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The future of artisanal miners from a large-scale perspective: From valued pathfinders to disposable illegals?

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ABSTRACT

The article contributes in an innovative way to debates on futures and development. It departs from the fact that mining is always linked to a future oriented discourse. It shows how jargon used by professionals in the mining sector, and in particular notions of risk, serve to portray and predict outcomes of particular mining projects. The article is concerned with exploration companies ("juniors") that try to attract investors for their projects in West Africa and in particular Burkina Faso. It shows how mining companies capitalize on their scale of operation and impact to demonstrate their contribution to the development of poor countries. Scale is a major criterion in the legal arrangements for gold mining in Burkina Faso, a country where small-scale mining is often tolerated and can be legal, but where large-scale mining seems to have the future. This discourse is analysed in terms of the politics of scale.

1. Introduction

Discussions about mining in Africa are ways of talking about futures. International financial institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund have promoted mining as a promising path for national revenues and development [26], while more sceptical views paint a pessimistic future, based on the notion of the "resource curse" [6,30,34]. Positive or negative, most assessments focus on large-scale mining, indicating that scale is an important factor in such judgments. Precious metals can be, and have been, mined at different scales, but the neoliberal trend of attracting foreign direct investment means that large-scale mining has gained dominance over small-scale, artisanal mining. This is most apparent in regions where large-scale mining is a relative latecomer, for example in countries with gold such as Mali and Burkina Faso. In these countries artisanal gold mining has a longer history, and recent operations of international exploration companies are often taking place in the vicinity of traditional artisanal mining sites. Legal arrangements introduced under the aegis of international financial institutions privilege large-scale mining, and current mining codes express the idea that only large-scale mining can be expected to contribute to the future of these countries. Indeed, with the recent scale-up of mining in Burkina Faso, gold has overtaken cotton and is now the major export product [22]. Some see this as providing Burkina Faso with needed tax revenues, while others argue that these developments do not outweigh the negative effects on local situations or the draining of resources by foreign mining companies. Whatever the actual future outcomes of this situation, present-day discussions do indeed assume that the future for mining in countries such as Burkina Faso should entail scaling up. Scale does not simply refer to a difference in size or capacity; it is also connected to what is legal and what is not, and to what is seen as contributing to the development of a country and what is not. In time, such scaling up may turn artisanal miners into disposable 'illegals'.

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This article unravels the ways in which mining companies use notions of the future to reinforce their positions of power. Mining idiom points to the importance of temporal aspects of mining practices. Mining is organized in stages: from 'exploration' to 'development', suggesting a chronology of activities, and terms like 'prospectivity' and 'project' point towards future expectations. Tania Li's [25, p. 124] semantic analysis illuminates how the term 'project' evokes the making of futures: "The term project twists together two threads of meaning: (1) the verb to project – to imagine or fantasize a part, as a slide show projects images on a blank screen; (2) the noun, a project, a purposive activity intended to bring about definite results."

Jargon that is highly specific to mining also encapsulates temporal processes and ideas about future outcomes. Mining is concerned with assessing the value of parts of the earth, valorisations that depend upon trends in the market and socio-legal circumstances. This comes to the fore in the distinction between 'resources' and 'reserves'. A mineral deposit is a 'reserve' when it is legally, economically, and technically feasible to extract value in the present. A 'resource', on the other hand, is considered potentially valuable if it has a reasonable prospect for economic extraction sometime in the future. This shows that assessments of the value of a chunk of earth – in the present or in the future – depend upon the legal and social circumstances of the environment where the deposit is situated. Mining companies share this usage of jargon for framing chunks of earth entangled in social circumstances, portraying nature as embedded in a specific social frame of possibilities and circumstances. Mining companies frame resources as 'socionatures' [14,38] in which certain social aspects are incorporated and others disregarded. The selection of aspects is highly political. What is included and what is left out is shaped by how the social environment of resource extraction is envisaged and how the future of a particular project is portrayed.

'Risk' is the key concept used by companies in assessing circumstances and future prospects. Investing capital is commonly understood as taking a certain risk with the aim of profit. Risk connotes a future orientation: it requires an assessment of the likelihood of yields or losses in the future in relation to a particular financial sacrifice made in the present. Risk assessments select certain criteria for inclusion, and these are taken into account at the expense of others, the 'externalities'. Risk is par excellence a concept with which to frame, and hence to keep certain aspects out of the picture. As such, representations of risk are related to issues of power [1].

The article is concerned with exploration companies ('juniors') that try to attract investors for their projects in West Africa and in particular Burkina Faso. I analyse how Canadian juniors represent their promising patches in Africa to an audience of potential investors. Investors will only be attracted if they can be convinced that the future prospects are bright. I will show how two notions of risk – country risk and geological risk – allow companies to juggle different ways of portraying their concessions. As we will see, the two notions frame concessions at different scales, and allow companies to zoom in on and out from social circumstances. One social circumstance deserves particular attention: the presence of artisanal miners on concessions. How do artisanal miners feature in the way exploration companies try to paint bright futures? The analysis will show how the assessments of futures to come can be analysed in terms of a 'politics of scale' [38]. It will demonstrate how scales of mining operations are hierarchized, and how scalar perspectives inherent in notions of risk are functional in making these hierarchies. In order to do this I first explain how the legal system in Burkina Faso differentiates between forms of mining in terms of scale. I then describe the growing interest for West Africa's gold mining potential particularly among Canadian companies. By paying attention to the differences between the major companies that produce mines and the junior exploration companies, the issue of scale remains centre stage. With this variety of large-scale mining companies in mind, the article analyses the ways in which companies juggle notions of risk in the public relations of their mining endeavours in West Africa, and, in particular, how companies take into account the presence of artisanal mining on their concessions.

2. Mining codes and the politics of scale in Burkina Faso

The field of resource extraction is marked by the politics of scale [15,38]. The international arena of mining distinguishes between 'global' and 'local' players, which are regulated by authorities positioned at the national scale. Moreover, the legal criteria for access discriminate in terms of the scale of technological capabilities. Not only are players defined in terms of scale of operations (large-scale and small-scale), but mining codes may confine miners to 'their' levels of technology.

Changes in mining codes, as these were stimulated under the influence of neoliberal ideologies, epitomize the politics of scale. In *Seeing Like an Oil Company*, Ferguson [12] suggests that in the age of neoliberalism, the territorial sovereignty of nation states is overruled and reworked by the dominance of private companies. His examples show how the movement of capital produces territorial grids in Africa. In his critique of Scott's [37] overemphasis on the state, Ferguson seems to stress that capital rolls back the state and replaces it as territorial grid maker. However, many other cases show that the nation state is still powerful in organizing sites for resource extraction. While neoliberalism is characterized by the rescaling of governance (through the increased influence of international financial institutions as well as domestic decentralization), Mansfield [28, p. 468] argues that 'the national scale should neither be ignored as superseded through glocalization nor taken for granted as ontologically given category'. In general, the nation state maintains an interest in territorial control, including the internal territorialisation processes that allow the state to determine who has what kinds of rights to resources [43]. This is a good starting point for understanding how international junior companies are currently engaged in exploration in West Africa.

In the 1990s the World Bank and the IMF started to promote gold mining in poor countries as a way for them to get out of the debt trap. Foreign investment in the mining sector came to be seen as a motor for development. National mining codes