

Anthropology exposes how miners shape our world and our views of it

October 30 2014, by Sally Babidge

Miners do much more than extract minerals and make profits. All over the world mining corporations are collaborating with governments, local populations and NGOs. Their logos, mottoes and CEOs seem to pervade the news media, including the social sections.

The Australian government recently [repealed the mining tax](#). In September, the Queensland parliament passed the [Mineral and Energy Resources Act](#), which has removed citizens' rights to object to 90% of new mines. This is part of the mistaken move by late capitalism: allow mining companies to regulate themselves and at the same time play a powerful role at all levels of society.

Mining has become an industrial actor central to many of the most compelling socio-ecological debates of our time. These include the place of [corporations](#) in politics, [environmental management](#) and climate science, the ethics of resource use, and the global unevenness of development and social change.

A flurry of new books from social anthropologists examines mining corporations, mining impacts and mining conflicts. But what can anthropologists tell us about mining that we didn't already know?

In part, anthropologists help to reveal how the "corporate effect" is produced: how an entity comes to be singularly powerful despite internal inconsistencies. This fracturing of power through description of its social process is admittedly sometimes slow to appear in print. But perhaps the

most useful aspect of anthropological analysis to the broader public in the past 50 years, and particularly in the past ten, is the work examining corporations.

Mining corporations have a vast reach

Recent ethnographies, one by [Marina Welker](#) and the other by [Stuart Kirsch](#), are different takes on how we might understand how mining corporations make our world and the problems with leaving them to it.

Social anthropologists are perhaps most known for their work among Indigenous Peoples in relation to mining conflicts. Many also work inside mining companies as staff in [corporate social responsibility](#) (CSR) sections, in mining NGOs and as independent academic researchers ["studying up"](#).

Welker spent more than two years of observation inside the mining giant [Newmont](#) in its Denver offices and at a mine site in post-authoritarian Indonesia. She then [wrote about](#) how the corporation is much more than an entity enacting the desire for [profit](#) and driven by [CEO psychopaths](#).

Welker is interested in showing how the corporation makes its boundaries, activates interests and creates its responsibilities. She internally differentiates the apparent Leviathan, showing how "moral self-narratives" help employees make sense of its impact.

For example, the gold mine dumps 58 million tonnes of tailings per year into the ocean. Meanwhile, during an annual company-led beach clean-up, mine workers talk about villagers' environmentally problematic rubbish disposal and "overfishing" of onshore reefs. In this way, they justify company-led local development projects to lift people from their ecological harm-causing poverty.

This is not a simple smokescreen. Tales told internally about "doing good" allow the company to define itself as responsible through scientific and moral justification.

Kirsch's long-term field research with peoples affected by mines in Papua New Guinea synonymous with disastrous environmental impact – [Ok Tedi](#) and [Porgera](#) – is a more traditional-style anthropological study. His [ethnography](#) gives credence to his criticism of these reputational campaigns.

The socially and environmentally "sustainable" mining industry is familiar to many of us and is publicly demonstrated through corporate audit. Using the word "sustainable" to describe an industry that is finite by definition is a [corporate oxymoron](#). The effect is to co-opt the language of mining critics and render it meaningless.

An analysis of audit practices shows these to be more about measurement of self-defined performance indicators than effective regulation of an always potentially damaging industry. Audit, Kirsch writes, is a formalised loop "by which the system observes itself".

The loop is also evident through Welker's insider access. Her research exposes the regulatory ineffectiveness of having the industry set its own gauges and engage consultants to do the accounting.

Mine managers resignedly submit to or sidestep expert consultant auditors. Their attitude of "utopian modernist" ideals for a "perfectly functioning system" sits uneasily alongside the messy reality of a gold mine.

Miners invest heavily in image-making

Corporate social responsibility programs have improved the behaviour

of actors in the mining industry at least partly as a response to criticism from NGOs and citizen groups. A member of [Barrick's](#) CSR advisory board [told us](#) that:

... we live in a world where reputation matters and that's more transparent than ever before.

The industry is continually evolving its CSR practices in response to criticisms but also in collaboration with environmental, human rights or social justice NGOs. Some of the larger organisations have teamed up. They include Oxfam with BHP Billiton to run a program on [participatory development](#), Rio Tinto [with](#) the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, and collaborations such as the [Devonshire Initiative](#) in Canada.

Such social development programs have effectively "turned combatants into collaborators", to quote [Dinah Rajak](#). Kirsch sees the division among citizen groups as part of a strategy by which mining corporations gain control of local situations to the detriment of environmental and social conditions. Or, as Welker would have it, it is an effect of their moral campaign to move local communities toward a capitalist future.

Ethnographies provide a detailed empirical basis for an argument about [mining's](#) role in the reproduction of social and environmental inequality and about the problems of acting as their own regulators and undertaking community development activities.

Anthropologists ask: how have things come to be like this? These studies take our knowledge beyond the resigned sneer of cynicism that the only thing CSR enacts is a smokescreen. They seek to explain the veneer.

In this way, we can move beyond simple criticism to show how global corporate giants are made and remade in social, moral and political

forms.

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