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Review: *Unearthing Conflict: Corporate Mining, Expertise, and Activism in Peru*

By Fabiana Li

Reviewed by Lia Vella

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Li, Fabiana. *Unearthing Conflict: Corporate Mining, Activism, and Expertise in Peru*. Durham, NC, USA: Duke University Press, 2014. X, 265 pp. ISBN: 9780822358312, paper. US\$ 25.95; Acid-free paper, photographs and maps; also available in cloth binding and as an eBook.

A colleague noticed the cover of *Unearthing Conflict* and said, “I know THAT story. It is the same as every other one about mining in a third world country: they came, they stole our gold, wrecked our water, and ruined our soil.” I am happy to report that my colleague is wrong. Although the familiar narrative of plunder and pillage underlies Fabiana Li’s analysis of Minera Yanacocha’s activity in the Peruvian highlands, it does not comprise the focus of her very well-informed and carefully conducted study. Instead, Dr. Li, an anthropologist at the University of Manitoba whose doctoral field research in 2005-2006 is the basis of this book, shows how local communities were able to influence the activities of a large mining company by strategic appropriation of the terminology used in public debate.

In Part 1, “Mining Past and Present,” Li traces the history of mining in the Peruvian Central and Northern highlands, describing the ways in which mining technologies, political activism, and corporate practices have changed since the early 20th century, and the ways in which mining activity has altered landscape and livelihood practices. Focusing on one concept—pollution-- Li delineates the shifts in power that occurred as scientists and activists seized control of the discourse to bring about regulation and change, and how companies parried with their own “corporate social responsibility” initiatives meant to pacify the local and global communities.

Part 2, “Water and Life” is a case study of the Yanacocha mining company’s attempt to expand operations into Cerro Quilish, a sacred mountain and water source for the local population. With a detailed account of the efforts of community groups to stop expansion of mining operations, Li demonstrates how the mountain became a “boundary object:” simultaneously “a valuable mineral deposit, a mountain that holds water, a sacred mountain, and a sentient being” (p. 110). By emphasizing that the mountain is an *Apu*—a Quechua term meaning “mountain spirit”—community resisters shifted the terms of public debate away from who should benefit from mineral resources and toward the animate nature of the mountain itself.

Part 3, “Activism and Expertise,” describes why the accountability process used in mining projects fails to prevent conflict. The form of the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA), as well as the process of producing this key document, are critical elements contributing to this failure. EIA documentation tends to describe potential problems only inasmuch as the company management is able to resolve them by technical means. Additionally, although stakeholder input is solicited, Li suggests that, “the language of ‘impacts’ and ‘risk

management' creates a process in which the very form of participation and critique is circumscribed from the moment in which the risks become visible" (p. 203). Thus, stakeholder participation is a red herring, meant to give the EIA greater authority as a "collaborative" document despite it not being truly collaborative.

Far from re-spinning a tired old tale, *Unearthing Conflict* takes a fascinating angle on the relationship between a mining company and the local populations who are the recipients of the fall-out from mining activity. Li's intensive fieldwork forms the basis of a compelling narrative that will be of interest to environmental activists and indigenous rights organizations in addition to mining professionals. Although it is a dense read, this book would also be useful in graduate or upper-division undergraduate courses on the sociology and ethics of resource extraction, corporate social responsibility, cultural anthropology, or the sociology of activist movements. Maps, photographs, and other illustrations elucidate the text, and extensive notes and references, as well as an index, complement the work.

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