

Postscript

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The contributors to this book have covered wide ground, with many of them charting new paths and providing new dimensions through which to think about informal mining in the contemporary world. The chapters have literally taken the readers from one corner of the globe to another, from Southeast Asia and mainland Asia, to the heart of Africa and Latin America. They have not only followed the historical trajectory of informal, artisanal and small-scale mining at continental scales, but also at national and local scales. In the process, contributors have examined new dimensions of artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM), the idea of informality and the broader political–economic processes within which it takes place, and dealt with the difficult questions that such mining raises. In the process, the contributors have plotted the future direction of research into the broader thematic topic.

Clearly, three important aspects emerge from the chapters as crucial for scholarly understanding. The first is to link the growth of informal mining with political–economic processes. Hidden within these processes are the causes of the sudden mushrooming of informal mining in locations and contexts that have no history of such activities. Dealing with this question would involve understanding the broader context: rural stagnation; structural adjustment programs that leave the rural poor to fend for themselves; unhelpful states pursuing self-interest that outweighs obligation to their citizens; and the global reach of the market in which international commodity prices touch the lives of the poor living in the most remote areas of the world. Even though contemporary rushes for minerals remind us of those of the past, examining the finer details reveals them as somewhat different, precisely because of these factors that constitute the background within which contemporary extractions are occurring. Again, concealed within these broader political and economic

processes driven by global forces lie particularities that are essentially local in nature; for example, the specific trigger factor(s) that lead to a sudden enhancement of mining activities in an area.

The second aspect is the need to understand mining organisations and the oftentimes complex and exploitative labour processes that define informal, artisanal and small-scale mining. The lone entrepreneurial miner is largely fictional, and modes of mining production exhibit a vast range, from family units operating solo or in groups, to reasonably capital-intensive operations managed by contractors on behalf of owners of land or capital equipment. The contractors act as intermediaries, hiring labour locally and ensuring that they are paid the lowest wages possible. The precarity of labour, rather than legal attributes, is one of the manifestations of the informality of ASM. The cheap labour, lying at the bottom of the production process, makes this kind of mining possible and productive. Of this labour, we now know a large proportion are women, sometimes acting as independent wage earners, but most often acting as part of the family unit of labour, and producing minerals on piece-rate basis for up to 12 hours per day. Whether these meagre incomes add to their empowerment—that elusive goal for feminist development planners—by providing a way out of poverty and exploitation remains a pressing concern. The back-breaking work that women and men perform in such mining leads to innumerable and serious health issues amongst the workers. Again, the question as to how best to deal with them poses a challenge that remains intractable.

The third aspect is the management of mineral resources and communities' rights. 'Governance' of ASM is a challenge in situations of inadequate knowledge, especially since institutions have typically aimed to facilitate the extraction of minerals by companies and corporations. There remain gaps in knowledge, lacunae in laws and poor recognition of more equitable systems of governance in legal frameworks. These appear as primary obstacles in helping those toiling away in the mines. More importantly, there are undeniably close links between informal mineral extraction and political power. In this context, governance needs to be creative and innovative, taking into consideration the 'assemblage' of factors that create the local context.

Several almost intractable difficulties inherent to informal, artisanal and small-scale mining become apparent in a close reading of the chapters. I will note only three that are important for consideration of

the chapters in this book. The first is geographical. Whilst we at once become aware of the *in situ*, place-based, local nature of this kind of mining, we also become acutely aware of how some of these local transformations are integrally linked to global processes and systems. For example, high commodity process in international markets, and the ease of communication through which a local place becomes global, allowing inhabitants to participate in global market processes and supply chains.

The second inherent contradiction is analytical. In a situation in which absolute ownership of mineral resources by the state is accepted, how does one envisage the judicious, equitable and sustainable management of these resources? Is it even possible to relieve ASM of its perceived illegality? Is it possible even to contemplate co-management of resources that have so far been treated as open and lootable commodities? In other words, and to put it simply, is it possible to integrate contemporary notions of justice and equity, and contemporary processes of participation and inclusion of the marginalised, into the management of mineral resources?

The third problematic is linked to the two noted above, and concerns the elephant in the room—the sustainability of environmental integrity. This concern has somehow taken a backseat in discussions of informal, artisanal and small-scale mining in recent years, as researchers have tried to point to its historical roots, livelihood concerns and to the important economic contributions it makes. The major issue has been mercury pollution, with global research tending to focus on the damages caused by mercury use by artisanal gold miners. However, one could include deforestation, deteriorating water quality, changing river regimes, damages to riverbeds and lowering of air quality through dust generation and open-air coking of artisanally mined coal. Indeed, the harm is not limited to the local area. Whilst such mining provides a crucial livelihood for those who are involved in it, the effects are commonly borne by those often living in areas beyond the mining tracts, and by those who do not receive any benefit whatsoever from it. Therefore, questions of environmental justice and equity assume an important dimension. If a political economy lens allows us to draw attention to the extractivism inherent in states' neoliberal policies, then the need for the protection of environmental integrity for future generations encourages us to consider the political and economic questions that rise at the local scale. However, the widespread nature of ASM implies that there is a growing need to move beyond the micro scale

to the macro, and from the present into the future. No extractivism is sustainable, whether practised by states or individuals, irrespective of the pressing, compelling factors that they might be subject to.

The task for future researchers is to broaden the definition of mining, but at the same time link ASM with rural development and labour processes. We now know that stagnating rural economies and oppressive poverty are the primary persuasion pushing many rural folks into mining to 'try their luck', but what we do not know is how many of them—if any—can indeed strike it rich. In other words, how do mining individuals, families and communities handle and perceive money and wealth, and in what ways do they build assets, and of what kind? How do gender relations change once families and communities begin to diversify their livelihoods? This book has provided more questions than answers, and the list could be endless. Indeed, can we ask if it is possible to think of such mining within the framework of a moral economy? We know how large-scale mineral extraction undermines ordinary people's livelihoods and benefits the companies and corporations besides the states. In this context, can one theorise informal mining as an expression of resistance?

These are some questions amongst many for the future generations of scholars to answer. I will end this book with these questions, hoping that they will be debated by upcoming researchers.

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