

REVIEWS OF BOOKS

LONG TAKES: MINING AND MANIFESTATIONS OF UNDERDEVELOPMENT

South Africa's Gold Mines & the Politics of Silicosis.

By Jock McCulloch.

Suffolk, England: James Currey, 2012. Pp. xxiv+178. £19.99, paperback (ISBN 978-1-84701-059-9).

From the Pit to the Market: Politics and the Diamond Economy in Sierra Leone.

By Diane Frost.

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Jock McCulloch and Diane Frost have written two books that differ greatly in style, but which seek to tackle one of the most important questions in the politics of mining: Why are some mineworkers and their communities treated so badly? The 'bad treatment' is conceptualised as underdevelopment in mineworker communities and each book focuses on a different manifestation of this underdevelopment. Both books show how mining corporations tried to externalise costs to maximise profits and the resulting human consequences. In South Africa these consequences were ill-health and impoverishment of mine-worker communities; in Sierra Leone, impoverishment and violent conflict over land.

Research since the early 1990s about the politics of mining in Africa has tended to focus on the mining industry as a cause of violent conflict. *From the Pit to the Market* is a useful elaboration on this theme. It places the Sierra Leonean diamond industry in a global and historical context and demonstrates that that country's 'civil' war was not merely a struggle by internal (domestic) actors for control of the diamond industry and its profits. Frost argues that violent conflict – together with the dispossession of land, the impoverishment of labour, and general underdevelopment of mining communities and Sierra Leone as a whole – were the consequences of the interests and strategies of a set of actors that are powerful in the global extractive industries sector.

Frost sets out to explain the relationship between the poor economic and social conditions in diamond mining communities and economic globalisation, specifically globalisation in the mining industry but also the expanded global influence in the 1980s and 1990s of international financial institutions and the governments that control them. She argues that diamond mining communities in Sierra Leone became subject to violence and impoverishment as a result of a set of internal and external factors. The internal factors are largely related to weak government institutions and an uncaring local political elite – in both its colonial and indigenous incarnations – which meant that the state delivered little to diamond mining areas. Frost argues the external factors have been inadequately analysed in the literature on Sierra Leone, despite being at least as important as internal factors. These external factors are related to increasing globalisation that allows the free flow of capital and capitalists into countries in order to exploit natural resources, as well as the

free flow of profits out of these countries, but militates against fair wages, long-term investment, or economic diversification in local communities.

Frost is best when analysing local conditions, but she is not persuasive when trying to make the causal link between global factors and these conditions. There are many arguments to be made about this relationship, but Frost's economic analysis lacks rigour and this weakens her overall argument. Quoting a miner who complains that the 'World Bank or the Diamond High Council does not do anything to fix or regulate the price' of diamonds (p. 98), without offering some analysis as to how the miner can have such a misunderstanding of the way the world works, makes it seem that Frost agrees with this sentiment (which would cast doubt on Frost's own economic knowledge).

The core problem with Frost's analysis is that she does not convincingly show how the underdevelopment of Sierra Leone was the result of a *coordinated* strategy by external actors, yet her rhetorical approach suggests that diamond traders, Western governments, global mining corporations, local political elites *et al.*, were working together with full knowledge of the impact of their strategies – that there was a *predation* at three different levels: by the state, by armed groups, and by international actors linked to global corporate interests (p. 150). She argues that this pattern of resource predation in Sierra Leone is typical of the resource-focused exploitation that occurs elsewhere in Africa. Frost may be correct about this causal link, but *From the Pit to the Market* provides insufficient evidence and analysis to support this view.

In the Introduction and Conclusion, Frost identifies the precise ills of underdevelopment experienced by Sierra Leone and tries to pin down the cause. For example, on p. 14 she discusses the role of 'overseas companies, financial institutions and Western governments' in widespread corruption in Africa. But establishing this relationship on the issue of corruption is different to showing that decision-makers in these institutions knew their policies and actions were causing, or at least exacerbating, civil war and underdevelopment. What is needed is a convincing argument about how contextual factors, such as corruption or criminal networks, which contribute to (or constitute) underdevelopment were the product of deliberate strategy, such as the negligence exposed by McCulloch.

One of the strongest features of *From the Pit to the Market* is Frost's historical perspective. In Chapter One on colonialism, post colonialism and resource predation, Frost does an excellent job of analysing tensions in the diamond sector when it first developed in the 1930s and tracing these through to the 1990s. She convincingly argues that tensions related to inequity around diamond mining and profits was not a phenomenon of the 1990s, contrary to what some of the literature argues about the rise of economic interests or 'greed' following the end of security and ideological concerns associated with the Cold War. This part of the book relies on documentary evidence and, as for *South Africa's Gold Mines*, the reliance on the historical record has facilitated greater analytical clarity and a more compelling account than the sections focused on more contemporary events that rely on interview data.

A weakness in Frost's attempt to make broader insights into African politics in general is that she gives the impression that politics in sub-Saharan Africa remains overwhelmingly about Africans and Westerners. Perhaps this was true of Sierra Leone and the diamond industry in the 1990s – although the power of Lebanese in the diamond industry suggests otherwise – but it is not true of Africa today. Frost's binary conceptual framework itself

inflates and perpetuates the role of the West. Colonialism irreversibly changed society and governance in Africa, but this does not mean that the former colonials themselves remain as important. What is interesting about African politics today is the pace and direction in which they are evolving, with markets, capital, entrepreneurs, and ideas in Guangzhou, Mumbai, Dubai, and Johannesburg becoming more significant in many parts of the continent than Old Europe, and this is the case for the diamond economy as well.

Frost also wears her bias against the mining industry, especially global extractive corporations, on her sleeve. Yet for every negative example she gives of chaos and violence in countries dominated by an extractive industry (pp. 13–14), there is a counter positive example. Sierra Leone? – Botswana. Gold and coltan mining in eastern D. R. Congo? – Copper and cobalt mining in southern D. R. Congo. ‘Many mineral rich nations have the poorest people in the world’ (p. 13)? Many mineral rich nations have the richest people in the world (Canada, Australia, and the United States). All of this is simplistic. The relevant point about whether an extractive industry is going to benefit a country in terms of creating well-paid jobs and local investment – leaving aside questions of environmental damage – is about the nature of the political regime in place and the stability and strength of domestic institutions, especially government institutions, labour unions, and community organisations.

Jock McCulloch’s *South Africa’s Gold Mines* is altogether different. It is an exercise in restraint and its sparse prose, cracking pace, and sleuthing for evidence are reminiscent of a Scandi-noire crime thriller. McCulloch offers a master class in how to craft a compelling narrative from the driest of documentary sources: legal judgments, commissions of enquiry, corporate annual reports, and medical files.

The transfer to communities of the costs of mining is a theme in both *From the Pit to the Market* and *South Africa’s Gold Mines*. However, while Frost fails to make a convincing causal connection between the strategies of powerful mining actors and Sierra Leone’s conflicted and impoverished local communities, McCulloch is wholly persuasive in his argument that mining companies and the South African government deliberately transferred the costs of gold mining to mineworkers and the communities from which they came.

The health costs of white miners *were* carried by industry and this was the policy of an apartheid government that valued the political support of whites. If business had to pay the health costs of black workers (and their families), which because of the greater disease burden caused by tuberculosis and silicosis, and poorer nutrition and housing conditions, would probably have been higher per worker than for white workers, it would not have made a profit and the gold mining industry would have collapsed. Neither business nor the South African government wanted this, thus the (unwritten) policy became one of deliberate negligence on the issue of black mineworkers’ health.

The problem for industry was that they needed labour and their labourers kept getting sick and were then unable to work. A system of recruiting migrant labour from across Southern Africa was established to feed the gold industry’s endless demand for new healthy workers while minimising the cost to industry of the health burden incurred by these workers and their communities. Mining corporations that lobbied the British government and regional colonial administrations to allow recruitment of African men to be mineworkers brokered the system. The chief opponents of this system were colonial administrations in (then) Southern Rhodesia and Northern Rhodesia, which wanted to force Africans to

enter their own labour markets as capitalist development expanded the economy in these territories and resented losing ‘their’ labour to the Rand.

Some medical data were available regarding the full extent of ill-health in black miners and their communities, but these data were suppressed by both industry and government medical officers and the white medical research community itself (see Chapter Four). The role of the gold mines in spreading tuberculosis – specifically the fact that housing and nutrition for mineworkers were conducive to disease, that tuberculosis and silicosis were contracted in the mines, and that miners carried tuberculosis to their homelands on their return – was also understood by key medical and mine personnel. Yet in complete contradiction to the reality, South Africa established a worldwide reputation for mineworker health and safety and was envied by industry in the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, and elsewhere (Chapter Three). McCulloch concludes, and persuades the reader to conclude, that the only possible explanation for the ignoring of these data and for the failure of the medical establishment to do additional research given both the significant evidence of a health crisis amongst black miners and the explicit role of the mines in this crisis, was that there was a cover-up.

The magnitude of the cover-up is astounding, in terms of both its eighty-year history and the number of individuals and institutions that participated. It ranged from the ignoring of data about tuberculosis and silicosis and the relationship between the two, to the deliberate creation of suboptimal conditions for reviewing workers’ health, including excessive workloads for medical officers, inadequate equipment, and the system of doctors voting on whether a worker should receive compensation (rather than compensation being based on evidence). As McCulloch so pithily puts it, ‘The system of medical review was organised fraud.’ (p. 111)

Compared to Frost, McCulloch had an easier job in terms of gathering evidence, because of the existence of documents about the politics of silicosis. He was also able to use data, especially medical data, to support certain arguments such as the likely true extent of silicosis and tuberculosis in mineworkers. Some data are unreliable, but McCulloch skillfully turns this fact into one of the strongest themes of the book by analysing how South African medical scientists and practitioners were coopted into publishing and propagating incorrect data. These unreliable data are at the heart of the cover-up that McCulloch exposes.

As for *why* mineworkers in South Africa were treated so badly, apartheid is – of course – a key part of the answer, but it depends which mineworkers one is talking about. Politics across Southern Africa were controlled by whites and structured by them to advantage whites, until majority rule across the region and then in South Africa in 1994. Blacks’ legal status as second-class citizens with truncated rights was comprehensively institutionalised in South Africa after 1948 when the Afrikaner-dominated National Party won government and this bode ill for black labour. But the relationship between the apartheid system and business was complex. Apartheid was often kind to labour – as long as it was white and did not challenge the political system (the apartheid government viewed whites with communist leanings as a threat equal to that of black nationalists). Apartheid politics also often antagonised big business, given its gross inefficiencies and costs: elaborate infrastructure (designed to keep whites apart from non-whites), protections for white-owned small businesses that might otherwise have been crushed, a highly regulated labour market, and high salaries for (white) skilled labour. Mining companies would happily have phased

out jobs reserved for white mineworkers and filled them with lower paid blacks employed under poorer conditions, if the government had let them.

The politics of silicosis has a clarity lacking in the Sierra Leonean diamond industry because of the clearly defined actors and interests: capital, labour (including its racial subsets), and the state, notwithstanding some convergence of these actors' interests. Frost, on the other hand, had to contend with fifty shades of grey: shadow economies, shadow states, criminal networks, 'sobels' (soldiers by day; rebels by night), etc. She had little data to assist her enquiry and this is the case for any research that focuses on something that is pervaded by secrecy or illegality, such as the diamond industry. Data that are available, such as the population of diamond mining regions, the value of diamond exports, or the ethnicity of diamond dealer licence holders, have limited use in furthering her arguments.

This raises the question as to why there is so much data and documentary evidence around the politics of mining in one country, South Africa, and why there is comparatively little such evidence for Sierra Leone. This presence, or absence, of evidence raises an important political question itself: Why is the politics of mining in South Africa so mediated and shaped by the law – resulting in the kind of commissions, reports, and legal judgments that McCulloch is able to use? What is it about gold mining that caused large corporations – Capital – to want, or need, formal state institutions that mediate and document aspects of the mining industry? What is it about diamond mining in Sierra Leone that caused Capital to not need, and possibly not want, formal state institutions that mediate and document aspects of the mining industry?

The answer to these questions is related to uncertainty. Gold mining of the kind carried out in South Africa – capital-intensive, complicated infrastructure, many skilled workers – requires extensive investment, and investors want certainty. In particular, they want certainty about property rights and strong legal institutions provide this. Governments also need capable institutions to extract revenue from industries such as this. Artisanal diamond mining such as in Sierra Leone does not require the same degree of investment and can continue with reduced certainty and weak institutions. In conditions of violence, profit-making strategies are short-term and property rights are always uncertain. Land where diamonds might be found, whether communally owned or not, may be seized at any time by an armed group. And neither violence nor weak property rights stop diamonds reaching buyers in the global supply chain.

In conditions of conflict there is much less clarity about what is happening, so it is harder to document what is going on. People are also less inclined to create records because they are busy trying to stay alive. The illegal and illicit aspect of diamond mining also means that people actively avoid writing down decisions, agreements, and plans. Most importantly, in conditions of violence mediation of property rights or policy differences does not happen through the institution of the law (even if customary law) or through political institutions, but through the barrel of a gun. The availability of documents, especially legal documents, tells us something about the way politics are regulated and shaped. In turns, this raises political economy questions about which actors need the institutions that create these kinds of documents and why.

South Africa's Gold Mines could have been a book for specialist audiences interested in industrial diseases or labour history. Instead, McCulloch has produced a page-turner that

should be read by anyone who wants to learn how to write well about politics and history, especially scholars and students relying on documentary evidence. *From the Pit to the Market* is the culmination of a quality endeavour, but with sharper writing and analysis, guided by cold-eyed editing, it could have been better. Students and scholars interested in the politics of Sierra Leone or the politics of the diamond industry should read the book, but it could have had, and should have had, a bigger audience. While *From the Pit to the Market* is flawed in a way that *South Africa's Gold Mines* is not, these very flaws create opportunities to discuss key social science issues such as why some forms of evidence are created and endure, and how inherent limitations in conceptual frameworks (such as the notion that African politics is still largely about Africans and Westerners) can hinder recognition of change.

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JUBILEE IN QUESTION

50 Jahre Unabhängigkeit in Afrika: Kontinuitäten, Brüche, Perspektiven.

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The fiftieth anniversary of independence celebrated in many countries in 2010 led to a spate of publications that attempted to draw up a balance sheet on the significance of the transition that operated in or around 'Africa's Year'—1960. This is a tall order by any standards, as a thorough understanding would, in principle, require a longitudinal analysis of broad historical developments stretching over several decades—both before and after the year that was purported to constitute that 'rupture'. This book, published under the auspices of the Institute for Ethnology and African Studies in Mainz, one of Germany's principal centers in the field, pursues this question by looking at trends and developments since that 'constitutive' date in the entire range of human endeavor. Four parts treat broad societal developments; issues of nation and nation building; aspects of political economy; and various cultural dimensions (media, literature, film, music). A fifth and more explorative part looks at current and possible future trends. Written in German, each chapter is followed by an English summary and extensive bibliography.

Treatment of the significance of the onset of the independence era is rather uneven, depending, amongst other things, on the field of human activity through which the several authors were asked to pursue this meta question. For example, a chapter on media is squarely focused on issues that arose after 1990, cramming historical developments of the three preceding decades (and the entire colonial period) into a mere three pages. Is there not more to be said about media and the press during the era of one-party rule?