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## Underground Politics

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## SUMMARY

This dissertation draws on 13 months of ethnographic fieldwork to zoom in on the underground politics of small-scale gold mining in Chocó, Colombia. It tells the story of a heterogeneous miner population that has become increasingly sidelined by mining legislation. Moving beyond the mystifying tropes of unruliness that generally surround this population, the ultimate purpose of the dissertation is to flesh out the forms of socio-political order that arise in an area commonly portrayed as a zone of social disorder. Stated otherwise, the dissertation explores the question: *Which everyday practices of socio-territorial organization are emergent in the allegedly disorganized gold-mining regions of Chocó, and how are these practices being shaped by, and giving shape to, state governance?* In answering this question, the book weaves together an analysis of three distinct, yet interrelated, research themes, namely socio-territorial relations, political subjectivities, and bottom-up state-making.

Chapter 1 introduces the study: It situates Chocó's miners against the wider Colombian backdrop of small-scale mining criminalization, presents the debates that scholarly literature on small-scale mining has generated, charts the historical and geographical context of Chocó, and sets out the research methods used and the book's writing style and chronology. The cornerstones of the chapter are the sections dealing with theory and methods. The theoretical section explores the debates on formalization and environmental degradation that permeate the literature on small-scale mining, and subsequently outlines the three contributions that the current study seeks to make to this literature, namely: (1) revealing from up close the socio-territorial relations that lie dormant in highly informalized mining regions; (2) complicating the scholarly image of a uniformly excluded small-scale mining sector by showing how state policies affect mining stakeholders in unequal ways; and (3) challenging notions of state absence that prevail in mining literature by visualizing stakeholders' everyday practices of state-making. The methodological section, in turn, motivates the choice of the three fieldwork locales ("Caliche," "La Peña"—both pseudonyms—and Bebará), details the different protagonists of the study (most notably: miners, community leaders, and landholders), reflects on issues of positionality, and elaborates on the study's reliance on participant observation and the three forms that such participant observation predominantly took (meetings, hanging out at mines, walking).

After the introduction, the book's eight empirical chapters are grouped in three overarching parts, reflecting the study's three-pronged thematic division. Part 1, *Socio-Territorial Relations*, comprises three chapters that present a close-up view of how

Chocó's miners organize, perceive, and live their mining under the radar of formal regulatory mechanisms. Chapter 2 sets the stage and introduces the reader to the current "afterward" situation of *chocoano* mining. It tells the story of mined-out landscapes, where low-tech operators scrape the surface for the residual gold that earlier excavators left in their wake. Although many of these operators begrudge the present-day difficulties of finding gold—as they have become destined to perform the same Herculean labor as their parents, but for lower production returns—mining in "afterward" forests does come with several perks that make precarious livelihoods easier to bear: Miners find joy in working with peers, take pride in not having someone bossing them around, and derive hope from fantasizing about striking a rich gold deposit.

These perks, the chapter reveals, not only speak to the ambiguous moral value of mining, but also demonstrate the difficulty of portraying miners as self-strategizing subjects in search of maximized profits. Indeed, alluvial mining in Chocó is conditioned not only by controllable mechanisms of production and cost-profit speculation, but also by well-formulated desires for autonomy, by friends and family claiming their share in one's gold mine, and by the willingness of gold itself to appear (or not)—notwithstanding one's investment of time, fuel, and labor. In view of this indeterminant appearance of gold, Chapter 2 shows that *chocoano* miners must become savvy readers of landscapes in order for their luck to increase. The activities of foregoers offer clues to where gold may rest, the motions of the earth where dangers loom large, and the whims of the weather when extraction can occur. Of course, apart from properly reading the land, miners can win nature over with horse power: Bigger motors wash larger quantities of earth and therefore produce more gold. Still, by betting on technical advancement, miners also expose themselves to menaces, ranging from mechanical failures to labor accidents.

Scaling up to more technically refined excavation, Chapter 3 examines what it is that residents of mining regions like about excavator miners who ravage their forests. By illustrating that in these regions the degradation of nature and the making of livelihoods are not a priori antagonistic forces, the chapter sits uneasily with commonplace readings of rapacious frontier grabs. It shows that while in the past few decades excavator miners have devoured trees, subsistence crops, and surface gold, they are nevertheless still applauded—and courted—by large parts of mining communities for the access they provide to deeper-lying gold. The interlocutors of this study were not indifferent to the ecological price they had paid for such mineral access. But they also presented themselves as being more than their lands. They dreamed of better futures, and desired to remodel houses, pay for tuition fees, and have money for

leisure activities. To accomplish these goals, many continued to view excavator mines, now diminished in number, as the preferred model for development, despite, or because of, the damage that these mines had inflicted on traditional economies. Now that excavator destruction had entered an advanced stage, low-tech mining methods and subsistence agriculture simply felt too little, too late.

Continuing with excavators, Chapter 4 shines an empirical light on the effects of heavy extraction on community organization. The chapter identifies an unfolding of contentious politico-economic relations in the voids of the state's regulatory framework, whereby miners, landholders, and community leaders simultaneously work together and against one another in the scramble for gold. The chapter shows that while concealment and rivalry are paramount in extractive organizing, mining stakeholders are careful not to let conflicts escalate. They accept defeat, defuse tensions, tolerate the trickery of others, and publicly praise those they badmouth in private spheres. In order for mining to continue as usual, people regularly opt for pragmatics over pride, preferring some imperfect truce over losing out on gold winnings altogether.

Hereafter, the second part of the book, *(Un)Making Citizens*, enwraps informal extraction within the wider web of state rule and reveals how mining communities are affected by formal governance. It bundles together two chapters scrutinizing Colombia's (in)formalization policies, capturing these policies both as a neoliberal rationality of rule (Chapter 5) and as a concrete set of governing effects that give shape to miner subjectivities (Chapter 6). In doing so, the chapters channel attention to miners' differentiated legal inclusion, thus pushing against prevailing scholarly suggestions of a singular, informal small-scale miner population.

Chapter 5 engages with the policies and discourses of central state representatives. First off, it breaks down how Colombian lawmakers' wooing of the corporate industry has fused with a relentless stigmatization and penalization of domestic small-scale miners. Then, going beyond a mere analysis of informalization, the second half of the chapter analyzes the political potential of actual formalization efforts. It details the emergence of *mineros permitidos*, namely small-scale mining subjects who enjoy access to formality, as long as they commit themselves to restricted subsistence methods in "mining reserves" that do not endanger the current model of extractive development. Such "permitted" inclusion, the chapter argues, allows the state bureaucracy to confront its problems of public legitimacy and extend its formal regulatory framework, while leaving intact the corporate underpinning of this framework.

Chapter 6 looks at the affective experience of informality and shows how political abandonment works out in daily practice. The chapter's principal focus is excavator miners, who because of their higher production levels are at the forefront of informality: Compared with low-tech operators, they are more likely to be associated with and extorted by armed groups, to be blamed by legislators for environmental degradation, and to be subject to equipment destruction and detention by police forces. In exploring the question of which forms of citizenship emerge under conditions of severe illegalization, Chapter 6 is mostly a story of disillusion and defeat. It chronicles excavators blown up in police operations, worksites raided by bandits, titling requests getting tied up in bureaucratic red tape, and miners describing the destruction of their working equipment by their government as the destruction of their own personhood.

Then, after we have observed how state governance impinges on mining territories, the book's third part (*Bottom-up State-Making*) illustrates how these territories themselves give form to state-making. Part 3 consists of three chapters that together challenge the imagery of statelessness that pervades much writing on mining frontiers. By adopting an anthropological conceptualization of the state, in preference to a legalist top-down approach, the chapters tease out the myriad ways that stakeholders in gold country participate in statecraft.

Chapter 7 focuses on the state-making practices of miners. It details how rather than being solely trampled by state legislation, "informal" miners actively influence how such legislation manifests itself in everyday life. Although state blueprints like laws, decrees, and concessions do a thorough job in regulating, taxing, surveilling, and excluding miners, the latter also read and reenact these statutory categories in ways that exceed their original purposes and meanings. During the fieldwork, one form of such bottom-up law-making particularly stood out, as it occurred in the places where formality felt most absent: the excavator mines. While excavator owners lacked mining titles and environmental licenses, many of them nevertheless invested in a kind of make-believe legality, by planting the trees they thought the government wanted them to plant, and by holding on to paperwork that hinted at some connection to officialdom. Miners calculated that some limited expression of "legality" could favor their odds in a forthcoming police operation, or, as some dared to dream, would perhaps one day result in a mining concession. Hence, by anticipating government interventions, and by treating de facto legality as cumulative rather than binary, these miners were "conjuring" (Campbell 2015) from the ground up a formalization regime that had yet to arrive top-down.

Chapter 8 extends the argument of bottom-up state-making to community councils, and documents the emergence of "underground" modalities of multicultural

rule. Drawing principally on fieldwork on the Bebará river, the chapter shows how the regulation of mining activities by Afro-descendant communities is predicated on claims, practices, and documents that make continuous reference to ethno-cultural law. Now, even though such “underground multiculturalism” derives its legitimacy from everyday uses of law, it is a form of grassroots governance that operates mostly in opposition to state regulatory authority: Its involvement in heavy extraction mismatches with the traditionalist and “subsoil-excluding” gist of multicultural law, its regulated miner population is severely criminalized by extractive legislation, and—as in the exceptional case of Bebará—its regulatory effectiveness may even depend on enjoying access to the “muscle” of extra-state armed actors.

Chapter 9, then, reveals how the bottom-up state-building by miners and community leaders does not just conjure state power in the interstices of formal rule; in fact, its unfolding is constitutive of, and depends on, the governing activities of the state apparatus. Written as a rejection of monolithic representations of the Colombian state, the chapter paints a picture of local bureaucrats as pragmatic rulers, whose governing practices have more to do with the nuances of local power relations than with strict allegiances to legal mandates. The chapter shows how gold frequently crosses the line between the legal and the extra-legal, fostering unlikely collaborations between community leaders, miners, and bureaucrats, which allow the first to instill their public authority, the second to access variously convincing mechanisms of make-believe legality, and the third to raise their tax bases, increase their legibility, and build infrastructure.

Finally, the conclusion summarizes all of the former, and gives a brief post scriptum on the current state of mining affairs and formalization in Chocó, thereby offering a tentative outlook on the future of chocoano gold extraction.