalism) and the accumulation of socio-ecological contradictions in life, capital and power over the last five centuries.

Nigerian scholars such as Charles Ukeje (2011), Cyril Obi (2010, 2012) and Modesta Tochi Alozie (2020), to give a few examples, have offered a “long lights” view of the conflict in the Niger Delta. For all of them, the interplay between the various processes of capital accumulation, the natures and power of the various actors that have historically interacted in this scenario is key. Ukeje (2011: 84) puts it as follows:

Many scholars have inadvertently hinged their narratives of the multifaceted crises facing the Niger Delta [...] when crude oil was first discovered in commercial quantities

in 1956, after which production and exports began in 1958. Such analyses mostly offer only a partial and incomplete explanation that can only be remedied by historicizing the changing political economy of the region from the 1450s onwards. It was from then that inhabitants of the region began to engage with a succession of European explorers, missionaries, slavers, colonial mandarins and post-independence state authorities, to produce the unique blend of social and political relationships that is evident to date.

From the Slave trade to the palm oil trade

There are three major global processes in which capital accumulation, nature and power were key in this region: the slave trade, the palm oil trade and, in a final phase, oil production. With regards to the Atlantic Slave Trade that lasted for three centuries, but which was particularly intense between the mid-17th century and the mid-18th century, some authors claim that the Niger Delta sea networks played a crucial role in it. Before the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833, more than three million African slaves had been shipped to Europe and America through the Niger Delta coast (in Alozie, 2020: 90). There is much debate in African studies on the impact of an episode as distant a priori as the slave trade on the political, social and economic present landscape of the countries that suffered most from it. However, from a critical perspective, it is assumed that the impacts were multiple (depopulation, culture of violence promoted by the “predatory regimes”, feeling of inferiority and moral trauma, etc.) and at different levels (economic, social, political or psychological) (see, among others, Poku & Mdee, 2011).

Authors such as Stefania Barca (2020) draw attention to the importance of the economic system of exploitation implemented through the transatlantic slave trade and the enslavement of human beings, without which - she holds - the original accumulation of capital that generated the subsequent development of neoliberal capitalism would not have been possible. In this regard, the late burkinabe historian Joseph Ki-Zerbo (2011: 327-328) notes:

Europe used black workers as accumulators of wealth. Thanks to the considerable profits from the black trade -300 percent to 800 percent- the high-level trade of Europeans could self-finance its activities and create various processing industries, the birth of which marked the birth of big industry. In terms of labour-capital and raw materials, Africa has thus contributed, against its will, to the economic take-off of Europe, continuing in this role throughout the colonial or neo-colonial period.

After the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade in 1833, trade relations between Europe and the Niger Delta continued through the palm oil trade. Critical literature analysing the current conflict in the Niger Delta often refers to it as a key process for understanding the present, which can be understood in parallel to the process of British colonisation of what is now Nigeria. According to Alozie (2020: 91), in the latter part of the 19th century the demand for palm oil trade grew and it was a demand that the industrial revolution and the increasing demand for natural oil in Europe had inspired. The old continent was struggling with its future, and just as the labours of African male slaves contributed to the wealth and development of pre-modern Europe, Europe desperately needed the palm oil from West Africa to modernise (Watts, 2008). For Obi (2012), the connection between the dispossession of the wealth of the African continent and the growth of industrial capitalism in Europe and North America is plain to see. This unequal exchange, the author points out, in the case of the Niger Delta, led to the integration of this region into global trade as a source of palm oil that did not benefit the people of the region in any way, but led to the exploitation of the region’s resources for the benefit of Europe and to violent resistance.

This trade had not only economic, but also political and social implications. The control of the palm oil trade was instrumental in the British conquest of the region as a precursor to the eventual colonisation of Nigeria in 1914. The creation of Nigeria and its division into three regions meant the subjugation of the Niger Delta trading states and the local business class. Furthermore, the people of the Niger Delta were relegated to ethnic minority status in relation to the numerically superior ethnic groups that dominated political life in the former Western (Yoruba), Eastern (Igbo) and Northern (Hausa-Fulani) regions of Nigeria (Obi & Rustad, 2011: 5). These elements, as in many other places on the African continent, contributed to the construction of grievances among ethnic groups that underlie many of the internal conflicts that have taken place in the country since then.

Both the slave trade and palm oil trade, Ukiwo (2011: 20) holds, required community participation as they entailed massive mobilization of local labour and capital. Surpluses and rents which accrued to the local elite contributed to class formation and the consolidation of dynastic rule in some of the prominent communities.

From the perspective of World-Ecology, moreover, the subjugation of nature and societies for commercial and profit-making purposes, in what Moore (2015) calls “cheap nature”, will be key to the process of accumulation in Europe at that time. This subjugation is based on the dehumanisation and commodification of people and the conception of nature as a mere object, something that, for this author, is functional to the configuration of capitalism. The discovery of oil in the late 1950s initiated a third global process that continues to the present day, in which the dynamics of today’s violence are embedded. From the Ecology-World perspective, understanding this “historical coherence of capitalism”, as Moore calls it, since the 16th century (and in the case of the Niger Delta even since the 15th century), is key to any analysis of the current dynamics.

Oil, Accumulation and Violence in the Post-Colonial Context of the Niger Delta

Although oil was discovered in 1956, it was not until the mid-1960s, with Nigeria now independent, that crude oil exports began to gain prominence and to undermine revenues from other sources such as agriculture. In the early stages, the oil industry in the Niger Delta was dominated mainly by Shell-BP, which was later joined by other multinational oil companies. Local participation and the ability of the national authorities to regulate the business was minimal until the 1970s (Obi & Rustad, 2011). From then on, as oil commercialisation became the country’s main asset, state authorities nationalised the oil profits, generating a huge level of resentment and frustration among the local population of the Niger Delta as they watched the oil profits remain in the hands of the Nigerian state elites and the big corporations.

The various local resistance movements, whose motivations will be analysed in the following section, began to proliferate in response to the perceived marginalisation they already suffered as minority groups in the new post-colonial context, and to the dispossession of their natural wealth. These groups, most notably MOSOP (Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People) or IYC (Ijaw Youth Council), were characterised by the use of peaceful means. For Charles Ukeje (2011: 85), however:

Conflict began to brew and escalate during the 1990s, against the backdrop of past failed promises, growing marginalization and frustration that reliance on non-bellucose community-based actions to draw attention to their plight had yielded little, if any, positive result. The groundswell of new community- and grass-roots-based protests began to grow during the late 1980s, exacerbated by the biting effects of the IMF/World Bank-imposed Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP). At the same time, nascent grassroots

protests sprouted in the context of domestic and post-Cold War global discourses on human, environmental and minority rights, the former deriving from a nationwide clamour for a quick return to civilian rule, and the latter to do with attempts to bring about the empowerment of minority and environmentally challenged groups around the world.

According to Ukoha Ukiwo (2011), in a few years, the Niger Delta witnessed the transition from a peaceful and civil protest to a violent movement that gradually intensified its activities and strategies (sabotage of oil installations, kidnapping of expatriates, ...) against the presence of multinationals and state authorities.

Apart from the proliferation of various armed groups and militias since then, violence in the Niger Delta has also been characterised by the multiplicity of actors and instruments that make up a complex network that, for instance, Michael Watts (2006) has called the “oil complex”. This notion connects with concepts such as “Global assemblages” (Sassen 2006; Abrahamsen, 2017) or “Networked wars” (Duffield, 2001) which, precisely, aim to highlight the multinodal, complex and networked nature of violence in contemporary armed conflicts. In this regard, Watts sees the Nigerian state as interacting in a network with: i) state and federal military forces; ii) local and global civil society organisations, whether through transnational advocacy groups concerned with human rights and transparency of the entire oil sector, or through local social movements and NGOs fighting the consequences of the oil industry and the accountability of the state; iii) transnational oil companies - the majors, independents and the major service industry; iv) local political forces, such as ethnic militias, paramilitaries, separatist movements, etc.; v) multilateral development agencies (e.g., the International Monetary Fund, the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, etc.); vi) financial corporations such as export credit agencies as key intermediaries in the construction and expansion of energy sectors in oil-producing states, or among others, vii) drug trafficking networks or private security companies.

In this last area alone, that of private security, Rita Abrahamsen and Michael C. Williams (2009: 10) have shown, for instance, how in the case of the Niger Delta between 1500 and 2000 private security companies were deployed in this region, employing more than one hundred thousand people who participate in the complex dynamics of violence. Both authors have pointed out how private security in the Niger Delta plays an important role in securing not only the operations of oil companies, but also, by extension, the authority of the federal government, which depends on the revenues from these operations.

According to Obi and Rustad (2011: 2), the reality of the Niger Delta has devolved thus into a vicious cycle of exploitation, protest, repression, resistance, militarisation and the descent into a volatile mix of insurgent violence and criminality. The human and environmental impact since then has been extraordinary. On the latter point, for example, in recent years several reports have warned of the extraordinary impact of extractivism on the Niger Delta ecosystems that local populations need to survive (UNDP, 2006; UNEP, 2011). More recently, the Bayelsa State Oil and Environmental Commission (2019: 11) published a report echoing the scale of the catastrophe for local populations:

Hundreds of thousands of people in Bayelsa have been forced to live on contaminated land, drink and fish in contaminated water and breathe contaminated air. Mortality and morbidity rates have risen sharply, as has the incidence of chronic disease, in communities without the resources to cope. Countless lives and livelihoods are being destroyed. Thousands of communities and tens if not hundreds of thousands of people have seen their land and fishing grounds poisoned. Neonatal death and child malnutrition has risen, and hundreds of thousands have been forced into abject poverty.

The complex webs of violence, however, demand a nuanced analysis based on the recognition of the confluence or interaction of many factors - national, regional, international and transnational - rather than the imposition of a single narrative or “cause” as responsible for the violence in the oil-rich but impoverished region (Obi & Rustad, 2011). From a World-Ecology perspective, it is important to emphasise the asymmetrical character of violence. Environmental and human devastation is not the mere consequence of armed confrontation between the different actors in this network, or the primary responsibility of local militias and local groups that are considered “criminals”. Violence does not have, in this regard, an “anthropogenic” character, which places equal responsibility on all human action, or in this case, on all the actors involved in this network. The violence in the Niger Delta is, from our perspective, a *capitalogenic violence*, that is to say, driven by a capitalist system that historically accumulates by dispossessing on the basis of a given power structure (see also Hardt, this special issue).

This historical dynamic, moreover, is not only responsible for fostering direct violence (devastation of the environment and ecosystems, deaths resulting from armed clashes, etc.), but has historically produced structural violence, systematising a system of inequalities and injustices, as well as a culture of violence that legitimises the current militarised dynamics in the region. As will be argued below, any conflict transformation strategy must emphasise the structural and cultural violence elements that underlie this capitalogenic violence. Yet conventional responses have generally insisted on addressing aspects of the conflict that are very superficial and essentially concerned with dampening direct violence.

MEANINGS AND INTERPRETATIONS OF VIOLENCE AND POLITICAL RESISTANCE IN THE NIGER DELTA

A second narrative that has been prevalent in the interpretation of violence in the Niger Delta is one that understands it as a criminal and post-political phenomenon, essentially centred on the role, in this case, of local militias since the 1990s. This interpretation is not unique to the Nigerian context. Most media, political and even academic interpretations of post-Cold War African armed conflicts have advocated understanding violence on the African continent from monocausal and very simplistic narratives, in which identity (Rwanda), the resource curse (Sierra Leone, Democratic Republic of Congo) or the role of the failed state (Somalia) are considered central elements in explaining the origin of armed violence (see Ruiz-Giménez, 2012). The critical literature on conflict analysis has warned of the serious impact of this trend. The interpretation of a conflict in a certain way also ends up determining the type of solutions offered at the state, regional or international level (Mateos, 2020).

From conflict resolution strategies to conflict militarisation strategies in the Niger Delta

In the case of violence in the Niger Delta, conflict resolution strategies have been very superficial and little oriented towards addressing the structural elements that have to do with the processes of accumulation by dispossession of global chains. In recent years, there have been some attempts to pacify and negotiate a way out with armed groups and militias. Babatunde Ahonsi (2011: 36-39) identifies three broad phases of the official response to the crisis and conflict to date: i) 1960–89, this period was featured by the early recognition by the federal government of the special developmental attention that the region deserved, establishing the so-called Niger Delta Development Board (NDDDB)

to manage the developmental challenges of the region that was not able to achieve much; ii) 1990–99, a period that witnessed the intensification of discontent and protest and in which the governmental authorities set up the Oil Mineral Producing Areas Development Commission (OMPADEC) that allocated 3 percent of federal oil revenue to tackle the developmental challenges of the oil-bearing communities, and iii) 2000–present, a period characterised by the decision to grant more benefits to local communities (increasing the so-called “derivation principle” to 13 percent of the wealth), the creation of a ministry for the Niger Delta and the granting of an amnesty to imprisoned members of armed groups and militias.

The Amnesty program provided training and reintegration opportunities for demobilised combatants and led to more than 30,000 alleged members joining the amnesty between October 2009 and May 2011 (ICG, 2015). This fact was hailed as a major achievement of Umaru Musa Yar'Adua's government (Ukiwo, 2011). Although the amnesty, as well as other initiatives deployed in this period (NDDC or the Ministry for the region, mainly) were considered important milestones in the pacification of the region, the proliferation of new militant groups has revived violence almost permanently and highlighted the fragility of peace. Moreover, problems related to corruption, poor inter-institutional coordination or political interference have also derailed many of these measures (Alozie, 2020). Analyses that have addressed the difficulties of peacebuilding in the region, however, have raised two fundamental problems that critical peace studies have been suggesting in order to understand the unsustainability and lack of legitimacy of these initiatives: on the one hand, the tendency to boost top-down strategies that do not include the participation of communities and affected local actors; on the other hand, the inability to address the underlying issues (Babatunde, 2020; Obi & Rustad, 2011).

Oil companies have also been subject to a global debate on corporate social responsibility, through initiatives such as “Publish what you pay”, which have sought to promote transparency, respect for human rights in contexts of conflict and compensation for affected communities (Idemudia, 2011). Likewise, various international resolutions have condemned the actions of some of the companies present in the Niger Delta. The networking of local civil society organisations with regional and international civil society organisations has been instrumental in exposing the responsibilities of multinational oil companies and in increasing the national, regional and international pressure and demand for accountability on them.

All of these initiatives, however, do not take into account the capitalogenic character of violence, nor do they have the capacity to address the structural elements that are found in the processes of accumulation by dispossession that affect the Niger Delta. They are essentially reactive measures (based on ex-post compensations) and aimed at regulating the impact of multinationals on the local context. Global governance initiatives, such as the aforementioned “Publish what you pay”, or others such as the so-called “Global Compact” or the “United Nations Guiding Principles”, have made the abuses committed by oil multinationals more visible and have forced these companies to incorporate this issue into their modus operandi. However, all these global governance initiatives, which have a multi-stakeholder and multi-level character, do not achieve a real readjustment of global production chains. On the one hand, they represent a cosmetic change for many of these companies (*greenwashing*), which continue to be based on economic growth and profit as their main guideline. On the other hand, they do not imply a questioning of the dynamics of accumulation by dispossession, based on a culture of extreme consumption that is only possible, as Moore points out, through the use, in this case, of cheap nature, energy and labour. Beyond corporate social responsibility policies, a real transformation

requires, at the level of economic governance, questioning and regulating the very process of these global chains. At the cultural and social level, it means tackling a system based on a consumer culture that generates winners and losers.

Likewise, the limited results obtained by these measures are accompanied by a growing militarisation of the response in an attempt to contain local discontent over the effects of the dispossession of their resources and the impact on ecosystems. According to Obi (2008: 428), the globalisation of Niger Delta oil has been accompanied by a process of securitisation, in which global hegemonic forces regard oil as a “globally necessary” vital resource, whose continuous “uninterrupted” flow along with the security of (transnational) oil investments and oil workers must be protected by all means, including military means. To understand the factors underpinning the securitisation, and ultimately militarisation, of the Niger Delta, Ukeje (2011) argues, it is important not to forget the character of the colonial state and its post-colonial reincarnation.

The strong military presence in both areas has entailed a strategy based on repression, intimidation, abuse, mass arrests, detentions, beatings, torture, killings and destruction. In the view of Agbonifo and Aghedo (2012), there is no doubt that militarisation has aggravated the spiral of violence. We cannot forget that the execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight other Ogoni environmental activists in November 1995, based on fabricated charges by the Sani Abacha regime (1993-1998), was the beginning of the intensification and systematisation of violence, which would escalate in the late 1990s. However, it is clear to Babatunde (2020: 16) that the main strategy so far of the Nigerian government and international actors has been militarisation: “The government seems to rely on the brutal force more than the concerted commitment to tackle the mounting environmental and developmental problems facing the region.” This explains why a considerable proportion of the federal government’s budget allocated to the Niger Delta, at least in 2008 (one of the years with the highest intensity of violence), went to military and police security (Ukiwo, 2011).

“Resource curse” or “resource control”?

Violence in the Niger Delta, especially since the late 1990s, has tended to be interpreted as a criminal phenomenon (see Watts, 2004). The emergence in 2006 of the so-called Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) marked a turning point in the systematisation and intensification of actions against the oil complex, aimed literally at destroying the Nigerian government’s capacity to export oil (Ako, 2011).

The proliferation of groups, guerrillas or militias in this context has even led some authors to try to categorise such diversity and differentiate the nature and characteristics of the various groups. Francis, Deirdre, and Rossiasco (in Aghedo & Osumah, 2014: 217), for example, distinguish between what they term as: i) Advocacy groups (agitate for substantive ethnic and communal demands using non-violent methods); ii) Cults and confraternities (main players in petty crimes and local kidnapping for ransom, they are not politically motivated but frequently serve as mercenaries or allies of other armed groups and may join political militias during elections); iii) Community-based ‘vigilante’ (they assure communal defence and protection from criminals or predatory enemies); iv) Militias (sustain themselves with oil bunkering, well-paid security contracts for politicians or oil companies, political enforcement, armed services, piracy, or trafficking in drugs and weapons), and v) Umbrella militias: MEND.

This process of intensification and diversification of violent actions in the Niger Delta since then has given more space to narratives that focus on the presence of natural resources and that stereotype all these groups, as Alozie (2020: 21) suggests, as ‘restive’, ‘criminal’, ‘gangs’, ‘terrorist groups’, hell-bent on destabilising the region, largely because of ‘greed’ and ‘poor education’.

The case of the Niger Delta has attracted the attention of all those authors who have inserted themselves into the narrative of the “resource abundance curse”, from the different variants: the “honey pot” narrative, which directly links resources, greed and violence; the “Dutch disease” narrative, which analyses the indirect link between natural resources, violence and the rentier state; and the “separatist incentive” variant, which focuses on the relationship between resource wealth and so-called “secessionist” wars (see Mateos, 2011). These narratives have offered some interesting elements, such as, for example, the visibility of the networks and actors in the global economy of contemporary conflicts, although, on many occasions, their authors have tended to caricature, depoliticise and criminalise the multiple and complex meanings of violence, especially on the African continent. The various works of economist Paul Collier have undoubtedly been one of the main exponents of such narratives. In his work, *The Bottom Billion*, Collier (2007: 30-31) frames the conflict in the Niger Delta in the following terms:

[People in the Niger Delta] with a sense of grievance were no more likely to take part in violent protest than those who were not aggrieved. So what did make people more likely to engage in political violence?...well, being young, being uneducated, and being without dependents... [There] was no relationship between social amenities that a district possessed and its propensity to political violence. Instead the violence occurs in the districts with oil wells...

From the critical literature that has analysed this Nigerian region, the “resource curse” narrative is reductionist, and in turn, damaging, as it does not help to articulate any truly transformative strategies. For Alozie (2020), for example, this understanding of youth violence obscures the decisive impact of local and international capitalist networks, the pre-colonial and the colonial legacy of exploitation and cultural factors in shaping local violence. For the author, instead of considering this violence as a form of youth criminal behaviour, in direct allusion to Collier, it is necessary to understand it as the interaction between multi-level factors. Political ecology, she suggests, believes that social relations are shaped by the interaction between humans and the biophysical environment, and that this interaction can inform people’s identities and shape political and economic processes. Because humans and the biophysical environment co-produce each other, transformations of the latter can shape social relations in violent ways.

Critical peace and conflict studies have insisted on understanding the nature of today’s armed conflicts as multi-causal and complex (Ruiz-Giménez, 2012). It is not only a matter of understanding the different actors or structural factors that explain violence, but also, as the “anthropology of war” reminds us (see, for example, Richards, 2005, or in the case of the Niger Delta, Bøas, 2011), of understanding the multiple and overlapping motivations that lead different individuals to engage in violence in a particular territory. Ukiwo (2011), in this case, has argued for understanding violence from Frances Stewart’s (2008) theory of “horizontal inequalities”, seeing perceptions of alienation and exclusion as central to the shaping of grievances.

Cyril Obi and Siri Aas Rustad (2011) or Rhuks Ako (2011), among others, have contrasted the resource curse narrative with what they have termed the “resource control” view, in which the “politics of dispossession” are central:

The quest for resource control by the people of the Niger Delta lies at the heart of the violence in the region. Resource control is essentially based on claims of ownership, access and equity, and refers to the desire that the region be left to manage its natural resources, particularly its oil, and pay taxes and/or royalties to the federal government. The notion of 'resource control' is grounded in the historical struggles of the people of the Niger Delta for self-determination and local autonomy, particularly in reversing decades of perceived federal marginalization in the distribution of power, and from the benefits accruing from the exploitation of the natural resources in the region. (Ako, 2011: 42).

Latin American Ecofeminism invites us to understand resistance movements against extractivism in a way that links with the perspective of World-Ecology. Resistance, in this sense, is interpreted as a form of re-appropriation of subtracted livelihoods and as a way in which land, resources and the body are an intertwined whole that confronts capital's attempts at dispossession. Cruz and Bayón (2020) thus speak of the "Body-territory" to recognise one's own body in connection with the fabric of life and in interdependence with the territory they inhabit. Women, Navarro-Trujillos and Linsalata (2021) also point out, have not only been identifying the dispossessions, exploitations and affectations of the territory-land of which they are part, but also those logics of domination over their own bodies in their physical, emotional and spiritual dimensions, finding that there is a continuum and that nothing is separate. In a similar vein, the Nigerian scholar, Oluwatoyin Oluwaniyi (2011), relates women's protests in the Niger Delta to the double exploitation of women, first by men, and second as a result of their exclusion from the benefits of the oil economy, including their victimisation by state repression of the protests. For Oluwaniyi, the struggle for resource control and self-determination of ethnic minorities in the region has a gendered component. In addition to fighting against male and class domination, women play an important role in the resistance in the Niger Delta (see also Mújika, this special issue).

This perspective, therefore, questions the simplistic and hyper-rationalist narrative, which focuses on greed as a central aspect inserted in a context of enormous material and cultural precariousness. From a World-Ecology perspective (but not exclusively), it advocates repoliticising, historicising and complexifying the interpretation of violence, based on two main aspects: i) understanding the role of elements that have to do with the structure and functioning of global chains historically in the context of global capitalism; ii) in turn, also understanding, as Alozie (2020) suggested, the elements of agency that seek to understand the motivations of those individuals who participate in the different armed groups or militias, also related to a complex social and cultural interaction that end up shaping and informing their priorities, perceptions and decisions.

CONCLUSIONS

This article has attempted to question the dominant narratives in the interpretation of violence in the case of the Niger Delta region from the perspective of the World-Ecology. On the one hand, the article considers that the context of violence circumscribed by oil exploitation is rooted in the long history of the region's insertion into global chains since the beginning of capitalism, first during the slave trade, and second, with the commercialisation of palm oil. The historical interaction between power structures, the dynamics of wealth accumulation, and the human and environmental impacts since then, generate a capitalogenic violence that generates structural and cultural violence that goes far beyond the direct violence generated since the late 1950s with the discovery of oil. It is this long-standing dynamic that helps us understand how the forces and actors that have

shaped global capitalism since then have moulded nature and the environment. In turn, to what extent this reality should not be conceived as a mere externality but as a reality that has also co-produced the different political and social processes that have characterised the region since then, such as resistance and the proliferation of local groups and militias.

The second part of the article has argued for a move away from the resource curse narrative, usually adopted in the political discourses of major international actors or in media interpretations. Rather than being a problem of resource abundance in a context of poverty, lack of opportunity and illiteracy, the World-Ecology perspective, together with, for example, Eco-feminism, helps us to understand violence in a much more complex and politicised sense. The critical literature, with a strong presence also of Nigerian scholars, suggests understanding local resistance as an attempt to re-appropriate historically expropriated livelihoods. And in turn, understanding this struggle as a connection of resistance to the territory that these communities and groups inhabit. The article, however, is also committed to approaching this whole phenomenon from a broader perspective, in which it is possible to understand the multiplicity of motivations based on interactions in specific social or cultural contexts.

The World-Ecology perspective is incorporated as a key discourse, highly suggestive and complementary to critical conflict analysis and peace studies, which in recent years have questioned the negative impact of the dominant monocausal narratives, and have tried to advocate a complex and multicausal view. From such a perspective, we are challenged in a suggestive and urgent way to overcome the Cartesian dualism between nature and society, internalised as an insurmountable prism even from perspectives that are highly critical of dominant discourses. The Niger Delta is thus a good context in which to continue thinking and reflecting on the causes, dynamics and meanings of armed violence on the African continent.

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