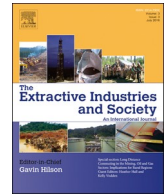




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Viewpoint

Invisibility and the extractive-pandemic nexus

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ABSTRACT

The Covid-19 pandemic is reshaping the world economy. Headline news stories depict mining companies as a stabilising force: supporting the flow of resources to keep the economy moving, and contributing to local welfare initiatives for communities in crisis. We argue that this narrative masks important details about the local conditions where mining companies operate. The issues at the company-community interface are typically invisible to distant audiences. While travel restrictions are necessary to limit community-spread, these constraints push interfaces further into the unknown. The effects of the global pandemic will be far reaching. Scholarship is needed to understand the dynamics of mining in the time of Covid-19 and to place present impacts, actions, and decisions in their proper historical context.

1. Introduction

The global pandemic is reshaping the world economy. Headline news stories depict multinational mining companies as a stabilising force: maintaining business continuity in the face of viral and economic threats, and contributing their share in response to the crisis. We argue that this media narrative masks important details about the local conditions where mining companies operate. The issues and interactions at the company-community interface are typically invisible to distant audiences. While travel restrictions and ‘lock downs’ are necessary to help prevent the spread of the virus, these constraints push these interfaces further into the unknown. The effects of the pandemic will be far reaching, and the uncertainty formed by the pandemic is itself grounds for research. Scholarship is needed to understand the dynamics of mining in the time of Covid-19 and to place present impacts, actions, and decisions in their proper historical context.

2. Zones of invisibility

External visibility over local-level issues in mining arenas is limited by the remote nature of extraction. Even under ‘normal’ conditions, the social relations of mining are barely visible to interested stakeholders. The triple challenge of distance, visibility and complexity mean that gaining access can be incredibly difficult for the most diligent and experienced of researchers. We have previously characterised these dynamic environments as ‘zones of entanglement’ (Bainton and Owen, 2019), where identifying root causes or discerning issues and effects requires a special kind of interest with a special type of access,

supported by a robust ethical framework (Golub, 2019).

The impacts of extraction can be severe. With the expansion of digital communication networks, social media has made some of the more drastic harms visible to the public. The recent tailings dam failures in Brazil, for instance, exposed catastrophic impacts in powerful and unprecedented ways, just as the latest destruction of Indigenous heritage in Western Australia reveals ongoing forms of dispossession. Once media interest in these events wanes, however, it becomes difficult to gain access to information about local conditions. The mundane, daily routine of living in the aftermath of a catastrophic event, or with the chronic impacts of operations, rarely rates as news worthy. In this environment, scholars play a critical role in capturing the local conditions of both fast and ‘slow moving crises’ (Kirsch, 2014) and forms of ‘slow violence’ (Gamu and Dauvergne, 2018). Although these conditions of relative invisibility have long been a normal state of affairs, the latest global pandemic intensifies this situation. It adds another layer of complexity and opacity to these convoluted and contested spaces – or what we call ‘zones of invisibility’.

3. Self-ascribed virtue

In response to the pandemic, the private sector has announced aid and recovery activities worth billions of dollars. With their ‘good deeds’ on display, many major mining companies are actively cultivating an image of responsible corporate citizens fundamentally, it seems, to legitimise continued operations. Public knowledge about the industry response is currently a product of their corporate statements to the press. From our present vantage point, we are unable to confirm these

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acts of ‘corporate humanitarianism’. We are in touch with both companies and communities, but remain restricted in terms of testing the veracity of these very recent corporate statements. We are sceptical when we read about companies that, pre-pandemic, were accused of human rights abuses, and that are now projecting a sanitised image. In many of these locations, mine-affected communities have expressed a profound sense of crisis over their experience of large-scale mining. Yet, companies have now embroiled themselves in a parallel crisis, credentialing themselves as ‘essential’, ‘humanitarian’, ‘generous’, and ‘clean’. Simply put, the pandemic is providing a platform for unchecked corporate self-ascriptions of virtue.

Legacy management and social impact mitigation are contested endeavours at most large-scale mines. At sites where mine-affected communities have become the sudden beneficiaries of corporate humanitarianism, there is a risk that underlying legacies may be deprioritised. Covid-19 raises critical questions about the scope and nature of corporate responsibilities: how is it that companies can find money to respond to a viral pandemic, but were unable or unwilling, to resource initiatives to address impacts induced by their own operations, or to invest in preventative measures? At one level, these recent actions are consistent with pre-pandemic times – where companies externalise social risk and approach mitigation as a discretionary activity.

Several questions surface from the state of invisibility shrouding the sector’s activities at this time. How should we understand this corporate generosity? Where are these funds coming from? Are companies deploying resources that would have otherwise been used to manage social impacts and remediate legacy issues, or redirecting corporate-community development funds? Given that these are not large sums of money relative to operational costs, observers might well ask whether certain companies are simply reallocating their annual public relations budget in a more strategic way, at an opportune moment. Companies are competing to communicate their contributions in what can be understood as tournaments of virtue.

We call for greater public accountability over these expressions of corporate generosity. No doubt many governments and communities genuinely welcome this support, just as industry insiders know that it is harder to criticise a company in the act of doing good. However, this is a privileged, powerful, and disclosure-adverse industry; and this ‘new normal’ puts further distance between the industry and the interested eyes of the public. Given the industry’s track record of harm and obfuscation, these are the worst kind of conditions in which to be promoting or employing public accountability, or verifying safeguards. Regulatory control through public scrutiny – made possible in most countries by freedom of movement – has been suspended.

4. Crisis and contribution

In her 2007 book *The Shock Doctrine*, Naomi Klein (2007) coined the term ‘disaster capitalism’ to describe the ways that corporate entities capitalise on large-scale crises and exploit moments of collective shock. This term is useful as we observe the politics of the pandemic, and ask questions about the ways that mining companies are contributing, while potentially manoeuvring for advantage. For example, will companies continue to negotiate land access agreements while communities are under stress? Is this ethical? Should we consider agreements negotiated under pandemic conditions legitimate? States will likewise find themselves in dire need of investment, to stimulate a battered economy and restore revenues. Should projects permitted at this time be given special consideration? If so, on what basis? How much should states concede, and to what end? Where is the line between crisis response and disparate exchange? The role of the state in commissioning and mediating these developments calls for careful analysis and critique.

While some commentators insist that Covid-19 ravages rich and poor alike, and that this is a ‘democratic disease’, statistics demonstrate that the poor of the world are disproportionately affected by the virus

(The Economist, 2020). Groups that are distant from metropolitan centres may be able to limit the viral flow, and we are certainly witnessing new expressions of sovereignty as Indigenous communities seek to regulate their territorial boundaries to keep the pandemic at bay. If this appears like a positive consequence of historical marginalisation, we should not be blind to the possibility that remote communities will be rendered more invisible, illegible, and vulnerable, as political attention and resources are directed towards densely populated urban centres. We anticipate that such shifts may in future be understood as a perverse and macro-scale expression of ‘social distancing’. Covid-19 has potential to reinforce the asymmetries and dependencies that constitute the social relations of extraction. For remote Indigenous communities that host large-scale mining projects, dependencies can be especially acute. This current moment of crisis – which is likely to have a long temporal tail – will test the claims that mining companies are making about the need to prioritise public wellbeing, of *their* workers and communities.

We can reasonably predict that the current pandemic will introduce further volatility into an already uncertain project lifecycle. A majority of mining projects do not complete their lifecycle. The orderly, comprehensive closure of mining projects is not common industry practice. Instead, mainstream practice is to divest the asset or formally change its status, for example, to a designated state of ‘suspension’ or ‘care and maintenance’ – essentially ‘mothballing’ the operation, and delaying or avoiding the responsibilities of formal closure processes. As the world economy contracts, and as demand softens and supply lines are disrupted, patterns of production become unclear. Is this an opportunity for operators, for whom divestment is not feasible, to abandon assets with little scrutiny under the tailwinds of a global crisis? Or will the trajectory instead be one of rapid project development and expansion, with limited regard for local values and priorities?

5. Issues and implications for research

The constraints created by Covid-19 pose specific challenges for researching extractive-pandemic conjunctures that go beyond the usual difficulty of gaining ethnographic access to corporations and their operations. By way of conclusion, we pose several critical questions: What methodologies are available when we cannot directly observe events up close – when we cannot undertake the sort of engaged human scale, or ethnographic research that is our most powerful asset as social scientists? How will physical absence and technology limit or reconfigure social research in remote locations? How will we observe and interact, and on what basis, as we move forward? How do we maintain relationships with mine-affected communities to understand their experience of mining, of the pandemic, and new forms of entanglement that could emerge? And, are our own connections strong enough to access alternative explanations and narratives of corporate intent and impact?

At the very least, these circumstances call for a rebalancing of methodologies. There are a host of mediated ways of ‘doing fieldwork in a pandemic’ (Lupton, 2020), from digital ethnography to the use of digital mapping and geospatial technologies. Researchers can track events from a distance, through a patchwork approach of gathering information through correspondence, phone calls, social media, blogs, reports, new stories and the like – all of which builds upon more detailed knowledge of places, people, processes and institutions. Although researchers are often wary of ‘writing in the eye of a storm’, with many preferring a certain analytical and temporal distance from subjects and settings, in situations of rapid change and restraint there is a need for ‘remote ethnographers of the present’. Writing of recent events occurring at the Ok Tedi mine in Papua New Guinea and the effect of continued operations during Covid-19, anthropologist Dan Jorgensen (2020) reminds us that attention to the present is particularly important when it captures unusual and ephemeral events that contribute to historical processes. Witnessing events also helps to recognise moments of crisis and unequal

power relations. By attending the present, with a view to the past and the future, we can better comprehend the contingent nature of events and moments of crisis.

This is not the time to pause or retreat from research. Covid-19 will deepen the conditions that give rise to egregious issues and impacts. We must find ways to investigate and understand – to reveal – the convergence of resource extraction and Covid-19, and the effects on the ground. To help make extractive conjunctures and changes a little more visible, we must continue to ask questions, observe events, and verify our results. This is to discover, as the famous scholar [Henry Bernstein \(2010, 22–23\)](#) so neatly put it, ‘who owns what, who does what, who gets what, and what do they do with it?’

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