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Analysing conflicts around small-scale gold mining in the Amazon: The contribution of a multi-temporal model

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ABSTRACT

Conflict is small-scale gold mining's middle name. In only a very few situations do mining operations take place without some sort of conflict accompanying the activity, and often various conflicting stakeholders struggle for their interests simultaneously. Analyses of such conflicts are typically confined to unpacking the more structural or long-term dimension, the actual actions of the stakeholders or the sequence of incidents. We believe that such strategies have limitations, and in particular can often not explain how in most cases a certain equilibrium, an arrangement, a 'conflict choreography', emerges. To be able to account for such situations, we introduce a multi-temporal model for conflict analysis in small-scale gold mining. We distinguish between a protracted structural dimension, concentrating on the underlying causes, an expeditious dimension of the actual interactions and confrontations, and an intermediate dimension of the preparation or equipment of the actors, focusing on such questions as: from what backgrounds and with what aspirations do people come? And what identity, collectively and individually, did that formation produce? We argue that only by taking into account the latter dimension might we be able to better analyse the how's and why's of the low-intensity nature of mining conflicts that, at face value, should result in unrelenting hostilities.

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1. Introduction

Whenever we announced that we would be visiting small-scale gold mining (SSGM) sites in the Amazon, we would nearly always receive well-intended warnings: *Be careful, it's violent out there; there is no law, no police, no mercy. There is only club-law – an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth – and everybody is armed and uptight.* In this article we argue two things: first, that the controversies in and around mining areas are not merely characterized by outright violence or ongoing impetuous street fighting. Instead, conflicts are most often channelled in *modi vivendi*, in ways to deal with these conflicts and turn them into practices that allow people to do and/or profit from the main motive to be there in the first place: to mine. We call this the conflict choreography. Second, that we are dealing with an amalgam of very different types of conflict, given shape by actors who fully understand their interests, albeit in different ways. These actors have histories, memories and strategies and are hardly inclined to hit out wildly at anything

in their way. This point, we believe, can only be adequately analysed by applying a multi-temporal model of conflict reconstruction that includes the long-term and structural features of the situation, the short-term dynamics of the manoeuvring of different parties, and the different stories of the actors and stakeholders. In other words, we need to analyse the conflict choreography. To substantiate our claims about conflict adjustments and the need for a multi-temporal conflict analysis, we present two cases we studied in Bolivia and Suriname. Presenting these two instances of conflicts might serve both as examples of the types of struggles in mining, and as sources that provide material for designing the model we suggest is needed to analyse them.

In the next section, we sketch recent developments in SSGM, mainly in Latin America, in tandem with laying out the conceptual vocabulary usually applied. Towards the end of that section, we present our claim that on-the-ground analyses of conflicts suggest that the parties, even in competition, are aware that they benefit from some predictability and from certain rules, even if these are only implicit or inferred. Therefore, there usually exists a certain acceptance of given power positions and acknowledgement of others' positions, ranks and/or legitimacy. From there, we move on to presenting the cases of Bolivia and Surinam, focusing on the

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complex nature of the conflicts and the manner in which different parties operate.

In the subsequent section, we describe the three-layer model for studying conflicts, situating the proposal in ongoing and broader theoretical debates on structure, agency and the domains of entanglement. Instead of advocating more structural or more interactional propositions, or more political opportunity or more resource mobilization, or more rational choice or more culturalized propositions, our three-layer model alludes to the *relative* contributions of all these and other theoretical currents and methodological approaches by focusing on the multiple, compound and composite reality of how the conflict choreography crystallizes. Different approaches contribute different insights to the composite whole. And to understand more in particular why a *modus vivendi*, a truce rather than a generalized all-against-all smacking and thrashing, usually dominates, a model that allows the integration of the coming-into-being and trajectories of the actors into the equation is indispensable. We end with a recap and brief discussion on the potential and applicability of our proposal.

2. Small-scale gold mining conflicts: an overview of contemporary analysis

In only a very few situations do mining operations take place without some sort of dispute accompanying the activity, and often various conflicting stakeholders struggle for their interests simultaneously. This seems even more the case with SSGM: the absence of state regulation at remote sites and the volatile nature of the SSGM operations tend to result in conflicts between miners and regional authorities, between miners and companies claiming rights in the territory, between miners, between miners and local communities or environmental activists, and so on. Rumours about successful miners trigger small and large migration flows, unsettle communities, launch people into risk-taking and result in tensions, upheaval, bitter poverty and delinquency, and – sometimes – some success. The enormous increase in the number of people involved in mining challenges the existing infrastructure and transport facilities (Bebbington et al., 2008; Cuvelier et al., 2013; Fisher, 2007; Grätz, 2002; Li, 2015; MacDonald, 2016; Theije and Bal, 2010; Theije and Heemskerk, 2009; Theije et al., 2014).

Considering the nature of the activity, its conflictive character should not surprise us. Over the last few decades, the dramatic boost in SSGM has resulted in increased environmental problems and socio-political conflicts over the access to the mineral rich soils in areas where mining takes place in the Amazon and elsewhere. The environmental impact of SSGM materializes in the pollution of rivers and creeks, deforestation, and the contamination of air, fauna and humans with mercury and the other chemicals used (Alvarez-Berríos and Aide, 2015; Swenson et al., 2011). Polluting effects of SSGM may threaten the livelihoods of indigenous peoples or peasants in the vicinity of the mining operations (Grund, 2016; Oliveira Santos et al., 2002). SSGM activities are generally relatively low-tech, and although limited in geographical scale still very harmful because of the uncontrolled expansion of (albeit often small) operation sites, and because of the frequent careless use of mercury and other chemicals, and little awareness about the effects of inorganic waste (Hilson and Vieira, 2007; Siegel, 2013).

Conflicts arise not only over the environment but also over land. Land-use conflicts abound between miners and other collective or private concession holders or local inhabitants, like indigenous communities, peasants, loggers, Brazil nut collectors or those engaged in other forest extraction activities. Relationships between local dwellers and the miners are sensitive to conflict. Local communities sometimes want the miners to leave; at other times they want a share, or they chase the miners away to start mining themselves. Hence, some communities will dislike the

presence of the mining activities, although others appreciate the employment opportunities, the money and the concomitant local (economic and other) dynamics. Additionally, working conditions are often unhealthy and dangerous, and may constitute a source of conflict between mine owners, concession holders, overseers and labourers. The scale of the problems is increasing as a result of the recent global economic instability driving up the price of gold and then bringing it down again, causing constant uncertainty, the activity thus becoming alternately attractive and less attractive, and even simple techniques becoming more mechanized (Caño López, 2014; Theije et al., 2014). Furthermore, cross-border tensions arise when miners from one country enter another country to work there, or to smuggle gold, fuel, chemicals, other utensils or machinery between countries (Theije and Luning, 2016).

Such visible and invisible effects obviously raise critical questions about the state governance of mining rights and activities, and more specifically the licenses and concessions granted by national or local authorities (Damonte, 2016; Perreault, 2015). Overlapping concessions are often granted to different international, national and local players, like transnational mining, logging or plantation companies, or miners, land colonizers, eco-tourism entrepreneurs and indigenous communities. Conflictive interests between the various state ministries responsible for these contradictory policies are minor in comparison to the conflicts that erupt on the ground because of what was granted to such players (Souza et al., 2015). National and regional authorities try to get a grip on the unruly mining activities through imposing formalization processes, but are distrusted by the miners (Heemskerk et al., 2014; Smith et al., 2017). Formalization often leads to more conflicts between those miners who are informal and are under pressure from those who have regularized their businesses and now have to comply with certain requirements (Salman, 2016). Few national or local governments know how to adequately respond to these developments and the conflicts they cause, and their reactions vary from keeping aloof, via regulation attempts through repression or efforts to control things through new legislation, to *ad hoc* measures. The miners (and sometimes other local players, too) are habitually excluded from policymaking, and both repression and eviction strategies often prove unsuccessful. In practice, informality and self-regulation predominate and thus environmental damage is scarcely registered, measured or combatted (Verbrugge et al., 2015). Because of the absence of or ineffective control by state representatives, conflicts are not prevented by legal stipulations. Conflict resolution at the mining sites is typically improvised and self-administered. This might make things easier, but can also result in violent conflicts, which the most powerful win. New alliances emerge but may be short-lived, whereas fuel for conflict is produced day after day. The mix of small and larger, violent and verbal, latent and manifest, and shifting participants in mining conflicts can be confusing and shambolic.

Finally, there are tensions between SSGM and larger companies. In Bolivia, a new law triggered conflicts and political bickering with private companies (which feel they are disadvantaged vis-à-vis the smaller scale cooperatives), the Ministry of Finance (which wants higher taxes and royalties), environmentalists (who believe that nature is insufficiently protected) and ethnic communities (which feel that they have fewer rights than cooperatives when it comes to conflicts over mining sites) (Salman et al., 2015). In Peru or Brazil, it is more often the small-scale miners who feel that their interests are worth less than those of transnational companies (Damonte, 2016). And in Surinam, despite the larger companies being backed by the law and national politics, creative collaborations are sometimes developed on the ground (Seccatore and de Theije, 2016).

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