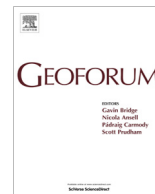




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# The sacred mountain: Confronting global capital at Niyamgiri

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## ABSTRACT

Translocal mobilizations on issues of social and environmental justice have arisen across the world, often in response to the depredations of extractive industries linked to global capital networks. A key challenge in theorizing such mobilization is to understand how dispersed and diverse actors come together contingently around common campaigns of justice, and enable powerless and marginal actors to contend with powerful state and corporate actors. In my paper, I draw on DeLanda's work on assemblages to engage with this question in the context of the case of Niyamgiri in India. The proposal to mine Niyamgiri, a mountain located in South Odisha in India, gave rise to a transnational mobilization which included local grassroots movements, activists, lawyers, conservation organizations and human rights/indigenous rights networks from around the world. I describe the mobilization as a translocal assemblage of resistance, individuated out of interactions between diverse actors across locations and scales. I discuss how this assemblage emerged through interactions between pre-existing actors, networks and institutions, and enabled marginalized and powerless communities to contend with powerful assemblages of state and capital. I argue that thinking in terms of assemblages can provide a strategic depth to social and environmental justice movements, which totalizing discourses of capital, power and revolution often foreclose.

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## 1. Introduction

Global flows of capital, information, material and cultures are accompanied with increasingly dispersed, cross-boundary and networked mobilizations on issues related to social and environmental justice (Holifield et al., 2009; Keck and Sikkink, 1998). Many scholars and practitioners have started labeling these mobilizations as “global environmental justice movements” (Bickerstaff and Agyeman, 2009; Carruthers, 2008; Faber, 2005). A theoretical challenge in such global environmental justice movements is to understand how dispersed and diverse actors come together contingently around common campaigns of justice, and enable powerless and marginal actors to contend with powerful state and corporate actors. My involvement in a translocal environmental justice movement to save Niyamgiri, a mountain in South Odisha, India, from mining operations, brought home to me the difficulties in theorizing the complex configurations of agency, structures, scale and contingency inherent in these mobilizations.

The Niyamgiri struggle drew in heterogeneous actors and participants, with diverse interests and capacities, from around the world. The mountain is held sacred by the local people, especially by the Dongaria Kondhs,<sup>1</sup> for whom it is the abode of the deity

Niyam Raja, “the giver of law”. It also contains a rich deposit of high-quality bauxite, proposed to be mined to supply feedstock to a multinational-owned alumina refinery located at the foot of the mountain. The mining and the refinery have been opposed by a large number of local people on livelihood, environmental, religious and cultural grounds. In 2004, when I first climbed Niyamgiri, and observed the scars of construction of the alumina refinery in the plains below, the possibility that a weak and fragmented local opposition to mining could succeed seemed farfetched. Yet, within a few years, Niyamgiri has become well-known in India and abroad, and efforts to mine the mountaintop remain stalled.

The translocal mobilization to save Niyamgiri emerged from the contingent actions of many diverse actors located in different places. The ideologies and beliefs of many of these actors were divergent, and often conflicting. Seemingly inconsequential intersections between people, places and non-human actors had major consequences, while other seemingly significant encounters led to dead ends. Subjectivities of various actors, individual and institutional, shifted with (or through) their involvement in the movement. Humans as well as non-human artifacts like photographs and videos traveled long distances, physically and virtually, creating ripples of effect and emotions in far-flung places. Tropes of indigeneity, human rights, conservation, and social justice intersected with each other in varied contexts. Yet, these contingencies and mobilities occurred within stabilized landscapes, institutional arrangements, discourses and power relationships. Histories, context and place *mattered*, and

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<sup>1</sup> Dongaria Kondhs are a very small, ethnically-distinct tribe, (around 8000 in number), who reside only in the Niyamgiri Hills. They are notified as a Primitive Tribal Group (PTG) by the Government of India.

intentional agency of individuals and institutions came into play.

Network approaches remain the predominant framework for examining social movements (Della Porta and Diani, 1999; McFarlane, 2009). However, as Haynes (2012) pointed out, these network approaches, though powerful for empirical descriptions, fall short on explanatory power. The interplay of scale, contingency, structure, and agency in the Niyamgiri movement pushed me to consider alternative theoretical frames of assemblages (Anderson and McFarlane, 2011; De Landa, 1997, 2006) that can account for both relational dynamics and stability of entities and structures. The paper mobilizes assemblage theory, as discussed by DeLanda, to consider the Niyamgiri struggle, and to illustrate how additional avenues of inquiry and practice are opened by considering social and material formations as assemblages (Anderson and McFarlane, 2011; De Landa, 2006).

I begin the paper with a brief description of DeLanda's assemblage theory and its applicability to social movements. I frame the translocal mobilization to save Niyamgiri as an emergent assemblage, and map its major constituents; and I then discuss agency, maintenance, and power relationships within the assemblage. I conclude by discussing how social movements can be visualized as open-ended, dynamic rhizomatic entities, which can inter-penetrate and affect assemblages of state and capital. This perspective provides a strategic depth to social and environmental justice movements not afforded by worldviews which see state and capital as reified totalities.

## 2. Assemblage theory

Network paradigms, with their focus on interdependence and relationships, have become the standard theoretical and methodological approaches to conceptualizing social movements (Escobar and Osterweil, 2010), including translocal mobilizations. In spite of their powerful capacity for empirical descriptions of social phenomena, network approaches, with their emphasis on flows and fluidity, have been criticized for diminishing human agency; being deficient in addressing power issues; and ignoring stabilized entities such as place and state, or categories such as class, gender and ethnicity. Many of the issues mentioned above arise from the ontological fuzziness underlying these approaches (Escobar and Osterweil, 2010; Haynes, 2012). Haynes points out that network approaches in general do not make explicit the nature of the nodes or the relations that constitute network theory's basic concepts (Haynes, 2012). The problems of essentialism, reification and atomism are not addressed, and reductionism is often deferred from the macro- to the meso- or micro-scales (Haynes, 2012). In terms of social movements, these ontological confusions can give rise to issues such as reification of place and the local, lack of attention to transformation of subjectivities, and confusion about scale, etc.

In recent years, the concept of assemblages, drawing from the work of Deleuze (Anderson and McFarlane, 2011; Bennett, 2005, 2010), is being increasingly employed within the social sciences. Theories of assemblages have the potential to address some of the shortcomings of network theories, especially in relation to the ontological status of connected elements or nodes (Haynes, 2012), and to provide an alternative analytical lens to examine social movements and contentious politics (McFarlane, 2009; Srnicek, 2007). I specifically mobilize the realist theory of assemblage developed by DeLanda, whose realist ontology of assemblages (De Landa, 1997, 2005, 2006, 2011) draws on Deleuze's philosophy to develop a realist ontology of assemblages (De Landa, 1997, 2005, 2006, 2011). DeLanda explicitly links Deleuze's work with complexity theory, and incorporates insights from non-linear

dynamical systems and population dynamics (De Landa, 2005), as well as providing a substantive common theoretical ground for natural sciences and social sciences. DeLanda's realist ontology does away with reifying categories or essences, and describes reality in terms of historically-constituted assemblages. He proposes a flat ontology, made up of unique, singular individuals, different in spatio-temporal scales but not in ontological status (De Landa, 2005). These unique, singular individuals are assemblages, defined as wholes that emerge out of interactions between heterogeneous elements. The constituent elements of any assemblage are themselves assemblages.

Assemblages are individuated through relationships of exteriority between constituent elements (De Landa, 2006). These relationships of exteriority are "contingently obligatory": the component elements that form an assemblage are affected by, but are not fully determined by, these relations. This implies that components (themselves assemblages) may be detached from one assemblage and plugged into another assemblage, where they may exercise very different capacities.

Since assemblages are individuated through interactions of diverse constituent elements, the properties of these elements cannot, in general, account for the emergent properties of the individuated assemblage (De Landa, 2005, 2006). At the same time, the emergent properties of the individuated assemblage may constrain, shape, or influence the constituent elements through various mechanisms. Assemblages have emergent properties that allow them to exercise *capacities* in interactions with other assemblages. The capacities of an assemblage offer an open-ended set of potentialities that cannot be deduced from its properties, since "these capacities do depend on a component's properties but cannot be reduced to them, since they involve reference to the properties of other interacting elements" (De Landa, 2005, 2006). For DeLanda, reality is composed of an infinite regress of assemblages on diverse spatio-temporal scales. Thus an atom, a word, a human, a nation, a discourse, a galaxy—all can be conceptualized as assemblages that have emerged out of historical processes of interaction between their own constituent assemblages.

Constituent elements within assemblages play both expressive and material roles (De Landa, 2006). Internal processes or external interactions can stabilize the assemblage (territorialization) or destabilize it (deterritorialization) (De Landa, 2006, p. 13). All assemblages, even the most stable ones, are dynamic entities, undergoing processes of territorialization and deterritorialization, on varied timescales. Analysis in assemblage theory is not conceptual, but causal, concerned with the discovery of actual mechanisms operating at a given scale (De Landa, 2006, p. 31).

The assemblage approach revisits many of the basic assumptions of the social sciences by avoiding reifications of entities and processes; and it provides explanation for social entities as assemblages emerging through historical processes (Escobar and Osterweil, 2010). It implies attention to the objective and historical processes of assembly through which a wide range of entities, from persons to nation-states, come into being (De Landa, 2006). Assemblages can have diverse temporal and spatial scales. An assemblage (e.g. a mountain) may seem static and unchanging on one temporal scale (human lifespan) but become dynamic on another timescale (erosion over millions of years as a result of interaction with water and wind). A social encounter can be seen as an assemblage, lasting for a few moments. Organizations or nation states are also assemblages, which may exist for decades or centuries. All have ontological status, with material and expressive elements, and are constituted by elements which are themselves assemblages (De Landa, 2006). Another useful insight is that a particular entity (an assemblage) may be a constitutive element in multiple assemblages, which may have widely-varying spatial or temporal extent, and exercise different capacities in each assemblage depending on

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