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Mobilization, Momentum, and Imagined Communities: The Politics of Identity in Resource Frontiers

Ted Baker

As resource extraction spreads into marginal areas (new frontiers), we tend to see a proliferation of new organisations, communities and collectivities that were not necessarily there before. In turn, these newly emergent groups (and some may be simply reorganisations or transformations of previously established communities) must define themselves in legible ways, utilizing the dominant bureaucratic discourse of those who are eager to gain access to these resource “rich” lands. “What has emerged is a ‘globalized political space’ in which new forms of political agency are being invented and contested against both established and newly configured structures of domination” (Brosius 1999:277).

It would seem that this situation is more than simple action and re-action, so how is this change propelled, and what role do identity politics play in this process? Things are changing very fast in these remote areas, but as the mounting pile of ethnographic literature is showing, rarely for the better. Instead of populations finally breaking the shackles of tradition to enter the full-flight of modernity (to use Walt Rostow’s metaphor), we encounter populations whose planes have been insidiously sabotaged by the First World so that takeoff is next to impossible.

For this paper I will utilize the language of the “actor-oriented approach” presented by political ecologists, with one major exception. As has been pointed out by several critics of this young discipline (if one could even call it a discipline yet), political ecologists tend to subsume an incredibly diverse population—with diverse interests—within static categories. However, some (like Bryant and Bailey, 1997) do recognize the limitations of setting up such broad categories like “Grassroots Actors” or “The State” or “Multilateral Institutions,” admitting to both the considerable heterogeneity subsumed under one name and the porosity of the boundaries they assume. But in order to facilitate a discussion that “relates an understanding of actors to political and ecological processes” (Bryant and Bailey 1997:24), they argue that this simplicity must be applied. Any abstraction that wants to look at the behaviour between groups of like-minded individuals will tend to smooth over the fractures and fragmentations within such collectivities in order to focus on processes at the macro-structural level. As mentioned, this approach causes nervousness among those who fear an effacement of these internal contradictions, and as Anna Tsing points out, “for them [political ecologists in general, Bryant and Bailey in particular], these sites solidly position political programs; they develop in generally autonomous internal dynamics.” However, she is quick to recognize the benefits of an actor-oriented approach—as long as these internal fractures do not become invisible: “What if we accepted the importance of these sites, yet disputed their solidity and internal autonomy?” (Tsing 1999:6).

In other words, I want to propose the use of political ecology’s actor-oriented approach while assuming the fluidity and heterogeneity of the actors involved. Furthermore, I want to suggest that these actors, be it “the state”, “grassroots actors”, or “transnational corporations,” are themselves emergent entities that are constituted just as much by the dialogue and contestations going on internally, as they are by what is happening externally. So, using the political framework and the actor-oriented approach of political ecology, I want to conflate the ideas of several theorists, in order to present a way of modelling the dynamics involved when identities become political. I am going to expand on the analytical tool that Anna Tsing labels “cultural mobilisation” by trying to combine her ideas with those of Elias Canetti and his work on the relationship between crowds and power, as well as utilizing Benedict Anderson’s classic Imagined Communities. To fill in the gaps, I also want to present some insights from complexity theory as well as expanding upon Peter J. Brosius’ brief emphasis on the concept of momentum within the turbulent context of resource frontiers. But before I engage this rather large combination I want to clarify a term that is important to the argument.

Culture as an Emergent Property

One of the central arguments of complexity theory—a body of knowledge that has
been spreading out from the natural sciences into neighbouring disciplines—is the emergence of order from disorder. This emergence, technically known as an “Emergent Global Property,” arises due to the local interaction of individual components. Through the interaction of these individual components something greater than the sum of the parts emerges which, in turn, “feeds back to influence the behaviour of the individuals that produced it” (Lewin 1999:13). While this theory is generally applied to the behaviour of complex physical systems, their applicability to social systems has not been ignored (Schehr 1997). For this paper I will assume that culture, or any other representational platform composed by a group of individuals (be it a nation-state, a grassroots movement, or village community), is an emergent property which then “feeds back” to affect the individuals that produced it.

However, it is important to recognize that these emergent properties are not physical entities (even if their representations are), but rather, they are collective abstractions located within the consciousness of those involved—produced through their interaction. That said, these abstractions nonetheless have real and physical consequences which directly affect the lifeworlds of these individuals (the feedback mentioned above that folds back on the interacting individuals). In many ways this is simply a different way of presenting the structure/agency paradox (we both produce and are produced by culture) which obviously indicates that these collective identities exist through process, and as such, are constantly changing (some more than others).

Another consideration should be exposed before continuing. When theorists from the natural sciences describe emergent properties they discuss the interaction between individual components, which, since they tend to be identical components within a system (like a swirling mass of smoke particles), are for all intents and purposes equal. In other words, the disorder is a disorder between equal particles. However, when looking at the interactions of individual beings, who tend to be widely unequal in power and influence, we need to take into account the power differentials involved. Some individuals would obviously have more influence in directing the action or emergence of the group, but as in all situations involving differential access to power, this does not mean that the dominant act within a vacuum. The less influential, or less powerful, still exert a force that will effect the direction and position of more powerful individuals or groups.

Finally, the application of emergent properties to model the politics of identity works at multiple levels; local, regional, national, or global. For example, the “Eastern Penan,” as an abstraction of collective identity made up of individual communities, can be described as an emergent property, as can “The Penan” as a combination of Eastern and Western groups, as can Malaysia as a nation-state.

**Imagined Communities**

In a rapidly changing natural and social environment that is generally unpredictable, uncertain, complex and contingent, people are bound to respond in similar yet complex ways. As Brosius points out (1999:285), the representational platforms (or collective identities) from which groups speak are “zones of constantly shifting positionality,” a fluidity made possible through emergence and bricolage. While these identities can be fairly fluid and constantly changing, in order to mobilize in response to some aggravation or perceived threat (or simply to present a coherent whole), this flux and shifting reality of collective identity must be solidified. In order to prevent their resources and land from being stolen and exploited, local people and indigenous groups have had to (although not always) present a unified front. This coherence may be easy if the crisis affects everyone the same way, but this is rarely the case. Sometimes the perceived threat may benefit some of the group, making a homogenous position nearly impossible, for “in a relationship of power, the dominant often has something to offer, and sometimes a great deal (though always of course at the price of continuing in power). The subordinate thus has many grounds for ambivalence about resisting the relationship. Moreover, there is never a single, unitary, subordinate” (Ortner 1995:175). Numerous voices demand to be heard, but in order to present the group as a unified and coherent collective, only one voice can speak. Thus, forced unity requires a silencing of dissent. Heterogeneity becomes anathema for action, for if the group was to squabble then nothing would get done. As such, resistance becomes a problematic area of investigation due to the recognition that presenting a stable platform of resistance to domination requires the nearly impossible suppression of internal heterogeneity and resistance. However, it should be noted that this may not always be the case—some forms of
resistance may utilize disorganization and fragmentation to thwart the actions of the dominant, and it may also be the case that the focus on unity may be an assumption of the ethnographer.

The investigation of what exactly a nation is has confounded many theorists. “People have said that a nation is this or that, apparently believing that all that mattered was to find the right definition; once found, this would be applicable to all nations equally” (Canetti 1962:169). The modernist attempt to explain the nation, as an actual entity, has proved to be very hard indeed, beginning from and resulting in a highly bureaucratized attempt at legibility (Scott 1998). The nation has come to stand for territory, language, ethnicity, history, and forms of government, but “in every case the exceptions have proved more important than the rule. It has been like clutching at some adventitious garment, in the belief that the living creature within could be thus grasped” (Canetti 1962:169). A unity and coherence is perceived when the name or identity of a nation is presented, but when the reality is investigated, the boundaries of what the nation stands for (regardless of which characteristic you choose to define it as such) become blurry and unstable. Seton-Watson (quoted in Anderson 1993:15) echoes this exasperation: “all that I can find to say is that a nation exists when a significant number of people in a community consider themselves to form a nation, or behave as if they formed one.” This also impelled Ernst Gellner to observe that “nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness: it invents nations where they do not exist” (quoted in Anderson 1993:115).

In Benedict Anderson’s widely influential book entitled Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism, he continued the argument that nations are imagined communities, but he was bothered by the implication that this was a false or inauthentic representation. After all, millions of people have sacrificed their lives for this supposed fiction, indicating either mass-hysteria on the part of those foolish enough to die for an abstraction, or testifying to a deficiency in our theories (of which Gramsci’s dynamic-duo of consent and coercion obviously provides something of a corrective to). Anderson begins by pointing out the imagined nature of the nation, claiming that individual members of a nation “will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (Anderson 1983:15). However, even if these ideas of nation and nationalism are abstractions or figments of the collective imagination, he echoes the danger mentioned above in assuming that they are fabrications: “Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined” (Anderson 1983:15).

The relevance of this argument lies within Anderson’s expansion of this idea of imagined communities beyond (or in this case within) the realm of the nation. While the assertion may be harder to make in a face-to-face situation such as a small village, where everybody may know something about everybody else, there still remains enough ambiguity and heterogeneity that requires such imagination, or smoothing-over, in order to present a community as a real and recognized “community.” Anderson recognizes this when he states that “all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined” (1983:15, emphasis added). I take his suggestion that even face-to-face villages are also imagined communities to be true in order to speak to the debates on authenticity and essentialisms.

There is no such thing as a true (or false) “Canadian” or a true (or false) “Penan,” but when we talk about Canadians and the Penan we seem to infer that they are a unified and unproblematic group. Not only do we tend to see them as unified wholes, but those involved also seem to assume their coherence through unity (as Anderson pointed out). However, “Anthropologists today recognize ... the innumerable gaps and fissures in all societies, including the so-called pre-modern societies that were imagined to be more integrated and whole than we fragmented moderns” (Ortner 1995:174). For example, the Chipko movement, located in the Garhwal Himalayas of India, began as a group of protestors, made up of a constituency that was very diverse. It consisted of competing factions that offered competing interpretations. They were, in effect, “a heterogeneous constituency with multiple political affiliations and even conflicting goals” (Rangan 1996:215). However, in their public representation, they were presented as possessing a cohesive unity, “hailed by academics and environmental activists throughout the world for its grassroots environmental mobilization” (Rangan 1996:205).
The crucial question thus becomes by whom and for what reason was this cohesiveness presented.

Whenever we try to generalize actors we tend to assume a false homogeneity that "both hinders our ability to recognize the dynamism that characterizes ... movements and discourse and obscures the agency of the actors involved" (Brosius 1999:283). However, as Brosius points out in the same article, this recognition comes at a time when "historically marginalised communities have begun to recognize the political potency of strategically deployed essentialisms" (Brosius 1999:281). This has triggered a vigorous ethical debate causing some (like Brosius) to claim that we should be extremely worried about the side-effects of showing that these movements (movements we tend to support at least ideologically if not politically) are just as contingent, relational, and shifting, as any other socio-cultural group in the world. However, even though this is an important debate (and an old one at that) that deserves recognition, it is an ethical debate that starts off with some faulty logic. For example, as Rocheleau and Radel point out in response to Brosius' concerns, we need to "theorize identities as contingent and relational, discarding essentialisms both politically and analytically..." for if we approach these "identities as shifting, contingent, and relational, we can understand them as both strategic and authentic" (Brosius 1999:296-7, emphasis added). However, they remain unclear on how to go about doing this without falling back on the use of stable topologies. This is where my own theoretical bricolage (using fragments and pieces of other people's ideas and theories) will hopefully present a useful way for analysing identity politics. Anna Tsing's notion of cultural mobilisation provides some much needed change to this static and essentialised essentialist argument.

Cultural Mobilization, Oil Globs and the Momentum of Crowds

"Environmental struggles today are irrevocably tied up with identity politics" (Brosius 1999:288). This recognition comes from the fact that the performance of collective identity becomes a very strong and almost necessary tool in the frontiers of resource extraction where one of the only ways to slow a multinational corporation's (and the government authorities that hope to capitalize on the taxes produced) monopolisation of profit is to present a unified whole in order to claim ownership. But in order to be heard, as has been mentioned above, unity must be presented, and, more importantly for this discussion, an identity must be presented as a focal point. In order to receive compensation and royalties, cohesive communities (and landowners) must step forth. Therefore, in order to get something done there must be a "performance of identity, goals, and directions" (Tsing 1999:7)

In an article entitled Notes on Culture and Natural Resource Management, Anna Tsing puts forth a fairly simple argument: "Cultures of nature develop in dialogue with and against shifting partners" (1999:6). She agrees with the focus on power that political ecology expounds but she doesn't agree with their emphasis on autonomous political positions in their actor-oriented approach. Instead, she wants to investigate the linkages and collaborations that cross these supposedly static sites: "I am interested in the open-ended, unpredictable process in which groups and institutions try to influence each other to redefine their respective projects" (Tsing 1999:6).

In order to do more than simply criticize political ecology, and to answer her desire to analyse open-ended processes, she presents us with the notion of "cultural mobilisation":

Cultural mobilization in my usage here refers to the process of (re)assembling a set of practices, knowledges, legacies, values, organizational forms, or, indeed, a way of life, in the midst of challenges—from other groups, from new ways of thinking, or from the condition of the environment itself. This (re)assembling brings adherents into a new awareness. (Tsing 1999:7)

This seems to suggest the method through which a collectivity, social movement, or society keeps itself vivid and engaging.

Elias Canetti, in a stimulating book entitled Crowds and Power, seems to be touching on this same dynamic when he discusses the natural desire for crowds to want to grow and expand, constantly trying out new configurations in a desperate attempt to remain viable and legitimate. However, as soon as a crowd loses this dynamic motivation it withers away and the
members that were once part of the group go their own separate ways, joining and being consumed by other crowds and formations, thus taking advantage of the multiple linkages and collaborations that exist within any of these imagined communities.

Canetti talks about the dynamics of crowds, but his observations are quite relevant to this paper when we assume the crowd as a metaphor for any collectivity or community. He begins by making a distinction between open and closed crowds, a distinction that echoes the process of establishing a cohesive unit—or, in the language of Anderson, an imagined community—from a fluid and chaotic open crowd. An “open crowd exists so long as it grows; it disintegrates as soon as it stops growing.” Furthermore, “as soon as it exists at all, it wants to consist of more people” (Canetti 1962:16). However, given this basic drive to grow, the open crowd is a sensitive thing, ready to fall apart as soon as it stops increasing.

Here it is informative to bring in Brosius’s recognition of the importance momentum plays in resource frontiers. As mentioned within the context of resource frontiers, organisations, communities, and institutions are continually changing, shifting, emerging and evolving, all at a very fast pace. Brosius claims that one aspect of environmental campaigns “that deserves our attention is the somewhat chimeric but no less real quality of momentum ... The history of this ... can in part be written as one of increasing and then decreasing momentum”(Brosius 1999:283). Although she does not expand on this, Eeva Berglund picks up on this “evocative” notion in her reply to Brosius’s article: the concept of momentum “not only captures well the fact that things are, indeed, moving very fast but also has made me consider the possibility that there is pattern in the highs and lows of activism which scholars would be better placed than those at the centre of the political action to document” (in Brosius 1999:289, emphasis added). This possibility that “there is pattern” in this fluctuating cultural system is exactly what this paper seeks to elucidate.

Returning to Canetti, this idea of momentum seems to be played out in the description of crowds. In order to remain viable and cohesive, an open crowd must maintain a momentum that will ensure its survival. However, in order to postpone dissipation, the creation of a closed crowd is necessary. This seems to suggest a contradiction, for if momentum is to be sustained, setting up established and coherent boundaries would seem to be antithetical to a continuous momentum. The question thus becomes, how to maintain vitality within a closed (or at least closed in abstraction) system.

“The closed crowd renounces growth and puts the stress on permanence. The first thing to be noticed about it is that it has a boundary. It establishes itself by accepting its limitations” (Canetti 1962:17). Anderson mentions this establishment of limitations as well, when he claims that “the nation is imagined as limited” (1983:16, original italics). This is also mirrored in the process through which a diverse group or community achieves a recognized or coherent identity: only by establishing boundaries can a movement achieve a stable identity that provides much needed recognition and legitimacy. So, in order to prevent potentially chaotic increase, which can threaten the stability of the crowd/community, the establishment of boundaries becomes essential, making “it more difficult for the crowd to disperse and so postpones its dissolution” (Canetti 1962:17). Therefore, in order to maintain the vitality of momentum, the closed crowd requires a goal or direction to which it aspires, and here we can fuse Tsing’s concept of cultural mobilization, whereby the retention of identity requires the group to “mobilize a vision,” and bring “adherents into a new awareness” (Tsing 1999:6). In other words, in order to maintain momentum and therefore prevent dissolution, a group must continually mobilize itself in order to “revitalize their interests.” This is a process that would seem to be fairly easy in the fluctuating and dynamical systems that emerge in resource frontiers.

Coming back to the notion of emergence, we can thus picture a situation where a mass of individuals converge to form crowds/communities/groups that emerges from the interactions of the individuals involved. Here I cannot help imagining the dynamics of oil globs on the surface of a pot of water. The individual oil particles come together, resulting in the emergence of several large globs that slowly move about the water’s surface. If we shake the pot, producing a massive perturbation (a familiar term to the science of complexity), the globs disperse into a multitude of smaller congregations that wander about, colliding, merging, dividing, separating, and assembling again. If the water is constantly moving (as the social context of any situation is always shifting) then these globs of oil are also constantly changing, with some
amorphous blobs absorbing smaller groups, some larger groups losing pieces of their shapeless form, and yet other smaller groups combining to create larger ones. We could almost see this as a metaphor for the dynamics of open-crowd behaviour, with each growing collectivity of individuals looking to absorb other individuals and smaller groups. But, as Canetti points out, this drive for growth is also its downfall. As the globs become bigger, and the push and pull of the interactions between the individuals involved becomes great, the possibility of dissolution becomes imminent. Small groups, no longer content to flow with the majority, divorce themselves from the trajectory of the larger group. We can see this dynamic in the case of paying out royalties and compensation in resource extraction: the crowd of those claiming ownership will grow in order to strengthen its claim, but when the group gets too big, competition, jealousy, and hard feelings erupt as individual “cuts” get even smaller. In other words, to present a powerful identity, numbers are required, but if the numbers get out of control then divisions will develop.

However, this metaphor falls apart when we try to understand the limits and boundaries that collectivities install. If the globs of oil (and the individual particles that make up these globs) had their own agency, and were not simply responding to the dynamics of the system, then we would probably see a much more complex interaction. Furthermore, this metaphor also ignores the collaborations and linkages that exist between socio-cultural groups, presenting a two-dimensional spatiality that, while recognizing the fluidity and fluctuation of any collectivity, ignores the multiple dimensions and identities that human beings operate within (ethnicity, gender, class, etc.). In other words, while this metaphor may capture the “volatile nature of real social systems,” it does so at the expense of simplifying an incredibly complex process.

There is yet another point of interest in Canetti’s work that speaks to identity politics and the essentialisms it tends to perpetuate. He claims that “the most important occurrence within the crowd is the discharge. Before this the crowd does not actually exist; it is the discharge which creates it. This is the moment when all who belong to the crowd get rid of their differences and feel equal” (1962:17). Basically, Canetti claims that the whole impetus for the emergence of crowds is to reduce the distance that individuals keep between one-

another in ordinary life. Canetti’s argument here is a little too psychoanalytic for my liking, and it also privileges a Western notion of individuality, but there are some aspects that seem quite relevant. Since people know that they are separated by distinctions of rank, status, property, ethnicity, gender, and several other inequalities, they have an internal desire to discharge these differences that separate them in order to feel part of a whole. “This, precisely, is what happens in a crowd. During the discharge distinctions are thrown off and all feel equal ... It is for the sake of this blessed moment, when no-one is greater or better than another, that people become a crowd” (Canetti 1962:18). However, Canetti is quick to mention that while this union, this establishment of equality and unity, is something the crowd attempts to achieve, it should be recognized that “it is based on an illusion: the people who suddenly feel equal have not really become equal” (Canetti 1962:18). Anderson also points out the importance of this conceptual communion when he claims that “regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail ... the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship” (1983:16). This seems to be a necessary requirement, this acceptance of the public secret of unity, in order to present a coherent and unified whole.

A brief example should help illuminate this argument. Through their erection of blockades in 1987, as a response to the deforestation that was ravaging their lands, the Penan (the Eastern Penan that is) became an overnight success story that influenced environmental movements around the world: “Penan resistance to logging was repeatedly cited as an important influence in the growth of movements promoting rainforest preservation and indigenous rights” (Brosius 1997b:469). Since they felt that their concerns were not being heard by the government of Malaysia, the Eastern Penan felt that they had to mobilize, both the blockades and their identity. Even more to the point of this essay is the “degree to which they [the Penan] have been characterized by a sense of unity among bands of people who have no history of unified political action” (Brosius 1997b:476). In other words, in order to mobilize they had to present a unity that was not there before. In order to achieve a certain goal, be it the right of self-determination, the control and ownership over local resources, or in the case of the Penan, environmental protection, a recognizable and “legible” (Scott 1998) actor must emerge. Of course one would need to look at the influence
that the Swiss artist Bruno Manser had upon the Eastern Penan, but this is beside the point. Even if their resistance was due to the influence of external environmentalists, such as Manser, this still demonstrates the need to present and mobilize an identity.

**Conclusion**

In all this talk about crowds and oil globs, communities and nations, personal agency is rarely attended to. However, emergence and emergent properties only exist due to the behaviour of every single individual in the system, thus pointing out the absolute importance of individual agency. This levels the playing field for individual action and recognizes the “authentic, and not merely reactive” (Ortner 1995:180) nature of this process. One must also be careful not to forget issues of power, hegemony, and exploitation, for these present an enormous influence on the ability for actors to be heard, let alone recognized. My lack of emphasis on these issues does not indicate their degree of importance in such matters, for they are indeed integral. Rather it indicates the mistake of casting my theoretical net too far.

In order for an imagined community to remain cohesive and viable, it must have some momentum, continually re-presenting, mobilizing and reinventing itself, all the while assuming a homogenous and unproblematic unity. In order to claim ownership one needs to present an owner. In order to present an owner, an identity must emerge. In other words, to present a group of people as a recognizable group, an identity must be formed, itself a process that is absolutely essential (no pun intended) to being a part of the game that is transpiring in the resource frontiers of the world.

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