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# **Contested claims over space and identity between fishers and the oil industry in Mexico**

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## **Abstract**

This essay examines neoliberal forms of resource governance and emerging struggles over control of sea space between coastal fishers, the para-statal oil industry and government authorities in the State of Tabasco, Mexico. The analysis focuses on the changing mechanisms of resource governance and networking related to contested claims over rights to offshore space. The study is based on material collected during ethnographic field research in Tabasco in 2011–2014. By linking a post-Foucauldian approach to governmentality with a Deleuzian perspective on networks, our research examines resource governance as a socio-political arena, constructed in negotiation between multiple governmental, private and civil society actors, including heterogeneous groups from local populations. The study demonstrates how hybrid techniques of resource governance lead to fishers' socio-spatial displacement, marginalization in the fields of political representation and subjection to ideas of aquaculture entrepreneurship. The ensemble of private regulation and governmental control provides a venue for drawing fishers into clientelist practices of governing while it diffuses questions of responsibility. These modes of governance fragment the fishers' efforts to mobilize politically, making them rely on less visible networks of contestation shaped by heterogeneous fishing groups, with varying access to resources and political representation. Recent transformations in environmental legislation and the fishers' mobile tactics to networking may offer opportunities for them to reclaim their resource rights.

**Keywords:** fishers, governance, identity, networks, oil industry, Mexico, space

## 1. Introduction

*Emilio, a political leader among cooperative fishers in Tabasco, launched my fieldwork with a serious lecture. On the second day of my three-month stay in his family, Emilio devoted three hours to explaining fishing politics in one of Mexico's most important oil-producing regions. He quoted excerpts from complex federal laws on fishing and cooperativism, and explained the problems fishers face with regards the implementation and enforcement of existing legislation. Though he quit school at the age of twelve in order to devote his time to fishing, he demonstrated an impressive fluency in the applicable law and a sound grasp of underlying politics.*

*Emilio said the big change came when the federal government established a 15,900 km<sup>2</sup> marine zone of exclusion around oil platforms in the Gulf of Mexico in 2003. Access to the zone was limited exclusively to the oil industry to protect against terrorist attacks. The government is trying to persuade fishers to leave the sea and become fish farmers, though few have either the desire or the finances to leave fishing and obtain the land required for an aquaculture operation. Many fishers prefer sea fishing because it is what they are used to, though in search of fishing areas away from the oil rigs, they are travelling into riskier, less familiar waters.*

Emilio's remarks on the role of legislation in the fierce competition for offshore space between fishers, the oil industry and government authorities in Tabasco opens up interesting viewpoints onto the interplay of power, politics and meanings in current contestations over neoliberal modes of governance in extractive industries. His comments also provide a point of departure for understanding a range of shifting forms of resource governance and contestation characteristic of large-scale extractive operations in the global South (Bebbington, 2012; Watts, 2011; Zalik, 2009).

In this essay, we focus on contested claims to space and identity within the context of hydrocarbon politics in Mexico. Placing the fishers, the oil industry and government authorities at the centre of our inquiry, we seek the "how" of hybrid forms of governance in contemporary extractive regimes (Appel, 2012). The struggles over resource

space in Tabasco are connected to the establishment of the zone of exclusion for all but the oil industry in the Gulf of Mexico in 2003. This declaration has restricted the fishers' access to their fishing grounds and forced them to travel further out to sea, making their fishing operations more demanding and dangerous. At the same time, the Mexican para-statal oil industry is undergoing strong privatization and restructuration, and in order to boost production, it is extending drilling activities along the coast of Tabasco. The ongoing struggles for resource access are characterized by changing techniques of private-public co-governance, fragmentation of the fishers' political mobilization and the fishers' shifting tactics of networking.

The main focus in our analysis is on the ways that techniques of governance and networks of contestation become shaped through the hybrid mechanisms of neoliberal oil governance. Inspired by Stephen Collier's (2009) Foucauldian approach, we examine how modes of resource governance based on conventional forms of authoritarian control (Watts, 2004b; Zalik, 2009) become combined with techniques of disentanglement and indirect governance (Appel, 2012; Himley, 2013). We argue that empirical analyses of neoliberal governance would benefit from more attention being paid to the complex articulations of different forms of governance. In Tabasco, within the shifting arenas of claim-making, for example, market-based mechanisms of governance are mixed with clientelist politics, producing a fuzzy ensemble. Fraternizing with the government enables the oil industry to relocate the responsibility for negotiating local fishers' demands for compensation to government authorities. Acting as mediator between fishers and the oil industry, government officials employ techniques that range from paternalist control to public-private regulation. At the same time, the oil industry is subcontracting foreign companies to carry out socially delicate oil exploration and drilling activities.

The challenges posed to local resource users by large development interventions

have been analyzed in numerous studies on indigenous, peasant, human-rights and environmental-justice struggles against mega industrial development projects (e.g. Carruthers, 2008; Doane, 2005; Perreault and Valdivia, 2010; Scholsberg and Carruthers, 2010; Watts, 2011). Many of these studies focus on contestations in which local communities have succeeded in forming well-organized counter-movements with strategic links to transnational networks (Gustafson, 2011; Haarstad and Fløysand, 2007; Sawyer, 2004). Our study, in contrast, analyzes conflict over resource space and identity in a situation where local agendas are heterogeneous and counter-efforts have remained fragmented. As Auyero and Swistun (2009: 7-8. 12) note, these less visible struggles over resources and representation have received little attention in academic studies on social movements, despite their relative frequency.

In Tabasco, hybrid techniques of neoliberal governance tend to fragment the efforts made by local resource users to institute legal claims and political mobilization, making them seek resource access through everyday forms of connectivity. Here we link our Foucauldian analysis of governmentality with a Deleuzian approach to rhizomatic subaltern networks in order to analyze the fishers' networking (Escobar & Osterweil, 2010; Lenco, 2014). The fishers' endeavours in the contestation are mediated by their engagements with the sea space and through the asymmetrical relations between fisher leaders and entrepreneurs like Emilio, small-scale, licensed fishers and unlicensed, informal fishers, who have no legally acknowledged position from which to negotiate with the oil industry. Through ethnographic inquiry into the ambiguous forms of governing within the shifting oil regime and the fishers' everyday strategies of contestation, we seek to offer insights into the less visible faces of power (Nuijten, 2004: 210) within the situated contexts of neoliberal governance.

The following section presents post-Foucauldian theorizations of resource

governance, combined with theoretical ideas of everyday contestation through rhizomatic networks. The third section explains the context and the methods of the study. In the fourth section, we move to analysis of the hybrid government-corporate strategies of resource governance, followed by the fifth section's examination of the fishers' fractured attempts at political contestation. The sixth section provides conclusions concerning the contested claims of corporates and communities to resource governance characteristic of neoliberal extractive operations today.

## **2. Governance, politics and fragmented networks**

Emilio's portrayal of the struggles over the occupation of the Tabascan offshore touches on important themes in the current discussion of discursive strategies, political games and identity codifications in the competition between extractive industries, government institutions and local resource users for access to resource space (Hatcher, 2012; Perreault and Valdivia, 2010; Watts, 2004a). Recent studies on governance have redeveloped Michel Foucault's concept of governmentality to better capture the processes of privatization, deregulation and self-management involved in neoliberal modes of governance and subject-formation (Collier, 2009; Ferguson, 2010; Rose et al., 2006). Within this discussion, Collier (2009: 99) proposes an analysis of governance that makes visible the diverse ways in which techniques and styles of reasoning are combined and become complex modes of governing. Such an approach seeks to reveal neoliberalism as a "heterogeneous space, constituted through multiple determinations, and not reducible to a given form of knowledge-power". Our study follows this line of thinking by tracing the mentality of governance in the hybrid ensemble of discourses and political practices through which the governing of the sea space and fishers' subjectivity is being reformulated in Mexican oil politics.

In his Foucault-inspired analysis of conflicts over oil extraction in Nigeria, Michael Watts (2004a: 199) conceptualizes oil governance as a “complex” that constructs “differing sorts of community”, with “differing sorts of identities, forms of rule and territory”. This perspective of multiple actors, identities and spaces offers an interesting angle for examining relations between the oil industry and local communities. Furthermore, Watts (2004b: 55) suggests that examining the logic of both rule and unrule and thereby the “perhaps *ungovernable*” spaces of oil politics is crucial for a more detailed understanding of oil governance. Correspondingly, Tania Li (2007a: 277) notes that an analysis of governing that goes beyond the “conduct of conduct”, can provide important insights into processes and experiences “that cannot be reconfigured according to plan”.

Exploring what remains unexplained in oil politics by the mentality of governance is crucial especially because, as Timothy Mitchell (2009) notes in his analysis of oil and democracy, the material qualities of crude oil, as well as the investments and technologies required for its transformation into a global commodity, make oil extraction highly vulnerable to disruption. For this reason, the oil industry seeks to organize its production into spatially isolated operations, separated from the social observation and political pressure of civic movements (Zalik, 2009). By appearing to remove itself from local social conflicts, the oil industry obscures the links between global projects of resource appropriation and local experiences of resource exclusion (Appel, 2012; Ferguson, 2005).

These dynamics call for detailed analyses of how the strategies and techniques of governing are implemented in particular times and places, and of their fragilities and fractures, as well as of ambiguous negotiations and contestations between differently positioned subjects (Li, 2007b; Nuijten, 2004). In Mexico, the economic and symbolic power of Petróleos Mexicanos (Pemex) in national politics, together with the melange of legacies of clientelism and new techniques of neoliberal governance, colour the globalizing oil sector’s

relationships with local populations (Martínez Laguna, 2004). The tightened regulation of the Tabascan offshore will probably impact on prevailing tensions over resource space between the oil industry and heterogeneous groups of fishers in the near future.

In addition to resource management through legislation and public regulation, oil regimes deploy other techniques to legitimize their operations and restrict the access of local populations to resource spaces. In their research on hydrocarbon governance in the Gulf of Mexico, Breglia (2013) and Zalik (2009) demonstrate how – apart from legal actions and state-policing in the privatizing offshore – the Mexican government’s welfare interventions are encouraging fishers to become entrepreneurial aquaculturists. Correspondingly, Sawyer (2004), Breglia (2013) and Himley (2013) show how corporations are seeking to transfer local claims to resource access from formal political arenas to voluntary programmes of corporate social responsibility and community development. These actions are aimed at obscuring the issues of environmental and social responsibility involved in extractive operations and hiding the inherently political nature of the corporates’ actions.

These hybrid mechanisms of resource governance raise many questions regarding contemporary struggles over resource access and cultural identity. Scholars inspired by Deleuzian approaches to networks have taken up the concept of the rhizome to refer to new forms of subaltern networking. Escobar and Osterweil (2010: 201) emphasize the changing connections and mobilizations within subaltern networks, suggesting that a rhizomatic perspective helps to convey a sense of that which is not “pure opposition or resistance” but yet escapes control. Lenco suggests (2014: 139) that a Deleuzian approach encourages the examination of emerging tactics of contestation within contexts of social change, in a world where “uncertainties have replaced regularities”.

Detailed analyses of rhizomatic ways of networking may provide insights into the logic that characterizes connections among heterogeneous groups of marginalized people



in contexts where institutional strategies of resource governance increasingly limit their livelihood options and political tactics. In Tabasco, intensified control of the sea space by the government and the oil industry has pushed fishers to deploy less visible tactics of contestation among the different groups. The fishers' mobile networks in offshore "taskspaces" (Ingold, 2000: 195–198) and ambiguous political arenas are keys to understanding their tactics of everyday resistance. Connecting post-Foucauldian ideas of governmentality with Deleuzian notions of rhizomatic networks, we examine the political arenas of oil and fishing not simply as spaces of authoritative intervention, but as constructed through diverse claims by actors in dissimilar positions (Büscher, 2010; Mathews, 2009). Empirical analyses of the conduct of conduct in struggles over resource access and identity can provide valuable insights into the hybrid rules and regulations, and fragmented tactics, characteristic of shifting forms of resource governance in today's extractive industries.

### **3. Studying Mexican fish-and-oil politics**

Coastal Tabasco contains a mixture of mangrove wetlands, coconut plantations and dozens of fishing villages. Oil pipelines break up the verdant landscape and turquoise sea. The 190-km-long coastline includes the major towns of Frontera, Paráiso and Sánchez Magallanes and many small villages that are home to altogether approximately 7,000 fishers (Figure 1); about half of them are unlicensed (*pescadores libres*).<sup>1</sup> Fish and oil are tightly interwoven in the lives of the coastal population, most of which is directly or indirectly engaged in at least one of these activities.

The Tabascan fishing communities are far from homogeneous. There is considerable intra- and inter-household differentiation according to age, gender, livelihoods,

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<sup>1</sup> The first author's interview at the Secretaria de Desarrollo, 2011.

social status and political position. Many of the unlicensed fishers work under more or less casual arrangements for wealthier, license-holding fishing entrepreneurs (*permisionarios*). Sea fishing, however, is not a part of women's everyday life; rather, they specialize in catching crabs, cleaning the catches of incoming fishing boats or working in collective fish-farming operations (Saury Arias, 2010). Women also assist their husbands and other male relatives in riverine and coastal fishing. The fact that the state authorities no longer grant fishing licenses to new fishers but instead are trying to promote onshore aquaculture, causes many difficulties for small-scale fishers, who do not have the legal status nor the resources required for aquaculture. In this situation, struggles over identity and political representation revolve around the issue of who is a "real fisher": one that practices fishing, or one that holds a fishing license.

The federal government actively promoted cooperative fishing from the 1940s to the early 1980s. During this time, it was relatively easy for coastal people to find work in cooperatives linked to the high-flying fish and shrimp industries. The cooperatives sold their catch to the state-owned company, Ocean Garden, which then exported the fish and shrimp to the USA. In the 1990s, the Mexican government opened the fishing industry to private investment. With cuts in government subsidies, overfishing and Pemex's operational expansion, the shrimp and fish industries collapsed and, currently, Tabasco accounts for only 1.4 percent of national fish production (Saury Arias, 2010: 43, 102). Meanwhile, the heterogeneity of fishers, competition over restricted resource space, and the large number of unlicensed, informal fishers who have limited political rights, has fragmented the political agendas of the coastal fishing communities.

Pemex, the eleventh largest oil company in the world and the third largest exporter of crude oil to the United States (US EIA, 2012), producing approximately 2.5 million barrels of crude oil a day, figures in the everyday life of fishing communities in

multiple ways.<sup>2</sup> The Sonda de Campeche (Campeche Sound) in the Gulf of Mexico holds the giant complex of the Cantarell and Ku-Maloob-Zaap oil fields, which together account for 51 per cent of Mexico's oil production (Pemex, 2013). Over 200 oil-production platforms and roughly 160 foreign companies operate in the Campeche Sound as suppliers. Since the establishment of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1992, the Mexican government has opened the energy sector to global investment and given transnational companies access to oil exploration and drilling under subcontracts with Pemex (Martínez Laguna, 2004). The new *Ley de Hidrocarburos* (Hydrocarbons Law) and *Ley de Ingresos sobre Hidrocarburos* (Hydrocarbons Revenues Law), created under President Enrique Peña Nieto's administration, allow Pemex to make licensing, production-sharing and profit-sharing contracts with private companies (DOF, 2014a; 2014b). These reforms and the expansion of extractive operations to Tabascan coastal areas will considerably increase the oil industry's influence on the livelihoods and living conditions of the fishing communities in the future.

Land-based oil extraction began in Tabasco in 1949, eleven years after President Lázaro Cárdenas expropriated the oil industry from foreign companies (Zalik, 2006). Pemex launched a major development of Tabascan offshore oil reserves in 1977–1980 (Beltrán, 1988: 52). With the ramping up of oil production, local populations began to recognize the wide-scale impacts of the oil industry on their living environment (Tudela, 1989: 248–254). Since the appearance of the industry in offshore waters, the fishers have reported on oil spills that have damaged their fishing equipment and caused fish death, and with the recent oil explorations along the coast, the fishers claim that the noise of the exploration boats is scaring fish away from their habitats.

Unlike the rapid transfer of production sites in many other global industries, oil production is difficult to move in cases of any kind of conflict because oil reserves are

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<sup>2</sup> Pemex, Statistics: "Producción de petróleo y gas", 2013.

physically embedded and the investments required for extraction are high (Ferguson, 2005; Zalik, 2009). Consequently, the Mexican government imposed initial security restrictions on movements near oil installations in the late 1990s (Arias Rodríguez and Ireta Guzmán, 2009: 13) which were formalized under a 15,907-km<sup>2</sup> zone of marine exclusion around oil installations in the Gulf of Mexico in 2003 (Figure 2). The zone was established under the federal legislation “Acuerdo Secretarial No. 117”, based on the power of ejection granted to the Secretaría de Marina (Naval Secretariat, SEMAR) (DO, 2003). This agreement prohibits any activity other than oil extraction within the zone. While the agreement was justified by arguments of preventing terrorist attacks and enhancing national security, one of its aims seems to have been to avert offshore social confrontation in order to ensure undisturbed oil production. Similar restrictions may also gain prominence close to the coastline as the oil industry plans to increase the number of coastal operating oil platforms in the traditional fishing waters of the local population from two in number to sixteen in the coming years.<sup>3</sup>

This study is based on empirical research into multiple actors. The first author carried out six months of ethnographic fieldwork among fishers, government and oil industry actors on the coast of Tabasco and in the state’s capital, Villahermosa, in 2011–2012. During this time, she lived first with the family of a political leader among the fishers, and then with that of an unlicensed fisher. Participation in the fishers’ lives provided insights into their daily activities, social networks and political strategies. This part of the study included 40 ethnographic interviews, dozens of informal conversations, and implementation of the methods of participant observation.

Both authors took part in the study of government and oil industry actors, which consisted of numerous interviews and participation in meetings and workshops with the representatives of government institutions, the oil industry and fishers. The first author

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<sup>3</sup> The second author’s interview with Pemex staff person, 2011.

conducted 35 interviews with government authorities and representatives of the oil industry in 2011 and 2012. The second author carried out 21 interviews with government authorities and representatives of the oil industry from 2011 to 2014, also participating in two workshops organized for representatives of global oil companies in Mexico: the first entitled “Conflict management in the oil production areas” and the second, “Corporate responsibility in the oil industry”. Participation in these workshops offered valuable information about oil industry perspectives on resource governance, including market-driven codes of conduct and programmes of community development.

Both authors reviewed relevant government documents, development plans concerning the oil industry and fishing, the oil industry’s social responsibility reports and other public documents. Access to the complex networks of Mexican fish-and-oil politics was highly challenging and required considerable flexibility in our field research. The sensitivity of the research topic, and the politically tense relations between the oil industry, government authorities and different kinds of fishers, required multi-faceted negotiations and efforts to build trust and protect the informants’ anonymity. These conditions also required strategies to secure the safety of the informants as well as our own. To improve the reliability of our argumentation, we carefully cross-checked information from the different sources of research data, a process that included multiple comparisons: between different interviews we had each conducted; between the sorts of information that the informants gave us on different occasions; and between the information gathered through interviews and that of participant observation and complementary documentary material.

## **4. Governing the sea**

### ***4.1. New negotiation procedures***

In the late 1990s, foreign oil exploration subcontractors appeared in Tabasco's coastal waters, causing restrictions on the fishers' seagoing movement. In a news story by the regional newspaper *Presente*, published January 11, 2002, two fisher leaders questioned the curious anonymity of the *buques exploradores* (exploratory boats) in the port authority's notification about the geophysical studies for oil deposits. The fishers said the notice did not identify the company subcontracted for the exploration, yet ordered fishers to stay out of its way. Within a year, the zone of exclusion was established.

At the time of our fieldwork in 2011, another transnational geophysical subcontractor for Pemex was exploring oil deposits along the coastline of Tabasco. Yet the strategies for informing the public were virtually unchanged from those of ten years earlier. The notification, distributed by the port authority, included detailed information about the coordinates and timetables of exploration and the Pemex logo, but the authority to contact in case of inquiries was the port officer. There was no mention of the company in charge of exploration.

These information-control measures form part of the socio-spatial regularization of the Tabascan sea space and the fishing population in the context of intensified integration of Mexican oil resources into global networks of production and trade. The conditions of a "petro-state" (Watts, 2005: 384), in which the Mexican government received about \$50.3 million in oil revenues in 2010, accounting for a third of the government's tax income (Pemex, 2010: 9, 16–17), link the Mexican political economy into volatile global oil markets and geopolitics. In the hybrid forms of resource governance, legislative measures and government-led techniques of oversight are combined with market-based incentives and the mechanisms of public-private co-governance. Together these techniques mediate the fishers' access to resource space and reformulate their institutional representation as resource users who are economically inefficient and/or politically

threatening.

Government agencies play an important role in these hybrid forms of governance. In our interviews, both Pemex and state government representatives noted that earlier forms of personalized settlements between fishers and the oil industry created an “industry of claim-making” (“*industria de reclamación*”), whereby fishers purportedly blamed Pemex for diverse harms and Pemex settled the claims in order to secure its oil production operations. Under current arrangements, the state-level Secretaría de Energía, Recursos Naturales y Protección Ambiental (Secretariat of Energy, Natural Resources and Environmental Protection, SERNAPAM), acts as a mediator in negotiations over compensation for environmental harm, economic loss and social disturbance caused by the oil industry to the fishers. Both the oil industry and government representatives considered these new procedures to be much more transparent than those in place earlier which, they claimed, allowed room for clientelist deals. According to them, compensation claims are now dealt with more uniformly and equitably under the supervision of state authorities. As an official in SERNAPAM explained:

This new approach was initiated in response to an industry of claim-making, where people claimed compensation from Pemex and Pemex paid out for whatever damage. Now we’re trying to get rid of this kind of social tutelage. We’re setting norms for coordinated actions, so that people are able to negotiate in coordinated fashion with governmental agencies.

(Second author’s interview at SERNAPAM, 2012)

Using state authorities as intermediaries is an important part of the oil industry’s indirect form of governance as, in compensation negotiations in particular, it makes it difficult for fishers to identify who is responsible for what and to whom. Yet, while officially emphasizing

transparency and social responsibility, in practice the oil industry and government agencies are engaged in various sorts of extra-legal reparation and informal horse-trading in order to control fishers' contestation tactics. The aim of the techniques of public-private co-governance is to give the appearance of the government being in control of resource regulation, thereby forestalling fishers' political mobilization.

The same holds true with regards the regulation of the fishers' access to offshore areas. The zone of exclusion, situated 30–40 kilometres off the Tabasco coast, includes an "area of marine prevention" of 15,907 km<sup>2</sup> through which the "fast transit" of fishing boats is allowed (Figure 2). The actual "area of exclusion" of 5,794 km<sup>2</sup> is closed to all traffic except that involved in oil drilling (*Diario Oficial*, 2003). Prior to the establishment of the zone of exclusion, Tabascan fishers enjoyed some of their richest hauls around the oil platforms, which act as artificial reefs and attract fish. Furthermore, the platforms provided shelter for the fishers during heavy storms and the opportunity to exchange fresh fish for other foodstuffs with platform workers. Despite the official discourse of national security, cordoning off the marine area seems to be a preventative act to manage potential social conflict with fishers, especially in light of the platforms to be established close to the Tabascan shore.

Government/industry co-governance has, however, not been an entirely smooth road. Pemex often blames state institutions for sustaining conventional relations of patronage, while state authorities accuse Pemex of avoiding its responsibility and using state officials as shields in fending off fishers' accusations. With regards the zone of exclusion, Pemex managers argue that Pemex, as a private company, has nothing to do with the federal government's national security legislation. Indeed, Pemex representatives assert that the federal government established the zone and it is the Mexican Navy that is mandated to enforce legal regulations therein. As a high-ranking Pemex official conceptualized the issue:



Earlier we didn't have so many problems with the fishers. It was mostly claims for damage to their nets. Now they accuse us of invading their fishing areas. They ask us, 'Who gave you the authorization to displace us?' But it was the federal government that signed the agreement restricting fishers' access. Pemex didn't intervene; it was the National Security [Forces].

(Second author's interview with a Pemex staff person, 2011)

Like other global majors, Pemex also increasingly engages in market-based, self-regulatory programmes of corporate responsibility which, together with various forms of compensation, aim to mitigate tensions over the offshore space with local fishing communities. Yet even here, it is the government officials that often facilitate these programmes, thereby enabling the oil industry to carry out its activities with limited direct engagement with local people. Moreover, as the programmes are based on voluntary agreements, they are largely beyond public scrutiny. Like other transnational corporations, Pemex prefers private codes of conduct and voluntary agreements, which provide more flexible, first-party verified regulatory schemes than the law and mandatory regulation.

The increasing use of subcontractors both in oil extraction and in managing the oil industry's relations with the local communities plays a strategic role in the new forms of governing the offshore resource space and the coastal fishing population. For a company with a past record of having managed some of the local people's claims through questionable deals, relocating the business of community relations increasingly to foreign subcontractors disentangles Pemex from earlier practices. At the same time, it allows Pemex to follow the lead of other global oil companies in establishing regulated relationships with local communities (Breglia, 2013: 174–177). The recent production agreements require companies contracted by Pemex to dedicate 1.5 per cent of their budget to community development, while the use of subcontractors also serves to blur lines of responsibility. As is common in

private norms of regulation, Pemex does not take responsibility for the actions carried out by its subcontractors; while the transnational subcontractors often shift the blame for unsuccessful programmes or unaccomplished goals to Pemex.

In 2011– 2012, Pemex was carrying out a community development programme in coastal communities together with one of its subcontractors. In this programme, which had a budget of approximately \$1.7 million, the companies donated 150 two-stroke motors and 100 equipment kits for navigation, safety and motor repair to licensed fishers. In November 2011, at a meeting held to decide on procurement of the motors that included representatives of the fishers, Pemex and the subcontractor, a fisher leader “welcomed” the participants with an aggressive rant blaming Pemex for decreasing catches. The fishers then accused the oil industry of delaying the procurement. The subcontractor nervously assured the incensed fishers that the motors would arrive eventually, but that it all depended on Pemex. Finally, the meeting calmed down when oil industry representatives started to ask the fisher leaders about the exact type of motors they were requesting. The course of the meeting seemed to follow a script that was familiar to the actors involved. Both the fisher leaders and the oil industry representatives knew that after the fisher leaders had been able to perform the role of an intrusive claimant, the oil industry would buy them off with clientelist techniques.

The community development programmes offer the oil industry an arena for political negotiation on compensation for lost marine space, even though representatives of the oil industry have not officially admitted to their having such a role. The new techniques provide the oil industry with a venue in which to continue clientelist arts of governance, while the subcontractor, by taking up the role of facilitator, diffuses questions of responsibility. While the programmes seem to prevent fishers’ frustration at the lost resource space from developing into an organized protest movement, everybody realizes that the programmes as such can hardly compensate the fishers for their restricted resource access and the changes in

their way of life.

#### ***4.2. Transforming sea fishers to fish farmers***

With the objective of identifying alternative livelihood strategies for fishers constrained by the restricted access to offshore, a new negotiating body, *la mesa pesquera*, was established in 2009, comprising representatives of fishers, Pemex, state-level SERNAPAM and federal-level Secretaría de Gobernación (Secretariat of the Interior, SEGOB). Although it lacks legal authority, all representatives considered it an important step towards greater transparency on the part of what amounts to a fortress-like oil company that had never previously sat at round-table negotiations with fishers. The major activities of the body have been the formulation of the oil industry's social responsibility programmes and the establishment of a fund to provide loans for fishing and fish farming to licensed fishers.

The fishing license is the key to attaining status as a legally constituted fisher with official resource rights and a politically recognized fisher identity in Mexico. As the federal Secretaría de Agricultura, Ganadería, Desarrollo Rural, Pesca y Alimentación (Secretariat of Agriculture, Livestock, Rural Development, Fisheries and Food, SAGARPA) no longer issues fishing licenses to new fishers, the fishing communities are increasingly divided into those with a license and thus with access to the compensation paid by the oil industry, and those without and thereby denied the opportunity to negotiate with the oil industry. Due to the political and symbolic power associated with the fishing license, licensing is a heated issue between the government and the fishers, and it remains intense despite the government's efforts to present licensing policy as a neutral, technical affair, in which restriction is considered to "discipline" fishers to prevent over-fishing. As the following excerpts illustrate, a strict division between legally constituted, licensed fishers and

uncontrollable, clandestine fishers characterizes the discourse of government agencies and the oil industry on the regulation of sea space:

The fishers operate in the federal zone. It's a real chaos. The only way to create order there is through licenses.

(First author's interview with a government official, 2011)

We only work with organized fishers. We don't work with *pescadores libres* because anybody who wants to can suddenly decide to identify himself as a fisher...*Pescadores libres* are not legally recognized fishers.

(Second author's interview with a Pemex official, 2011)

In arguments to support increasing control over offshore access, Tabascan state officials also used categorizing discourse that problematized fishers as reliable citizens and responsible resource users (Lund (2011: 889). Fishers were "impossible to negotiate with" because they were unwilling to cooperate among themselves. They were said to be cunning, dishonest and greedy. This discourse resembled what Sawyer (2004: 76) records when an indigenous Ecuadorian activist mimics the discourse of an oil company's chief executive on the people of Amazonia: "We can't work with those *indios*. They can't even agree on what they want. They are always fighting." In arguments for and against particular identities and forms of living, categorical labels of class, race and ethnicity are often used to justify differentiated access to resources (Povinelli, 2011; Lund, 2011). By presenting the fishers as the culprits of their own social abandonment, government officials and oil-industry representatives justify tightened access to the offshore space.

As a way to manage the conflicts related to the fishers' loss of resource access and endangered sea-fishing livelihoods, the government has proposed "rural development"

programmes based on the idea of transition to aquaculture. Through these “conversion programmes” (*reconversión pesquera*), the government aims to transform sea fishers into entrepreneurial fish farmers, assuring fishers that “what they catch in the sea, they can equally produce onshore” (Arias Rodríguez and Ireta Guzmán, 2009: 3). One of the government’s arguments for promoting fish farming has been to protect key Mexican fish stocks from overexploitation. This discourse obscures the oil industry’s offshore expansion as the main reason for the fishers’ displacement and attributes decimation of local fisheries to fisher indifference, thereby making fishers appear responsible for the conflicts over sea space. According to coastal fishers, the shift to aquaculture would serve to ensure exclusive access to the sea space for the oil industry.

In 2011, the Fideicomiso del Fondo de Reconversión Pesquera (FIFOPESCA) provided six million pesos to Tabascan fish farmers to invest in the cultivation of tilapia, oyster and shrimp. However, fishers must first comply with a long list of requirements such as environmental-impact assessments and water-use accountings before they are eligible to apply for state funds. Only 10 per cent of the currently registered 140 cooperatives and private license-holders, and none of the approximately 3,000 unlicensed fishers in coastal Tabasco are involved in aquaculture. The fish-farming programmes tend to favour better-off producers who have the capacity for long-term investments, while, in our interviews, few fishers saw fish farming as a realistic proposition for small-scale operators. In addition to lacking land, possession of which is a legal requirement for fish farming, fishers found that raising fish in ponds was a very different way of life and thus not an easy transition for those who have made their living from the sea since childhood. Nevertheless, many fishers struggle to meet the requirements for funds from these state-led development projects that carry the hopes of gaining extra income through paternalist engagement with the state. Indeed, Nuijten (2004: 223) calls this form of governmental power a “hope-generating machine”. With the restricted

access to the sea, many Tabascan fishers are being persuaded to seek the support provided by the state to encourage them to become entrepreneurial fish farmers.

For the fisher leaders who saw the government-promoted shift to aquaculture as a way to control fishers' access to the offshore areas, this strategy became palpable in December 2012 as the Commission of Agriculture, Forestry and Fishery in the Congress of Tabasco invited them and the representatives of aquaculture organizations and universities to discuss the proposed *Ley de Acuicultura y Pesca del Estado de Tabasco* (Tabasco's Aquaculture and Fishing Law). Most of the bill's 39 pages were devoted to the regulation of aquaculture, with few references to sea fishing. When participating in the forum, it became obvious for us that the approximately one hundred forum invitees were merely witnesses to decisions that had already been made. Considering that the law had been written primarily with fish farming in mind, two fisher leaders, including Emilio, offered critical comments on the bill while tactically deploying paternalist discourse in describing themselves as "*pescadores simples*" ("simple fishers"). The two leaders noted that legal requirements demand that officials arrange consultative workshops with fishers in each municipality when preparing such legislation. As it was too late for such hearings, the leaders demanded a few strategic reformulations to the bill in order to ensure that the legislation would also serve as an instrument for sea-fishing policy. Seven days later, the Mexican Congress approved the original bill with no changes.

In general, the hybrid modes of resource governance combine legal measures and public regulation with market-based incentives and techniques of indirect governing, thereby obscuring the role of the oil industry in the re-regulation of the fishers' resource space. Fishers' political claims for resource access are located under the oil industry's voluntary community-development programmes and government-mediated, extra-legal negotiations. Such modes of governance work towards political displacement of fishers as

legal subjects, meanwhile urging them to become responsible resource users and entrepreneurial fish-farmers. The portrayal of fishers' displacement from the sea as inevitable in order to assure national security and environmental sustainability makes the economic incentives offered by the oil regime to shift fishers' from the sea to the land appear almost like genuine charity.

## **5. Networks, mobility and contestation**

### ***5.1. Legal claims and fragmented political mobilization***

Although the juncture of the chocolate-coloured waters of the deltaic Grijalva-Usumacinta River with the turquoise clarity of the Gulf of Mexico long provided rich hauls for coastal fisher folk, the fishers claim that once abundant sharks have now all but disappeared because of noise from oil extraction. Also gone are the shrimp, the tortoises and the crocodiles. For several decades, the fishers and the oil industry have co-existed offshore with varying degrees of success but, even with the oil industry's appropriation of the sea space, fishers continue to consider themselves as rightful "*dueños del mar*" (masters of the sea).

During our conversations, the fishers' political leaders frequently pointed out the significance of statutory mechanisms such as the legal requirements for environmental impact assessments and public hearings in their struggles for resource access and livelihoods. Within the changing resource governance, legal measures and clientelist relationships represent a familiar framework to fisher leaders; a game whose rules they know. Emilio's calls to use the framework of the law in reclaiming fishers' right of access to the sea were based on the strong social precedent in Mexico to recognise customary resource rights in legal and political practice. Correspondingly, his comments at the above-mentioned Forum on the Aquaculture

and Fishing Law were based on his knowledge that public hearings are mandatory when planning significant changes in the fishers' legal status.

Most fishers, however, are considerably less fluent in the law and statutory process than their political leaders, a disparity that enhances the opportunities of leading fishers to engage in political dealings with government officials and the oil industry. Some governmental fishing authorities recently suggested that with the increasing number of oil platforms near the Tabasco coast, fishers should be supported to engage in deep-water fishing or marine aquaculture between the oil platforms. These plans enjoyed support from fisher leaders, although it was clear that both activities would require considerable capital investment. As many of the fisher leaders are commercial fishers, they calculated that in the implementation of such policies, they might have better resources and access to government subsidies than other fishers. In difference, most small-scale and unlicensed fishers, who need to sell their labour through unequal contracts to commercial fishers or engage in informal fishing, have a less advantaged position. These differentiations further fragment the efforts for political mobilisation in already divided fishing communities.

The power mediated through fisher leaders and their clientelist ties to political parties acted as a reference point by which fishers calibrate their understanding of the reconfiguring regimes of oil extraction. From the fishers' perspective, the gradual transformation of the sea space from a contested commons to an enclave assigned exclusively to the oil industry appeared to take place under a mandate of government and the then-ruling *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI), while the opposition *Partido Revolucionario Democrático* (PRD) was portrayed as an important supporter of fisher attempts to mobilize. According to fisher leaders, negotiation with political parties continues to be crucial in the struggles over resource space in order to avoid the risk of governmental repression. This holds true even with shifting forms of governance through which a diversity of governmental,



private and civil society actors is engaged in resource governance.

In terms of fishers' contestative efforts, the establishment of the zone of exclusion in 2003 precipitated a series of protest movements which they organized in alliance with NGOs, journalists and politicians from different parties. At the demonstrations, the fishers invoked their right to the sea as a resource space by referring to their cultural identity as sea fishers, and nationalist concerns that the zone of exclusion had been established to secure US energy needs. In 2004, the Fishers' Federation, supported by 3,000 coastal fishers, blocked a highway and demanded that the government abolish or at least relax restrictions on the zone of exclusion. As an alternative, the fishers proposed a variety of compensatory mechanisms, including expansion of the licensed offshore fishing area, aid for marine aquaculture, subsidies for deep-water fishing, economic support or employment for fishers on the oil platforms.

Under the heightened pressure, the federal government called off the restrictions and increased the budget for the Tabascan fishing sector from the previous year's 6 million pesos to 25 million pesos. As a result of these strategic concessions, open political confrontation withered. Once the situation was calmer, the exclusion-zone restrictions were soon reinstated, with oil industry and government representatives both noting that SERNAPAM-mediated meetings were the sole legitimate forum for airing fisher claims. According to the fishers, their open resistance was co-opted through political horse-trading between the oil industry, state authorities and their own leadership:

Fidel: A man rose up to lead our resistance, and there was discussion that the problem would be solved. This man has gobs of money now.

José: They silenced him.

Matias: They gave him money; they silenced him.

Fidel: He is rotting away in money! And the struggle did not achieve anything.

Ana: Nothing...because they paid the fishers and the struggle dropped off.

(First author's group interview with fishers, 2012)

The ambiguous processes related to restricted resource access and the increased involvement of foreign companies in oil extraction was a subject of intense discussion among fishers, for whom the actual power relations in oil politics were unclear. During our fieldwork, fishers usually portrayed the Pemex-state complex as the operator in charge, referring to transnational subcontractors simply as "*compañías*" ("companies"). This choice of terminology was not because the fishers did not know the subcontractors' names; rather, it expressed the fishers' concern about the legitimate masters of the sea under the new power configurations. By referring to them as "*las compañías*" the fishers highlighted the subcontractors' facelessness in their co-operations with Pemex to transform the sea space from a contested commons to a restricted enclave controlled by the Navy for the exclusive use of the oil industry. In this situation, the actual names of subcontracted companies had little relevance.

The public image of oil production as an environmentally contaminating and socially disruptive activity has made the global oil industry a special target of transnational environmental, human-rights and social-justice movements in recent years (Perreault and Valdivia, 2010; Watts, 2011). The environmental-social disaster resulting from the explosion on a British Petroleum-owned offshore drilling platform in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010 strengthened the position of transnational advocacy networks seeking greater responsibility from the oil industry. These networks have recently developed strategic ties with various indigenous, peasant, environmental and social justice movements in Mexico (Gúzman Ríos, 2009: 78–86).

Pemex, however, as a para-statal company has, until the ongoing energy-sector privatization, enjoyed national jurisdiction and sovereignty which has to a certain degree protected the company from becoming a target of transnational protest movements. Moreover,

in accord with the nationalist discourse, protest movements are often presented in public as counterproductive activities that impede the efficient utilization of the country's hydrocarbon resources. Since small farmers, fishers and trade unions organized a wide-scale political movement, called Pacto Ribereño, against the oil industry in Tabasco in 1976–1983, Pemex and the government have used strict measures to control such mobilizations. The techniques employed have combined legal measures, economic compensation and political repression, including imprisonment for political leaders (Guzmán Ríos, 2009). Given the fact that oil is one of the principal sources of national wealth and revenue for Mexico, and an emblem of symbolic power in national politics, Pemex expects strong government support in controlling protest movements.

Overall, the heterogeneity of the fishers' livelihoods and identities and the hierarchical power relations between different groups of fishers, as well as between fishers, fisher leaders, government authorities and oil industry representatives create multiple, and in themselves contested, communities within the coastal fishing areas. These conditions mediate the prevailing strategies to render the offshore resource space and the fisher population governable. However, while the ambiguous recognition of different categories of fishers by government authorities and the oil industry fragments the fishers' efforts to organize their political struggles, the fishers' rhizomatic networks constitute spaces beyond effective control (Watts, 2011) where the fishers seek to formulate mobile tactics of everyday contestation.

## ***5.2. Tactics of mobility and endurance***

Beyond clientelist co-opting and fragmented political mobilization, the fishers' networks of everyday connectivity mediate their relations to the sea as a taskspace, and their tactics for dealing with the hybrid forms of neoliberal governance. Unlicensed fishers, in particular,

create spaces for escape beyond institutional apparatuses of control, weaving their everyday forms of resistance into their efforts to continue unrestricted utilization and free movement in the marine environment. As Saury Arias (2010: 46) notes in his study of Tabascan fishing communities, the only economic activity that has persisted in the coastal areas of Mexico through successive economic crises and political turbulences is the “silent”, but consistent, presence of fishing. Paraphrasing Povinelli (2011: 78), this silence is “not about sitting quietly... waiting for the wizard to appear, or hanging out with the doorkeeper of law waiting for permission to enter”. It is a space where the fishers’ rhizomatic ties operate, a field of in-between-ness, located between what is now and what is imagined to become possible (Escobar and Osterweil, 2010).

These attributes of mobility and everyday endurance are embedded in the fishers’ sense of freedom and self-reliance when operating in the immense, unpredictable sea, many kilometres away from life onshore. For sea fishers, the offshore is embedded in a cultural logic of risk, survival and masculine values of physical force, self-reliance and freedom (Saury Arias, 2010). These experiences, along with the constant uncertainty of catching enough fish, are reflected in an unlicensed fisher’s comment:

You have to be patient if you want to be a fisher. Even though fishing is something wonderful, it is always about the uncertain chances of being hit by miracle.

(First author’s interview, 2012)

The sea is a space where fishers’ embodied knowledge of the environment mediates their sense of self and social alliances. At the same time, these rhizome-like connections provide the fishers space to withdraw from and reinterpret the restrictive forms of resource governance. A typical three-day fishing trip involves travelling beyond the zone of exclusion to waters 40 to 100 kilometres from the coast. Three or four men share a five metre, often

roofless, fibreglass boat, to catch red snapper, porkfish and sea bream with nets and long-lines under demanding conditions. The fishers' rhizomatic engagements offshore, that escape the governing gaze of the oil industry and the government, resonate with the fishers' view of their right to the sea as an "unbound" environment, as well as their way of life as mobile sea fishers. The spatial restrictions related to the zone of exclusion divide fishers increasingly into those with the resources and courage to travel to risky offshore spaces far from the oil platforms and those forced to compete within the scarce and overused coastal resources. As one unlicensed fisher, who sold his catch to a fishing entrepreneur, explained about travelling beyond the zone of exclusion:

I like being a fisher and being out at sea. This is what I've grown to do. I just returned from a fishing trip to seventy nautical miles from here... What I don't like is that we have to go further and further each time. One travels out there without knowing if one will return.

(First author's fieldnotes, 2012)

In another interview, a cooperative fisher who, due to the offshore restrictions, had stopped long-distance fishing and was fishing along the coastline and in the river, commented:

...now they are also here, on the fishers' zone in the river. Pemex's supply boats bump into us as we go out to fish.

(First author's interview, December 2011)

As an everyday form of resistance, some fishers flout the law and frequent oil platforms anyway. Although policing of the zone of exclusion is under the Navy's jurisdiction, Pemex's high-tech capabilities and infrastructure play a crucial role in zone surveillance. Pemex is

usually the one to inform the authorities about a zone incursion, while the Navy carries out the policing operation. Breaching the zone carries a fine of 200 pesos per violation, and if a fisher is caught three times, his boat is confiscated. Besides being necessary for survival, everyday operation in “*la zona de los pescadores*” (“the zone of the fishers”) – as one of the unlicensed fishers called the Gulf – is a tactic used by the fishers to stake a collective claim to the sea space and their fisher identity and demonstrate their freedom. According to the fishers, the endangering of their livelihoods and the questioning of their identity as sea fishers amidst the aggressive expansion of the globalizing oil industry cannot be simplified to an issue of economic compensation; it is also a question of social justice and environmental equity.

Fishers’ desires for their needs to be better considered in terms of resource governance are also reflected in the ways licensed fishers engage with the oil industry’s community development programmes. As an everyday form of protest against the unwillingness of the oil company to recognize their resource rights, the fishers reinterpret the programmes to better suit their needs. In the above-mentioned programme, where Pemex and its subcontractor donated two-stroke boat motors, many fishers promptly sold their new motors and invested the money in something they regarded as more important. In order to ensure that fishers were complying with the programme rules, oil industry representatives criss-crossed the coastal communities to inspect whether the motors were still in the beneficiaries’ possession. Some fishers heeded the advice of fisher leaders who warned their constituents not to sell their motors until after the inspection; others planned to go out and buy used cars, gadgets or other items with the money. The fishers’ resistance to the oil industry’s defining their needs seemed to be well-known among Pemex officials who, in the course of an interview, inquired of us whether fishers had already begun selling the donated motors. Similarly, the fishers played along with state efforts to transform them into fish farmers. In order to obtain governmental subsidies, many fishers posed as environmentally sound,

enterprising, potential farmers even if few of them actually considered fish farming a viable alternative to sea fishing.

Meanwhile, as the oil industry and the federal and state governments are tightening the fishers' access to the sea, recent changes in environmental legislation at the federal level may provide new opportunities for the fishers to stake collective claims for environmental damages caused by the oil industry. The *Ley de Acciones Colectivas* (Law on Collective Actions), which went into force in 2012, enables groups of at least thirty persons to raise class-action claims for environmental harms caused by the oil industry. A group of fishers and small-scale farmers from the interior of Tabasco, supported by environmental and human rights NGOs, has already used the law as a basis for suing Pemex, its subsidiaries and the involved government institutes for damages caused to the environment and local livelihoods (Asociación Santo Tomás, 2013; IPS, 2013). If coastal fishers are able to meet the high burden of demonstrating oil-derived environmental harms and verifying that those harms are the cause of reduced fish catches, the case could bolster the fishers' efforts to regain their rights to the sea space and livelihoods as sea fishers. Within the globalizing oil industry and the shifting forms of resource governance, the fishers' struggles for a fair distribution of the resource space and institutional recognition of their perception of the sea as a taskspace and a living sphere depend on their opportunities to create efficient networks for contestation at multiple scales.

## **Conclusion**

This essay has analyzed the hybrid forms of governance that characterize the oil industry's operative expansion in the coastal and offshore areas of the Gulf of Mexico, and the involved struggles over resource access and identity between sea fishers, the oil industry and the

government. Building on post-Foucauldian approaches to governmentality and Deleuzian perspectives to rhizomatic subaltern networks, the study has shown the shifting forms of resource governance as intersections of dispersed claims and contestations by actors in dissimilar positions. Our attention to the politics of, and power over, resource space and identity in neoliberal contexts of resource extraction has been inspired by recent calls for more careful consideration of the “how” of the conduct of conduct and the complexity of contestations in the hybrid conditions of neoliberal governance (Appel, 2012; Collier, 2009; Li, 2007; Watts, 2011).

The legislative restriction of fishers’ access to their former fishing grounds has been complemented by a series of governing techniques that ultimately shape resource governance into a fuzzy ensemble. This hybridity manifests itself in the intertwining of clientelist deals and paternalist control of political representation with public-private co-governance and techniques of obscuring responsibility in the regulation of resource access and in the corporate programmes of community development. The federal government’s centrality in managing the legislative changes that concern marine resources, and the state authorities’ strategic role as intermediaries in the negotiations between the oil industry and the fishers over compensations for environmental harm and social disturbance caused by the oil industry, send contradictory messages to the fishers. On the one hand, the government appears as a paternal authority, in control of the neoliberal governance shift; while, on the other, strategic co-governance allows the government, Pemex and subcontractors to shift responsibility for restricted resource access and inadequate compensation back and forth, making it hard for fishers to distinguish which agency is in charge of responding to which of their claims.

Overall, the hybrid modes of governance work to displace the local fishers from the sea space and weaken their position in the arenas of political representation, whilst



attempting to persuade them to stay onshore and become fish farmers. In such a situation, where half of the practicing fishers are officially defined as not having a right to that identity, the fishers' mobilization is limited to rhizomatic networks and everyday forms of resistance. Through these efforts, fishers seek to counter the drastic changes in their resource access and in their way of life as sea fishers and to make what they can out of the community development programmes designed by the government and oil industry. The fisher leaders' tactics of political mobilization draw essentially on the strategic use of legislation, clientelist relationships with the government and the oil industry, and earlier experiences of government repression. At the same time, the fishers' mobility in the elusively governable offshore taskspace works as a means to escape from control and demonstrate tactics of everyday resistance (Lenco, 2014). Nevertheless, with the growing regulation of the sea space and fishers' resource rights, these rhizomatic networks may in the future come under more effective surveillance.

In recent years, extractive industries in many parts of Latin America have deployed corresponding techniques of resource governance to render large resource spaces governable. Neoliberal discourses and programmes of corporate social responsibility have been combined with clientelist co-opting and indirect governing in the Peruvian Andes (Himley, 2013) and Ecuadorian Amazonia (Sawyer, 2004). Most studies of these phenomena examine situations where local resource users have succeeded in collectively mobilizing against extractive industries. However, understanding contemporary struggles over resource governance demands that we also consider the less visible, less governable and yet common spaces of contestation and counter-struggles for political representation that have received relatively scant academic attention (Auyero and Swistun, 2009; Horowitz, 2011; Perreault and Valdivia, 2010).

The value of combining a post-Foucauldian approach to governance with a Deleuzian perspective of rhizomatic networks lies in the assistance offered by the resulting framework in tracking a detailed picture of the multifaceted claims and contestations. Extending Foucauldian inquiry from the logic of governance to the “how” of actual practices of governing, of negotiations and struggles over power and of local resource users’ interpretations of the shifting forms of resource governance, provides valuable insights into the contextual variation and everyday complexity of neoliberal governance.

In Tabasco, the forthcoming extraction of coastal and offshore oil reserves will increase the presence of platforms and submarine tubes in areas used by the local fishers and thereby probably tighten the competition for resource space. The recent changes in Mexican environmental legislation and transnational networks of environmental and social justice may provide new opportunities for Tabascan fishers to reclaim their resource rights in the Gulf of Mexico. However, even in this case, the access to the Gulf’s seafood resources may primarily be gained by a few economically and politically well-positioned fishers.

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