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# THE UNCERTAINTY OF OIL

## Balancing through the Temporalities and Affects of Depletion in Gabon

Text: *Christine Fricke*

### Abstract

This paper argues that uncertainty is intricately entwined with temporalities and affects. Taking the uncertain future of oil in Gabon as my ethnographic example, I trace five versions with which people contemplate depletion: a scenario, a vision/plan, a calculation, a dream, and a desire. I show how these versions not only differ in their prognosis, but also conjure up diverse histories, temporalities and affects that, ultimately, entail fairly distinct forms of uncertainty.

**Keywords:** *future, decline, uncertainty, natural resources, Gabon*

### Introduction

Gabon is assumed to be running out of oil. With mostly mature oil fields, no major new discoveries and a decline in production by one third since 1997, Gabon has been tipped to become «the unlucky pioneer in the quest for a viable post-petroleum future» (Gary & Karl 2003: 28). Since the early 2000s economists predict that «severe challenges» (Söderling 2005: 117) loom over the efforts to diversify the largely oil-dependent economy; sociologists prognosticate fundamental changes ahead and debate the necessity of «learning to live without oil» (Atenga 2003); and opposition politicians publish extended reports on

the urgency of sector reforms to save the country from doom (Assima 2003). Even though, when I did fieldwork in 2010–2013<sup>1</sup>, there was hope that new discoveries would reverse the current trend, the discursive presence of a post-petroleum future rendered visible the temporal sensibilities the end of oil entailed. Newspapers published articles entitled «Every drop of oil counts», a temporary banner at the Ministry of Oil read «Oil will run out, but innovation is forever», and government repeatedly stressed the pressing need to redirect the economy to literally greener pastures by rebranding Gabon from an oil well into an eco-touristic El Dorado. The *après-pétrole* is looming large. This article explores the uncertainties at the end of oil.

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Uncertainty opens the future. At the end of oil, this openness is twofold, on the one hand pertaining to the moment when exactly oil will be depleted and on the other hand concerned with what a future without oil will look like. As one of the oldest African oil states, Gabon has been built on oil ever since independence. Depletion, therefore, comes to be anticipated as a major incision into national time and is expected to significantly alter the economic, political and social framework of the nation. In this article, I trace some of the versions and visions of the future with which the people I met contemplated the uncertainties of depletion. What guides my discussion is the idea that the lived experience of uncertainty is intricately entwined with temporalities and affects that constitute and are constituted by uncertain futures. I ask what temporal dimensions are conjured up by an uncertain future. How does uncertainty impact on perceptions of time? What forms of affect are mediated by imaginations of an uncertain future? And how do temporalities and affects produce different kinds of uncertainty?

One aim of this article is to argue for the liberating force of uncertainty. Uncertainty is often defined in negative terms as lack of knowledge, loss of control, heightened vulnerability and, hence, inability to predict, direct and act upon the future. Yet uncertainty also has positive and productive force. As several anthropologists have pointed out, uncertainty enables creativity, curiosity and exploration, it spurs imaginative and anticipatory practices, triggers subjunctive action, animates social relations and shapes the ways people negotiate and navigate the contingencies of everyday life (Calkins 2016, Cooper & Pratten 2015, Haram & Yamba 2009, Vigh 2006, Whyte 1997). In a similar vein, the literature on future-making and prognostic politics has highlighted the diverse technologies of prediction, from risk analysis to scenario planning, with which individuals, experts and governments attempt to narrow down possibilities to probabilities and to turn uncertainties into certainties (Mathews & Barnes 2016, Lakoff 2008, Nelson et al. 2008, Zaloom 2004). Building on this research, I argue that uncertainty is not only formative in the sense of bringing about coping strategies, but can in itself be experienced as positive and liberating. As it (re-)opens the future to indeterminacy, to possibility and to hope, uncertainty allows for alternative futures to be imagined and enables transformation.

A second aim of this article is to show how anticipation of uncertain futures conjures up multiple temporalities. The life span of resources, as Ferry & Limbert (2008) write, often frames how people experience time on an individual as well as on a national level. Cycles of boom and bust, assumptions of progress or decline, the comfort of resource wealth or the threat of depletion, all convey senses of time and temporality, in a multitude of forms. In her ethnography on the «time

of oil» in Oman, Limbert (2010) shows how in expectation of depletion, many Omanis anticipate the future as a return to the past. Unlike teleological conceptualizations of progress, Omanis understand the present time of oil as transitory, as a dream-like interlude between past and future poverty. Coping with the uncertainties of depletion they bring the past into the present as a reminder of the future. Similarly, Breglia (2013) describes how depletion at the Cantarell oil field in Mexico is anticipated not as a return, but as a repetition of the past, that is, as just another boom and bust cycle in a series of cycles of natural resource exploitation over the past 500 years. I here want to contend that there is more to anticipation than thinking and living towards the future. Anticipating depletion, Gabonese activate diverse histories that connect to different kinds of time and entail different perceptions of time. These diverse temporalities lead to quite different projections of depletion.

Finally, I wish to demonstrate the affective responses produced by the end of oil and economic decline more generally. Ferguson (1999) has powerfully described how the decline of the mining industry and the unmet expectations of modernity in the Zambian copperbelt generated a profound sense of abjection amongst the population. Living in a moment of decline, though, does not necessarily or solely generate feelings of dread. Walsh (2012) has shown how life in a post-boom Malagasy mining town was most of all marked by a feeling of uncertainty that, however, also left room for nostalgia, hope, aspirations and new expectations. As Weszkalnys (2016) has pointed out, affect is neither an anti-economic response nor an externality to resource extraction, but intrinsic to capitalist dynamics. Paying attention to affect helps to comprehend the complex constellation of historical trajectories and material capacities, significations and individual and collective dispositions, global power relations and social, governmental and corporate processes through which oil comes to matter in our world. What interests me here is how affect mediates the uncertainties of depletion and reveals the multiple ways oil extraction is entangled with individual and collective aspirations and concerns.

In what follows, I focus on five different versions of the future: a scenario, a vision/plan, a calculation, a dream, and a desire. I show how these narratives envisage different temporal horizons of depletion spanning from the near to the mid-range as well as to the far and the very far future. These multiple futures are grounded in multiple pasts that inform anticipation, provide affective orientation towards the future and shape the present experiences of uncertainty. Imaginations of depletion generate fairly distinct forms of temporality, affect and uncertainty, the relation of which I summarize in the conclusion. My discussion is based on 19 months of ethnographic fieldwork during which I lived with local families and friends in Libreville, the capital

of Gabon, and Port-Gentil, the oil-hub of the country. Some of the people I met worked in the oil industry and administration, whereas others lived at the very margins of the oil wealth. Their perspectives on oil differed markedly, yet they all balanced through the uncertainties, temporalities and affects of depletion.

## Apocalypse Tomorrow

«What will happen if we run out of oil? In a few years oil will be depleted, and then?» Elise, a civil servant in her late fifties, her daughter Anne and I were standing in the kitchen, chatting about all kinds of things.<sup>2</sup> Neither oil nor the future had been a topic. Elise's worries came in unexpectedly and she sounded seriously concerned. «There is enough oil, don't worry», Anne, a petroleum engineer at Shell Gabon, replied rather unimpressed. Elise insisted: «There are people who say that there is no more oil. They haven't found anything since Rabi». Her voice became alarmed, almost panicking as she continued: «They tell us there is Toucan, Koula, but that's nothing. It's finished! What will we do? This will be civil war...» «Mom! Stop it! There is still enough oil for at least 40 years!» «How do you know?» «Mom, this is my job! There is enough oil and there will not be a war!»

Elise probingly stared at her daughter and then walked out of the kitchen. Anne turned to the dishes. I stood startled, slightly embarrassed of having witnessed what felt like a quarrel and irritated by the sudden intensity that the topic had released. Rarely had I heard anxieties about the end of oil expressed so explicitly and emotionally charged.

Scenarios are imaginations of uncertain future events that envisage the prognosis of a plausible and credible future (Mathews & Barnes 2016, Lakoff 2008). The scenario of civil war may appear anything but plausible in Gabon, a country that is seen as harbour of peace and stability in the sub-region. Yet far from being a dystopian fantasy of some particularly pessimistic individuals, the worst case scenario had been represented by politicians as a realistic threat ever since independence. The fact that Gabon had so far circumvented any larger violent conflict was mainly attributed to the strategic distribution of oil revenues by President Omar Bongo. As Atenga (2003: 124-126) points out, oil revenues are the very foundation of the clientelistic distribution networks that define the Gabonese system of governance and conflict management, allowing for the paying off of political opponents. Without oil revenues, the state would no longer be able to appease social tensions. The end of

oil, including the last years before depletion when revenues are due to get scarce, is therefore expected to lead to more frequent and more severe socio-political conflicts, to an increase in xenophobic violence and to a rise of insecurity. Here, oil in its monetary form is understood as the «lifeblood of the nation» (Apter 2005: 45) that, although not equally distributed, has kept the nation together, and will do so as long as it circulates.

What had brought the worst case scenario into the near future was the death of Omar Bongo in 2009 and the political crisis that unfolded as his son Ali Bongo accessed to power in what people referred to as an electoral coup d'état. Fierce political contestation and repeated unauthorized and, hence, repressed demonstrations by the opposition caused fatalities in the streets. Freedom of expression being curtailed, the self-proclamation of opposition candidate André Mba Obame as President of the Republic in 2011 and the reiterated call by civil society organizations for a new National Conference all augured badly. The striking similarities with the upheavals following the failed democratisation process in the early 1990s, which in Gabon is widely remembered for having brought the country to the brink of civil war, evoked a worried sense of the past repeating itself and – amidst the escalating tensions – nourished fears that this time, there might not be a peaceful solution. As oil revenues apparently no longer sufficiently trickled down to appease the current crisis, rumours of state bankruptcy started to circulate and further increased anxieties. The end, it seemed, was near.

Here, uncertainty was experienced as radical and the premonition of disaster entailed fears and an acute sense of insecurity. While the balance between war and peace seemed to be shifting, radical uncertainty came in intervals whenever events speeded up. This speed generated a feeling of having no time to direct the future. The future was running out of control. The crisis evoked a sense of recurrence, yet the notion of repetition hardly worked to ease uncertainties. By pointing to the fact that the new President no longer distributed oil revenues to appease tensions, people not only expressed expectations of depletion in the near future, but also detected a difference in repetition. And this difference increased uncertainty.

## Confidence in the Future

Contrary to the alarming scenario, the official version of the future was a bright one. Well aware of the anxieties and uncertainties that the end of oil entailed, Ali Bongo entitled

<sup>2</sup> All names, except those of public personalities, have been changed.

his political project «confidence in the future» and promoted the vision of «emergence», the goal of attaining the status of an emergent country by 2025. According to the *Plan Stratégique Gabon Emergent* (PSGE) that accompanied the vision, oil would be depleted in less than 30 years. The time span to redirect and diversify the economy, though, was shorter. As the PSGE stressed, the major shift was only possible within the next ten years, that is, as long as the oil sector still generated enough revenues and could provide for the «fuel for emergence». This time span prohibited ignorance, but it also did not provide any reason for panic to befall. Rather, it brought the date of depletion close enough into a mid-range future so as to be in need of foresight and planning, while also leaving enough time to prepare for an alternative future. The time span evoked a sense of urgency, not alarm. It allowed for calm, but not for carelessness. And it allowed government to present drastic measures as necessary reforms and as effective efforts by state institutions to work against the uncertainties of depletion.

As government and the President repeatedly explained, emergence was not just another political slogan or a dream, but a reality. However, to realize the future the country needed to leave behind the culture of claims that was based on expectations of state allocations and the random distribution of oil revenues. Instead, people were supposed to consider their obligations as citizens and what they could do for the country. Some of the very first actions taken by the President therefore targeted the psycho-political aspects of emergence, including the implementation of stricter working hours, a curfew for restaurants and bars, an official dress code, communal cleaning days and so on. A post-petroleum future was possible, but it was the responsibility of every single citizen to optimize him- or herself in order to achieve this future. Emergence also promised a spectacular future. Following the PSGE, in 2025 Gabon would be a major democracy and a model of human well-being, social equity and shared prosperity. The vision of emergence was sustained by a plethora of virtual models of the future circulating through Gabonese media. The most prominent feature of this spectacular future was a Dubai-like artificial island called the «Triumphant Field» that was presented as the Gabonese equivalent to the Statue of Liberty or the Eiffel Tower. In its vocabulary and content, the spectacular future looped back to the triumphalism of the past. It conjured up memories of the future of prosperity and international recognition that had already been hailed in development plans during the so-called triumphant years of the oil boom in the 1970s. Yet this future had continuously been postponed.

While this focus on the present and the distant future seems to echo what Guyer (2007: 410) has described as the characteristic «combination of fantasy futurism and enforced pre-

sentism» that has come to mark neoliberal time, the mid-range, what Guyer calls the near future, was neither evacuated nor solely punctuated by events. Rather, it was this temporal gap that preoccupied economic policy and that was filled with all kinds of plans. The PSGE defined 159 tasks, subsumed in 28 programs and sector plans, to be accomplished within the first phase until 2016. Planners admitted that an economic shift of such scale usually required the time of one generation or 25 years, whereas in Gabon it was supposed to be achieved within 15 years. While still following the optimistic teleology of modern time, the mid-range future was planned backwards. In contrast to forecasting current trends into the future and then searching for adequate policies to adapt to this future, planning backwards - or backcasting - would take the desired goal of emergence in 2025 and then define the policies to achieve it. As Abram (2014: 143) writes, backcasting alters the concept of time. Whereas forecasting understands the future as inevitably emerging from the past and present, backcasting brings agency into the near future to form and direct the more distant future. The PSGE clearly aimed at this capacity to determine the future.

Here, the uncertainty of depletion was made manageable and offered political leaders the possibility to create change. Pushing depletion into a mid-range future allowed for the planning of a spectacular alternative future that was not only deeply engrained in the hopes and expectations of many Gabonese, but also promised to eliminate the uncertainties of depletion. The many reforms and ambitious projects launched in the name of emergence entailed an affect of confident urgency. The PSGE, with its detailed declination of necessary tasks, created confidence that the long-awaited future of prosperity was still and truly attainable. However, there was much urgency and little time to achieve this future as uncertainty shifted from the scarcity of oil to the scarcity of time. As a presidential program, the overall accomplishment of emergence was tied to the 7-year electoral rhythm and the re-election of the President. If emergence and the PSGE were supposed to eliminate the uncertainties of future depletion, then political-electoral time again generated new incertitude.

## Producing the Future

Sitting at a large wooden table in his air-conditioned conference room, Richard was deciphering the map of Gabon's oil field concessions to me. Although I had initially started to meet with Richard to learn about the past of oil, we usually ended up talking about the future. This was obviously little surprising given the centrality of resource futures in Gabon. But it also had to do with the fact that Richard felt respon-

sible for the future. Richard was in his late sixties. He had been one of the first Gabonese petroleum engineers and, after his retirement, had established a petroleum-consulting firm, advising oil companies on subsoil potential and offering support in the negotiation of contracts with the state. Our conversations were marked by his factual, unexcited way of talking about oil.

As Richard went through the different oil blocks on the map, he provided me with a history of technological advances in oil production over the last 90 years. Oil production, Richard relayed to me, relies on continuous exploration and engineering advances. The most prominent reminder of this was Rabi Kounga, the largest onshore oil field on the African continent that, due to new advances in subsoil imaging, had been discovered in an area already explored before without any success. As Rabi went on-stream in 1989, it not only reversed a decade of decline after Gabon's production had peaked in 1976, but raised production to a new peak in 1997, contradicting all prior prognoses of depletion. Nowadays, unexplored fields were often of an uncertain prospectivity, that is, either too small or particularly difficult to exploit and requiring an oil price of at least \$80 to cover extraction costs. Yet with enhanced recovery techniques, horizontal drillings and favourable investment conditions, Richard insisted, oil production would very well continue for another 40 years as stated by official industry forecasts.<sup>3</sup> And with advances in deepwater exploration this time span would easily extend further into the far future, even though for this, the country relied on the expertise and financial capital of multinationals.

Here, uncertainty was calculable. From the expert's point of view, and for those who were aware of the history of Rabi Kounga, the future of oil was a technical task that required the knowledge of how to combine geological data with adequate technology. Grounding the future in the history of technology evoked a rational faith in progress. The question was not if there was a future with oil, but when new technologies would push oil production to the next level. Yet defining oil as a global commodity that depends on foreign capital, favourable investment conditions and the global oil price, meant that the future of oil was subject to the speculation of economic profits. Relying on foreign capital also meant dependence and what Smith (2011) has described as the «temporal dispossession» produced by global capitalism – that is, the lack of authority to determine what the future is supposed to look like. Vying for investments, Gabon competes with new oil producers in the Gulf

of Guinea, whose assets often seem or are declared by the oil companies as more promising. Reminding of the need for favourable investment conditions, oil companies thus opened uncertainty to negotiation.

## Gabon, My Soil, My Future

The importance of deepwater and ultra-deepwater prospects for the future of Gabon became particularly clear in an exhibition entitled «Gabon, My Soil, My Future». Coordinated by the First Lady, Sylvia Bongo Ondimba, and curated by the Ministry of Culture and numerous local scientists and experts, the exhibition had been designed for the celebration of Gabon's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of independence in 2010 and served as a temporary national museum. Following the exhibition catalogue, «Gabon, My Soil, My Future exalts the feeling of being and acting together, to share a collective hope for the future of a country that has the will and all the means to succeed».

In how far a collective hope for the future was still grounded in Gabon's soil became clear in a documentary screened at the entrance to the museum. The film started with the paleogeographic theory of the Gondwana and Laurasia supercontinents. Located in the centre of a round landmass depicting Gondwana was a small area in the shape of contemporary Gabon. «Gabon, the heart of the world, a place in the sun», the sonorous voice of the documentary's speaker commented. It followed a presentation of the spectacular scientific discovery of 250 fossils of a multicellular life form dubbed «Gabonionta» that a few months earlier had brought Gabon to global headlines. The fossils had officially been confirmed to be dating back 2.1 billion years. The discovery massively rattled existing theories about the origin of life, as it pushed the date of multicellular nascence 1.5 billion years further back in time. Jumping almost 2 billion years forward, the documentary then continued with the breakup of Gondwana some 180 to 110 million years ago. As Gondwana dissolved into South America, Africa, Antarctica, India and Australia, the film zoomed in on the coastlines of Gabon and Brazil that neatly fitted together like two pieces of a puzzle.

What makes planetary deep time so interesting here is how the evolution of life and the geologic chronometry of the planet's formation linked up to hopes for the country's fossil-fuel future. Rogers (2015) has described how the Russian oil

<sup>3</sup> In 2012 Gabon's «estimated proven reserves», the term bears witness to the vagueness of any prediction, amounted to 3.7 billion barrels in the subsoil, which along current production levels translated into 41 years of oil production.



company Lukoil, by sponsoring museums and cultural festivals, linked the physical depth of oil to the temporal depth of culture, genealogy and geology and thereby represented itself as deeply rooted in the oil region. What had bestowed deep time and particularly the Gondwana theory with such popularity in Gabon was much more to the ground. Since in 2007 the world's largest oil discoveries had been made in Brazil and had turned the country into an oil super-giant, the Gondwana theory supported the expectation that similar spectacular discoveries could be made in the Gulf of Guinea – a prognosis that had set off the investment frenzy in African oil exploration. Countering the reluctance of oil companies to invest in Gabonese deepwater, the fossils epitomised the geological potential of Gabon. Gabonionta was the iconic reminder of deep time's treasures hidden in the ground.

Invoking deep time and pushing the temporal horizon to such enormous scales sparked the expectation of Gabon's production to exceed all prior production levels, promising unprecedented and unlimited wealth. Here the future was a dream, grounded in the largest possible frame of resource temporalities. Just as the fossils allowed government in a peculiar nationalist retrospective to trace national history to the Precambrian eon by proclaiming Gabon to be the cradle of multicellular life, Gabonionta also projected the nation into a fossil-fuel future. Building the future on geological time suggested continuity and the extension of deep time into a deep future. It replaced historical time with a sense of duration and permanence that entailed an affect of joyful certainty. The future was safe. As deep time turned the perceived «always already» condition of oil into an «always forever», it also erased the uncertainty of oil.

### «No After-Oil without an After-Bongo»

In 2013, the oil company Total Gabon started test drills in the Gabonese ultra-deep offshore. The Minister of Oil stepped in front of the cameras and proclaimed the stabilization of Gabon's oil production and the commencement of the next oil era. Amongst some sections of the Gabonese public, though, the test drills prompted reactions that were anything but enthusiastic. The following comments are taken from the public debate forum on Gabonreview.com, Gabon's most prominent news website that is highly solicited for the lively and uncensored debates ensuing around the articles. In June and August 2013, Gabonreview had published two articles that summarised the prospects of a future with oil (Malouana 2013, Ndjimbi 2013). The comments illustrate the profound disillusion about the often invoked superlative vision of phenomenal riches and a glorious future:

*«Dreams of paradise. Without a total change of paradigm we will continue to receive only a small rent».*

*«If there is a discovery, the vultures will be back, ritual crimes will rise. Let's be careful with this cursed wealth which is the black gold! Rent is good, but work is better».*

*«I can't be happy about this kind of discovery, because the people don't benefit from it. It's an illusion that resource extraction would lead to development».*

*«I have the impression there never was oil in Gabon. Where did the money go? In the pockets of those who govern Gabon, the president, ministers, directors! Do you think the population will get anything from the oil? Will corruption end? Student grants will no longer be embezzled? Don't make people dream with this kind of information!».*

*«The discovery is worth nothing. We all know it will only serve the Bongo Clan to enrich itself even more».*

*«More oil, more money, more poverty».*

Or simply: *«Bad news!».*

After sixty years of commercial oil exploitation that has largely kept the population excluded from the merits of the country's wealth and 49 years of the Bongo family ruling the country, frustrations are high and have led to a profound state of despair. For those living at the margin of oil, including one third of the population that lives underneath the poverty line, oil translates into exclusion, inequality and abject poverty, authoritarian rule, oppression and empty promises of a better future, or what Bernault & Tonda (2009) have described as a «tropical dystopia». Although this state of affairs cannot be blamed solely on the presence of oil, oil is nevertheless understood as sustaining the status quo, as the comments above demonstrate. Here, the uncertainty of oil unfolded around questions of what can be done *with* the oil and if the larger part of the population would ever profit from it. The future was not a question of the after-oil, but of the «After-Bongo» (Assima 2003: 24). Although Ali Bongo promised «rupture in continuity», the violent suppression of demonstrations following his disputed election in 2009 and the subsequent curtailing of civil liberties did not give much reason to hope that things would change. The future, instead, seemed to be the continuation of the past.

The perceived determinacy of the future turned into a full-fledged crisis of temporality. Time collapsed. There was no longer a past, a present or a future. Everything was the same, always had been the same and always would be the

same. The present had been turned into the political eternity of the Bongo regime. Living in atemporality, people claimed to have lost their capacity to hope, to dream and to believe in a future not to mention the possibility of change. It was in this context of non-futurity, in which time was perceived as stuck in a perpetual present that disabled any viable future to unfold, that uncertainty became desirable. It (re-)opened the future to indeterminacy, to possibility and to hope. As the last thing people wished for was a continuity of the status quo, the uncertainty and openness that the end of oil entailed came to be anticipated as the point of departure into a better future. If oil revenues kept the Bongo regime in power, then depletion meant liberation and would mark a break from the past. The prospects of new oil discoveries that would prolong oil production for decades, therefore, came as a closing of the future.

Obviously, for those who wanted to get rid of the loathed present, waiting for depletion was hardly an option. Instead, they brought uncertainty into the present. Desperately longing for a future, frustrated youth proclaimed that they rather preferred to embark on civil war than to any longer endure the unliveable living conditions. Talk of war was all around, if only to keep the future open and indeterminacy alive. As criticism of Ali Bongo's style of governance increased, as more and more former ministers and influential members of the ruling party joined the opposition and as strikes in the public sector became the norm rather than the exception, uncertainty gathered liberating potential. Change, again, seemed possible. Directing their hopes to the presidential election in 2016, people made clear that they would no longer accept any predetermined election results and that, if the incumbent president would again enforce his election, they were determined to fight for liberation, regardless of the uncertainties and risks this entailed.

## Conclusion

Uncertainty implies that anything can happen. The multiple versions of the future that circulate in Gabon are illustrative of this openness and indeterminacy, not only in the significantly different ways they suggest the future will unfold, but also in their simultaneous existence that is in itself revealing of the uncertainty of what to expect.

Uncertainty, I have argued, is intricately entwined with temporalities and affect. As the different versions of the future illustrate, Gabonese conjure up multiple histories as they cope with uncertainty and contemplate depletion: histories of expecting disaster, of planning spectacular

futures, of the continuous search for oil, of oil's formation and of exclusion from the oil wealth. People do not simply look back on these pasts to define expectations of the future. Rather, they look forward from the past. They activate «histories of the future» (Rosenberg & Harding 2005) and bring these into the present to imagine, anticipate and inhabit an unknown future. Connecting to different kinds of time (social, political-electoral, economic, geological, collapsed), these histories influence people's perception of time. Time is speeding, proceeding slowly or not moving at all. Time is scarce or repeating itself, projected forwards and planned backwards, in duration or tied to rhythms, dispossessed or actively shaped. These temporalities lead to diverse projections of depletion and imaginations of the future. Anticipation of uncertain futures, then, implies more than bringing the future into the present. If anticipation «is not just a reaction, but a way of actively orienting oneself temporally [...] a regime of being in time» (Adams et al. 2009: 247), this anticipatory mode cannot be separated from the past. Anticipation activates histories of the future and is profoundly framed by these.

The different histories not only inform temporal practices and imaginations, but also reveal the affective trajectories that have marked almost a century of oil extraction in Gabon. Hopes and expectations of prosperity, confidence in progress and longings for international recognition are as much part of this history as attachments to subsoil potential and excitement over new discoveries. But also has this trajectory been comprised of frustration and despair over exclusion, fears of societal breakdown and feelings of dependency on forces that lie beyond one's own control. These multiple affective responses demonstrate how oil extraction is deeply entangled with individual and collective aspirations and concerns about the future. And it is these affective resonances and dissonances that condense around ideas of depletion and articulate the uncertainties of oil. Although not always expressed in the most straightforward manner, the premonition of disaster, appeals to confidence and urgency, the unexcited calm and expectation of new discoveries, the joyful evocation of deep time and the many hopes for change fundamentally shape the moods and atmospheres that surround the uncertain future.

The histories, temporalities and affects that unfold around depletion, ultimately, produce different forms of uncertainty. Expecting depletion in the near future, histories of conflict, the speed of events and fears of disaster produced a sense of radical uncertainty. Planning for depletion in the mid-range future, histories of economic take-off, the organization of time in development plans and appeals to confidence made uncertainty seem manageable, even though electoral



rhythms increased urgency. Pushing depletion into the far future, histories of surprising discoveries and faith in technological progress made uncertainty appear calculable. Postponing depletion to a deep future, natural history pretended permanence that made uncertainty seem irrelevant. Finally, histories of exclusion, a sense of non-futurity and feelings of despair made uncertainty desirable. Reopening the future, uncertainty was experienced as liberating. As such, uncer-

tainty preconditions what Appadurai (2013) has termed the «ethics of possibility» – those ways of feeling, thinking and acting that extend the horizons of hope and increase people's capacity to aspire. For many Gabonese, uncertainty enabled the possibility of political transformation and a truly alternative future to unfold. Insisting on the openness of the future, they embraced uncertainty in their hopes and aspirations for a better future with or without oil.

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