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RESOURCE EXTRACTION AND FLUCTUATIONS IN POVERTY: A CASE STUDY

Contents

The existence and persistence of poverty across economic cycles associated with the development of natural resources has long been noted in the literature. Most of the attempts to explain poverty, however, have relied on relatively static models. This case study shows how poverty itself, as well as causal factors, changed during one of the better documented resource developmental cycles and suggests that more than one theoretical orientation may be necessary to assess this complex and fluctuating phenomenon.

Keywords boom/bust, economic development, poverty, resource extraction, rural

Many local community leaders (Lewan, 1993) and residents (Thompson and Blevins, 1983) think of resource extraction as a road to economic success. This perspective has been reinforced by scholarly attention, particularly when extraction has been tied to the capture of linked economic activities (Hirschman, 1958, 1977; Lovejoy and Krannich, 1982). More recent studies have begun to question this conventional wisdom. Freudenburg and Gramling (1992; see also Gramling and Freudenburg, 1992) have found that resource extraction communities have the potential to "overadapt" to extractive activities, especially when the capture of economic linkages has been significant (Freudenburg and Gramling, 1993a). In overadapted communities, fluctuations in the demand for the resource or eventual exhaustion of the resource can lead to severe economic dislocations. Humphrey et al. (1993) have noted the persistence of rural poverty specifically in communities associated with resource extraction and, in the most comprehensive attempt to date, delineated four theoretical perspectives to examine the links between natural resource development and poverty (see Freudenburg and Gramling, 1994a for a critique).

Rational underinvestment (human capital theory) rests on the assumption of rational decision making evident in classical economic theory and posits that individuals weigh alternatives, evaluating the costs and benefits of the acquisition of skills and education, and choosing to increase human capital when the benefits in the future outweigh the costs of immediate deprivations. Poverty, from this perspective, is a result of underinvestment in human capital. Humphrey et al. (1993) have noted that natural resource extractive processes have a history of shifting over time from labor-intensive to capital-intensive technologies, with the declining local job market in a community providing little incentive for locals to invest in the acquisition of human capital because the return on their investment is perceived as questionable or nonexistent. In addition, powerful resource extraction interests may block a community's ability to provide for the local acquisition of human capital by shifting the burden of taxation and, hence, the ability to support local institutions such as schools on to local citizens.

Bureaucratic power explains persistent rural poverty in natural resource communities by the differential access of various interests to scarce natural resources that are controlled by public or private bureaucracies. The basic assumptions are: (1) a valuable natural resource is controlled by a regulatory or ownership bureaucracy; (2) a constituency comes to capture, or exert influence over, decisions made by this bureaucracy; and (3) the resulting patterns of exploitation of the resource result in clear winners and losers with the influential constituency(ies) profiting.

Rural restructuring borrows from the world systems approach (Wallerstein, 1974), concentrating on how the structure and distribution of capital, infrastructure, labor, and transportation provide relative advantages and disadvantages to regions within global or regional markets. Here core regions are able to dominate peripheral regions because they can transport raw materials or low-technology products from the periphery, use them in the manufacturing or marketing process--thus benefiting from the value-added turnover--and in the process transform the peripheral regions away from traditional diversified economies and into dependency on the extraction of raw materials.

Moral exclusion builds on the perspective of Berger and Luckmann (1966), seeing resource exploitation as a social construction of what actually constitutes a resource and the appropriate use of a resource (Freudenburg et al., 1995). Powerful interests may define resources and resource use in a way that excludes extraction communities. Humphrey et al. (1993) have used the example of how the environmental movement defined certain forests and forest activities in a fashion that had major impacts on logging communities, an example with which Freudenburg and Gramling (1994a) take issue.

Each of these theoretical approaches conceptualizes poverty as a relatively fixed phenomenon, a dependent variable to a set of independent variables or processes. In contrast, Brabant (1993a, 1993b), examining poverty in a known resource extraction region, found something quite different: poverty as a fluctuating phenomenon with marked shifts throughout the cycles of resource development. In this perspective, the difficulties encountered by earlier explanations of the relationship between poverty and natural resource development may be at least partly because of the fact that "poverty" is a changing phenomenon, with its causal factors varying over time.

This paper draws on that research to show how both poverty itself, as well as its causal factors, changed over one of the more graphic developmental cycles that have appeared in the literature, the cycle associated with coastal and offshore oil development in southern Louisiana (see Brabant, 1993a, 1993b; Freudenburg and Gramling, 1992, 1993b, 1994a; Gramling, 1989, 1995; Gramling and Brabant, 1986; Gramling and Freudenburg, 1990). No single theoretical orientation is sufficient to assess this complex and fluctuating phenomenon.

The time frame, 1970 to 1986, includes the period before the Mideast oil embargo (1970 to 1973), the rapid escalation in the price of crude oil following the embargo (1974 to 1981), and the subsequent decline in price (1982 to 1986) following the glut of oil on the world market. The data were collected in two south Louisiana parishes (counties). Lafayette Parish is the center of the managerial/white-collar labor force associated with offshore oil development, as well as the base for many of the linked businesses that have emerged. St. Mary Parish is contiguous to the Gulf of Mexico and thus to the area of heaviest offshore development. Historically much of the offshore staging and support, and much of the fabrication of offshore platforms and support vessels, have been located in this parish. In contrast to the activities in Lafayette Parish, these activities primarily produce blue-collar jobs. Communities in the two parishes range in size from Lafayette, a midsize town of about 86,000 in 1980, to small unincorporated rural communities in St. Mary Parish.

Contact with the poor, particularly after the fact, is problematic. As Thernstrom (1968,p. 161) noted: "The poor [leave] but a vague imprint on the historical record; much of what we would like to know about them is irrevocably lost." In any community, however, there are those who have or have had face-to-face contact with the poor on a day-to-day basis over long periods of time. The primary data source for the present study was interviews with key informants who, at some period during the time frame, had worked directly with individuals who requested food, shelter, and/or clothing. Defining poverty as the need to go outside kin and neighborhood networks to meet one or more of these three basic requirements eliminates two problems long associated with attempts to operationalize poverty (Brabant and Gramling, 1985): (1) Value judgments are avoided--that is, differentiating the "deserving" from the "undeserving"; and (2) confounding variables such as class or lifestyle are eliminated from consideration.

The interviews with these social service providers were open-ended and for the most part unstructured. All informants were told the purpose of the study and asked for permission to tape the session.[1] The first interview questions established when and under what circumstances the informant had had contact with the poor. Each respondent was then asked: (1) What kind of people came (come) to you for help? (2) What did (do) they need? and (3) What, if any, changes have you noticed over the years? In a snowball sampling technique (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), respondents were asked to recommend others in either parish who were (are) actively involved in addressing basic human needs. In all, 35 interviews were conducted between July of 1989 and May of 1990: 29 in Lafayette Parish, the central focus of the study, and 6 in St. Mary Parish. Respondents included persons employed by the state, city, church-related agencies, other private organizations, and volunteers.[2] As with any oral history, specific dates often could not be established. Thus, local and state newspapers as well as available agency notes and minutes were searched as a means to more specifically delineate time periods.

Findings Preboom Poverty (1970-1973)

According to key informants in Lafayette Parish, the "traditional" poor were present prior to the boom. There were the elderly "who are always with us on the food stamp program." Although there was some unemployment, the majority of the preboom poor were the underemployed: "clients who received food stamps and had jobs but did not earn enough money to support them [or] their families independently of food stamps" and the "illiterate, those who had menial jobs with lower incomes without any hope of being able to rise above that." A local minister remembered working with families in which "neither father nor mother could read or write." Although one informant remembered the poor as "predominantly black," others recalled the ratio as "half and half," or as "pretty well mixed." Similarly, in St. Mary Parish, a food stamp worker remembered the poor as those "on welfare or old age assistance... or people working for very, very low--just bare-minimum wages." On the agricultural side of the parish, many of the poor were farm laborers whose work was seasonal.

Boom Time: "Let the Good Times Roll" (1974-1981)

The oil embargo, imposed by the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries in 1973, led to the rising price of crude oil and an aggressive program to lease federal lands on the outer continental shelf (more than 3 miles offshore) for offshore oil development to combat the energy shortages. These factors led to tremendous growth not only in the primary sector of the economy but also in the secondary and tertiary support sections as well (see Gramling and Freudenburg, 1990). A food stamp worker recalled:

Later on in the '70s and the early '80s our caseload started to dwindle down because people were getting off the welfare rolls, because you could find a job anywhere in Lafayette. If you wanted to work, you could work.

For some, the boom meant more than just getting off welfare. "We had welders who used to be welfare clients, and they were making, like, $20 an hour."

Not everyone, however, enjoyed the good times. "[For] the people who could respond with skills, it was all right. But there were some people in Lafayette that never had the required skills and never got in on the oil boom." For the elderly poor, boom times made poverty even worse. "The cost of living went up ... [and] that bled finances." For these fixed- and low-income individuals, housing became a problem unless they had owned their home before the boom came. Comments on the impact of the boom on minorities were mixed. One informant in Lafayette Parish noted: "I think better job opportunities were possible for blacks as well as poor whites." For the most part, however, these opportunities were in the secondary and tertiary sector.

A phenomenon mentioned frequently in the boom town literature is the influx of outsiders drawn to the boom economy. This was certainly the case in south Louisiana. With increased employment opportunities in the oil industry and the related support sectors, coupled with a national recession (see Rossi, 1989), people were drawn to the area.

The word got around that if you go to Lafayette, Louisiana, anybody can get a job. People came from all over. Many of these people had been unemployed for a while, and they came on foot; they were hitching fides here. When they came here they were penniless.

Throughout the 1970s most found work. The manager of Job Services (a state employment agency) recalled that "it was practically impossible to furnish the oil field people with the personnel that they needed [during this period].... They wanted warm bodies, right. They didn't bother too much about physical exams and things like that." At first migrants were "mainly men, white males.... As the years went by and unemployment became a national problem, there were families." The plant superintendent at a downtown church recalls:

Half of these people, which got to be quite a bit of people, half of them were single men coming down, and a few were married. But a lot of them were men coming down to find jobs before they would bring their families. The other half brought their families down and had not a penny with them, ran out of money and needed assistance in shelter, clothing, food, medicine--you name it, they needed it.

By 1980, the boom was receiving national attention (Tuhy and Dreyfus, 1980; Stevens, 1981). In October 1981, The National Enquirer described Lafayette as "Boom Town, USA" (Mullins, 1981). The nation was in recession, and some informants believed this article drew migrants fleeing the "Rust Belt" as much of the steel industry shut down. Indeed, so many came from Michigan that some of the informants referred to these newcomers as the "black license plate gang." The director of a shelter in the early 1980s, however, noted that they came "from all over the United States."

Some hitchhiked in. Others came in "regular cars like a recent model appearing to be in good condition." Still others came in cars "just barely chug-a-lugging." One informant noted: "Some were just old cars packed ... I mean like something you'd see in movies or something, things hanging out the windows it's so stuffed. And tracks. I remember that! Trucks just being loaded down with people's belongings." Still another commented:

It was horrible . . . just to see some of these people, the way they came down, you know. Not a penny to their name. Everything they owned was in a couple of old trash bags, and that was it. The clothes for the whole family.

This same informant, the superintendent of a downtown church, recalled that "when it got real bad, I was seeing up to twenty and thirty people every day. That many. And I mean that was every day."

The immigrants shared one characteristic: In unfamiliar surroundings with no connections to the local power structure, they were vulnerable. The arrest of Jack Henry Abbott, author of In the Belly of the Beast, in an oil field pipe yard (Hodge and Anderson, 1981) brought national attention to the labor camps around Morgan City (Rawls, 1981) and reinforced the apprehension of local officials concerning the occupants of the labor camps. Informants revealed another picture of the labor camps, a picture of exploitation. A food stamp worker from the Morgan City area remembered:

There were, I guess, two labor camps and these men--they'd hire these men on to go to work and it was what they called "day laborer." They'd go to this labor camp and they'd get hired on, and they'd have these buildings with a bunch of bunk beds in it and a bathroom and these men would sleep there--all single men without families. Or if they had families, the families were some other place and they'd work for these labor bosses. They'd bring them to the job site, they'd work there during the day, and then they'd bring them back to the labor camp at night so they could sleep. When it came time for their paychecks, they owed for the bed they slept in at night, they owed for their meals. They wouldn't get a check, you know, they'd work a whole week and then they'd maybe end up with $10, 'cause naturally they were selling their cigarettes at a higher price than what they paid for them.

In some cases the men would end up owing camp owners money instead of being paid. A longtime church worker in Morgan City recalled:

They would charge them for a lemon, they would charge them for bathroom uses, the meals were atrocious. I mean like thin soups that had very little nutrition, and they charged them outrageous prices, and they'd only feed them twice a day. Cigarettes, they charged maybe $20 a carton. They would supply their steel-toe shoes and helmets and stuff, but, like, double the price, and most of these people at the end of the week owed the company. There was no way to get out because you always ended up owing the company.... The only way they can get out is to walk out, and I've had some have to leave their belongings and just walk and just not go back.

Even when there was no exploitation, hardship stories abounded. Families sleeping in cars were common in both Lafayette and St. Mary. A St. Mary food stamp worker recalled a common plea during the boom period: "My husband got a job and went offshore, and he won't be home for three weeks. We don't have any place to stay. We slept last night in the car, we don't have any food, what can you do to help?"

Both parishes saw the emergence of "tent cities" that sprang up on the outskirts of towns as newcomers streamed into the area. A volunteer with a church-related agency in Lafayette recalled:

At the time when everything was so affluent here and there was no housing we had ... people living in store-and-locks, and the store-and-lock people were afraid of fire. What the person would have would be a lamp and a little hot plate and a cot in there, and live in those places.

Some slept in the open. "They would sleep next to the air conditioners, wherever there was any closed area, in the corner, in the back of the shrubbery by the church."

There were problems other than housing. "Some families didn't have transportation, so that posed another problem." In addition, the nature of offshore work (see Gramling, 1989) compounded problems faced by families. The director of a shelter noted:

The family is separated, and this is very frightening I know for the children, I'm sure for both [adults and children]. They're still in an uncertain situation, and then let's say [the father] goes offshore. Well, [he] may be gone a couple of weeks, a month, and you just never know.

Despite the many hardships, many of the newcomers did find jobs. A food stamp worker remembered that they tended to get off food stamps quickly. "Yes, they would get off pretty soon. Like, in the beginning of the '80s, well, no one would be on over a month . . . because they would definitely find work in the oil patch." For some, however, it was over before they arrived. A shelter director recalled:

I remember this one family, and they all came with all their belongings piled in the back of a truck. I'll never forget ... the mom and the daddy and I think there were four or five children. It's like they had come to the Promised Land. Everyone had been hearing about all the work being available. But what they didn't realize was that the bottom was going out and the cost of living here at that time was astronomical.

The Bust (1982-1986)

There was no "Black Monday" to pinpoint the onset of the bust. The first signs of change began in 1982 when the price of crude oil on the world market began to fall (Oil and Gas Journal, 1988). The price of oil fluctuated through 1983 and 1984, but in late 1985 the bottom dropped out of the market. In December 1985, crude oil was selling for $24.51 per barrel; by June of 1986 it was selling for $9.39 per barrel (Oil and Gas Journal, 1988). The boom was over.

Among the first to be hurt were those who had been last to come. "A lot of these people [the newcomers] [found] work. But then when the economy dropped, they were the last employee [to be hired], and they were the first to be laid off." Others who came too late never experienced the good times.

Previous welfare recipients lost jobs and had to return to food stamps. In addition, a class of people emerged who came to be known as the "new poor." A food stamp worker recalled:

When the bust came in the early '80s, not only did we get the repeat of our welfare, our usual welfare clients, but you start getting what we term "the new poor." You got people who had $80,000 homes, who had a huge mortgage, the wife may not have been working and the husband was working offshore or for an oil company making beaucoup amount of money . . . and then when this hit, they were not prepared....

Both the backgrounds and the time of emergence of this new poor varied across parishes. The informant added:

In Morgan City (St. Mary), because of the offshore industry, they got really affected bad, but it wasn't until later--'83, '84--that you saw the administrative staff, the secretaries in Lafayette start getting affected because of the cutbacks in the oil industry.

The manager of Job Services in Lafayette, however, remembered early 1986 as the critical time:

We had people standing in line all the way out the door and into the streets... engineers, people with Ph.D.s, geophysicists, geologists, people making upwards to $250,000 a year coming in and filing claims for unemployment insurance for $205 a week.... People had board meetings at the interviewer's desk to dissolve their companies right here in the office so they could qualify for the unemployment insurance.

Most of the "new poor [were] middle management or laborers," but there were also people who "had several million dollars and who now live in $165 to $200-a-month rent houses." The common characteristic of the new poor was neither type of job nor income; it was that the individuals had never been poor before.

As the crunch began to affect the middle and upper classes, domestic workers lost their jobs. The bust had begun in 1982; by 1986 the boom was over for every-one--the poor, the near poor, the middle class, the rich, and the very rich. As one informant put it: "It's affected everybody. I guess that'll be the best way to explain [it]."

Implications

The traditional poor, the elderly on fixed incomes in trouble as boom times bring price escalations, the migrants with few resources lured by the hope of jobs, and the new poor who have never before experienced poverty share little in common other than their poverty. They arrive at this situation by very different routes and at different stages of resource development. Although beyond the scope of the present format, there is considerable evidence that several of the theoretical perspectives discussed earlier are necessary to examine the link between poverty and resource extraction. Over-adaptation (Freudenburg and Gramling, 1992), for example, is clearly evident in the creation of the new poor as the bust hit the formerly flourishing oil dependent economy.

In addition, at least two of the theoretical perspectives noted by Humphrey et al. (1993)--rational underinvestment and bureaucratic power--are also clearly relevant. With respect to the first, many of the new poor lacked the flexibility to adapt to the changed conditions following the collapse of the world oil market precisely because they were lured away from continued education by lucrative jobs in the oil and support sectors (Freudenburg and Gramling, 1994c). Thus, rational underinvestment happened not because individuals saw no potential for employment, but because they saw no need for more flexible skills. With respect to bureaucratic power, the extent of offshore leasing and development (the engine that drove the boom in southern Louisiana) was controlled by a federal resource bureaucracy. There is also evidence that this bureaucracy was captured by industry interest (Freudenburg and Gramling, 1994b). Both circumstances lend support to the bureaucratic power explanation put forth by Humphrey et al. (1993).

Humphrey et al. (1993) have done a great service by delineating four theoretical perspectives that offer insight into the persistence of poverty across resource development cycles. This case study, however, suggests that no one perspective can adequately explain the varying types of poverty that emerged in southern Louisiana between 1973 and 1986. As Freudenburg and Gramling (1994a) have noted, it may be necessary to use all of these theoretical models and search for imaginative new perspectives to understand the complex relationship between resource development and the subsequent failure of some individuals to meet their basic needs.

Notes

1. *Interviews were transcribed for analysis, thus allowing direct quotes.*

2. *There are obvious limitations to the data. First, asking respondents to recall the characteristics of clients over the entire resource extraction cycle relied heavily on memories that in some cases were almost two decades old. Second, because it was impossible (in 1992) to interview those who had experienced poverty in the past, the type of data was limited to those things that social service providers could observe (e.g., the types of clients, where they came from, what they needed, the reasons they gave for their current situations). Finally, it was impossible to substantiate any particular individual's recollections. The consistency between the interviews, however, lent credence to each. Clear trends emerged from the interviews, trends that delineated, at least in a descriptive fashion, the changing nature of poverty over the resource extraction cycle. Selected quotes are used throughout the paper to illustrate these trends.*

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