



Islands, extraction and violence: Mining and the politics of scale in Island Melanesia



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ABSTRACT

Set against the backdrop of past, contemporary and possible future mining-related violence on islands in the western Pacific, this article explores how scholarship on the politics of scale, as well as strands of the burgeoning island studies literature, might sharpen our understanding of the political economic and violent effects of extractive resource enclaves in Island Melanesia. Drawing upon field research in Bougainville and Solomon Islands, I argue that just as Melanesian islands were produced as a scale of struggle in the context of the introduction of capitalist social relations under colonialism, so too have they emerged as a critical, albeit problematic, scale of struggle in contemporary contestations around extractive resource capitalism under the current round of globalisation and accumulation by dispossession. I suggest that this politics of scale lens enriches our understanding of how “islandness” can be an important variable in social and political economic processes. When the politics of scale is imbricated with the well-established idea of the island as the paradigmatic setting for territorialising projects, including the nation-state and sub-national jurisdictions, islandness emerges as a *potentially* powerful variable in the political economic struggles that attend extractive resource enclaves. I also highlight, in the cases considered here, how islands can become containers for internal socio-spatial contradictions that can be animated by extractive enclaves and can contribute to the island scale becoming violent and “ungovernable”. The article advances recent efforts to bring the island studies literature into closer conversation with political and economic geography.

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1. Introduction

The sustained and growing dominance of extractive resource industries in the economies of Papua New Guinea (PNG) and neighbouring Solomon Islands, in concert with the highly contentious politics that they engender, places them at the centre of efforts to understand state formation, political reordering and the ongoing negotiation of political settlements of various types throughout post-colonial Melanesia. Nowhere is this more apparent than on Bougainville, an autonomous region of PNG, where the future of large-scale mining is imbricated in critical ways with the island’s political fortunes, including its quest for a viable form of self-determination in its relationship with PNG.

Much of the extant social science research on extractive industries in Melanesia has taken the form of detailed ethnographic analyses of individual projects and the dialectics of their articulations with “host communities” (e.g. Bainton, 2010; Ballard & Banks,

2003; Filer & Macintyre, 2006; Golub, 2014; Kirsch, 2014). The research reported here builds upon this work, but adopts a political ecology approach, by which I mean an analytical focus on “the conflicts and struggles engendered by the forms of access to and control over resources” (Peluso & Watts, 2001, p. 25). Moreover, in contrast to the dominant political economy perspectives on the “resource curse” and “resource conflict” (see, for example, Collier, 2000; Collier and Hoffer, 2004; Ross, 2004), my political ecology approach adopts an explicitly spatial sensibility. I am interested in how attention to socio-spatial relations, in particular the politics of scale, might shift our view on the Melanesian version of the resource curse in potentially productive ways¹.

¹ Several researchers have explored socio-spatial dimensions of extractive resource industries in different Melanesian settings (Allen, 2013b; Bainton, 2010; Ballard & Banks, 2003; Banks, 2008; Horowitz, 2009). Banks (2008) explicitly applies a political ecology framework to an analysis of “resource” conflicts in PNG. He examines three different “scales of conflict”: “regional”, “inter-group” and “intra-group” (2008:27). My project builds upon Banks’ framework by deepening its spatial orientation, especially towards the politics of scale.

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The focus is upon a particular dimension of the Melanesian resource curse: the strong association between extractive resource industries and violence of different types and scales, an association that is by no means peculiar to Melanesia (e.g. Korf, 2011; Le Billon, 2001; Ross, 2004). One need only take a cursory glance at recent events at mining projects such as Porgera and Ramu Nickel in PNG and Goro in New Caledonia to be reminded of mining's violent history in Melanesia. Melanesia's extractive economies have been, and continue to be, extremely violent ones. And this has been especially true on Bougainville and on Guadalcanal in Solomon Islands, islands that have hosted the region's most serious armed conflicts since the Second World War, with large-scale mining deeply implicated in both cases, albeit to very different extents.

This brings "islandness" into my analysis as a potentially important variable. Recent decades have witnessed a florescence in thinking about islands as evidenced by the emergence of island studies as a discrete field of inquiry (Baldacchino, 2004) and a growing recognition amongst geographers that islands "offer rich spaces to study political geography" (Mountz, 2013, p. 835). Mountz (2014) distils from the multi-disciplinary island studies literature some of the critical dialectics of islands that render them valuable sites of inquiry for political geography. Foremost amongst these is the tension between exceptionalism and universality that is salient in islands; the on-going debate within island studies about the uniqueness of islands (also see Baldacchino, 2004, 2005).

Returning to the cases of Bougainville and Guadalcanal, important questions emerge from this tension between exceptionalism and universality. Would these mining-related conflicts have played out differently, if at all, if these were "mainland" as opposed to island settings? Does islandness matter for our understanding of contemporary contestations around large-scale mining projects, including proposed projects, in Bougainville and in Solomon Islands? I will argue that in all of the cases considered here – Bougainville, Guadalcanal and three other islands in Solomon Islands – islandness does matter. It matters not only because the territorial qualities of islands renders them paradigmatic settings for territorialising projects, as the island studies literature has shown us, but also because islands can be produced as a scale of struggle in the contentious, and frequently violent, politics of scale that attends the extractive industries in the current round of globalisation and accumulation by dispossession. This points to a coproduction of territory and scale that is uniquely, *though by no mean inevitably*, possible in islands, making them *potentially* exceptionally potent spaces for ideologies and strategies that deploy islands in political economic struggles. I will also suggest that islandness matters, at least in the two main case studies presented here, because of the potential for islands – due to their boundedness and ecological geographies – to become containers for internal socio-economic tensions and contradictions that can be exacerbated by extractive enclaves and can contribute to the island scale becoming "ungovernable".

In making these arguments, I draw upon my previous field research on resource conflict in Solomon Islands and more recent fieldwork in Bougainville and Solomon Islands. The article is broadly structured into three parts. In the first I describe the study's methodology and provide brief accounts of the armed conflicts in Bougainville and Solomon Islands, focusing on the role that large-scale mining played in each case. The second part sets out the study's theoretical orientation by introducing and defining the terms politics of scale and territoriality, and sketching out the territorial dimensions of "islandness" as developed in the island studies literature. I also examine the ways in which Melanesia's large islands were produced by the introduction of capitalist social relations under colonialism, with a particular focus on the emergence of islands as a scale of political struggle and their

territorialisation into sub-national colonial and post-colonial jurisdictions. The third part of the article commences with a discussion of how the more recent encounter with extractive resource capitalism has also seen the production of the island as a scale of violent struggle. This is immediately followed by an examination of how the island scale is problematized by a raft of internal tensions that have been exacerbated by the advent of extractive industries. I conclude by discussing an important counterfactual – large-scale mining on "mainland" PNG – that clarifies my arguments, before drawing out what I suggest to be important implications of the study for the emerging intersection between island studies and political geography.

2. Methodology

The research reported here draws upon seven months fieldwork (carried out between mid-2014 and early-2016) in the Autonomous Region of Bougainville and in four island-provinces in Solomon Islands: Guadalcanal, Choiseul, Isabel and Renbel (with fieldwork conducted on the island of Rennell). The research design originally focused only on Bougainville and Guadalcanal. However, with the closure of the Gold Ridge mine on Guadalcanal in April 2014 and the contemporaneous intensification of mining and prospecting activities on other islands, notably Isabel, Choiseul and Rennell, I decided to extend my field research to those islands as well. That said, Bougainville and Guadalcanal remain the two core case studies, where most of my field research was conducted. In the case of Guadalcanal, I also draw upon my earlier research on resource conflict, based on nine months fieldwork conducted in 2005–2006 (Allen, 2012, 2013a).

At the conceptual level, the research design is informed by the political ecology of extractive resource industries and violence and, in particular, Michael Watts' work on oil and violence in Nigeria. In an earlier article, I drew upon Watts' (2004) "governable spaces" framework and Colin Filer's (1997) work on the "ideology of customary landownership" in Melanesia to argue that, as has been the case in Nigeria, the advent of large-scale extractive resource industries in post-colonial Melanesia has produced contentious politics that are fundamentally spatialised and frequently violent (Allen, 2013b). Central to this framework – and to political ecology more broadly – is a concern with the politics of scale, which I elucidate in a later section. Drawing upon my earlier article, the working hypothesis animating my research design is that the contentious and often violent politics engendered by extractive industries in post-colonial Melanesia are produced within and between three "governable spaces" – defined as particular configurations of resources, territory, power and identity that are hierarchically-scaled: customary landownership, indigeneity and nationalism.

My initial research objective was to explore this hypothesis by applying it to the cases of Bougainville and Guadalcanal where large-scale mining projects had not only contributed to previous episodes of wide-spread organised violence but where, in both cases, various mining agendas continue to be a critical animator of contentious politics within and between different scales. However, it became increasingly difficult to ignore the fact that these two case studies are islands. While the original research design did not contain any explicit hypotheses in relation to "islandness", I began to suspect that it mattered somehow, or at least that it could potentially matter, in the scalar and potentially violent politics of resource access and control. I wondered, for example, whether the Bougainville conflict would ever have occurred (or occurred to the extent that it did) if Bougainville were not a sub-national *island* jurisdiction (i.e. province) of PNG but instead a landlocked province within "mainland" PNG. In this manner, I became increasingly

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