

Call for Papers

Workshop « Critical Ethnography of Mining Encounters »

Paris, 25-26 September 2024

This workshop aims to foster a multidisciplinary, comparative dialogue on ethnographic methods in research on mining activities. Starting from the consideration that carrying out fieldwork in the midst of conflicts linked to resource exploitation can be particularly challenging (Ballard and Banks 2003), it seeks to explore the potential of a critical ethnographic approach (Fassin 2012, 2017) and complementary research methods, in order to grasp the multiple asymmetrical relations that unfold in and through mining.

Contemporary, globalized resource extraction is in fact the product of multiple and articulated processes, involving human and non-human actors across scales. In order to seize the complexity of these assemblages, Pijpers and Eriksen argue for a “dialectical and multifaceted approach” of mining realities as “encounters” (2018:3). This term designates the uneasy interaction between a great diversity of material practices, social relations and life-worlds brought together by mineral extraction, whose study allows to further complexify the initial triad composed by the state, mining companies, and local communities (Ballards and Banks 2003). Mining activities in fact involve an extremely diverse array of actors – environmental engineers, indigenous leaders, state officials, development practitioners, academics and environmental activists – whose scalar practices serve different objectives and mobilize contrasting forms of legitimation (Bainton and Holcombe 2018; D’Angelo and Pijpers 2021). In these deeply unequal contexts, environmental impact assessments define risk and reparation (Li 2015), mining companies develop particular understandings of sustainability (Lanzano 2021), corporate social responsibility programs mirror and impose new moral regimes of capitalist production (Dolan and Rajak 2011; Gajardo 2021), States elaborate distributive policies to quell anti-mining mobilization (Arellano Yanguas 2011), and local communities struggle – among themselves as well as with state, corporate and non-governmental actors – to define and impose their own development objectives. From localized extraction to globalized protest, and from national administration to community-level corporate social responsibility or research, mining therefore constitutes a challenging field which has not failed to question anthropologists as to how their positionality and collaborations in such highly unequal contexts affect data validity and research ethics (Bainton et Skrzypek 2022; Golub 2018; Le Meur 2015).

Recently, the aftermath of the Sars-Covid19 global pandemic, changing geopolitical equilibriums (Fornillo and Lampis 2023; Giese 2022) and new demands generated by energy transitions policies appear to be re-shaping the globalized mining sector. These processes lead to the expansion and intensification of exploitation of strategic minerals in the global south (Bos and Forget 2021; Ciftci and Lemaire 2023; Weinberg 2023), the re-exploration of former mines in Europe (Balan 2021) and the upscaling of existing ones as a response to economic crisis (Buu-Sao 2023; Castelos 2023), as well as the exploration of new resource frontiers

such as deep-seabed (Le Meur et al. 2018) and space mining (Klinger 2017). In such a context, it seems imperative to renew our attention to the reconfiguration of power relations in the field, and to the possibilities and limits of critical ethnographic engagement with mining encounters, both past, present and future.

In order to develop a critical understanding of these new forces and processes shaping actor's practices, research on mining encounters must therefore diversify methods, pluralize sources and interlocutors, so as to shed light on the logics of domination at play and their effects on the daily lives of different social groups. By allowing for a wider view of local and supra-local social logics, critical ethnography calls for particular focus on unequal power relations at play in mining encounters and the way in which these reconfigure both local and global practices in asymmetrical ways. This does not imply to develop a macro or binary analysis opposing local communities to mining companies and states (Svampa 2019, Gudynas 2015), but rather to analyse power relations *within* each one of these social worlds as well as *across* them (Golub 2014, Welker 2014, Li 2015). The term « critical » is in fact not associated with any specific participatory or activist research method, nor to the form of the ethnographer's ethical engagement (Madison 2019), but aims to designate an analytical approach. While ethnography allows to account for the social intelligence or reflexivity of each actor, critical ethnography requires a particular attention to the diverse and overlapping forms of material, symbolic and political domination that affect actors' perspectives, and therefore calls for the adoption of complementary methods of inquiry (Fassin 2012, 2017). Our aim is therefore to explore whether and how the mobilization of different methods and sources – media coverage analysis, archival research, analysis of scientific reports, interdisciplinary or multi-sited research, etc. – combined with a critical approach, can make our understanding of mining encounters more productive.

On the basis of ethnographies carried out in different social and cultural contexts, the aim of this two-day workshop will therefore be to explore contemporary mining encounters and current transformations of the extractive sector from a critical ethnographic perspective. We welcome proposals based on ethnographic fieldwork from colleagues of any discipline, along three main lines or axes. The first explores the possibilities and limits of critical ethnography in mining contexts through a reflexive discussion of methods. The second invites to reflect on the impact of energy transition discourse and policies on extractive activities and environments. The third wishes to analyse negotiations and processes of (re)valorization of mining grounds after their primal exploitation or in the liminal phases such as closure, patrimonialization or relaunch of mining extraction.

1. Possibilities and limits of critical ethnography

Literature on mining underlines a set of methodological challenges that social scientists have to face when analysing these activities. In fieldwork, ethnographers have to navigate between different sets of actors, each defending their own interests regarding extractive activities. Working with government officials, local leaders or company managers can place the ethnographer in situations that give access to radically different points of view on mining capitalism (Kirsch 2014), while limiting their capacity to contextualize these points

of view and to grasp their blind-spots. Understanding and navigating power relations is therefore essential to a critical analysis of mining contexts. What kind of methodologies, skills and strategies can the ethnographer mobilize, in order to gain access to the diversity of perspectives and actors in their interactions with mining activities? At the same time, ethnographers need to develop a series of complementary theoretical and methodological skills in order to bridge the multi-scalar and cross-disciplinary dimension of mining. For example, they might have to read through environmental impact assessments or annual reports to investors (Rajak 2016), master legal complexities and intercultural justice debates (Piccoli 2014), inform themselves on the historical and economical logics surrounding mineral resources and mining companies (Kalowatie and Dougherty 2016) as well as the local history of resources and mining (Welker 2014). Which alternative forms of data-collecting and processing can the ethnographer put to work in order to better understand relationships of domination and inequality in mining contexts? What are the possible biases or limits to these approaches, and how can critical analysis attempt to overcome them?

2. Energy transition and extraction: new resources, new industry?

Energy transition leads to an increase of industrial activities in the mining sector. This movement is characterized by the search for minerals and by a political will for a sustainable industry, notably represented by European policies pushing for social justice regarding extraction and environmental conservation (Voskoboynik and Andreucci 2022). The energy transition is re-shaping the mining sector in two main ways. First, the rush for strategic minerals leads to an expansion of mining territories by the exploration of unexploited or sparsely exploited regions from the Arctic to Europe and South America (Buu-Sao 2021). Second, current exploitation and new explorations are legitimized by a sustainability narrative positioning extractive environments at the core of a global scenario of climate change and energy transition (Kirsch 2009; Chuffard *et al* 2021). Mobilized by local stakeholders, States and industrial companies, this narrative articulates local, contextual issues with the global rush for minerals. Resource potential emerge in different places, establishing mining encounters that provoke environmental negotiations or conflicts (Bruna 2022). Interdependence relationships between resource stakeholders are generated, and local relational ontologies of territory are modified. In this axis, we look for critical ethnographies of mining narratives and resource explorations centred on the energy transition scenario. Moreover, we seek to question the performativity of sustainability narratives and policies. Are they recognized as legitimate and/or appropriated by local or national populations? In what ways is the energy transition changing local and national relationships to extractive environments? What specific new modes of symbolic and material domination are thereby being produced?

3. Mining transformation: closure, patrimonialization, relaunch and intensification.

Mining spaces are not only concerned by on-going extraction, but also by its transformation through processes such as those of closure, patrimonialization, re-exploitation or upscaling of production. Certain former European mining territories where extraction has

run dry since during the XXth century have become the objects of patrimonialization policies led by local or national public entities (Lusso 2013), whether or not are concerned by the possible “relaunch” of future mining projects (Bahamonde-Rodríguez et al. 2024) responding to national needs. How do these new configurations affect the way in which actors relate to their mining past and the ways in which they may imagine et mining futures, two critical aspects in a context of continuing resource exploitation over the world? For South-American populations currently confronting the dismantling of mines that have been operating for many decades, the closure process may prompt an exercise of eco-political imagination of the future (Cagueñas et al. 2020). The intensification and upscaling of existing extractive activities (Buu-Sao 2023) can on the other hand give rise to local disputes as to the desirability, or not, of large-scale mining exploitation, confronting different values, interest and world-views (Horowitz 2011), but also engendering a re-reading of the local mining past. All these situations reveal the tensions at play when analysing contemporary mining encounters and the historical legacies that they intertwine with. In what way are these encounters re-shaping local relationships to mining history today, and vice versa how are memories of mining playing into the acceptability of re-exploitation and upscaling projects? What new narratives and policies are being developed in these territories and how are mining encounters shaping their future?

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Proposals: A 300-word abstract must be submitted **by April 30th** by email to the organizers. Participants will receive an answer by the end of Mai.

Location: The workshop will take place in Paris. Details will be provided in the final program.

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