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# In Search of the Midas Touch: Gold, Güiriseros and Globalization in Nicaragua

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**Abstract:** This paper seeks to interrogate three central claims of discourses on globalization—newness, interconnectedness, and the claim that capitalism is all pervasive in all parts of the world. Using historical and ethnographic materials from a mining town in Nicaragua, this paper explores these issues through a discussion of the changing relationships between small mining, gold production, and globalizing processes. It argues that the persistence of small mining and struggles over commodity production highlight the uneven and incomplete nature of capitalist globalization and the role of long-term historical processes in shaping contemporary local-global encounters. It concludes by suggesting a need for further theoretical refinement and a framework that incorporates older and newer approaches to the analysis of forms of commodity production under contemporary globalization.

**Keywords:** globalization, mining, Nicaragua

**Résumé:** Cet article souhaite interroger trois thèses centrales concernant les discours sur la mondialisation, celle de sa nouveauté, celle des interconnexions, et l'idée que le capitalisme envahit le monde entier. Utilisant un matériel historique et ethnographique à partir d'une ville minière du Nicaragua, cet article explore ces thèmes à travers une discussion sur l'évolution des relations entre petite exploitation minière, production d'or et processus de mondialisation. L'article argumente sur le fait que la persistance de la petite exploitation minière et la lutte pour la production de biens souligne la nature incomplète et inégale de la mondialisation capitaliste et le rôle d'un processus historique à long terme dans la formation de rencontres locales-globales. Il conclut en suggérant le besoin d'une recherche théorique plus affinée et d'un cadre qui incorpore des approches anciennes et nouvelles pour analyser les formes de la production de biens dans la perspective de la mondialisation contemporaine.

**Mot-clés:** mondialisation, exploitation des mines, Nicaragua

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*Boccardi Capital Brings "A Touch of Gold" to Las Vegas*

LAS VEGAS, Feb. 12 /PRNewswire/ —Boccardi Capital announced today the beginnings of their much-vaunted branding concept, KING MIDAS WORLD. New partners have come on board for this development that promises to change Las Vegas forever. More than just an innovative way to play with money in Las Vegas and elsewhere, the KING MIDAS WORLD concept introduces an all surrounding lifestyle. Based on the ancient legend of KING MIDAS (The Midas Touch) who turned to gold everything he touched, KING MIDAS WORLD will empower people in much the same way. With the pieces in place, Boccardi is set to deliver to Las Vegas a revolutionary new dimension to the gaming industry, opening new doors of revenue and entertainment.<sup>1</sup>

## Random Images:

Snapshot 1: A marriage is taking place in Coimbatore, South India. The 800 or so guests stare with interest at the groom and bride seated in the middle of the large wedding hall. The groom looks mightily uncomfortable in a silk *dhoti* that is embroidered with real gold patterns. The bride sweats through a 9-yard silk *sari* that is also woven with gold. The temperature in the room is about 100° F. The wedding is solemnized by exchanging gold necklaces, each weighing about 15-20 ounces. Although they do not believe in dowry, the bride's family hands over a vast array of "gifts" to the groom's family. Prominent among these, as noted by everyone present, are gold coins, biscuits and jewelry.

Snapshot 2: A small sailboat has left the coast of the United Arab Emirates. In addition to fish, it carries 200 pounds of gold bars. The boat will make landfall somewhere on the West Coast of India. From there, the contraband will make its way into the "formal" precious metals market in Bombay.

Snapshot 3: The hole was bigger. What was once a mountain covered with tropical hardwood trees was now

a gaping dust-ridden crater five kilometres wide. The company's workers labour in their caterpillars and trucks far below, 400 feet below ground level. Gold-bearing ores are brought up to the processing plant where they are added to the large mounds placed on sheets of black plastic over which a pipe sprays a cyanide-based solution. The Indonesian soldier, machine-gun in hand, looks on as the helicopter takes off with gold ingots. A similar scene is being played out simultaneously in the Philippines, Ecuador, and Nevada, U.S.A.

Snapshot 4: June 1999. San Juan Ridge, California. Eighty-five activists from 21 countries meet for a week to discuss the global implications of gold mining. Environmentalists, feminists, indigenous rights activists, scientists, small miners, and mine workers discuss and debate against the backdrop of mountains and streams that were decisively transformed by the California Gold Rush of 1849. Although no consensus is achieved, everyone agrees that large-scale gold mining should be immediately banned.

The stuff of fantasies, dreams and nightmares, gold continues to circulate in peoples' lives around the world. Loved and worshipped by billions, hated, increasingly, by millions, it is a commodity with few equals. Despite the much-vaunted world of high technology, Internet finance, virtual money, or hedge funds, gold continues to play an important economic role in the present context. Although no longer viewed as a counterpart to money in the West, gold nonetheless retains that role in large parts of the developing world. Its global presence signifies past and present linkages that provide a useful window into the nature and shape of contemporary globalization.

Gold is a rather peculiar commodity. At an abstract level, it is a commodity like any other that is produced under conditions of capitalist production. Similar to oranges, shoes or wine, it has use value, exchange value, and value. Gold does not have any special abstract qualities that mark it as an unusual commodity. It is traded in formal and informal markets from stock exchanges to pawn shops and street corners. Like other metals and minerals, it is inorganic and non-renewable. It is found in very specific locales and regions that meet certain geological conditions. Control over space, especially sub-surface rights, is crucially important in gold mining as it is in the case of other precious metals. These three factors have generated tendencies towards cartelization in the mining sector (Fine, 1994). However, these factors and yet others do not add any special properties to gold; they could as easily apply to manganese, copper or platinum. What gives gold its unique status has less to do with its

malleability or rare occurrence and more to do with the ways in which it has been and continues to be linked to the changing contours of historical and contemporary phases of globalization.

Unlike most commodities, gold has a rather complicated relationship with globalization. An investigation of all of the facets of this relationship would be useful indeed. Here I will just mention some salient features. For example, one would have to interrogate the notion that gold, like other commodities, is "inserted" into global processes. Indeed, the reverse may equally hold true; after all, in many ways, the pursuit of gold was a precursor to earlier phases of globalization and the formation of a world economy, not least of which was the conquest of the Americas. Additionally, there is the matter of the relationship between gold and the emergence of world money in the modern context (Vilar, 1976). Gold came to occupy an eminent place in the emergent world capitalist market since it underpinned and backed international monetary and financial transactions. The gold standard was initially associated with British imperial power beginning in the 1820s. Later, aided by the discoveries of large ore deposits in California, South Africa, and Australia, an international gold standard was established and, despite the turmoil of late 19th-century industrial capitalism, it persisted as the medium for international currency conversions until the First World War. It was briefly re-adopted in 1928 and again after the Second World War. The rise of Bretton Woods and U.S. dollar hegemony after the Second World War was based upon the fact that the U.S. government virtually had monopoly control over most of the available gold in the world at the time. Indeed, the unhinging of gold from the U.S. dollar, under the Nixon administration, signified the first step in the collapse of Bretton Woods, the subsequent rise of floating exchange rates and a host of other monetary and financial instruments, and the emergence of the current phase of neoliberal capitalist globalization. This would be an interesting study and the monetarist and financial literature is full of impassioned debates surrounding this long relationship between gold, world money and global capitalism.

Other aspects, especially of interest to anthropologists, might also involve an exploration of the continuing endurance of the symbolic power of gold. Or, how through the different global circuits of legal and illegal networks of distribution, a large part of the world's gold ends up being consumed in countries like India and China, primarily as jewelry and as "savings" in lieu of bonds and shares. Another facet of this relationship might also deal with the large and growing global environmental movement that seeks to ban world gold production, especially

extraction and refinement, since it is so harmful to the environment. Finally, there is the issue of the production of the commodity itself. Despite being dominated by multinational corporations, gold continues to encompass highly varied methods and forms of production.

All these various kinds of relationships emerged in distinct periods and places, and involved different kinds of peoples and social relations. What one finds at the global level is a bewildering variety of relations of production, distribution and consumption, differentially positioned agents, institutions, and social and financial networks, shaped by long-term historical processes, and with their attendant political and cultural motives in distinct local, regional, national and global realms (Roseberry, 2002). We are thus confronted, once again, with the issue of analyzing the nature of a dynamic yet perpetually uneven world capitalist system. My argument of course rests on the premise that globalization or global capitalism is nothing more than the inchoate fusion of distinct processes in different parts of the world. Even as important academic debates revolve around the identification and analysis of the dominant tendencies of this evolving system (Friedman, 1994; Harvey, 2000), what remains an important anthropological task is the analysis of the place-based embeddedness of global capitalism (Smith, 2002).

In this paper, I explore the changing relationships between gold and processes of globalization from the perspective of one “globally” marginal country, Nicaragua. Currently, Nicaragua is not a major gold producer in terms of the global mining industry. Mining’s contribution to the Nicaraguan national economy is also minimal. Nonetheless, the transformations and conflicts in the mineral sector, especially gold, expose some of the conflicts and contradictions associated with contemporary globalization. Within Nicaragua, the focus is on the mining town of La Libertad in the province of Chontales. The primary intent is to trace out some of the historically changing patterns of relationships surrounding the production of gold in the area, how it links up to regional, national, and international processes, and the ways in which these have shaped local encounters with the current phase of neo-liberal globalization. By use of this ethnographic material, I want to interrogate three central claims made by globalization theorists—newness, interconnectedness, and most importantly, the claim that capitalism is all-pervasive, in all parts of the world, now, more than ever.

The paper proceeds as follows. First, it outlines the encounter between a transnational mining corporation and the mining town of La Libertad in the mid-1990s, something that cannot be easily bracketed within the concepts of “resistance” and/or “adaptation” (Lewellen, 2002;

see also Barber, 2002). Next, the paper moves back in time to briefly consider three earlier phases of globalization. The choice of these periods is arbitrary and one could very well outline more phases than those discussed here. The point of this historical exercise is to explore how the politics of the present are constituted. My argument is that the current local-global encounter in distinct areas has to be placed within a long-term historical framework if we are to make sense of the different reactions to and engagements with neo-liberal globalization. Finally, the paper returns to the present context to chart the contradictory impact of globalization. The paper concludes by suggesting that the first two claims of the dominant strand of writings on globalization (I am referring here to the body of work associated with scholars like Arjun Appadurai, Anthony Giddens, David Held, Joseph Stiglitz and others)—newness and interconnectedness, have been and can be dispatched effectively. However, the third claim, that the world is capitalist, now more so than ever, remains the leading assumption that needs to be confronted. This seems quite important in order to highlight the uneven nature of global capitalism and to understand the nature of the struggles over commodity production that are going on in different parts of the world.

## The Differentiated Local

### *From Revolution to Neoliberalism*

La Libertad is a small town (officially a city by Nicaraguan statutes) and administrative centre of the municipality of the same name. It is located in the province of Chontales in the south-central area of the country. The provincial economy is dominated by extensive cattle ranching, as it has been since the colonial era, and industry is virtually non-existent. La Libertad and a neighboring town Santo Domingo, with sizeable populations engaged in gold mining, remain exceptions to the larger provincial dynamic. With a population of about 4000 people, La Libertad lies right in the middle of hills and valleys crisscrossed with gold-bearing veins that have been exploited for than a century. Despite a long history of gold mining, or maybe because of it, it remains a backwater town with crumbling roads, minimal infrastructure, few services, and high levels of poverty (Lazo, 1995). Indeed, when first time visitors get off the bus on the La Libertad’s main and only paved street, they have no visual clues that this was a commercially vibrant and rich town for a good many years. While the majority of the inhabitants make their living directly or indirectly from mining activities, a sizeable number, including the town elite, is involved in cattle ranching. The rest are itinerant merchants or traders,

domestics, or work at odd jobs, and a good number are unemployed. La Libertad is typical of most towns and cities that dot the Nicaraguan landscape and would have likely remained in obscurity had it not been for the fact that both Daniel Ortega, guerilla fighter and President of Nicaragua during the years of the Sandinista Revolution, and Miguel Obando y Bravo, Central America's Archbishop and ideological spokesperson for Nicaraguan conservatives, hail from the town.

On the political and ideological level, La Libertad presents an interesting paradox within the provincial dynamic. Like most parts of Central Nicaragua, Chontales was the staging ground for fierce battles during the decade of the 1980s. The overwhelming majority of the provincial population, primarily rural, was part of and sympathetic to the U.S. backed-and-funded *contras*. This municipality was no exception. But in town the situation was, and remains, quite different. Urban *Liberteños* (people from La Libertad) remain polarized about the Sandinista Revolution and this cleavage largely runs along occupational lines. Urban-based cattle ranchers and many of their *mozos* (field hands), along with the richer mercantile families, who also form the town's political and economic elite, are staunchly anti-Sandinista. Mineworkers and small miners, along with their families, small merchants, domestic workers, and schoolteachers form the core Sandinista constituency in town. This element of significant urban Sandinista support made La Libertad unique within the larger provincial dynamic. Things began to unfold in new and complicated ways as Nicaragua embraced the dictates of neo-liberal globalization in the 1990s.

In 1993-94, Greenstone Resources Inc., a Toronto-based transnational company gained a mining concession from the neo-liberal Violeta Chamorro government. The Chamorro government, elected in 1990 after a decade of radical Sandinista rule, was committed to a dramatic overhaul of Nicaragua's economy. Nonetheless, it could not fully implement this since the *Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional* (FSLN) was the largest opposition party in the Nicaraguan National Assembly. The dream of a quick transformation towards neo-liberalism remained deferred and became an arena of conflicts and compromises through the 1990s.<sup>2</sup> One area where there seemed to be consensus was the opening up of mineral and other natural resources to private ownership and exploitation. Mines previously nationalized under the Sandinista government were slated for privatization. Mines were seen as the central elements of an export-oriented strategy that would bring in not only much needed foreign capital investments but also, so the argument went, generate employment, and contribute revenues in the form of taxes.

Mineworkers in Nicaragua's beleaguered mining industry, especially the gold mines, were caught in a quandary in the period of regime transition. On the one hand, they fought long and hard to retain effective possession over key operating mines. On the other hand, they were also faced with the spectre of minimal government support and poor and deteriorating technology and infrastructure, especially after years of the U.S. led trade embargo and civil war. The pro-Sandinista, national mine workers' union, FETAMINE, had few options. Faced with mounting losses in the country's mining industry, large debts, the possibility of bankruptcy, and with no resources to ensure smooth production, it was cajoled and coerced into becoming party to joint ventures with foreign corporations.<sup>3</sup> Effective control of Nicaraguan mining by foreign corporations was a *fait accompli*.

One of the players in this transition phase was the Canadian firm, Greenstone Resources Inc. (hereafter Greenstone). Key gold mines throughout the country were opened up for bids and La Libertad's mine was acquired by Greenstone. The La Libertad mining concession made Greenstone the largest enterprise in the province. The concession covered sub-surface mining rights to 160 square kilometres that included the entire town of La Libertad. Greenstone was already at work in Panama. Acquisition of the Nicaraguan concession was part of their design to become Central America's largest gold producer. Although it was primarily an exploration company that acquired properties to profitably resell them to other entities, it appears that Greenstone had decided to move into gold production proper with the acquisition of the La Libertad concession. Indeed, this appeared to become true over the next couple of years as the company obtained a concession in San Andrés, Honduras, and also acquired a 5 000 square kilometre exploration concession on the Atlantic Coast in Northeastern Nicaragua (approximately one-tenth of Nicaragua's national territory). By 1995-96, Greenstone was the largest mining company in Central America.

### *The Company Arrives*

When Greenstone officials arrived in La Libertad in mid-1994, they were confronted by a town whose reactions to the company's presence did not run along neat and ordered lines. On one side were the workers of the former national mine. As members of IMISA, they were "shareholders" in the new joint venture and eager to get back to production after a three-year lag. Although some were disgruntled at the lack of government support and felt they had been "sold" out to the *gringos*, the majority felt that this was indeed a better option than no work at all in the

crushing landscape of neo-liberal austerity. The local mineworkers' union, known nationally for its radical postures, promised its workers expanded benefits, higher salaries, and safe working conditions. On the other side were the town's small-scale miners. They referred to themselves as *pequeños mineros* (small miners) although most preferred the term *güiriseros*.<sup>4</sup> At the time, they numbered about 90-100 in all. Like the rest of Nicaragua, they were struggling to make ends meet in the post-revolutionary era where state subsidies for health, education, and welfare had dwindled to a minimum. Their livelihood was based almost exclusively on small-scale gold mining. Unlike the other mineworkers, they had no union or any collective organization. There was a loose conglomeration of individuals and families who worked in small groups of three to five persons using, as they themselves admit, "rustic" tools—pickaxes, shovels, crowbars and hammers.

The reactions of cattle ranchers and merchants were a bit more complicated. Cattle ranchers had dominated the local landscape from the 1950s onward. Those who owned properties close to town were wary of the possible effects of the company's ownership of the concession since by law they could be forced to sell their lands. A few were also concerned about potential environmental and ecological issues stemming from open-pit mining. Others looked forward to gaining lucrative monies as the company's presence dramatically boosted local real estate values. Wealthy merchants were very pleased with Greenstone's arrival as it brought back memories of the commercial bonanzas of years past. The commercial sector had been in the doldrums for most of the 1980s and the early 1990s. Neo-liberalism's promise was yet to materialize. They were tired of handing out commodities on credit to small miners and the unstable workforce; few had accumulated vast sums of money through trading activities alone. The arrival of the company with its promise of expanded employment, regular salaries, and the presence of foreign contractors seemed to indicate the possibilities of new and heightened patterns of consumption. Small merchants and moneylenders were a bit more cautious. They were poor themselves and their livelihoods were intimately connected with the small mining population. Their big fear was the end of small mining and with it the end of their activities. However, many also hoped to snatch a few jobs with the new company.

### *Protest and Accommodation*

Right from the beginning, relations between the small miners and Greenstone were fraught with tensions. In mid-1994, small miners were working on a small hill named El Mojon a few miles outside the town. A "rich

find" there, by a small miner prompted most small miners to work on the same hill in hopes of recovering a similar bonanza. Unbeknownst to the small miners, El Mojon was to be *the* location where Greenstone planned to build Central America's largest gold mine. At the time of the find, Greenstone officials had still not formally arrived in the area, but when they did they were rather surprised to find these small miners occupying the company's prime location. Surprise soon turned into frustration and anger when the small miners refused to leave. The latter were making claims on what was their "find" despite the fact that legally (and many did not understand the rapidly changing laws in Nicaragua) they had no valid claim to the area.

Greenstone officials, in conjunction with the mine's Nicaraguan administrative officers, all of whom were staunchly Sandinista, sought to cajole and then threaten the small miners. Facing possible eviction, the small miners armed themselves and decided to hold on to El Mojon by force. A few tense days passed with an armed stand-off between military troops, also Sandinistas, and the small miners. Faced with little support in town and the possibility of bloodshed, and with recent memories of 10 years of unrelenting civil war, the small miners decided to negotiate. Finally, negotiations took place and a series of accords were reached.

Part of this encounter had to do with how the situation was being interpreted. The small miners were not opposed to the company's presence *per se*. They just wanted to ensure that they would always have a place to mine on their own within the broader landscape of the town and surrounding hills. Many of them had familial and kin ties to the mineworkers. Additionally, mineworkers and small miners were united in their broad support for Sandinismo in a town, municipality, and region that was vehemently anti-Sandinista. Despite kin ties and political ideology, though, small miners were zealous in their arguments that the gold-bearing veins of La Libertad belonged to all *Liberteños*. Not only did gold belong to them due to their *derechos historicos* (historic rights) but it also was part of the general *patrimonio cultural* (cultural patrimony) of the town. They were the "militants" (*militantes*) who acted on behalf of the interests of the entire community.<sup>5</sup> They were willing to share mineral resources with Greenstone as long as they had rights to their livelihood. This meant that they would produce gold on their own with what little "autonomy" they could muster, using their "rustic" and "artisan" methods of production.

The responses to the small miners' claims varied. Central government officials who were in the area to prevent a potential armed conflict were outraged at such

claims since legally all mineral resources belonged to the nation, and the state, as guarantor of the nation's well being, had to dispense with resources as it saw fit. In the neo-liberal climate of the 1990s, facing IMF imposed austerity measures and seeking to reduce Nicaragua's debt situation, the government had been busy selling off concessions to the country's mineral, forest, and marine resources. By 1997, 60% of the national territory as a whole was handed over to various and sundry shell corporations. Small miners were definitely not part of the salvage plan.

Greenstone officials were bemused and annoyed. As far as they were concerned, gold was a commodity to be exploited following the dictates of the new global economy. Nicaragua's embrace of the free/world market in the 1990s did not give anyone any kind of "rights" to mine unless they could do it in an efficient, competitive, technologically sound, and profitable manner. Their arrival in Nicaragua coincided with massive flows of Canadian mining capital into Latin America in the 1990s. They had never faced any kind of sustained opposition in other countries, least of all, of this sort; a claim by groups to be "partners" in commodity production. As a high-ranking Greenstone official, a British ex-patriate based in the U.S. and working for a Canadian company in Nicaragua, informed me:

These people...these *güiri* whatever, have no place in the modern global economy. Hell, look at them! They are dirty, poor, backward, illiterate,—Christ! Who works with pickaxes and shovels these days? It's all so sad and backward. They better wise up and work for us, do something with their lives, or they'll be left with nothing.

This was not an isolated comment and reflected quite accurately sentiments shared by many high-ranking Greenstone officials who hoped either to displace the small miners completely from the concession or, as a compromise, incorporate some of them into the company's workforce.

Despite the best efforts of company officials, in conjunction with numerous state functionaries, they were far from successful. A variety of overt and covert tactics aimed at manipulating a negotiated settlement in favour of Greenstone failed. In the aftermath of the armed stand-off, and faced with the threat posed by the company and Nicaragua's neo-liberal regime, the small miners legalized themselves as a co-operative, and forced an agreement with the company. The company's heavy-handedness and threats to end small mining had galvanized much of the

population that saw the company's policies as mean-spirited and there was increased support for the small miners' efforts to defend their livelihoods. As grumbling and resentment grew in La Libertad and nearby towns, the company finally gave in and signed a set of accords that were quite favourable to the small miners. Small miners were guaranteed rights to work inside the concession as long as all recovered ores were sold to Greenstone at prevalent world market prices. Over the next five years, the number of people engaged in small mining in La Libertad grew from 100 to around 300. This was not an isolated local instance but reflected national trends in small mining growth. Given the 45%-60% rates of unemployment around the country and grinding poverty, a direct result of the imposition of structural adjustment policies by the Chamorro and Aleman governments, small mining offered a possible alternative for many of Nicaragua's poor who eagerly embraced the activity. Even as the government was busy courting foreign mining investments, the number of small miners in the country swelled in the late 1990s.

So, what does one make of a situation like this one in La Libertad? I think it alerts us to the fact that the "local" itself is a site of multiple, overlapping and contradictory interests and class dynamics, all of which play a key role in shaping the local-global encounter (Roseberry, 1989). This is all the more so in places like La Libertad, where about 80% of the population directly or indirectly earned its livelihood from the commodity under dispute, gold. Second, and this is more important, the responses of *Liberteños* was not something automatic, a sort of localist opposition to or embrace of globalization, but borne of deep-rooted and long-term encounters with a variety of globalizing processes. I turn now to briefly explore three snapshots of some of these processes to trace out the contours of the local-global encounter.

## Globalizations before Globalization

### *The Creation of a Small Mining-Merchant Capital Town*

There is no pre-global La Libertad. Unlike many parts of Nicaragua and the Americas broadly, where populations have long pre-colonial and colonial histories and have interacted with wider regional processes before being forcibly incorporated into world-systemic processes, the town of La Libertad has no pre-global history. The town/place/local emerged out of a confluence of global processes in the mid-to-late nineteenth century: the California Gold Rush, U.S. filibustering and other imperial adventures in the region, the struggle between U.S. and British forces to establish hegemony in Central America,

the search for gold in Canada and Australia, Nicaragua as a potential trans-isthmian canal route, foreign migrations to the country, and internal migrations and state-formative processes. All of these factors played a role in the establishment of La Libertad as a gold mining town, populated as it was, by a variety of Nicaraguan, European, North American, and Central American gold-seeking miners, merchants, bureaucrats, adventurers and travellers.<sup>6</sup>

Forms of small-scale mining, linked to, and dependent upon combinations of merchant and usury capital, dominated gold production in this time period. This is not to suggest a rosy picture of petty commodity production. There were differences in terms of investment in machinery, number of workers employed, the amounts of production, levels of indebtedness, whether it was family-based or run as a small business, yet, the overall logic was something that cannot be called capitalist. At least for the first 50 years, no large companies dominated the world of mining. The dispersed nature of mine ownership, problems of transportation and communication, an internally differentiated and competitive mercantile and money-lending sector, and the availability of multiple forms of credit ensured the reproduction of small mining, however unstable and precarious the circumstances may have been. There were efforts at monopolizing mining claims but they largely failed. What is relevant to this story is the emergence of a small-miner or *güiriserero* identity. Despite the ups and downs of the mining economy, the *güiriserero* presence survived until the 1940s.

Mercantile and money-lending profits undergirded the entire small mining economy even as it linked La Libertad to commercial elites in the important city of Granada and, from there, to London and New York. As in other parts of the non-Western world, merchant capital was content to interact with and benefit from diverse forms of production (Kahn, 1981). It was not, as some have suggested, the main factor in causing underdevelopment by extracting values and transferring them to metropolitan countries and corporations (Kay, 1975). In the absence of significant capital investments in the area, merchant capital allowed small mining to sustain itself over time. This is a pattern that has been observed in similar contexts of economies based on the extraction of natural resources and where the sources of waged employment are non-existent (Nugent, 1993). La Libertad was a cosmopolitan town linked to the outside world through commercial and trading circuits and where consumption practices reflected the latest trends and patterns in Europe and the U.S. Briefly, from 1909-19 a British mining company established its presence in the area. Although it strengthened

tendencies towards proletarianization, it never displaced small mining. The company's collapse in 1921 saw a resurgence of small mining that continued well into the late 1930s. Through this early period of almost a century, the majority of small miners, although highly indebted to various agents, had access to production space, and controlled the organization, rhythms, and patterns of production. They were not workers but were similar to small and petty commodity producers found in diverse historical and contemporary contexts (see for e.g., Adnan, 1985; Lem, 1998). Many owned, possessed, or leased mines and tools, and most had access to extraction and refining machinery. To be sure, there were some who earned their livelihood from wage labour or others who combined small mining with wage labour or petty mercantile activities. However, the overall dynamic in this period is neither one of increased proletarianization nor of a crystallization of class structures within small mining.<sup>7</sup> The dominant trend remained one of an unstable yet persistent pattern of small and petty commodity production.

### *Globalization in Reverse*

From 1950 to the 1979, La Libertad was, to use James Ferguson's apt phrase (1999), "disconnected" from the world economy as merchant capital fled and an extensive cattle-ranching economy displaced mining completely. This was not something that happened all over Nicaragua, as mining companies did continue to work in other parts of the country well into the early 1970s. It had more to do with local dynamics interacting with national and international processes. In particular, policy decisions of the Somoza State and land grabbing and mine monopolization by speculators and elites heightened class differentiation within small mining by 1938-39. The establishment of a large capitalist mining company in 1940, owned by one of Nicaragua's richest families, in league with U.S.-based investors, further weakened small mining as much of the local population ended up working for this company. This was the first time that capitalist mining and wage labour dominated the entire local economy. There was rapid and explosive commercial growth for the next few years as merchant capital increasingly embraced the profits to be garnered from large-scale mining. Proletarianization was widespread but it was short-lived. Economic crisis generated by World War II, the growth of trade unionism nationally, and local conflicts over access and rights to natural resources, forced the company to shut down operations in 1945-46.<sup>8</sup> Instead of the continuation of small mining or the reproduction of full-scale capitalist mining by other companies, there was complete destruction of the mining economy as the Somoza dictatorship's policies

ensured the privatization of national mining lands by cattle ranchers. The effects of embracing capital and global markets, symbolized primarily by La Libertad's airport (built in 1941) that connected local gold production to New York, were devastating. The result was a ghost town and by 1949 three-fourths of the population fled to other parts of Nicaragua.

Mining was forcibly displaced by extensive cattle ranching that created a more insular and "feudal-like" town with few (if any) global connections. The population of miners and their families that remained were socially and economically marginalized. Most remained unemployed while the rest worked as domestics, itinerant merchants, or as peons on the ranches. As expressed by informants, this was a period of abject "backwardness." Although the small mining population had always been poor, this was far worse as they were treated as pariahs and unsavoury elements. The bank, the movie theatre, various skilled workshops, the large commercial stores and small neighbourhood shops—symbols of the vibrant mining economy, all shut down, only compounding the sense of abandonment and decay. Mining was over for all intents and purposes but kept alive in memories.

### *Revolutionary Globalism and Gold Fever*

In the 1980s, Nicaragua and La Libertad became globalized again in new ways. At one level, Nicaragua became the new epicentre for social science, something that had been quite absent prior to the revolution. Unlike Mexico and Guatemala that had long been the focus of social science and anthropological research given the indigenous question, Nicaragua was the subject of only the occasional political science scholarship. All this changed with the Revolution of 1979 as left-wing scholars, including anthropologists, sympathetic to the revolution descended upon Nicaragua, joined by U.S., East European, and Scandinavian solidarity, anti-war, peace and church activists.

If Iran was a potential failure, in terms of its rapid swing to a fundamentalist revolutionary regime, the FSLN, despite its embrace of a mixed economy dominated by private property, at least stressed some commitment to socialist transformation that linked it with regimes in Eastern Europe and guerrilla movements in Latin America, Asia, and Africa.<sup>9</sup> The FSLN also sought to promote itself as a global player especially in the arena of Third World solidarity struggles and the Non-Aligned Movement as it tried to generate opposition to the U.S.-led trade embargo and counterrevolution. Even as the Nicaraguan Revolution was being globalized, especially its literacy and health-care programs which were lauded

around the world, La Libertad was being linked up to the global economy in new ways.

In 1979-80, world gold prices spiked to their highest levels ever jumping from \$80 an ounce to \$800 an ounce before finally stabilizing around \$400-\$450 for most of the 1980s.<sup>10</sup> In the chaos of the aftermath of the revolutionary overthrow of the Somoza dictatorship, thousands of poor Nicaraguans, including *Liberteños*, began to dedicate themselves to small mining. The FSLN government, which had nationalized all mining areas in the country as part of its revolutionary plan, reactivated a modern mining plant in La Libertad with its own salaried work force.

Unlike the mineworkers who laboured in the state mine for regular salaries, small mining was organized by small groups (three to five persons) of independent producers, usually related through ties of kinship or friendship, using their own tools, labour, and machinery. The groups were dependent on each other to address issues of transportation and refining of the ore but no collective organization emerged. The numbers of those engaged in small mining ebbed and flowed as some took up employment with the state mine, were drafted into the military, or migrated to avoid the draft and the civil war. Throughout the 1980s, small miners and the state enterprise worked side by side despite conflicts over the revolutionary state's claims to all gold produced in the country.

Facing an economically devastating embargo and counterrevolutionary war, the revolutionary government badly needed foreign exchange dollars and gold was a key commodity that provided this through its sale in foreign markets.<sup>11</sup> Small miners stubbornly resisted the state's efforts to control all gold commercialization. They had actively embraced a radical nationalist and anti-imperialist rhetoric that stressed productive autonomy and preservation of cultural patrimony. While they supported the revolution, they opposed the state using precisely those discourses promoted and simultaneously denied by the revolutionary government. Gold smuggling became a key part of the vibrant black market that rapidly grew all over the country and crossed regional and national boundaries (Ryan, 1995).

Local *Liberteño* identity was strengthened even as it was internally pulled apart by the contradictions of negotiating revolutionary nation-building but at the expense of place. The central issue for many was who controls the production and exchange of gold in a revolutionary context. As far as the revolutionary state was concerned, gold as a strategic natural resource and tradable commodity that earned foreign exchange belonged to the state since it played a pivotal role in financing programs

for the welfare of the nation's population. Further, it aided the FSLN in maintaining its global image of a government committed to socialist transformation. To this end, international geology and mining experts, especially from Sweden, were a constant presence in towns like La Libertad. In addition to massive amounts of Swedish foreign aid for machinery and equipment, these experts worked hard to assess gold reserves and increase gold production in the state owned mines. No attention was paid to small mining as it was considered less important even as the state tried, in vain, to capture the significant amounts of gold being produced legally and illegally by small miners throughout the country.

From the perspective of *Liberteño* small miners, gold was not something that belonged to the state but to the *pueblo* (the people), a term that constantly cropped up in FSLN rhetoric about the new revolutionary political economy under construction. From their perspective, there was an inconsistency between the state's efforts to promote a global image of revolutionary development and internal policies toward small mining. The majority of small miners were deeply committed to anti-imperialism and solidarity with other revolutionary movements in the Third World. Many had also enjoyed their interactions with and been impressed by Cuban and other activists who visited the town in this period. But they were firmly opposed to the state's claims over gold. They were sympathetic to goals of social justice and welfare for the country as a whole but not at the expense of their livelihood. The state's efforts to marginalize, and in many cases repress small miners, including several cases of imprisonment for illegal gold sales, was perceived by small miners as deeply anti-revolutionary. For many, the state became, as one informant put it, "*un acaparador de oro*" (gold merchant). The small miners' situation differed from that of other merchants, because this was a mercantile relationship that offered no credit or aid to help in procurement of production materials or to sustain them in times of economic crisis. Worse, the prices paid by the state for gold forcibly purchased from small miners were well below market prices. For small miners this was unconscionable. They perceived their livelihoods to be under threat and that their community was being sacrificed for the greater good of the "nation." Despite these conflicts, there was no "open" opposition on the part of small miners as many turned to the black market. Through the 1980s, they managed to hold ground working alongside more "modern" mining operations in the state mine. The conflict between state and revolution remained unresolved for many even as the FSLN lost power in the 1990 elections. Not surprisingly, small min-

ers in La Libertad, and around the country, voted overwhelmingly for the FSLN. Most were cognizant of the fact that in many ways they owed their ability to work and sustain themselves to a revolutionary movement, government, and political party that had opened up a definite space for them, and which, despite the turbulent relationship, had allowed small mining to re-emerge and flourish.

## The Politics of the Present

With this broad historical backdrop, when we turn to the 1990s, it is not surprising that the current global-local encounter in La Libertad over gold seems so messy. A variety of issues related to happy and sad memories of the past, class formations and disintegrations over the years, radical nationalism, de/proletarianization, local autonomy v/s national control, all were at play in shaping the myriad of *Liberteño* responses to Greenstone's presence in the town. The ability of small miners to forcefully negotiate and draw the majority of the population to their side, including many mineworkers, surprised and bewildered many in Greenstone's management who had assumed that small mining would slowly disappear without much of a struggle. Company efforts to bribe and win over town and provincial elites, and the national media and politicians, did mute opposition to Greenstone's activities. However, as a result of the accords signed in 1995, and once again in 1996, the number of small miners grew to 350.

Greenstone's own gold production was hampered for a variety of reasons ranging from mismanagement to hiring incompetent personnel and use of inappropriate machinery. The company's estimated gold production targets for 1996 and 1997 fell well below target and, ironically, it was ore purchased from small miners, which was high-grade, although a miniscule amount, that boosted production figures. Greenstone shares jumped to \$15-\$19 on the Toronto Stock Exchange and Nasdaq even though the company was still not producing large amounts of gold. This was the world of Internet-based trading as brokers and stockholders from around the world eagerly traded information on and awaited potential bonanzas from a town none had ever heard about. With online identities like "Mr. Metals," "JoGun," and "Technopeasant," shareholders from Canada, Australia, the U.S., and other countries, encouraged and boosted purchase of company shares.

This project aimed at building Central America's largest and most "modern" mine came to an end rather quickly. By 1998, Greenstone had already borrowed large sums of money and refinanced its debts twice. Despite the "positive" outlooks on the company's production from

financial consultants, lending agencies, and banks, the company was finding it hard to not only pay its contractors but also their workforce in La Libertad. Compounding the slow but steady decline in share values was a deep dip in gold prices as Central Banks in many European countries started selling their gold reserves on the open market. Operations were further hampered by the impact of Hurricane Mitch in 1998. By the middle of 1999, Greenstone was in the red, de-listed from stock exchanges, and by the end of the year it declared bankruptcy. Due to various outstanding debts to multiple lenders, the concession technically lay in the hands of banks in Nicaragua, Canada and Panama.

The impact of the closure on the town was devastating although less so than in the 1940s. Many rich merchants and storeowners were ruined. Mineworkers awaited new investors but, by the middle of 2001, none had arrived. Small mining continued to strengthen itself even as its numbers dwindled slightly. Despite threats from mine supervisors and government personnel, small miners installed grinding and processing machinery that dated back to the 19th century but which was well suited for their activities. The company's shutdown meant that they no longer had a committed buyer for large quantities of ore. This new context meant a return to subterranean and underground small mining that was focussed more on quality than quantity. It meant learning and relearning old skills, methods, and techniques to ensure sustainable livelihoods. It also meant a return to various kinds of mercantile and credit relationships to sustain this form of production. The new neo-liberal globalization came with a bang to La Libertad and dissipated slowly, although not completely, with a whimper. It is a story that continues to unfold even as gold prices are on the rise again globally after the financial shocks associated with the events of September 11, 2001.

### **Conclusion: Reassessing Globalization and Commodity Production**

So, what does this admittedly local case say about the usefulness of the notion of globalization? I think the "newness" and "interconnectedness" (greater connectivity! or lack thereof) arguments can be dispatched effectively through most historically based ethnographic studies. What is more troublesome, however, is the other claim of globalization discourses—that, now more than ever, we have to view the world through a capitalist lens with its attendant concepts, categories, and identities.

Such an approach tends to flatten the struggles over commodity production and pigeonhole it into a *Kapitalologic* straitjacket. Even David Harvey's stimulating alternative

to globalization, "uneven geographical development," misses the point because in his scheme there is no space/place for non-capitalist forms of production (2000). This is not an issue that affects only our analysis of 300 *güiriseros* in La Libertad or the 15 000 *güiriseros* in Nicaragua. Once we add thousands of small miners in South America, West Africa, Southeast Asia, Indonesia, Philippines, China, and other places, peasants (despite claims to post-peasantness), artisans, fishermen/fisherwomen, and so forth, we get a very different picture of the global economy. The world capitalist system or capitalist globalization is highly heterogeneous and continues to be an articulation of different forms of capitalist and non-capitalist production (Banerjee, 1987). This is not simply a theoretical or academic exercise but is central to issues of identity-formation and the politics of class struggle.

As we remarked, in the 150 years of gold mining in La Libertad what we witness is a protracted albeit uneven struggle between global capitalist processes, different forms of capital, most significantly merchant-usury capital and, what we have termed, non-capitalist forms of production. Local and regional mercantile/usury capital posed obstacles to a transition to a capitalist mining economy and sustained the reproduction of small mining even as it impoverished it over time. I am not suggesting that capitalist penetration and takeover did not occur. They did at different moments but the impacts were varied. In the period from 1909-19, capitalist mining established itself and strengthened processes of proletarianization but without significantly altering the overall small mining dynamic. There was a definite transition to a wage labour economy between 1940 and 1946 but there was no sustained transition to capitalism. We do not witness the transformation of one form of production to another but the complete collapse and destruction of the mining economy. When small mining re-emerged in the 1980s and 1990s, it interacted and struggled with first, a state sector, and later, in the current phase, a multinational capitalist firm.

The persistence of small mining and the ongoing struggles over commodity production thus pose awkward questions and raise issues about how we are to analyze this phenomenon. I am not suggesting that nothing has changed in the local, national, or global contexts over this long period or that small mining in La Libertad, and Nicaragua, today is similar to that practiced in the late 1800s. What I am insisting is that our theoretical models still require further refinement and reflection to address the "incomplete" nature of global capitalist transformations. A good number of historically based ethnographies have demonstrated that the struggles between capitalist and non-capitalist forms of production are far from a fore-

gone conclusion (see for e.g. Burawoy, 2002; Gledhill, 1991; Lem, 1998; Nugent, 1993; Roseberry, 1983; Smith, 1989). These studies suggest, along with the example discussed here, that it is not the case that capitalism “maintains” other forms of production for its own benefit nor is it that these struggles indicate some attempt to maintain and defend older forms of production. What we witness instead is the contradictions that are generated in these encounters, the way they shape the nature of class struggles in different contexts, and how this manifests itself in different local, regional, and national contexts and, subsequently, impacts the contours of global capitalism.

In conclusion, I am not suggesting a simple “return” to the literature on the “articulation of modes and forms of production” (Wolpe, 1985). What is needed, I would argue, is a framework that extracts some of the more positive elements of the “globalization” literature—international commodity flows, transnational patterns of migration, the dialectics of space and place, the formation of new identities, and an attention to diverse social and political movements. However, this needs to be linked to older and “outmoded” debates of the 1960s and 1970s surrounding petty-commodity and non-capitalist forms of production that emphasized the importance of class struggles and struggles over production, competition and conflict within and between capitals, the contradictory role of the state, and the dynamics of imperialism. These older debates, broadly known as “articulation,” themselves were critical responses to modernization theory that simultaneously avoided falling into the trap of world-system theory (see for e.g. Banerjee, 1985; Turner, 1986; Wolpe, 1985). Indeed, current approaches to globalization swing either in the direction of modernization theory or that of world-system theory. A reformulated focus on contradictory forms of production underpinning the global economy, would be a much more fruitful approach to bravely negotiate the webs of relations between commodities and globalization.

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## Notes

- 1 Available at <http://www.hotelnewsresource.com/article1992.html>, accessed July 17, 2003.
- 2 This was despite significant U.S. pressures to usher in a free market economy and return confiscated properties to their original owners, many of whom were associated with the Somoza dictatorship.
- 3 As part of the negotiations over the transition to neo-liberalism, FETAMINE became a private company owned by former state workers. The new company IMISA, while it had 25% ownership in the mines, effectively handed over decision-making power to its joint venture partners, most of which came from Canada. IMISA later sold its ownership shares to Greenstone by the end of 1996.
- 4 There is no easy description of the term as its meanings have changed over time. It ranges from fiercely independent artisan miners to high graders and pilferers.
- 5 Militant was word coined in the 1980s to distinguish “true” and “revolutionary” Sandinistas from others who were just supporters of the Revolution. Many of the Nicaraguans in management positions at the mine brandished their militante credentials all the time, a fact that angered many of the local poor who saw them as “having sold out to imperialism.”
- 6 The town was important enough that several travellers visited and wrote about the mines there (see for e.g., Belly, 1867; Levy, 1976 [1873]).
- 7 Of course, this is not to imply that merchants, moneylenders, and speculators did not extract profits from small mining. Indeed, many grew wealthy, as did many of Nicaragua’s elite families benefit from their involvement in small mining. However, this cannot be read an instance of the functionality of small mining to capitalist accumulation. There were counteracting trends within the mercantile sector itself that posed obstacles to a transition to capitalist mining.
- 8 This is a highly condensed version of a rather complicated period in Nicaraguan history that was primarily shaped by the efforts of the Somoza State to create an enduring hegemonic project which included a short-lived but important alliance with factions of the labour movement (Gould, 1987, 1990; Walter, 1993).
- 9 The FSLN’s adoption of a mixed economy model generated vigorous debates and a voluminous literature that need not concern us here (see for example Griffin, 1988; Vilas, 1986; Weeks, 1987, 1988).
- 10 Explanations for this surge in gold prices stress the combination of a variety of factors: the collapse of the Bretton Woods agreements, the emergence of floating currency exchange rates, the OPEC oil crisis of 1972-73, a profitabil-

ity crisis in the centres of capitalist accumulation, and efforts by the U.S. Federal Reserve to clamp down on the world's money supply (Amin, 1990: 66-67; Arrighi, 1994: 308-321; Bernstein, 2001: 346-361; Henwood, 1998: 48-49). In these turbulent times, gold, no longer pegged to the U.S. dollar, afforded a safe haven for investment for diverse entities

11 It is not my intent to minimize the terror and devastation caused by the counterrevolutionary war, especially in the countryside. The war touched all Nicaraguans not only through the daily violence that was felt at multiple levels but also by the military draft that was initiated by the FSLN as it sought to protect the gains of the revolution from U.S. imperialist machinations. For a discussion of the impact of the war on Nicaragua, see Nuñez et. al. 1991.

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