

Book and Media Reviews

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The author makes a unique contribution to English-language studies of the French Pacific with her analyst's eye and diplomatic perspective on the actions of the French state. Fisher cautions both France and observers of the French Pacific that "the predictabilities of the past are giving way to the challenges of the future" (7). With the twenty-first century, like centuries before, being heralded as the "Pacific Century," as Fisher argues, France is well positioned to play a significant role, though what role that is, remains to be seen.

WILLIAM CAVERT
University of Hawai'i–Mānoa

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Mining Capitalism: The Relationship between Corporations and Their Critics, by Stuart Kirsch. Oakland: University of California Press, 2014. ISBN cloth 978-0-520-28170-7, paper 978-0-520-28171-4, e-book 978-0-520-95759-6, xiii + 314 pages, maps, notes, bibliography, index. Cloth, US\$65.00; paper or e-book, US\$29.95.

The world history of mining is drama and disaster ridden. In this respect, the Ok Tedi gold mine in Papua New Guinea (PNG) is emblematic in terms of environmental destruction and degradation, social violence, and the complex legacies of the project's promise of economic development and well-being. As Stuart Kirsch reminds us, "Ok Tedi was the first mining project approved by the postcolonial government of Papua New Guinea, which acquired its independence from Australia in 1975" (19). This book is about how that story turned into a bit-

ter combination of ecological disaster, legal processes, and what Kirsch terms a failed politics of time and successful politics of space. "Although the Yonggom and their neighbors initially welcomed the mine and the opportunity it portended, they quickly became troubled by the impact on the environment and their subsistence practices" (34–35). Actually, the "colliding ecologies" (chapter 1) of local livelihoods and mining activity impacts resulted by the early 1980s in a devastating "micro-economics of resource curse" (30–33).

Mining Capitalism can be read at two levels. First, it is a story of mining disaster and indigenous resistance, which Kirsch follows in multiple places and arenas and of which he has been part (11), notably including his involvement in the Mines and Communities Network studied in chapter 6 (194–198, 258n3). Second, the book provides the reader with an analysis of "the dialectical relationship between corporations and their critics [that] has become a permanent structural feature of neoliberal capitalism" (3). A brief summary of the book's narrative will be useful before commenting on the second level of reading. Ultimately, taken together the two readings raise interesting questions in terms of interpretation, ethnographic method, and the positioning of contemporary fieldworkers in local and transnational capital contexts.

The Ok Tedi story is told in the first half of the book from the indigenous point of view. This telling vividly exposes the strategy developed by mine-affected communities, or more precisely some of their leaders, to build alliances with activists, environ-

mental nongovernmental organizations, and lawyers and to unfold networks beyond the limits of the local. At the same time, alliance building was a process of identity building—the translation of local populations into a global discourse of indigeneity. Kirsch shows that resources of publicness and law were mobilized through the campaign launched to stop the mine and the legal action they took against the Ok Tedi operating corporation BHP. This transnational “politics of space” (chapter 2) eventually resulted in two lawsuits (chapter 3). The first case was settled in Melbourne—the meaningful location outside Papua New Guinea already marked this a success—in 1996 to the benefit of the plaintiffs with compensation of about US\$500 million and commitments to stop discharging tailings downstream in the Fly River. Actually, however, the victory was “incomplete” (109), as the infrastructures needed for tailings containment were insufficient and compensation payments generated much tension among mine-affected communities. A second lawsuit was filed in 2000 against BHP for breach of contract. The final verdict in 2004 was not to the advantage of the plaintiffs, and, “in the long run, the environment was also let down by the law” (122).

One interesting point in Kirsch’s tracking of the mining company into and out of multiple arenas can be found in the corporate evolution, which he characterizes as a process of mutation. What Ok Tedi peoples have been chasing across institutional and national boundaries is not a stable corporate entity but a mutant body: the Australian-based mining company BHP (Broken Hill Propri-

etary Company Ltd) until 2000; BHP Billiton after the 2001 merger with the Anglo-Dutch company Billiton PLC; and PNG Sustainable Development Program Ltd (SDP), established in Singapore with BHP Billiton’s 52 percent stake (in exchange for legal immunity). In 2002, the consortium of investors that Ok Tedi Mining Ltd (OTML) had created in 1980 to develop the project underwent BHP Billiton’s official withdrawal. Last but not least, the PNG state, as OTML shareholder (20% from the beginning; 37% in the 2000s, with the remaining 63% being held by SDP; and 100% in 2013 when the mine was nationalized) has been playing an active role in these transformations. All of these entities and their entangled institutions, actions, and legacies require intensive critical commentary. For the PNG state, Kirsch’s rightful comments on the potential (and actual) conflicts of interest between the two functions of shareholder and regulator deserve particular notice.

Chapters 4 and 5, on corporate science and corporate responses to the critics, respectively, lead the reader more directly to Kirsch’s core position regarding both the study and perhaps the character of mining capitalism. He chooses to focus on “the dialectical relationship between corporations and their critics as its object of study rather than conducting ethnographic research within the corporation” (13). The point is of course interesting, but it might have been useful to broaden the scope to encompass the relationship of corporations with not only their critics but also their supporters, as well as those who simply do not care. The choice to focus on one dimension of

corporate external relations is underlain by a strong (and in my opinion risky) assumption about the extreme polarization of the mining arena conceived as a one-dimensional field of contest. Furthermore, it derives from an assumed stance that also requires close critical attention: “conducting ethnographic research within the corporation poses a risk of co-optation, because the tendency of ethnographers to empathize with the subjects of their research may influence their findings or temper their critical perspectives” (12). This option can be seen as a paradoxical form of “ethnographic refusal,” which does not concern the study of resistance, as analyzed by Sherry Ortner in a 1995 essay (*Comparative Studies in Society and History* 37 (1): 173–193), but instead the study of dominant or powerful actors. The question of empathy stressed by Kirsch also raises its head regarding ethnographic subjects the ethnographer is supposed not to like: How can one ethnographically study neo-Nazi or extreme right-wing parties? Moreover, the issue is not only about “the risk of empathy.” In the case of corporation executives, it is also a matter of “studying up” (by analogy to marrying up) and of methodological biases this situation implies (as exemplified by Monique Pinçon-Charlot and Michel Pinçon in their sociological analysis of French high society (eg, *Genèses* 3:120–133 [1991]), or by Alex Golub and Mooweon Rhee in their work on corporate elites in the PNG mining and petroleum sector (*Paideuma* 59:215–236 [2013])). In any event, the methodological choices made by Kirsch, despite unquestioned shortcomings, are consistent with his

positioning as “participant observer” within the networks actively engaged in claims against the corporation, and the result gives room for a rich, insider’s account and analysis.

The “politics of time” that constitute the final chapter are explicitly directed toward a strategic use of the ethnography deployed in the volume. Drawing from results of the politics of space mobilized in Ok Tedi—in short, legal success, environmental disaster—and resorting to the Latin American practice of *consultas* (216–220), Kirsch demonstrates how a “politics of time” is activated to mobilize people beyond the start of any mining project. He engages a discussion on the notion of free, prior, and informed consent, which brings into focus an arena of contest between strong and weak definitions of the notion (similar in this respect to the notion of sustainability).

To conclude, if the anthropologist’s commitment alongside the peoples she or he lives with can rightly be seen as a form of reciprocity (9), symmetry as an anthropological principle—studying all the stakeholders on an equal methodological footing—is also a sign of commitment to the politics and ethics of ethnography. However, despite his rejection of symmetry in this case, the account delivered by Kirsch and the clarity of his positioning make this book a fascinating piece of work, well worth reading.

PIERRE-YVES LE MEUR
*Institut de recherche pour
 le développement (IRD),
 Noumea, New Caledonia*

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