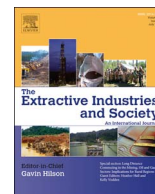


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Original article

“It can lift someone from poverty”: Imagined futures in the Sierra-Leonean diamond market

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to draw attention to the role of the future in artisanal mining. It argues that in order to understand the dynamics of artisanal mining, research must understand miners' imaginaries of a better future which inform their economic strategies in the present. Drawing on Jens Beckert's (2016) concepts of fictional expectations and imagined futures, the article investigates projections of the future and strategies of future-making in the Sierra Leonean diamond market. If these expectations remain poorly understood, development policies will not be able to address the needs of mining communities.

1. Introduction

Artisanal mining has often been depicted as an unsustainable economic strategy; it is environmentally hazardous and detrimental to the health of miners (Sánchez-Vázquez et al., 2016) who are often trapped in poverty and exploitative social relationships (Hilson, 2006) and operate outside of the legal framework (Hilson et al., 2017). Moreover, mining booms have been associated with conflicts between adjacent communities (Walsh, 2003), conflicts over autochthony (Bolay, 2014), sexual violence and transactional sex (Kelly et al., 2014; Rustad et al., 2016), child labor (Hilson, 2010), and a heightened risk for violent rebellion (Lujala et al., 2005). Advocacy groups and policy consultants in particular have a tendency to depict artisanal mining as a “casino economy”, in which nobody ever strikes it rich (e.g. Partnership Africa Canada and Global Witness, 2004), while scholarly research has developed a more nuanced perspective on artisanal mining as an economic activity that provides a livelihood to millions of people in the Global South (see Hilson and Maconachie, 2017).

Both scholarly and policy-oriented research on the driving forces of artisanal mining tends to portray artisanal mining as a livelihood activity with a short-term time focus. Studies investigating the role of “hot money” and “conspicuous consumption” in the practices of artisanal miners have depicted mining as an activity with a strong orientation towards the present, stressing that income derived from artisanal mining is often spent on the spot and on ephemeral goods (Walsh, 2003; Cuvelier, 2017). Especially young men use mining income as a means to “live for the moment” (Walsh, 2003: 291). In a socio-political context which has assigned young men the role of powerless dependents, fast

spending can be understood as a means of self-actualization through which they free themselves from an oppressive social structure and reclaim their agency (Walsh, 2003). As Werthmann (2009) and Pijpers (2011) point out, conspicuous consumption of mining income seems to be a predominantly male phenomenon, while profits made by women through mining or mining-adjacent activities might be more likely to benefit the household or be invested in more sustainable ways. In contrast to the “hot money” narrative, research investigating the role of mining as part of the livelihood portfolio of marginalized rural and migrant populations stresses that artisanal mining is often a vital subsistence strategy complementing farming-generated income (Hilson, 2006; Maconachie and Binns, 2007; Pijpers, 2014). For many families, mining provides the only source of cash while farming provides food (Bürge and Cartier, 2011). Households plan mining and farming activities according to seasonal cycles, required labor force and anticipated income from mining (Maconachie et al., 2006). In this sense, mining is a strategy of rural livelihood diversification.

This article aims to complement the growing literature on the temporalities of mining, and more specifically to the role of the future in artisanal mining. It argues that mining research needs to pay stronger attention to miners' orientation towards the longer-term future – in particular, the aspiration of creating a better life for oneself and one's family. The future remains a largely neglected theme within the literature on artisanal mining. Where temporality plays a role, it is mostly through reference to a history of undemocratic and unaccountable political institutions, structural adjustment and agricultural crisis which have caused the poverty and marginalization that are at the root of artisanal mining in its present forms (Banchirigah, 2006: 167;

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Verbrugge, 2016: 109).¹ In this case, the present is explained through the past. This article aims to further the debate on artisanal “mining temporalities” by exploring miners’ conceptions of the future as they inform their actions in the present. Conceptually, it draws on Jens Beckert’s (2016) notion of fictional expectations, which Beckert posits as a building block of a sociology of economic action that starts at the micro-level of society. Using the artisanal diamond sector in Sierra Leone as a case study, this article analyses actors’ imaginaries of the future and their strategies to make this future come true.² I argue that understanding artisanal mining as an economic strategy with a short-term orientation, directed mainly toward subsistence, neglects the agency of market actors that employ mining as a strategy for upward social mobility.³ While the analytical focus of this article is on artisanal miners, it places their economic imaginaries and future-making practices within the broader social and historic context of the diamond market in Sierra Leone.

The discussions and arguments in this article offer insights that are relevant to researchers and practitioners of natural resource governance and environmental peacebuilding. Development efforts have long favored large-scale mining projects, assuming that these are easier to control and tax than hundreds of thousands of artisanal miners that are a hallmark of mining landscapes in the Global South (International Labour Organization ILO, 1999; Hilson et al., 2017). This is presently changing as international organizations and donors are increasingly interested in artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) sector reform (ibid., Hilson and Maconachie, 2017). If policy interventions in artisanal mining sectors are to be successful, policy-makers need to take seriously the future orientations of their participants.

2. Imagined futures: fictional expectations and economic action

With its focus on artisanal mining and the role of future imaginaries, this article contributes to a re-emerging social science of the future (e.g. Bell, 1996; Adam, 2010; Schulz, 2015; Miyazaki and Swedberg, 2017). In particular, the article draws on Beckert’s (2016) concept of imagined futures. At the root of this concept lies the observation that the study of capitalism has largely neglected the temporal order of capitalist economies, specifically the temporal orientations of economic actors and their impact on capitalist dynamics. The analysis of capitalism, Beckert argues, requires an understanding of actors’ expectations of the future and their impact on economic decision-making in the present.⁴ Scholars of temporality have posited the ability to imagine a future that differs from the present, as one of the defining characteristics of modernity in general, and of modern capitalism in particular. The shift from traditionalism to capitalism is characterized by an enlargement of actors’ time horizons – from cycles repeating familiar states of the world to an open, and thus shapeable, future (Bourdieu, 1979; Koselleck, 1979).⁵ Economic actors create imaginaries of the future, their own place within this future and causal pathways that will lead to it by means of “fictional expectations”, i.e. “interpretative frames”, based on predictions of future scenarios, which inform their decision-making

(Beckert, 2016: 9). Fictional expectations are not delusions. They are usually based on facts and are accompanied by a narrative, detailing how the envisioned future will come into being (Beckert, 2016: 69). Narratives supporting fictional expectations present themselves as “stories, theories, and discourses” (Beckert, 2011), in which actors anchor their economic decision-making. Fictional expectations have considerable emotional gravity, providing actors with the hope of dream-fulfillment and the satisfaction of working toward their goal. Economic actors act “as-if” their projection of future outcomes was accurate and they act “in-order-to” (Beckert, 2016: 49) make this imagined future come true, thereby creating a feedback loop between imaginaries of the future and their creation. By directing their action towards the realization or avoidance of predicted future states, economic actors shape future outcomes. Fictional expectations thus hold immense creative potential as they enable actors to envision and strive towards a reality that differs from the present, thereby opening up the future for new and uncharted pathways. In contrast to economic theory, the sociological conceptualization of the idea that economic action is oriented toward the future works on the assumption that the future is fundamentally uncertain and hence unforeseeable. Furthermore, economic imaginaries are “socially embedded”, meaning they are influenced, amongst other things, by collectively shared beliefs and narratives, cultural frames, institutions, networks, opportunity structures, and cognitive devices available to economic actors. They can also be shaped, manipulated and managed through “politics of expectations” (Beckert, 2016: 79).

3. Mining imaginaries: future orientations in extractive societies

Corresponding to the recent interest in time and temporality in the social sciences, a number of studies have investigated the relationship between natural resource production and use and expectations of the future. In their edited volume “Timely Assets: The Politics of Resources and their Temporalities” (2008) Ferry and Limbert have explored the relationship between natural resources and senses of time, including imaginations of resource futures that are embodied in feelings of optimism, apprehension or dread. The authors of this seminal work draw attention to the fact that understanding something as a resource already implies an orientation toward the future. The anticipation of potential futures is inherent in the conceptualization of materials, people or knowledge as resources. The process of resource-making entails the construction of a potential use-value as the source of future profits (Ferry, 2008). Through notions of “risk, hope, dread, fate, and life span” (Ferry and Limbert, 2008: 15) the future takes hold in the present. Drawing on Ferguson’s (1999) now classical study of economic decline in the post-boom Zambian Copperbelt, Ferry and Limbert link the production and management of natural resources to understandings of modernity, calling attention to the fact that interpretations of modernity are often tied to nations’ capability to govern their environmental assets. In a similar vein, Weszkalnys (2014) examines the material effects of expected future states that become productive through the anticipatory reactions of individuals and collectives in the present. In her study of São Tomé and Príncipe’s preparation for large-scale oil production, Weszkalnys illustrates how societies actively position themselves toward predicted outcomes, instead of passively awaiting their “fate”. The realization of political measures to avert, mitigate or actualize specific outcomes represents the “temporal politics” of the “not yet”. Like Beckert, Peet and Watts (1996) conceptualize the relation between the present and the future through the notion of imaginaries. Building on Castoriadis’ concept of social imaginaries, the authors introduce the concept of “environmental imaginaries” to describe the “situated knowledge” (Peet and Watts, 1996: 263) through which people relate to and instill with meaning the environment they live in. Environmental imaginaries are expressed through discourses, practices and political forms that take into account the historically grown and place-specific social relations of people to their natural

¹ For a detailed discussion of the literature, including the topics of seasonality and boom and bust cycles, and fluctuations in market prices see Lanzano (this issue).

² The findings presented here are the result of six months field research on the Sierra Leonean diamond market in 2012 and 2013, mainly in the diamond-producing regions of Kono and Zimmi, in the border region to Guinea and in the capital Freetown. Data collection took the form of in-depth, serial and biographical interviews as well as everyday conversations with market actors (legal and illegal miners, dealers and exporters), interviews with state agents, NGO and development agency staff and journalists, and observation in mines, dealers’ and exporters’ offices and illegal market places.

³ For broader debates on structure vs. agency see e.g. Sewell, 1992.

⁴ Similar concepts relating to the future orientation of economic actors have previously been introduced under the label “economy of dreams” (Miyazaki, 2006) and the study of “hope in the economy” (Miyazaki and Swedberg, 2017).

⁵ For a critique of the dichotomy between modern and traditional temporalities, see e.g. Adam, 2003.

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