

No Ethnographic Playground: Mining Projects and Anthropological Politics. *A Review Essay*

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Golub, Alex. *Leviathans at the Gold Mine: Creating Indigenous and Corporate Actors in Papua New Guinea*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2014.

Kirsch, Stuart. *Mining Capitalism: The Relationship between Corporations and Their Critics*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014.

Rajak, Dinah. *In Good Company: An Anatomy of Corporate Social Responsibility*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011.

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“Mining is no ethnographic playground,” Chris Ballard and Glenn Banks warned in their 2003 review of the anthropology of mining. The deep conflicts that characterize the industry find echoes in “a parallel war of sorts ... waged within the discipline about the nature and scope of appropriate forms of engagement” (p. 289). This review essay examines how authors of recent ethnographic studies of large-scale, capital-intensive mining projects in Papua New Guinea, South Africa, and the United States have politically positioned themselves as researchers, and the insights into mining companies that derive from these situated perspectives.

On the cover photo of *Mining Coal and Undermining Gender: Rhythms of Work and Family in the American West*, the author, Jessica Smith Rolston, and her father, a mine mechanic, pose in mandatory mine safety gear in front of a haul truck that dwarfs them. It is a fitting image for this fine-grained study of labor and gender relations in Wyoming’s Powder River Basin, in which Rolston emphatically positions herself among the miners and largely eschews the

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perspectives of managers. Dinah Rajak's signal contribution to the burgeoning anthropological literature on Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), *In Good Company: An Anatomy of Corporate Social Responsibility*, instead trains a lens upwards, focusing directly on CSR's purveyors and apparatus rather than its targets. Her multi-sited ethnography begins in London, the "global capital" of CSR, where putatively universal frameworks and standards are developed for global export, before going on to situate the Anglo American mining company in its national context of South Africa, and finally in the local context of Rustenburg, where the company's platinum mine shafts, smoke stacks, smelters, refineries, crushers, hostels, and slag heaps are found.

In *Leviathans at the Gold Mine: Creating Indigenous and Corporate Actors in Papua New Guinea*, Alex Golub positions himself between Ipili people and the Porgera Gold Mine. He discloses in the epilogue that his research impulse was to try to tell two sides of the story, in which the two sides, though different, were "both right" (212). The mine identifies Ipili as "landowners": those who live in the mine vicinity and in many cases actually own little or no land, having sold it to make way for the mine facilities. Porgera discharges its tailings waste into the same river system as the Ok Tedi copper and gold mine, which forms the focus of Stuart Kirsch's *Mining Capitalism: The Relationship between Corporations and Their Critics*. The starting point of Kirsch's multi-sited inquiry is downstream, amidst the "mass destruction" (LeCain 2009) produced by the mine. Yonggom people drew their subsistence from the local rainforest and savannah before the mine discharged 2 billion metric tons of tailings, overburden, and waste rock into the Fly River system, producing a slow-moving environmental disaster by polluting the water and causing flooding and vegetation dieback. As capital-intensive mining companies have developed ever-greater capacities to mine low-grade ore and have turned to riverine tailings disposal to cope with the massive amounts of waste generated, they have provoked fresh opposition and critique. To counter critics, companies have developed an arsenal of "corporate social technologies" (Rogers 2012) meant to reassure, coopt, and disable them. Kirsch persuasively argues that this dynamic relationship between corporations and their critics is central to the constitution of contemporary mining capitalism. I turn now in more detail to each of these ethnographies.

Mining Coal and Undermining Gender is grounded in ten months Rolston spent working at coalmines as a summer student employee, and twenty-two additional months of ethnographic fieldwork at four different mines, during which she was still regarded as a trainee (29). Rolston's lengthy experience shines through in her analysis of how workers, most of whom spend the bulk of their 12-hour shifts alone in the machines they operate, develop dense social ties and a sense of belonging to "crew families" through the shared temporal dislocations of shiftwork; coffee, meals and practical jokes in break rooms; radio communications; and machine-mediated interactions (a shovel operator,

for example, can show consideration for the haul truck operator by “feathering out” rather than abruptly dumping the first load of ore in order to keep from jarring the driver’s body, 165).

In their social interactions, workers make efforts to diminish the salience of gender difference. In mines where women make up around 20 percent of the production crews, Rolston found that miners condemned exaggeratedly stereotypical gender performances (“ladies” and “macho” men), valuing instead “tomboy” women who were technically competent and unafraid of dirt, and “softie” men with a thoughtful and sensitive side belying their tough exterior (9–10, 136). Yet, the gender-neutral ideals workers espoused were only partially actualized in practice due to anatomical differences between the sexes and the ongoing hold of binary gender ideologies. Taking bathroom breaks, for example, reduced load counts and disproportionately affected female workers, who were often unable to match the productivity of their male colleagues as a result (81–82). Female workers still confronted stereotypes that they were more caring and safety conscious but less technically competent, while male workers were reluctant to publicly request help when they encountered equipment problems (e.g., 159–62). Rolston examines what unfolds off-site as well, following workers home and finding that childless households are more gender-neutral in their domestic division of labor. If the intensity of shiftwork promoted a sense of crew family and relatedness, it also made it difficult for chronically sleep-deprived miners to participate in heteronormative family time regimes with their daily meals, medical appointments, school schedules, church services, birthdays, clubs, and athletics (70).

Rolston’s study of the lifeworlds of miners is strikingly positive, offering relief from the dismal tone characterizing most mining studies (my own work included, e.g. Welker 2014). Mining shiftwork is grueling and can be dangerous (on one occasion, the wheel of a haul truck Rolston was riding caught fire), but it pays well. Rolston remarks that the miners are among the “last of the blue-collar aristocracy”; maintaining blue collar pride alongside middle-class living standards, consumption practices, and identifications (19, 33, 47). They are also, by and large, antiunion. In reaction to struggles over working conditions in older Appalachian coalmines, companies deliberately recruited a nonunion workforce from the ranks of rural farming and ranching communities in Wyoming (45).

Rolston reveals something of her own political differences with the miners in a humorous anecdote (72). After her coworkers mischievously tell her that one miner is a Democrat, she approaches him as a fellow traveler only to find he is actually one of the staunchest Republicans on the crew. Her political views thereafter become the butt of several jokes; she gains the nickname “Leftie” and is asked to position her ore haul truck a bit more to the right when parking it for loading. Some readers might wish for Rolston to take a more critical stance when depicting the miners’ assimilation of antiunion

rhetoric, for example, or to underscore a discrepancy between their avowed appreciation of nature and open skies and their work in the fossil fuel industry. In my view, Rolston avoids the charge of being an apologist for the coal industry by aligning herself with mine workers, and by giving precedence to their own critiques of the gender and working-class stereotypes that pervade media, Hollywood, and also academic depictions of mining. She also carefully acknowledges the facets of Wyoming coalmining that make it exceptional, at the same time underscoring the importance of attending closely to the geographical and historical specificity of the mine under study.

Rajak's *In Good Company* is more ambitious than Rolston's book in its historical and geographical scope, and in the questions it poses. Rajak asks how corporate power is exercised through CSR, and how CSR authenticates corporate power by framing corporations as the solution to—rather than the cause of—global poverty and underdevelopment. Whereas Rolston obscures the identities of both her interlocutors and the mines they work for, Rajak is squarely focused on Anglo American. Employing 195,000 people worldwide, it is the largest private-sector employer not only in South Africa but on the whole continent. In contrast to the open-cut mines studied by Rolston, Anglo American's platinum mines in Rustenburg are underground, which generally cause less environmental damage but employ more workers in more difficult and dangerous working conditions. As a consequence, the company's CSR efforts are primarily directed at workers, although Rajak also treats Anglo's community extension work. A study like Rolston's on the labor experiences and gender identities of miners would have looked very different at Rustenburg.

In an extended discussion of corporate HIV/AIDS policy, Rajak shows how the company claims a leadership role in providing treatment to HIV-positive workers, positioning the company ahead of a laggard state while failing to acknowledge how the political economy of mining in South Africa enforces migrant labor regimes that encourage the spread of HIV. What is more, Rajak argues that a financial logic motivated Anglo's programs to extend HIV care to productive "human capital." Anglo only became the world's largest business customer for HIV drugs after generic ART drugs became available, and at the Anglo Platinum Rustenburg operation, with an estimated 28 percent prevalence, workers who became too unfit to work were given three months ART before being medically "repatriated": "handed over" to an ill-functioning state health system for the final stages of their illness, when two-thirds of medical costs are typically incurred (151). Due to Rajak's decision to focus on the purveyors and apparatus of CSR rather than its targets, we only get a limited sense of workers' actual interactions with and perspectives on these HIV programs.

Whereas Rolston laments Wyoming miners' invisibility on the national stage and highlights their role as producers of energy crucial to the functioning

of everyday life in the United States (31, 33), mining looms large in South Africa's national imagination. Rajak provides a particularly thorough analysis of how Anglo American has sought to manage the company's image. The company straddles two identities, portraying itself as both "global citizen" and as "proudly South African," staunchly patriotic despite having moved its primary stock listing from Johannesburg to the London Stock Exchange in 1998. Called upon to account for its relations with the apartheid regime, the company attempted to position itself on the right side of history by claiming apartheid damaged its interests, while downplaying the mutual dependence of apartheid politics and capitalist accumulation, and Anglo's role in bankrolling the apartheid regime. Anglo commends itself for its "stealthy" anti-apartheid work and for fostering intimate ties with the ANC before and after the end of apartheid (64). Yet, Rajak argues that Anglo's interactions with ANC were directed at influencing the party to embrace neoliberal rather than socialist policies (85–87). Rajak also points to the ongoing influence of apartheid logics in Anglo's contemporary CSR efforts, from the ways in which company discourse around HIV resonates with earlier approaches to tuberculosis to the perpetuation of structures segregating mine workplace from home life. She is also critical of the missionary zeal and paternalism that characterize CSR efforts to "uplift" people and of the reanimation of Victorian discourses of the deserving and undeserving poor (184–85, 217).

Rajak's eloquent, methodical, and unwavering critique of Anglo seems to belie Kirsch's fear that "conducting ethnographic research within the corporation poses a risk of co-optation, because the tendency of ethnographers to empathize with the subjects of their research may influence their findings or temper their critical perspectives" (12). Rajak never seems to be in danger of losing her critical distance from her subjects; indeed, I wished at times that she were less impervious to the allure of their discourse. I wanted a deeper sense of how they made their work compelling to themselves, as well as of their own ability to critique it. Such an approach would not preclude Rajak's own incisive critiques but rather make them all the more convincing by showing CSR purveyors as more multidimensional actors. At times, Rajak also makes the company seem more strategic and invulnerable than the realities of organizational life would warrant. She depicts the cosmopolitan, socially enlightened world of corporate offices, populated by Oxbridge pedigreed Rhodes scholars turned Anglo executives, for example, serving as a perfect foil for the coalface industrial domain of mine management (a strategy/operations or suit-wearing/boot-wearing duality, 113). A company identity as patron of arts, people, and society, Rajak suggests, cleanses Anglo American and its directors, distancing them from the gritty and ruthless business of resource extraction (72). While Anglo executives might indeed strategically deploy these different images, if Anglo is constituted by distinct parts it would be interesting to hear

Rajak comment more on how its complex makeup could be a source of internal conflict and tensions—and not just external power—for the company.

Drawing inspiration from colonial scholar John Furnivall's (1991) account of the bumbling nature of the early British Empire in Burma, and with similar dashes of humor and violence, Alex Golub depicts the Porgera Gold Mine as a more fraught and vulnerable project than Rajak's Anglo American. *Leviathans at the Gold Mine* sets out to examine the semiotic and political processes through which two leviathans—a large company and an ethnic group, the mine and the Ipili—are created and maintained as corporate actors. One such process is the ultimately failed mine-*Ipili* negotiations over resettling local communities to make way for a waste dump site that would reduce mine costs and potentially extend production. Golub contrasts the benevolent paternalism of the Australian negotiators, who represent, or rather, in Hobbes' terms "personate" the mine, with the views of landowners, who personate the *Ipili*. The Australians regard the meetings as a means of generating trust and understanding, while *Ipili* approach them as a venue for the antagonistic exchanges of proposals and counterproposals (47).

Golub's apposite formulation of mines as "complex sociotechnical system[s] made up of a variety of human and nonhuman actors" (7) invites anthropologists to draw on a range of data in theorizing mining companies: public documents and private contracts, budgets and deadlines, mine infrastructure, waste, and molecular impacts (see also Rogers 2015 on oil). Adopting this view, Golub (7) acknowledges that "[d]efining who 'the mine' is can be ambiguous and tricky. If a security guard shoots an *Ipili* trespasser in the back, has 'the mine' or 'an employee' shot someone?" *Ipili* landowners themselves, along with the national and provincial governments, are among the mine's minority owners. Further complicating the question of just who the mine might be, Vancouver-based Placer Dome was the majority owner and operator until 2006, when it sold the mine to Barrick.

Although written to account for how both "the *Ipili*" and "the mine" are presupposed and entailed through ordinary encounters, the *Ipili* ultimately steal the spotlight in Golub's book. Golub shows how various outsiders (colonial and postcolonial government officials, missionaries, and fortune seekers) ignored the fluid nature of social relations and practices, converting the place-name "*Ipili*" into an ethnonym referring to a people with a stable associated set of customs, kinship rules, and territory. Based on this construct, the mine determined who had "legitimate" compensation claims, conferring wealth and power on those construed as *Ipili* in contrast to their close neighbors. Golub portrays the mine gathering knowledge about *Ipili* people in a haphazard and idiosyncratic fashion based on key assumptions that were later challenged and revised (e.g., the notion that individuals only have a single clan affiliation, or that kinship and residence tidily correspond). In a context where people form but also discard corporate identities with seeming ease,

Golub argues that constituting the Ipili as a collective subject is a particularly fragile achievement (187, 195). “While landowners never quite managed to become a leviathan,” Golub concludes, “the mine surely was one” (198).

Golub ends the book on a conflicted note. His jaunty call for “an anthropology ready, willing, and able to sport with leviathans” is followed by an epilogue that betrays significant doubts about his own erstwhile desire to tell a story in which there were two different sides, and “they were both right” (212). Golub’s misgivings crystallize around his sense that the situation at Porgera has gone deeply wrong. Masters of negotiation, the Ipili initially set a new standard for compensation by hammering out the best mining deal yet signed in Papua New Guinea (99, 11). Instead of enjoying the hoped-for benefits, however, the Ipili are now suffering from the usual grim mine-related pathologies, including pollution, police violence, land shortage, massive in-migration, and high rates of alcoholism and sexual violence. In her own review of Golub’s book, anthropologist and activist Catherine Coumans (2014) argues that these aspects of Ipili experience merit more sustained reflection in Golub’s ethnography. For Coumans (394), Ipili were never good candidates to form as a leviathan due not simply to their cultural propensities but to a fundamental disadvantage: their power rests “on a threat of illegal acts likely to result in broad and brutal police actions placing many Ipili at risk,” whereas the mine’s power rests on “bureaucracy, regulations, and laws” that the company is often able to manipulate to suit its interests.

Stuart Kirsch’s work is more faithful to an activist perspective that focuses on harms wrought by mining. Kirsch is himself an important and longstanding critic of the mine, and draws throughout the book on his extensive experience as an activist and scholar (see also Kirsch 2006), incorporating excerpts from editorials he published in Papua New Guinea and his experience testifying on behalf of Yonggom people in a lawsuit against BHP in Australia. Yet *Mining Capitalism* does not quite follow an idealized activist script, showing instead how the environmental struggle over Ok Tedi involved compromises and coalitions of actors with only partially overlapping understandings, goals, political identifications, and commitments over time (see also Fortun 2001; Tsing 2005). The David versus Goliath court battle between Yonggom people and BHP, in which Kirsch played a significant role, generated a moment of seeming triumph for the activist coalition with a 2004 out-of-court settlement in which BHP agreed to pay US\$500 million in compensation, and the Papua New Guinea government was given the task of reviewing and recommending alternative tailings containment options that would put an end to riverine disposal. But the government never carried out this task, and mine waste continues to flow into the river system.¹ The compensation payments, valued in

¹ With rising metal prices, Kirsch claims, the mine could have paid for a dam and still remained profitable (120–21). Although a tailings containment dam should produce less environmental

a declining kina currency, amount to a paltry \$95 per person or so annually (110–11).

Meanwhile, even among devastated downstream communities, efforts to close the mine have garnered little support and have only been deployed rhetorically (56). The chief leaders of the campaign against the mine, Kirsch's close friends, themselves had complex relations with Ok Tedi, having had apprenticeships at the mine and later established construction companies that were reliant upon mine contracts. Rather than seeking to close the mine, many Yonggom, dependent on resource rents and claiming that the mine has already destroyed the environment, wished for Ok Tedi to remain open to provide something for future generations. In my own research at Newmont's Batu Hijau mine in Indonesia, I saw the same lack of appetite for mine closure even in the most mine-affected communities. In the initial stages of the mine's operation at least, people living near the mine were more concerned with encouraging it to act as a generous patron, or with finding mechanisms to spread the economic opportunities it brought more evenly, than with closing it (Welker 2014). Under such circumstances, I found it difficult to work out what role I could play that would be consistent with my own more negative environmental and political assessment of the mine. Kirsch framed his participation in a campaign against the Ok Tedi mine as a "logical extension of the commitment to reciprocity that underlies the practice of anthropology" (11), but it was also compatible with his own environmental and political views.

In addition to studying the corporation in the courtroom, Kirsch analyzes corporate science and knowledge practices, critically discussing the modeling practices, deployment of averages, natural background rate comparisons, mis-measurement, and symbolic acts of consuming fish and water that the company used to placate critics. Further, he examines how the mining industry has attempted to co-opt critics by collaborating with them, and to sow dissent by using divide and conquer tactics and by creating activist turncoats and spies. Kirsch zooms out to study the tactics adopted by other industries such as tobacco and pharmaceuticals, arguing that ethnographers require this wide-angle lens to properly appreciate corporate public relations strategies. Like Golub, then, Kirsch portrays the corporation as shaped through relationships with other actors (in his case, critics). To study it adequately, however, Kirsch asserts that we need to look beyond the more readily apparent components of the sociotechnical system.

damage than the (much cheaper) practice of riverine tailings disposal, in seismically unstable regions like PNG there is always a risk of catastrophic failure. With a growing consensus that riverine tailings disposal is unacceptable, it may be that fewer will be approved in such regions in the future.

Kirsch found the Papua New Guinea state acting against the interests of Yonggom people, seeking on one occasion to implement legislation—prepared by BHP, an Australian company that happened to be the Ok Tedi’s majority stockholder—that would have imposed penalties on anyone pursuing legal action in Australia, criminalizing mine victims’ access to a foreign court (97–98). For Kirsch, the Papua New Guinea government’s 20 percent stake in the Ok Tedi mine raises a conflict of interest, because the state acts as both shareholder and regulator (22). Yet this conflict of interest assumes that the state is a unitary subject in the first place rather than heterogeneous and internally contradictory, with ministries of mining and environment often pursuing opposing goals, and conflicts over revenues unfolding between national and regional layers of government bureaucracy (e.g., Golub 72). States always derive revenues from a mining industry that they also regulate, and some would argue that national rather than private ownership of mines is more consistent with national interests.

To conclude the book on a more hopeful note, Kirsch looks beyond Ok Tedi. Yonggom people’s erstwhile subsistence grounds, already reduced to a “sacrifice zone” for mining capitalism and national development interests, might also serve as a lesson for companies and potential mine-affected communities alike. BHP Billiton’s own CEO referred to Ok Tedi as “an environmental abyss” (170), and the company has pledged not to participate in new projects involving riverine tailings disposal. An industry-organized review of mining (Mines, Metals and Sustainable Development) also advised mining companies against this practice, citing the high-profile disaster (169). While activists have long practiced a “politics of space” in creating long-distance coalitions, Kirsch advocates practicing a “politics of time,” using online activism and other tools to focus attention on potential projects before they receive government approval and financing, essentially stopping them before they gain sufficient momentum to get started. Kirsch draws on his own participation in an external review for a potential project in Suriname, and on the Latin American practice of holding popular votes (referenda or consultas) for communities to express support or opposition to projects. He warns, however, that in order to “make constructive interventions into political debates about mining conflicts, scholars must remain clear-eyed about corporate power rather than starry-eyed about the prospects for change” (221).

Ballard and Banks called into question the ability of the solitary scholar to pursue a multi-sited ethnography that would adequately tackle the full spectrum of geological, economic, social and cultural activities that contribute to mining (307) or, in Golub’s terms, make up their sociotechnical systems. To date, disciplinary conventions of fieldwork, funding, and authorship have largely held fast against the innovative collaborative ethnographic studies of large-scale mining projects Ballard and Banks propose. Yet the various perspectives discussed here nonetheless shed fresh light on “the figure of ‘the mining

company” that previously lurked “monolithically and often menacingly in the background of many anthropological accounts of communities affected by mining operations” (290). They illuminate how mines and mining companies are born and how they age, how they are gendered and enacted through social labor, how they are embedded in particular times and places, and how they are shaped by relations with other corporate, individual, and non-human agents.

They also illuminate ongoing debates over how anthropologists should position themselves vis-à-vis mining capitalism, and the orthodoxies of mining proponents and opponents (see also Jacka 2015; and Li 2015). These debates should not be adjudicated and closed, in my view, but rather left open and unsettled. There are multiple ethical and political positions from which to study and write about mining. No single one is privileged, and none is fully comfortable.

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