

Book Review

Tubb, Daniel. 2020. *Shifting Livelihoods: Gold mining and subsistence in the Chocó, Colombia*. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press

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Daniel Tubb's *Shifting Livelihoods: Gold mining and subsistence in the Chocó, Colombia* takes the reader on a winding journey down a river in Western Central Colombia, stopping at gold mines along the way. The beautifully written ethnography combines political economy with anthropological analyses to understand the complexities of a gold rush, as they are experienced by subsistence producers, small-scale miners, and communities affected by transnational mining companies.

Tubb, armed with his camera, a notebook and a pair of willing hands, gets to work panning for gold alongside small-scale miners. But, unlike other mining ethnographies which tend to hold close to the extractive process, he sees mining as connected to broader processes of livelihood making and, importantly for his analysis, he accompanies miners and their families as they complete other kinds of subsistence work (like hunting, harvesting), and other forms of life-making strategies for accumulating wealth (like holding a small store). As such it provides a more encompassing – and in my opinion, more just – approach to small-scale mining than is often found in the literature.

The ethnography is divided into three sections, anchored in traditional political economy concepts (Production, Accumulation and Transformation), with each section containing two chapters exploring each concept from the perspective of a different actor. The Production chapter looks at subsistence mining and how gold forms part of household economies where its use value is prioritized over its exchange value. The Accumulation section looks at how mines serve as outlets to accumulate wealth as a strategy for rebusque – but how that changes the relationship of the labourer to the mine, to the materials, and

to the surrounding environment. And the Transformation chapter challenges the idea that speculative mining projects generate value. This section in particular offers novel insights into mining projects in their totality.

This ethnography is relevant for discussions about precarious labour, and forms part of a growing anthropological discussion which seeks to situate people's lived experiences of the freedom, creativity and flexibility that informal and unsalaried labour provides while simultaneously situating this within a broader structural discussion of racialized violence, displacement, and inequality (see, for example, Kathleen Millar, 2018). Tubb uses the term used in Colombia *rebusque* – which he translates as shifting – to describe the insecure forms of work which have millions of Colombians creatively developing and shifting strategies to make a living and find work – He uses *rebusque* since he views it as a concept which enables agency but also recognizes structural limitations. He says “stories of living through *rebusque* are stories of a creativity and optimism that are a counterpoint to alternative renditions that would focus on lack of choice, lack of opportunities, and on the legacies of slavery, poverty and war.” (p. 24).

There are some novel insights that Tubb's political economy background provides for anthropological discussions of small-scale mining. First, his shift from production to accumulation enables him to develop a nuanced and specific understanding of non-industrial forms of gold mining. Whereas the literature generally refers to small-scale mining as characterized by the scale of the operation, Tubb demonstrates that there are significant differences between miners who pan for gold as a way of providing a cash economy to meet their subsistence needs (he refers to them as subsistence miners), as compared to small-scale miners who deploy machinery, employ labourers and work the mine in order to simply accumulate wealth. These categories provide an analytical frame to take a closer look at the kinds of labour and social relationships which emerge at these very different mines (despite their general similarities in appearance and scale).

Second, Tubb's discussion about transformation is an important one, if only that it seems to provide the reader with a novel approach to understanding speculation and money laundering which he lays out as parallel processes at “potential” gold mine sites in Cauca. Current understandings in NGO and extractivist circles maintain that mining projects *produce* value, through speculative practices which generate shareholder interest in stock exchanges outside of country. What Tubb demonstrates, however, is that stock exchanges, like money

laundering, serve to transform value, that is, to move it from one economic sphere to the next. This is an important contribution to economic anthropology.

As an anthropologist interested in the materiality of the labour process, I longed for more description on the phenomenological aspects of the different forms of mining explored in the book. Although he gives the reader some description of the way artisanal miners work with their hands, I expected this discussion to be more developed. A discussion which links the changes in the materiality of the work to the economic strategies and socio-cultural world making by miners would be compelling.

This ethnography is an eloquently written and concise read for multiple audiences interested in discussions about economic anthropology and the anthropology of mining. Although the theoretical underpinnings are complex, Tubb's ability to write and develop narrative without jargon makes it particularly accessible for an undergraduate readership.

Shifting Livelihoods is a respectful walk alongside miners in Colombia's Chocó region that manages to capture their humanity and dignity – something that journalists and politicians have failed heretofore to do.

Reference

Millar, Kathleen. 2018. *Reclaiming The Discarded: Life and Labour on Rio's Garbage Dump*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.