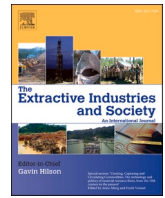


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Editorial

Institutions, governance and extractives: Where politics and ecologies collide



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ABSTRACT

Provides an introduction to the Special Issue: Politics and Ecologies. We review recent literature on the political ecology of extraction, and on relational approaches within the field. The introduction then provides a brief precise of each paper and their contribution, as well as the contribution of the collection to the field.

1. Introduction

The set of papers in this Special Issue were originally presented at a virtual conference hosted by the Political Ecology Research Centre at Massey University in Aotearoa New Zealand and the Sociology of Development and Change group at Wageningen University in the Netherlands in July 2020.

Despite the centrality of extraction to contemporary life, Anthony Bebbington (2012) wrote a decade ago of ‘the relative invisibility of minerals, oil and gas in the canons of political ecology’. While the intervening years have seen important political ecology scholarship that focuses on the power relations and distribution-based conflicts surrounding extractive industries (eg., [Arsel et al., 2016](#); [Jacka, 2018](#); [Prieto et al., 2019](#)), the extractive industries, and processes of extractivism more broadly, is a fertile space for further political ecology-driven exploration.

In order to re-examine extraction and its contested place in contemporary capitalism, this conference asked participants to take up the theme of “Extraction” in multiple senses: extraction as the material extraction of natural resources; as a mode of accumulation central to the histories and continuation of capitalism; and as a worldview in which nature is a resource to be commodified for human consumption and accumulation. We sought scholarly critique as well as engagement with the multiple movements that confront extraction and the communities that are practicing and imagining different systems based on regeneration. The papers selected for inclusion in this special issue all concern the mining industry, and examine the industry from the perspectives of diverse actors and geographies.

Literature on mining and its effects can broadly be characterised as moving through three analytical moments. First, a focus on *material* aspects of extraction and effects on communities gathered steam in the 1970s, with attention to the impacts of extraction. This strong thread has not entirely gone away, but it has overlapped with a *discursive* turn in the literature since the late 1990s, where what was said and written received

a much more critical examination. This was most obvious in the critical work on Corporate Social Responsibility in the sector, which often interrogates the narratives and CSR discourses of corporate actors. Most recently, and reflected in the papers here, we can discern a far greater concern with *relationality*; that is, with the intensely relational nature of activities in the sector. Hence, this collection highlights the relationships between corporations and companies/ state/ civil society organisations/ community members/non-human ecologies, and the dynamic, power-infused nature of these relationships.

The focus of this issue echoes the ‘relational turn’ in the humanities and the social sciences towards emphasising continually unfolding processes and relationships ([Connolly 2011](#)). Scholars are undertaking relational analyses of extractive industries across multiple disciplines, from anthropology ([Richardson, 2014](#)), political ecology ([Schilling et al., 2021](#)), sociology ([Rothfuß et al., 2021](#)), geography ([Barney, 2009](#)), and sustainability science ([West et al., 2020](#)) to gender studies ([Behzadi, 2019](#)). Relational analyses demand that we think through how to prioritise relations over substances or fully formed subjects in conceptualizing how the world is constituted. These approaches do not conceive of institutions as independent, stable structures, but rather as products of the same relations they mediate. Therefore, relational analyses are multi-scalar, situating studies of local encounters within the broader national and global political economy of mining; they are multi-directional, acknowledging the agency of differently positioned actors (such as the ways in which civil society actions shape decisions of governments and companies); and they locate understandings of extraction neither exclusively in the biophysical properties of minerals nor in webs of socio-cultural meaning, but in the dynamic relations of matter, knowledges, infrastructures, and experiences involved in extraction ([Richardson 2014](#)).

This set of papers illustrates two critical elements of a relational approach in political ecology scholarship on extraction: Firstly, the explicit unveiling of the power dynamics that sit behind the relationships that develop in the sector, and secondly, the diverse and often

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evolving nature of such relationships. Resistance, accommodation, coercion, co-option, and adaptation are all responses to power imbalances within a relational field. And importantly these sets of relationships are neither simple, singular or existing in isolation: they are often multidimensional (with, for example, many relationships and encounters between individuals within companies and local communities, especially where locals make up a significant element of the company workforce), and typically form part of complex constellations of power in these multiparty relationships. External interventions – by international NGOs, for example – can shift existing interests and relationships significantly, unsettling or further enabling vested interests in the sector. Relationality is expressed also through notions such as ‘Social licence’ between actors, which sets out the normative form of relationship anticipated between corporate activity and the broader society. A relational approach contextualises this discourse within larger debates that, for example, recentre the role of the state and civil society organisations. In different ways, and often utilising quite different windows into the sector, each of the papers in this special issue illustrates the critical nature of relationships: of coalitions of social movements, of state-community-corporate relationships, of the encounters between mining financiers located in the global north and the historical pan-movements that shape current racialised discourses of risk.

Methodologically, relational analysis poses challenges for empirical enquiry that is often bounded in time and space. The papers in this special issue deploy a range of methodological approaches that enable relationships across spatial and temporal scales to be foregrounded, from extensive interviews with a wide range of actors including government, mining company managers, civil society representatives and external consultants and financiers, to event ethnography of mining finance meetings, records from public hearings, and archival analysis of legal proclamations, social media posts and media documents.

2. The papers

Gisselle Vila Benites brings together the policy debates around artisanal and small-scale ‘illegal’ mining (ASM) and the formalisation of this ASM using the cases of Colombia and Peru. Developing the notion of ‘natures of concern’, she argues that much of the response to ASM by states and political elites in these two countries draws on an implicit concern with the fragility of the large-scale mining (LSM) sector in these countries, a sector that is critical to the survival of these elites. This relational analysis that examines the political ecology of large-scale mining and its intersections with approaches to criminalising small-scale mining highlight the roles of actors that receive less attention in mining research, such as the defence sector, that is of growing relevance to regulating mining when aligned with discourses of ‘green securitisation’.

Viktoria Reisch turns to the ways in which natural resource extraction restricts the space in which environmental civil society movements – Land and Environmental defenders as she terms them – can operate. This is often in subtle but constraining ways, as she demonstrates in the case of northern Chile – all of which see the state and the corporations seeking to shape the spaces for engagement between the key stakeholders: from poor information flows to dominant narratives of TINA (There Is No Alternative), and active co-option of some actors to the interests of the more powerful actors. She notes how these approaches and relationships continually evolve, and produce complex, often overlapping mosaics of relationships.

Maria Styve and Paul Gilbert focus on discourses within the financing of contemporary mining investment, and specifically the racially charged notion of ‘political risk’ when deployed in relation to sovereignty over resources on post-colonial African states (and elsewhere). Their analysis of this as a form of post-colonial ‘extractive anxiety’ illustrates the power-laden connections between mining investors, corporations and the African states where investment is targeted. A specific target of this racial vernacular are projects that seek,

through nationalisation or legislative reform, to increase the returns to the host nations in a context when it is considered that there is a ‘lack of governance’ in the sector, or the country as a whole.

Yanina Kowszyk and her co-authors draw out explicit political ecology themes in their examination of conflict management across four mining projects in Latin America. Using a systematic review of literature, discourse and documents and a select number of interviews, they tested five relational propositions derived from political ecology (and especially the notion of contrasting worldviews, ontologies and understandings of equality) against the evidence they compiled for each case. Their essential finding – that conflict in the Latin American large-scale minerals sector can be avoided or minimised by meaningful and proactive engagement between local communities and corporations, and through fair sharing of benefits – mirrors the long history of corporate-community relations in other parts of the world. Importantly, they note the importance of going beyond conventional analysis of participation to understanding how different ontologies held by communities and companies can lead to escalation of conflict.

Cindy Wilhem foregrounds the political motivations and decisions that drive local content policies (LCPs) in Guinea’s mining sector. The mineral sector reforms driven by President Condé, in part to make Guinea more attractive as a destination for mining investment had an explicit concern with LCPs as a means of strengthening the relationships between the political and business elites in Guinea. This Presidential project, in part driven by regional projects, has provided a focus for debates about the returns to the country from large-scale mining, but as Wilhem shows, the outcomes are limited: the political project, and the multitude of networks and connections that both feed LCP policies and are fed by them, doesn’t extend far beyond the rhetoric of national benefits, and the LCP ‘project’ itself may not survive the recent change in political leadership in the country.

Pedro Neto and Alexandra Mallett examine the relationships between environmental and civil society movements on the one hand, and the state and proponents of the proposed Retiro Project in São José do Norte in Brazil on the other. They look at the various means by which resistance was enacted through both formal, ‘state-sanctioned’ processes within the EIA, and when these failed to secure the degree of public participation needed (often by design), alternative, informal ‘outside’ channels to provide greater participation. Their relational analysis of civil society resistance and state responses reveal the need to analyse resistance beyond a ‘formal/informal’ dichotomy, to the strategic ways in which civil society movements seek to create space through pursuing both formal and informal channels to achieve their goals.

A further paper from the Extraction conference by Lisa Mills has also been published in this journal (Mills 2022). This detailed examination of the different regimes around mine closure in two Australian states (Western Australia and Queensland) highlights in an overt way, the effects of different political regimes on the regulation of the environmental legacies of mining.

3. Conclusions

This special issue comes at a time when environmental costs of extraction are becoming harder to ignore. The global appetite for large-scale resource extraction is insatiable. Extraction is the basis for contemporary capitalism, and for almost every commodity we engage with, use and even consume in everyday life. Extractive industries are also responsible for half of the world’s carbon emissions and more than 80% of biodiversity loss. Now, we are seeing new actions to contest and reshape extractivism, and to consider post-extractive futures. From a ban on offshore oil and gas exploration in Aotearoa NZ, to industry-led sustainable mining initiatives, and to strikes and protests against mining and oil developments through the Americas, Asia, Pacific and Africa, extraction (and activism towards it) is reshaping people’s relationships with state and market institutions, with the land and soil, and with each other. One particular thread that is likely to become more central within

political ecology are the so-called ‘transition’ minerals – the minerals that are required, in ever-increasing amounts, for the green technologies that will underpin the transition to a low-carbon future (Bainton et al., 2021). A relational analysis that foregrounds the continually changing power dynamics, knowledges and materialities that make up the extractive sector provides space for incorporating new foci in the rapidly changing sector.

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