Alain Beltran (ed.)
A Comparative History of National Oil Companies
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Introduction

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The history of hydrocarbons does not relate only to economic questions or to the technical domain. It is largely a political matter, or to be more exact a geopolitical matter, insofar as no other energy or raw material raises – to that extent – strategic questions concerning commercial relationships, economic independence and the volume of financial flows. Rather than giving a free hand to the market alone, or to the international companies (the Majors, stigmatized as the “Seven Sisters”), a certain number of countries preferred to obtain control, to a variable extent, of the oil market by setting up national (or nationalized) companies, with a major role going to the State by definition. This desire for self-assertion and to avoid experiencing an outside influence has taken numerous forms, ranging from powerful monopolies – sometimes considered as “a State within the State” – to companies that, on the contrary, are obediently integrated into the mechanisms of the oil economy. Wars, oil shocks and geopolitical ups and downs have generally given rise to such interventions by the “visible” hand. On the other hand, the last years of the 20th century, marked by strong mistrust of State power, brought some wide-ranging denationalizations. But that does not mean that States abandon public policy, but rather that they think that it can be exercised in ways other than through a national company.

To the same extent as results from ownership of a major oil company, the State, particularly in Western Europe, has surrounded itself with other means for exercising influence. Certain countries have developed specific legislation enabling the authorities to intervene on the domestic market, emphasizing the national interest. People in power in those great national companies have been chosen from among the most high qualified, often with very precise profiles, as “great servants of the
State”, people motivated by the national interest more than by profits. There was an oil nationalism. The capitalistic characteristics of trade in hydrocarbons did not prevent the emergence of a desire to protect the essential interest of the nation and to develop a real long-term policy. Certain countries consider that energy independence is too important to be entrusted to the market alone. Others – for instance, the producing countries of the South – are so mistrustful of the oil giants that they attribute hidden neo-colonialist designs to them. Certain national companies in the consumer countries have taken up such ideas to put proposals to the producing countries for new relationships, new and fairer forms of sharing, thus breaking up the existing monopolies. We may point here to the Italian example with the “condottiere” Enrico Mattei, or Franco-Algerian cooperation in 1965.

Hence some complex situations have emerged from 20th century oil history. It would be impossible to sum them up in just a few formulas. The colloquium held in November 2003, the procedures of which can be read here, covers a large part of this abounding reality. But that initial conference could not be exhaustive. Even if there are approaches here that are new, original and sometimes surprising, other meetings will have to be held. One must hail the various authors for their research, often original, and for their broad indulgence in new fields of investigation. They show how concrete one must remain in connection with the theories, and at the same time, when the data are there, try to make the first syntheses – fragile but vital. History is built step by step, modestly and empirically, but not without a certain focus and real ambition. We may be sure that a reading of the following pages will raise questions, give rise to other work, and weave a link among international researchers who have a lot to tell each other.