anthropology thesis proposal for Sam Law

Advisor preference:
First Reader:

I. The Marlin Mine in San Marcos Ixtahuacán and Sipacapa

The Marlin Mine, a gold mine in Guatemala, was supposed to be a model for how neo-liberal investment could function in the 21st century. It was not only the first mining project in Guatemala following the end of the civil war but it was also the first project that received funding from the World Bank following their 2003 “Extractive Industries Review” that was highly critical of previous investments. The project promised a new type of foreign direct investment, a type where companies were committed to “socially responsible mining” that would provide benefits to local communities to accompany the profits of the foreign investors.

However, the indigenous Mam and Sipapakense disagreed with the expert opinions of the mining companies and the World Bank and mounted serious opposition to the mining project. Their resistance, reflecting the multi-sited transnational nature of neoliberal governance, occurred at numerous scales: Citing ILO 169 that requires consultation with indigenous people, they carried out their own community consultations, won (empty) legal victories in national and international court, and re-established direct democratic indigenous authority structures that had been suppressed during Guatemala’s brutal decades long civil war. While the results of these efforts have not shut down the mine, leading to disastrous consequences for the land, air, water and health of surrounding communities, it has sparked a national movement in Guatemala, largely led by indigenous communities, opposing mining.

II. What I wish to spend the next ~7 months thinking about

In my thesis I want to examine what forms resistance to extractive industry takes in a neoliberal age, where transnational forms of governance mean that movements can
no longer operate at just the local and national level. While there are many different actors resisting the Marlin Mine, I want to focus on the Mam and Sipapakense people. Methodologically, I want to approach this issue from “the bottom up” however I also want to be cautious of spatial metaphors that pit “local” resistance at the “bottom” against “global” capitalism at the top. Rather, I want to, while centering the voices and actions of the people most affected by mining, examine how resistance, like capital, operates in and is made possible by a trans-local form. Such an approach entails looking at how the mine is contested at different sites, from international courts to rural democratic assemblies, and the different representational frames and scale-making projects that these contestations consist of. In order to find a common thread to tie together these diverse localities, I will trace the identity category of indigeneity and how it travels and is invoked across dramatically different contexts brought together by a “global” (or, trans/multi-local) political economic form.

III. sources

One major advantage of studying the controversy around the Marlin Mine is that it is incredibly well documented. As far as English language sources go, I have found seven academic articles, several long (100+ pages) NGO reports, 3 documentaries, numerous personal accounts from international solidarity activists, long speeches and interviews with Guatemalan activists, reports from the World Bank and the mining company itself and even a masters dissertation. There is also the coverage that the Mine has gotten in the media over the last 10 years. In Spanish (which I am currently learning) the sources are even more extensive. There are the websites of various activist organizations filled with informational material, videos of meetings and conferences, several books that cover the mine and even more extensive coverage in the media.
Bibliography


Joris van der Sandt. “Mining Conflicts and Indigenous People in Guatemala.”
Mining and Indigenous Peoples in Guatemala.; and Luis Willems. “Mining and Indigenous Peoples in Guatemala: The Local Relevance of Human Rights.”

Tracy L. Barnett. “Gold on Hold.” Cultural Survival n. pag.
