At an extractive pace: Conflicting temporalities in a resettlement process in Solwezi, Zambia

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ABSTRACT

Mining sites have often been described as enclaves, but the influence of mining companies extends far beyond their fences. I explore the planning and construction of an access road cutting through state and customary land in Solwezi, Northwestern Province of Zambia. For the Canada-based mining company First Quantum Minerals Ltd, the road is an attempt to disengage from the environment (Appel, 2014). This both illusionary and one-sided attempt to disentangle has re-structured people’s lives in multiple ways and integrated even more people into the mine’s circle of gravity, though.

The mine’s management balances two different planning logics: the overall goal of long-term profitability of the entire company and the much shorter rhythm of fluctuations on the stock market and the need to keep shareholders satisfied. This dual planning temporality creates the extractive pace: the transformation of constantly shifting time horizons into a concrete agenda for today’s actions and tomorrow’s plans.

Adopting Gell, 1992/Alfred Gell’s (1992) epistemology of time, I show how the implementation of a temporal regime on the environment is one aspect of how mining companies try to disentangle themselves from the economy and politics of their host country. This implementation often has the opposite effect on the local population.

1. Introduction

Canada-based First Quantum Minerals Ltd (FQML) is, through its subsidiaries, the largest taxpayer in Zambia. Its operations span two active mines (Kansanshi and Sentinel mine, extracting copper and gold), a smelter at the Kansanshi mine site, a 16.9% share in the Mopani active mines (Kansanshi and Sentinel mine, extracting copper and gold) and a decommissioned mine site (Bwana Mkubwa). Since the reopening of Kansanshi mine in the early 2000s and the opening of Sentinel mine in the Northwestern Province in 2015, FQML has induced massive social and environmental changes in the Solwezi and Kalumbila districts. The Kansanshi mine site itself, covering roughly 9,000 ha, is the clearest expression of these changes. Pits, tailings and fences are not only expressions of current extraction. They involve considerable investment and are perceived as claims for the future (D’Angelo and Pijpers, this issue). Based on expectations for this future, the entire region has seen massive in-migration, and Solwezi has grown fivefold in the past decade to an estimated 250,000 inhabitants (Preuss and Schmidt-Eisenlohr, 2016).

Although much of FQML’s influence is indirect, the company also exerts direct control over territory beyond the mine site. In this article, I analyse the planning and construction of a new access road by the mine and the associated resettlement process. The new road, which was planned and built by the mine although it cuts through state and customary land, shortens the time and distance between two steps in FQML’s production line. It allows truckers bringing copper concentrate from Sentinel mine to the Kansanshi smelter to circumnavigate the messy and congested town of Solwezi, smoothing the mine’s workflow and making it less dependent on the town council’s planning processes. For the mine, the road is an attempt to disengage its operations from the environment (Appel, 2014).

This attempt at disengagement, I argue, is as illusionary as it is one-sided. In their efforts to realise the vision of a neat transport corridor disengaged from their environment and separated physically and phenomenologically from the adjacent communities, FQML staff had to engage to a considerable degree with the human and built environment. This has re-structured people’s lives in multiple ways and integrated even more people into the mine’s circle of gravity.

Along with Appel (2014), I seek to throw light on the process of disengagement and its effects, and thereby challenge the assumption that mines can operate as “enclaves” in their host society (cf. Ferguson, 2005). Similar to what Appel describes in her article Walls and White Elephants for Equatorial Guinea and the corporate oil producing sector, the current ruling party in Zambia (Patriotic Front), just like its
Appel focuses her analysis on infrastructure and how the extracting industry at large practises framing projects – despite its “utter intercalation” with that “which is outside its walls” (2014: 445). Building on Appel’s work and on ‘Angelo and Pijpers’ concept of mining temporalities (this issue), I argue that we can better understand the work of disentanglement by analysing the temporal logic of the mine’s actions. The planning horizons and internalized time-maps of mine employees shape their engagement with the world beyond the fence and are an important medium for extending the mine’s influence. To conceptualize “the potential conflict and non-synchronicity of mining temporalities” (ĐAngelo and Pijpers, this issue), I adopt Gell’s (1992) notion of an anthropology of time. He calls on anthropologists to work towards “the reconstruction […] of the schemes of temporal interpretation, or internalized time-maps, of the ethnographic subjects” (1992: 240). In order to navigate time, people produce a variety of time-maps. Although these maps can vary widely among different actors, and people hold multiple, continuously changing maps, they are all based on some causal notion of actions and are thus geometric (1992: 190). Furthermore, they shape personal experiences of time but also structure people’s actions and tomorrow” (ĐAngelo and Pijpers, this issue).

Using the work of Gell, I argue that members of the FQML mining complex – made up of a diversity of actors spanning the board of directors, subsidiary companies, management, divisions, departments, consultants, and individual employees – construct time-maps in a way that privileges the interests of shareholders and employees. They try – and frequently manage – to impose imperatives stemming from these temporalities on people who are not part of the mining complex, people who live at the site of extraction with often very different temporalities.

Analysing conflict between competing time-maps is crucial for any analysis of power (Bear, 2014). Through understanding the “politics of time” (ĐAngelo and Pijpers, this issue) and the institutional bases of dominant ways of structuring time, we gain crucial insights into the workings of power imbalances in general. With this in mind, I examine the dominant temporality of a major corporate actor, the biggest employer in the area under scrutiny and the largest taxpayer in the country; I then examine how the company imposes this temporality on the mine’s social and physical environment.1

2. The extractive pace

The FQML mining complex is part of a global production network driven by shareholders, traders (Miyazaki, 2003; Zalam, 2009), rates of profit and investment (Ho, 2009), and commodity prices. Its planning horizon is shaped by the overall goal of long-term profitability of the entire company. The life span of the mine, the amount of investment, the willingness to spend money for projects, and the interpretation of the political situation in the country are all evaluated in their relation to this goal. Management’s ability to pursue their aims, however, is crucially affected by the much shorter rhythm of fluctuations on the stock market and the need to keep shareholders satisfied. FQML thus needs to balance two different planning logics and accept trade-offs between short-term and long-term aims. This dual planning temporality is crucial for the mining complex’s temporal regime (see ĐAngelo and Pijpers, this issue).

The duality in the mining complex’s temporal regime creates what I call the extractive pace: the transformation of constantly shifting time horizons into a concrete agenda for today’s actions and tomorrow’s plans. The temporal regime defines the conditions under which the extractive pace is set (and its implementation adapted to concrete circumstances). The temporal regime is shaped by the rhythms of capital (Bear, 2014) and is slow to change. Should labour one day take precedence over capital and workers’ wages replace dividends as the defining measure of corporate success, the mine’s temporal regime would shift. The extractive pace, however, can take many forms. Depending on global economic factors and local circumstances, mines can be developed quickly, or they can be put on maintenance or shut down, only to be reopened when prices pick up. Such changes do not affect the mine’s temporal regime, but by changing the extractive pace, they can have lasting effects on the lives of people living around the mine and affect their ability to determine their own temporal regimes.

Implementing their temporal regime through the application of an extractive pace on the environment is one aspect of how mining companies try to disentangle themselves from the economy and politics of their host country as well as from people’s everyday life (Appel, 2014). To show how this effort affects local populations, I use an example in which the company was largely successful. In Solwezi, this is the rule rather than the exception.

This article is based on 18 months of ethnographic field research in Solwezi town and the wider region between 2013 and 2018. My interlocutors and informants were people in the management and different departments of FQML’s subsidiary Kansanshi Mining Plc (KMP), representatives of the Solwezi Municipal Council, traditional authorities who are the guardians of most of the land outside Solwezi town, ordinary town dwellers, and villagers who find themselves at the fringes of a rapidly expanding town.

3. First Quantum Minerals in Zambia’s Northwestern Province

Through its subsidiary Kansanshi Mining Plc (KMP), FQML holds an 80% interest in Kansanshi Mine, the biggest copper mine in Africa by output. It sits in the centre of the “New Copperbelt”, situated 150 to 200 km west of the older Copperbelt towns of Kitwe, Mufulira, Chingola and Luanshya. Today’s open pit mine replaces an earlier shaft mine that was opened in 1908 as the first industrial copper mine in today’s Zambia, but that was either closed or running on very low capacity through most of the twentieth century. Linked to the mine, the colonial administration opened an office 10 km south of Kansanshi mine, around which Solwezi town developed as a small administrative centre. Some years before Zambia’s independence in 1964, the town became the provincial capital of the Northwestern Province, which it still is today.

Mines were nationalised after independence and became an important source of revenue; when global copper prices dropped, shrinking profits left the state budget in shambles. In the 1990s, under pressure from the IMF and the World Bank, the Zambian government started to reprivatize the mining sector and many of the country’s other assets. Once the mines were in private hands, the global mineral boom of the 2000s led to new foreign direct investment, much of it in the mining and construction sector. For most Zambians, re-privatization and economic liberalization brought insecurity, increased casualization of employment, reduced wages, and fierce competition for the few jobs left in a highly mechanized mining industry (Fraser and Larmer, 2010; Fraser and Lungu, 2007; Mususa, 2010).

As mining jobs became scarcer in the Copperbelt towns and across the border in the Democratic Republic of Congo (Rubbers, 2017), FQML’s arrival in the Solwezi District in the early 2000s and the reopening of the Kansanshi Mine spurred massive in-migration from urban and rural areas. From around 50,000 inhabitants in the early

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1 In his article on boaters’ time-maps in the waterways of London, Bowles (2016) gives a good example of resistance to a dominant time-map.
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