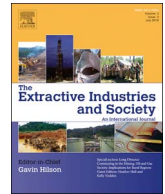




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Necessary illusions: Fetishism and the becoming of subsoil resources

David Kneas

Department of Geography and School of Earth, Ocean, and Environment, University of South Carolina, 709 Bull St., Columbia, SC 29208, USA

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ABSTRACT

The extraction of resources entails processes of transformation and rupture, the creation of new landscapes, communities, mining companies, as well as nations. Such processes involve varying forms of agency. In the promotion of both particular projects and national economies that encompass them, the language and locus of change often falls onto the resource itself. The inscription of agency and inordinate power onto subsoil resources represents a distinct form of resource fetishism. In this paper, I analyze the relationship between mineral boosterism and resource fetishism by examining imagery associated with Ecuador's promotion of mineral exploration and extraction. I call attention to the ways that fetishism infuses the ubiquitous, yet often taken-for-granted imagery of mining promotion. I demonstrate how patterns of fetishism are an inherent part of the subsoil imagination, and relevant for on-going debates about the materiality and becoming of mineral resources.

1. Fetishism and resource materiality

There has been, of late, increasing attention to the materiality of natural resources (Ferry, 2016a; Bakker and Bridge, 2006; Bridge, 2009; Richardson and Weszkalnys, 2014; Bennett, 2010). Thinking about materiality represents, in part, a way to take seriously how the properties and attributes of material things affect everyday life. It seems obvious to say that things in the world, from trees and stones to the buildings we occupy and the chairs we sit on, have significance beyond our representations of those things. Yet, such a move continues to challenge theoretical assumptions about the constituent parts of social life and the underlying influence played by material objects and environments (Barad, 2003). For scholars interested in the cultural and political processes of resource extraction, materiality has opened important intellectual space. It has allowed scholars to critically examine the social worlds that different resources invite and inhibit (Li, 2015), the dynamics of corporate practice and mining labor (Rogers, 2012; Rolston Smith, 2013), and the diverse natures that emerge from and in opposition to mineral extraction (DeLa Cadena, 2010; Kirsch, 2014). Moving beyond conventional accounts in which “humans are in a position of mastery and control over what is portrayed as an essentially passive material world” (Richardson and Weszkalnys, 2014:11), materiality has played a key role in on-going scholarship on the temporalities and becoming of resources (Ferry and Limbert, 2008; De Gregori, 1987).

In the broad array of writing that has testified to the importance of materiality, however, engagement with ideas of fetishism has been limited. The core idea of the fetish involves the granting of attributes to material objects that they do not really have, or do not seem to manifest. Ideas of fetishism center, therefore, precisely on relations of materiality and agency – how material things become “objects of desire, or

value, often one which seems somehow displaced, inordinate, or inappropriate” (Graeber, 2005:410). The modern idea of the fetish emerged in the 16th and 17th centuries, when Portuguese explorers and merchants used the term to make sense of and dismiss West African cultural practices that they nevertheless depended upon in their own, fetish-like, pursuit of gold (Pietz, 1985, 1987, 1988). Building upon its association with mysticism and illusory agency, Karl Marx used ideas of fetishism to critique 19th century modes of commodity consumption. For Marx, the true value of material goods derived from human labor and the social connection between producer and consumer that such labor engendered. But, as Marx saw it, 19th century consumers viewed objects as if all significance and value derived from the object itself. Commodity fetishism, argued Marx, was not only the systematic erasure of human labor, but the formation of social subjects defined by relations with material things instead of with one another (Marx, 1990:163–167).

Spanning different historical conjunctures as both colonial discourse and a way to critique western capitalism, fetishism is most often rendered from an outside perspective in which “an observer recognizes that someone else is attributing false value to objects” (Keane, 1997:677). What distinguishes fetishism as a form of social analysis is a willingness to consider the underlying logics of fetish objects, what fetish objects accomplish within distinct cultural and historical settings. Thus, while the history of the term fetish is one of dismissal, approaching fetishism as an analytical construct or question allows scholars to grapple with the work that fetish objects do and the types of social relations and material processes that come into being when objects are approached “as if” they possess certain powers and properties. Fetishism puts into stark relief claims over truth and causation, and offers a compelling vantage point to think about representations of change in which the source of transformation centers on material things to the exclusion of more contingent social processes.

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A useful guide for this type of analysis is Anne McClintock's (1995) engagement with the fetish objects of 19th century commodity advertisements. Whereas Marx's analysis of commodity fetishism did not address why some objects might be more fetishized than others (Dant, 1996: 496), McClintock examines the logics, contexts, and anxieties that informed some of the most fetishized materials during the Victorian period. Of these objects, soap and soap imagery is the most noteworthy. The value and overvaluation of soap and hygiene, McClintock shows, emerged in a context of anxiety over class and race within shifting patterns of urbanization, women's work, and imperial expansion. The valuation of soap during this period collapsed these contexts, uniting imagery of colonial encounters with scenes of domestic space. The spectacle of dirt was at once a sign of colonial blackness and urban grime. Soap imagery promoted the idea that soap could "preserve, through fetish ritual [of cleaning] the uncertain boundaries of class, gender and race identity," thereby promising "spiritual salvation and regeneration through commodity consumption" (McClintock, 1995:211). Of immediate relevance to discussions of resource materiality is McClintock's point that in these advertisements soap "becomes the agent of history itself. The commodity, abstracted from social context and human labor, does the civilizing work of empire, while radical change is figured as magical, without process or social agency" (McClintock, 1995:222).

In this article, I explore the relevance of fetishism within theorization of resource materialities and recent scholarship on the imagining and becoming of subsoil minerals (Weszkalyns, 2014; Rogers, 2015). I do so by analyzing iconography of the subsoil within the Ecuadorian government's promotion of mineral development and exploration. Focusing on state-sponsored advertisements, from popular education pamphlets to imagery of golden bars in promotional venues, I highlight recurring themes of material agency, purification, and conflated temporalities that are synonymous with fetish objects. In the same way that McClintock interprets soap imagery to underscore prevailing currents of fetishism within Victorian culture, imagery of Ecuador's subsoil shows the extent to which resource fetishism infuses the nation's promotion of mineral development.¹

These dimensions of fetishism are not unique to Ecuador, but are a recurring motif within an ever-expanding genre of mining promotion and boosterism. From the spectacles of resource abundance that saturate the investment portfolios of junior companies on the Toronto Stock Exchange (Kneas, 2016; Tsing, 2000), to claims of control and mastery that pervade the CSR discourses of mining companies (Kirsch, 2010; Rajak, 2011), and the promises of economic and political prosperity proffered by resource producing nations (Coronil, 1997; Apter, 2005), the promotion of mineral development is rife with fetishism. Mining boosterism is one in which the agency of human institutions (governments, mining companies, etc) is displaced onto material resources. Obfuscation (of contingent processes, uncertainties) and illusion (of resource size, environmental control) are common elements within the promotion of mineral development. Precisely because it highlights dynamics of truth, erasure, and agency, fetishism is a concept that merits attention within growing discussions of resource materiality.²

2. Magical minerals

Since the early 1990s, the Ecuadorian government has promised to make the nation a "mining country" of global significance. Ecuador as a "mining country" is consistently seen as a future condition and one that

would extend the entire "length and width" of the country.³ This promotion is less about defined returns on medium and small-scale mining, but rather evokes a scale of resource extraction that transcends the entirety of the nation's geo-body. Mining, in other words, is imagined as a total social fact (Mauss, 1990). Thus, even as a few projects advance in historical mining areas in the southern part of the country, officials continue to describe Ecuador as both uniformly rich and "largely unexplored."⁴ Indicative of the association between mining and a national re-birth, President Rafael Correa, in early 2012, declared that Ecuador would soon "pass into a new era, the era of mining."⁵ *Era* not only suggests a time period during which mineral extraction is important to Ecuador's economy, but a nation state that is defined by that era. Mining, therefore, implies a process of historical rupture, a process that reflects some causal agent. Ecuador's varied promotions of mining, in a rather obvious ways, rely and reinforce spectacles of resource fetishism. These promotional materials inscribe a sense of inherent agency to subsoil resources. Like the specter of cleanliness envisioned in Victorian soap imagery, Ecuador's transformation into a "mining country" seems to be magical, without process, labor, or social agency.

As part of President Correa's mining reforms initiated in 2008, the Ecuadorian government published two small pamphlets to promote these changes. The pamphlets were part of a series called "Patria de Todos" [Fatherland for Everyone] and designed to publicize Correa's broad, nationalist reforms to Ecuadorian laws. Issue number 8 in the series has a cover image with two happy miners holding a sheet with glowing pictures of "copper, gold, and platinum" (Fig. 1). The headline is "Mining in Ecuador: A Source of Hope."⁶ Issue number 15 deals specifically with the new mining law and is subtitled "Prosperity and harmony for the *Patria*," with a cover image that is a recognizable mosaic of Ecuador's physical and human landscape (Fig. 2).⁷ Dynamics of resource fetishism not only define each pamphlet, but relate to one another in noteworthy ways. Issue 8 shows the elements of copper, gold, and platinum in an extracted and purified form. They are on display, both on a table-like surface and in the poster showcased by the happy miners. The resources are held out as a spectacle, materials that are venerated by these miners and as something to behold for viewing subjects. As such, they seem to stand apart from the miners in a way that suggests distinct historical ontologies – the origin and becoming of these minerals is different from the social worlds of the miners. These metals are glowing, revealing internal agency and power. Interior luminescence not only bespeaks ingrained agency, but imagines that power as mythical and beyond the scope of human understanding. As McClintock describes in her analysis of soap, the glow of particular goods is a recurring element in the fetishized portrayal of commodities (McClintock, 1995:222).

The conjured power of these minerals is evident in issue 15, which depicts an Ecuadorian landscape regenerated by the "prosperity and harmony" of mining, yet where mining itself is absent. The image portrays a nation transformed by mining, but shows no visible sign of mineral extraction. There is no open pit mine or any stand-in referent for mining labor or the material process of resource extraction. Instead the pamphlet shows iconic landscapes of national agricultural and natural scenery – precisely the type of landscapes that are often found

¹ This paper is part of a larger research project on the cultural history of mining and mineral exploration in Ecuador from the late 19th century, which draws on long-term ethnographic fieldwork in Ecuador's Intag region (Kneas, 2014, 2016).

² See Huber (2013) for a noteworthy discussion on the fetishization of oil. While building on Huber's interests in the various ways oil is fetishized, my focus here is less on circulating resources and more on the fetishization of an abstract subsoil (with presumed resource wealth), which informs and precedes mineral exploration.

³ This phrase, for example, features prominently in *Minería Ecuatoriana*, a promotional magazine published in the 1990s by Ecuador's mining ministry. See "Nueva Política Minera" *Minería Ecuatoriana* (February 1990), p.7; and "Editorial" *Minería Ecuatoriana* (April 1994), p.1.

⁴ This idea runs throughout Ecuador's promotion of mining. At the 2016 meetings of PDAC (Prospectors and Development Association of Canada), one Ecuadorian official declared that Ecuador was "90% unexplored." For recent scholarship on mining areas in southern Ecuador, see Leifsen (2017) and Moore and Velasquez (2013).

⁵ "Ecuador apuesta su crecimiento a la minería gran escala." *El País* (12 January 2012).

⁶ "La Minería en el Ecuador: Una Fuente de Esperanza," Secretaría de los Pueblos, Movimientos Sociales, y Participación Ciudadana (No. 8).

⁷ "Ley Minera: Prosperidad y armonía para la Patria." Secretaría de los Pueblos, Movimientos Sociales, y Participación Ciudadana (No. 15).

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