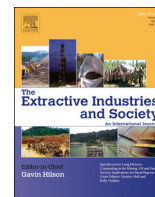


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Original article

## Mining in comparative perspective: Trends, transformations and theories

Jeroen Cuvelier<sup>a,b,\*</sup><sup>a</sup> Conflict Research Group, Department of Conflict and Development Studies, Universiteitstraat 8, Ghent University, 9000, Ghent Belgium<sup>b</sup> Institute for Anthropological Research in Africa, Parkstraat 45, Box 3615, Leuven University, 3000, Leuven Belgium

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## ABSTRACT

This article offers a brief introduction to a special issue based on a selection of papers originally presented at an international mining conference in Ghent (Belgium) in December 2017. The aim of the conference was to promote a comparative and multidisciplinary approach to a selective number of political, economic and socio-cultural aspects of mining in the Global South. The five papers included in the special issue have been grouped around three main themes: (1) mining elites, (2) the antagonism between artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) and large-scale mining (LSM), and (3) mining in a globalizing world.

### 1. Introduction

The papers included in this special issue were originally presented at an international mining conference in Ghent on 13–14 December 2017. The aim of this two-day conference, hosted by the Conflict Research Group of Ghent University, was to take stock of a selective number of trends and developments in current research on the political, economic and socio-cultural aspects of mining in the Global South, bringing together scholars from different fields in the social sciences and the humanities, including political science, development studies, anthropology and history. The approach we sought to promote and stimulate was a comparative and multidisciplinary one. Without wanting to downplay the value of paying attention to historical and cultural specificities, we invited participants in this conference to critically reflect on new and perhaps more fruitful ways to make theoretical sense of mining-related structures, processes and practices that seem to occur in different settings, contexts and historical epochs. While conference participants were obviously free to rely on their own disciplinary knowledge and to draw on their familiarity with a given area and/or era, we also wanted to offer them the opportunity to leave their comfort zone and to engage in scholarly debate with colleagues working on other continents and/or writing from different theoretical perspectives.

The idea for organizing this conference was born from a growing frustration about disciplinary insularity and theoretical narrow-mindedness in some of the social-scientific research about mining. At the risk of using a worn-out cliché, mining scholars working in the social sciences and the humanities sometimes seem to suffer from tunnel vision. Apart from overestimating the uniqueness of the phenomena they are encountering in the field, they sometimes show a disturbing tendency to analyze empirical data from the same angles, only using the tried and tested theories of their respective disciplines and only attending conferences and workshops where they can meet colleagues having the same disciplinary background, working in the same geographical areas, or being specialized in the same types of mining or minerals. In that sense, they behave – ironically – somewhat like the miners whose lives and practices they are studying during fieldwork: people who spend a considerable part of their days working underground, where they are completely disconnected from what is happening in the outside world. The ambition of the conference was to break away from this scholarly tunnel vision.

Five panels were convened by the members of the organizing committee<sup>1</sup>: (1) mining and urbanization, (2) mining and informalization, (3) mining-induced displacement and resettlement, (4) mining and violence, and (5) ASM in Central and Southern Africa. However, since only a limited number of paper presenters at the

\* Correspondence to: Institute for Anthropological Research in Africa, Parkstraat 45, Box 3615, Leuven University, 3000, Leuven Belgium.

E-mail addresses: [jeroen.cuvelier@ugent.be](mailto:jeroen.cuvelier@ugent.be), [jeroen.cuvelier@kuleuven.be](mailto:jeroen.cuvelier@kuleuven.be).

<sup>1</sup> The organizing committee was composed of Jeroen Cuvelier (University of Ghent), Katja Werthmann (University of Leipzig), Karen Büscher (University of Ghent), Sara Geenen (University of Antwerp), Boris Verbrugge (University of Antwerp & University of Leuven), Judith Verweijen (University of Sussex), Koen Vlassenroot (University of Ghent), Steven Van Bockstael (University of Ghent), Gillian Matthys (University of Ghent), and Sabine Luning (Leiden University).

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conference submitted their paper for publication, the coherence of this special issue has been ensured by identifying three main themes: mining elites, the antagonism between ASM and LSM, and mining in a globalizing world. In what follows, I will briefly explain how the selected papers relate to these three themes and what they contribute to the existing literature.

## 2. Mining elites

A frequently identified pattern in the literature about the role of elites in large-scale mining projects is that transnational mining corporations are highly dependent on local allies to facilitate their business operations. In an anthropological study of the mining and petroleum sector of Papua New Guinea, for instance, Golub has shown that local corporate elites make large-scale extractive projects possible by mobilizing their personal connections with influential figures in Port Moresby, the capital and administrative center of the country (Golub and Rhee, 2013). Likewise, Bull and Aguilar-Stoen (2016) have described how, in recent years, Guatemala has witnessed the entrance of new transnational elites associated with multinational mining corporations from Canada, Australia, the United States and Russia. While these new elites control access to international markets and technology, they remain in a subordinate position vis-à-vis the old, local elites in Guatemala, because the latter still exercise control over crucial political resources, networks of information and land. Many of the old elites have managed to strengthen their position even further by obtaining interests in junior mining firms that are subsidiaries of the transnational mining corporations. A final example is the ethnographic research of Welker (2014) about the activities of the Newmont Mining Corporation in Indonesia. Welker has documented how a local elite, composed of men who were already quite powerful and influential thanks to their positions in the civil service and the governing apparatus at the village level, have taken advantage of their role as mediators between Newmont and local villagers to monopolize economic opportunities associated with the mining project (Welker, 2014: 77–79).

In the literature on artisanal and small-scale mining, specific attention for mining elites has been relatively limited. Nevertheless, there is an extensive and growing body of scholarship about the driving forces behind the enormous expansion of ASM in recent decades and about the factors explaining people's participation in ASM activities, which can be seen as gradually paving the way for a better understanding of the emergence of mining elites in this sector. From the literature, it is clear that there is considerable variation in people's motives to become involved in ASM. Some participants in ASM are driven by the hope to escape poverty (Barry, 1996; Tschakert, 2009), others seek to diversify their livelihood portfolios by way of risk reduction (Hilson, 2010; Maconachie, 2011), and still others hope that their involvement in ASM will allow them to gain a higher level of personal freedom, or to adopt a more adventurous and prosperous lifestyle (De Boeck, 2001; Grätz, 2004; Werthmann, 2009; Walsh, 2003). A promising new line of research looks at how ASM is used as a means to achieve upward social mobility and emancipation (Engwicht, 2018), and to generate or accumulate wealth (Verbrugge, 2014; Hirsch, 2017), for instance by making strategic house building investments in larger towns and cities outside the mining areas (Jönssen and Bryceson, 2017).

In the first article for this special issue, which deals with small-scale gold mining in the Peruvian region of Madre de Dios, Dolores Cortés-McPherson describes the emergence of a new and heterogeneous elite of entrepreneurs who have managed to mechanize their mining operations and accumulate capital by skillfully making use of the opportunities offered by certain political and economic developments at the national and international level. Cortés-McPherson's research adds new evidence to Verbrugge's (2014) argument that the dramatic world-wide expansion of ASM in recent decades cannot only be explained by looking at its contribution to poverty reduction, but that it is also

important to take into account the roles played by capital-strong investors using the sector as a source of capital accumulation. Furthermore, the article by Cortés-McPherson highlights the importance of paying close analytical attention to the political-economic contexts in which these mining elites are able to rise to prominence, how they organize themselves, and how they try to exert influence at different levels of politics.

The second article in this special issue presents a historical analysis of the involvement of local elites in the mining industry of the Democratic Republic of Congo. Sara Geenen and Jeroen Cuvelier show how these elites benefit from mineral production, and how they succeed in excluding others from these benefits. Drawing on data from mines in the eastern and southeastern parts of the country, and examining different production modes in the course of Congo's mining history, the authors argue that Congolese elites have been able to access and control land, labor and capital thanks to their capacity to operate across scales and to adapt to changes in the political economy. Using a theoretical framework inspired by, on the one hand, Bayart's (2000) insights concerning the strategies of 'extraversion' of African elites, and, on the other hand, access theory Ribot and Peluso (2003) they demonstrate that local elites have frequently engaged in a strategic form of brokerage. Capitalizing on their position as intermediaries between the global and the local, elites have facilitated outsiders' access to Congo's mineral riches in exchange for part of the mining rents, while they have also offered protection and assistance to their followers at the local level, in exchange for the latter's loyalty and various types of material rewards.

## 3. The antagonism between ASM and LSM

The spectacular expansion of ASM in recent decades has led to an uneasy relationship with LSM. The coexistence of the two forms of mining has become increasingly characterized by antagonism, tension and violence (Ballard and Banks, 2003; Aubynn, 2009; Geenen and Verweijen, 2017). In many mineral-rich countries around the world, and especially in the Global South, governments tend to consider ASM as a temporary phenomenon, an economic activity that needs to be discouraged and even eradicated in order to create space for LSM (Banchirigah, 2006; Hilson and Potter, 2005; Luning, 2014). There are several reasons why LSM is usually preferred over ASM: it generates more fiscal revenues for the central government; it has lower levels of health and safety risks for the people working in the mines; it does not involve child labor; it is believed to be less harmful to the environment; it has the reputation of being easier to manage and regulate; it is believed to be conducive to long-term economic growth (Canavesio, 2014) and, finally, it is not suspected of having links to money laundering and the financing of illegal armed groups (Sarmiento et al., 2013: 62; Heemskerk and Duijves, 2013: 95–96).

However, as ASM has become a significant source of livelihood for millions of people (and especially for impoverished rural dwellers), governments and mining companies have a hard time putting an end to the presence of artisanal miners in areas earmarked for large-scale mining projects (Andrew, 2003; Geenen, 2014). In some places, relocations or forced evictions have taken place, often coupled with violent clashes between, on the one hand, security forces defending the interests of the mining companies and, on the other hand, members of the artisanal mining population protesting against their removal (Hilson and Yakovleva, 2007; Cuvelier, 2011; Heemskerk and Duijves, 2013). In other places, the two parties have tried to develop cohabitation settlements, with artisanal miners being allowed to continue working in the less attractive parts of concessions on the condition of handing over part of their production and/or selling all their minerals to the companies owning the mining rights (Aubynn, 2009; Luning, 2008; Geenen, 2013).

The third article in this special issue, written by Sarah Katz-Lavigne, examines the field of tension between artisanal and small-scale mining

(ASM) and large-scale mining (LSM) in the Congolese provinces of Haut-Katanga and Lualaba. The dynamics of the fierce competition for access to the region's rich copper and cobalt ores are analyzed through the prism of an adapted property rights approach. Katz-Lavigne points out that LSM sites in Haut-Katanga and Lualaba are governed according to a plural mineral rights regime consisting of three parts: a corporate component, an “authorized” component for artisanal extraction, and an “unauthorized” component for artisanal extraction. Emphasizing the fluidity and constantly changing nature of the boundaries between the three components, and acknowledging the incomplete enforcement of the rights and claims of the different parties in the struggle for resources, she shows that resource governance in the southeastern part of Congo is inherently unstable. This instability gives rise to different degrees and intensities of conflict, while, at the same time, it also leaves artisanal miners a certain room for maneuver to gain and/or maintain access to resources.

#### 4. Mining in a globalizing world

Global mineral resource flows started attracting the attention of social scientists and scholars in the humanities long before globalization became a buzzword in academic debates in the 1990s. Offering a survey of world economic history since around 1400, Wolf (2010 (1982)), a leading figure in Marxist-influenced anthropology in the 1970s, produced several examples of the enormous historical depth of the global trade in minerals, pointing out that, as early as the 9<sup>th</sup> century, immense quantities of gold originating from the area between the Zambezi and the Limpopo rivers in eastern Africa were already being exported (2010: 43). Around the same time as the publication of Wolf's book, historians and anthropologists inspired by dependency theory and/or world-system theory, were criticizing what they saw as the profound inequalities of the capitalist world economy, with resources from a periphery of poor, underdeveloped countries flowing to a rich, industrialized center, and miners looking for ways to resist and give meaning to their exploitative working conditions (Nash, 1979; Taussig, 1980; Higginson, 1989).

One of the most recent approaches to the study of mining globalization is the so-called Global Production Network approach (GPN), which can be defined as the ‘globally organized nexus of interconnected functions and operations by firms and non-firm institutions through which goods and services are produced and distributed’ (Coe et al., 2004: 471, cited in McQuilken and Hilson, 2018: 979). GPN is very popular among economic geographers and, according to its proponents, constitutes a useful tool for mapping production processes and the relationships between the different actors involved in it, as well as for figuring out how networks operate. McQuilken and Hilson (2018) have recently demonstrated the value of GPN for the analysis of production networks in ASM with a case study about Akwatia, Ghana's artisanal diamond hub. One of the key things emphasized in their study – and in GPN in general – is the importance of not only paying attention to vertical relationships in commodity chains, but also to horizontal ones (i.e. the institutional environment and the agents not directly involved in production or commercialization).

The fourth and fifth article in this special issue both look at structural changes in the global mining economy. The fourth article offers an insightful analysis of how mining governance in Tanzania has changed in response to developments in the global gold mining industry. Kai Roder shows that, since 2017, the Tanzanian government of John Magufuli has been pursuing a strategy of neo-extractivism, similar to what has occurred in a number of Latin American countries such as Venezuela, Ecuador, Bolivia and Peru (Chiasson-LeBel, 2016; Yates and Bakker, 2014; Brand et al., 2016). Reacting against the neo-liberal, investor-friendly mining policies of the 1990s, characterized by confidential contracts signed under pressure of the World Bank and the IMF, tax exemptions, and a preferential treatment of foreign mining corporations, amongst other things, the Tanzanian government has

taken several measures to increase state participation and control over the gold mining sector, to implement and enforce stricter regulations, and to increase revenue collection. The efforts of the Tanzanian state to increase control over and revenues from resource extraction have been coupled with the spread of a nationalist discourse about the virtues and benefits of state-led development in general.

Finally, in the fifth article of this special issue, Boris Verbrugge and Sara Geenen provide us with a stimulating theoretical framework for understanding two simultaneous and seemingly contradictory trends in the global gold mining industry in recent decades: on the one hand, an expansion of corporate mining, and, on the other hand, a growth of artisanal and small-scale mining. While previous scholarship has studied these two trends in isolation and has mostly focused on dynamics at the national and subnational levels, Verbrugge and Geenen advocate a different approach whereby the analytical point of departure lies in structural changes in the global gold economy. Building on Jason Moore's (2000) work on commodity frontiers, which considers capitalism as a socio-ecological system that constantly reproduces itself through the appropriation of ecological surplus, they argue that the simultaneous growth of industrial gold mining and artisanal and small-scale gold mining should be interpreted as the outcome of the same structural process, namely the ‘widening’ and ‘deepening’ of the gold commodity frontier. According to Verbrugge and Geenen, gold mining has tried to overcome a wide range of socio-ecological and socio-political limitations by expanding into new mining destinations (‘widening’), but also by intensifying appropriation of ecological surplus through various social and technological innovations (‘deepening’). The processes of widening and deepening of the gold mining frontier are illustrated with case study evidence from the Philippines and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

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