

ETHNOGRAPHERS OF EXTRACTION
ANTHROPOLOGY, CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY
AND THE RESOURCE CURSE

• DINAH RAJAK •

In September 2004 I attended the Bi-annual Convention on Corporate Citizenship in Johannesburg, as part of a year-long multi-sited study of corporate social responsibility (CSR) in the extractive industries. The theme of this particular convention was 'driving *responsible* growth and competitiveness in Africa'. With the extractive industries accounting for the lion's share of foreign direct investment in Africa, it is no surprise that mining, oil and gas companies such as Shell, Anglo American and Chevron Texaco featured prominently on the agenda, alongside the global banks that finance their operations. These conventions have become something of a rallying point for the CEOs of leading multinationals eager to demonstrate their commitment to good corporate citizenship. They are joined by an army of CSR consultants, representatives from bilateral development agencies, global NGOs, UN agencies, and to a lesser extent, government officials, equally committed to mobilising the reach and resources of multinationals in the service of development. During my fieldwork I had spent a good deal of time in elite gatherings of this kind, getting to grips with the new orthodoxy of CSR.

Like the others, this was a grand event, held in the opulent surroundings of Johannesburg's Sandton City, where delegates were treated to a 'business-leader's breakfast', a leather-bound conference pack embellished with traditional South African beading, a master-class in social impact assessment and no end of networking opportunities. But this particular event stuck in my mind. Following a panel session on fostering corporate-community relations in the extractive industries, the head of CSR at a leading multinational oil company remarked, over coffee, to his counterparts in two other extractive companies:

I remember when, in the old days the concept of CSR was a bunch of thugs in a truck coming in to 'persuade' the community that the operation was a good thing, or there was the time when (the company) literally flew in a plane full of prostitutes to try and convince the community leaders.

Today, the very same companies compete for prizes and index-rankings as top corporate citizen in national and international forums such as the Johannesburg Stock Exchange's Sustainability Index, the European Business Awards, the Global Business Coalition on HIV/Aids and so on. These are backed up by compelling case studies of corporate social investment, and state-of-the-art technologies for corporate-community engagement such as the 'Community Development Toolkit' produced by the International Council on Mining and Metals. In the vanguard of the CSR movement are those companies previously seen as the very epitome of irresponsible capitalist exploitation—the extractive industries. Once the pariahs of capitalism, those very same companies have emerged today as champions of sustainable development through business. They have done so in the wake of a catalogue of scandals surrounding allegations of the irresponsible exploitation of people and resources through the past century.¹ Yet the portfolio of environmental and social infraction has given way to a decade of initiatives, codes, agreements and tools aimed

at making the mining business, not only socially responsible, but ‘sustainable’, perhaps an oxymoronic promise considering the inherently unsustainable nature of extraction (Kirsch 2010). “One might have expected the mining industry to be the *whipping boy* of the world summit on sustainable development”, the former Vice-President of External Affairs at Anglo American (then the world’s third largest mining company) had told me, “but instead, we actually got a special plug for addressing these issues”. Indeed, an article in the *Guardian* newspaper covering the 2002 Summit in Johannesburg noted that on the flight over, Tony Blair sat next to Sir Robert Wilson, the CEO of Rio Tinto, one of the world’s largest mining company (Vidal and White 2002). Surely, the article went on, this symbolised the extent to which big business has been embraced as both a partner and advisor in international development planning.

As CSR has gathered momentum over the past decade, it has recruited support from an extensive and diverse constellation of actors. The discourse of CSR has, it seems, established transnational corporations (TNCs) as more the solution to the resource curse, than the cause. Companies themselves have, at times, become purveyors of best practice and ethical standard-bearers, the path to development, where states, characterized (so we are told) by chronic incapacity or corrupt rapacity, have failed. The moral high-ground once occupied by NGOs appears to have been usurped, so to speak, by the former targets of their campaigns. A movement which, led by NGOs, begun with the aim of exposing, and demanding an end to corporate social *ir*responsibility, has shifted seamlessly into a focus on the corruption and mismanagement of resources and revenues by Southern governments at the expense of their people, over whom this elite coalition of corporations, NGOs and development bilateral extends their collective guardianship. This hegemonic duty of care, in which TNCs play a leading role, is formally authenticated through multi-stakeholder partnerships, such as the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative aimed at ensuring accountability in the payment and expenditure of revenues from resource exploitation. Development policy-makers (see e.g. DFID 2009) and analysts alike have embraced this movement as the dawn of a new era in which not only the great financial resources of corporations, but also the creative spirit of competition, are brought to bear on issues of governance, under-development and resource conflict. The promise of a collaborative venture for a collective goal of sustainable development is of course compelling.

And yet, ethnographers continue to document cases of countries and communities benighted by the ‘curse’, of conflict, dispossession, and of course resistance and the many forms it takes (e.g. Zalik 2004, Sawyer 2004). So what is going on? For its critics, CSR represents at best a case of emperor’s new clothes, at worst a Trojan Horse cloaking extractive companies in morality, all the while they pursue their own profit-hungry interests and avoid regulation under the guise of benefactors (e.g. Doane 2005, Pendleton 2004). But if CSR were nothing more than a fig-leaf which could be removed to reveal an unchanging order in which multinationals divide the spoils of their conquests while local communities pay the price, there would be nothing more to say. The danger in reducing CSR to mere PR deployed to better ease the rapacious pursuit of oil and profit, is that we miss the more profound discursive capacity of CSR to reshape the social world to a particular set of corporate interests, by claiming a convergence between the market logic of maximisation and moral imperatives of social responsibility.

As Gisa Weszkalnys argues in this issue, the role of anthropologists cannot be limited to showing where such initiatives have failed to address the resource curse, whether because of cynical corporate manipulations, or a deficit of local knowledge. Clearly it is crucial that anthropologists continue to focus on subaltern experiences of corporate incursion and mineral extraction. But that is only half the job. In the past, the methodological commitment to the local and the disciplinary (or perhaps moral?) preoccupation with the subaltern has led to the representation of corporations as monolithic vehicles of capital driven by an unstoppable logic of maximisation, rather than as the focus of ethnographic interest in themselves. Anthropologists need to pay equal (and urgent) attention to the agency and practices of the corporate entities and agents that engage with 'the community' in processes of extraction, as they do to the response and resistance of local populations. Weszkalnys highlights the performative power of resource economics, and the ways in which international experts and economists deploy theories of the resource curse to explain why countries fail to enjoy the boons of mineral wealth. Crucially, she argues, anthropologists should analyse how these theories shape (rather than reflect) the real world of mineral extraction. But we must go further than this. The field of resource economics (just like economic theory more broadly) is intimately connected to corporate strategy and corporate interests—two mutually sustaining arenas of knowledge and practice, symbolically encapsulated in the BP Chair and Centre for the Analysis of Resource-Rich Economies at Oxford University, set up with a \$14 million endowment from British Petroleum.

In 'studying up', we must turn the ethnographic lens on (or up) to the corridors of power, to disentangle the agency of various actors within elite coalitions that have served to endow multinational corporations with moral authority and the responsibility to ensure good governance and the honest payment of revenues. For this incarnation of corporations as guardians of social responsibility, is not simply self-created. It is supported by a coherent framework of practices and knowledge, which produces and sustains dominant understandings of the resource curse, and critically, solutions to it. The contribution of anthropology to problematising the 'resource curse' lies as much in illuminating the powerful agency within the forces of extraction, and the instruments, apparatus and partnerships which sustain corporate power, as it does with the experience of those who become subject to them.

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¹ Illegal uranium mining in Namibia (Rio Tinto); co-architects of South Africa's labour repressive apartheid economy (Anglo American); complicity in the oppression of the Ogoni in Nigeria and the execution of Ken Saro Wiwa (Shell); complicity with paramilitary outfits in forced relocations in Columbia (BP); environmental disaster at Brent Spar (Shell again); involvement in the mine-related conflicted at Bougainville, Papua New Guinea (Rio Tinto again); asbestos poisoning in the Cape (Cape Industries); ChevronTexaco in Angola; Talisman in Sudan... the list goes on.

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THE REAL RESOURCE CURSE AND THE IMPERIALISM OF DEVELOPMENT

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The idea that the scope of anthropology in the face of the new development economics be widened is a welcome one. In explaining what has been called ‘the resource curse’, Gisa Weszkalnys (in this issue) suggests that anthropologists must go beyond merely looking for the social details that might help economists account for why their theories often go awry in real social settings. In other words, the role of the anthropologist is not to provide social justifications for economic models gone wrong. Rather, Weszkalnys asks anthropologists concerned with studying communities with coveted and valuable world resources to approach their study with a broader gaze. Doing so, according to the author, would entail at least four things: 1) providing ethnographic research on the role played by local and international individuals and groups involved coordinating, negotiating and governing resource extraction, 2) to explore and document how the local community experiences resource exploitation, 3) to study the very real material transformations that accompany resource extraction, and 4) to problematize the idea of ‘the resource curse’ by considering the specificity of the local environment and how locals understand the relation between resources and development. In addition to these four roles anthropologists might play, Weszkalnys suggests that the notion of a resource curse and how local communities might respond to it be contextualized within a broader history of ‘development’ projects that may or may not have been successful. These are all indeed convincing and worthy