

Widener, Patricia. 2011. *Oil Injustice: Resisting and Conceding a Pipeline in Ecuador*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.

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*Oil Injustice* tackles a subject that defines our era. Oil quite literally fuels the global economy, both in material and financial terms, while its flows engender tremendous and enduring inequalities. Some are made rich by oil; many enjoy lifestyles of relative affluence dependent upon it; still others live in intimate relationship with the petroleum commodity chain, enduring poverty, poor health and poisoned environments.

Patricia Widener's book is about the struggles of affected communities to defend their rights and dignity from the machinations of the global "oil-industrial order" (p. 11). Widener tackles this nexus by studying an emblematic pipeline controversy over Ecuador's *Oleoducto de Crudos Pesados* (Heavy Crude Oil Pipeline, or OCP by the Spanish acronym). The OCP was the second pipeline to connect Ecuador's Amazonian oil-producing region with refining and export facilities on the country's Pacific coast. Widener's account spans three years of political conflict over the pipeline, from 2000 to 2003, as well as some of the aftermath of the pipeline debate and the related evolution of Ecuador's oil sector up to 2010.

In her study of the OCP, and her related effort to characterize North-South relationships of exploitation and activism, Widener zeroes in on four different sites of contention, devoting a chapter to each. Two of these sites correspond to Ecuador's emergent environmental movement: a collection of professionalized environmental NGOs located in the capital city, Quito, and a grassroots green movement born in the small Andean town of Mindo. The other two sites comprise communities that live in the belly of the global oil complex and suffer classic relations of environmental injustice: Lago Agrio, located in the oil-producing region of the Ecuadorian Amazon, and Esmeraldas, the Pacific coast town where the nation's oil exporting and refining facilities are located.

Each of these sites entered the OCP controversy in different ways, but Widener identifies a fundamental distinction around site-specific demands and differential opportunities to build transnational alliances. Environmental NGOs and grassroots activists were largely preoccupied with endangered species and ecosystems, and effectively tapped into transnational networks to put pressure on the proponents and funders of the pipeline. Meanwhile, citizens of Lago Agrio and Esmeraldas sought socio-environmental justice in the shape of employment opportunities, improved local infrastructure, investment in economic development, and reduced exposure to oil-related contamination. Their mobilizations were largely confined to local network-building between activist mayors, community organizations, and unions. For Widener, this unequal access to transnational networks constitutes another layer of injustice on top of the injuries associated with the pipeline itself: "The communities most critical to the

supply of oil and with greatest links to the global marketplace and proximity to oil facilities . . . failed to have their agendas lifted beyond the particular site of contention” (p. 33). Widener’s sixth chapter looks more closely at the implications of the unequal and selective relationships that structure North-South collaboration within activist networks, “undermining the demands and bargaining power of the most affected in the South” (p. 225).

This is a passionately argued book. It is based on extensive fieldwork that has not only provided Widener with an impressive array of data from interviews and other documentation, but has also clearly connected her to the environmental justice struggles she describes. Her book is a plea to take those struggles more seriously. To this committed scholarship one can hardly object, but ultimately there is a lack of analytical depth behind the denunciations of corporate power, government inaction, environmental elitism, and North-South empathy gaps. Widener cites theoretical literature (e.g., Habermas, Gramsci, Tilly) almost in passing, leaving it unclear how it contributes to her own understanding of environmental justice movements. Similarly, the frequent comparisons to other cases are often frustratingly superficial.

These failings mean that Widener misses opportunities to make more fine-grained conceptual distinctions in her analysis and conclusions. Instead, her condemnations of injustice become repetitive, and her calls for a new kind of global social agency seem voluntaristic—quite at odds with the rich empirical content of the book. Widener claims to demonstrate that “affected communities in the South are calling for a Southern-led, community-driven global justice founded in an ecological and participatory democracy” (p. 253). Her empirical work suggests otherwise: environmental justice mobilizations in the Global South quite often lack this kind of global vision, ambition, and reach, remaining largely conjunctural responses to external threats focused on achieving greater voice vis-à-vis specific corporate actors and governments.

In light of these shortcomings, the last chapter of the book is refreshing. There, in something of an epilogue, Widener offers an update on the national political landscape in relation to Ecuador’s oil economy, assessing new challenges and opportunities for civil society movements in the wake of the OCP’s completion. In the context of this exercise she offers a much more detailed consideration of national and transnational balances of economic and political power in relation to Ecuadorian social movements. In so doing, the strength of her empirical knowledge is more effectively translated into nuanced judgments regarding the potential for environmental justice struggles to challenge dominant social relations within the global oil complex.