

## Reflections: *Lectio praecursoria*

### The anti-mining movement in Brazil in the 2010s

MARIANA GALVÃO LYRA



Galvão Lyra, M. (2021) The anti-mining movement in Brazil in the 2010s. *Fennia* 199(2) 294–298. <https://doi.org/10.11143/fennia.115235>

In this *lectio praecursoria*, which I presented as part of my doctoral defense at the University of Eastern Finland on 5 November 2021, I delve deep into the Brazilian anti-mining movement to understand the context in which activism take place, their main strategies and course of actions, and their ability to influence the overall mining debate in Brazil in the 2010s. It sheds light on the key challenges faced by groups fighting for more environmental and social justice in mining conflictual situations. More specific, the research covers the 2013–2017 time frame, when discussions on the mining framework and a severe tailings dam failure happened. These two cases are analyzed and their effects on anti-mining activism are explored through a twofold focus on social movements and environmental justice studies. The study contributes to scientific discussions on mining and society by seeking conceptual bridges across political-ecologically oriented studies on social movements against mineral extraction. It also expands, significantly, analyses of social movements in Brazil by contributing to the international comparative literature on the social and environmental impacts of mining, Brazilian and Latin American studies, studies on mining history, sociology of mining, and mining policy.

Keywords: environmental justice, social movements, extractivism, Latin America, environmental conflicts

Mariana Galvão Lyra (<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1928-013X>), School of Business and Management, Yliopistokatu 34, 53850 Lappeenranta, Lappeenranta University of Technology, Finland. E-mail: [mariana.lyra@lut.fi](mailto:mariana.lyra@lut.fi)

Mr. custos, Madam opponent, ladies and gentlemen:

I am not an activist. And you also don't necessarily need to be one to be interested in what I am about to say.

Today is the 5<sup>th</sup> of November of 2021. It is a bit overwhelming to think that it was on the 5<sup>th</sup> of November of 2015, exactly six years ago, when a mining disaster happened in Brazil. The Fundão tailings dam failed. Fundão was in operation since 2008 and was part of an iron ore pellets production in Minas Gerais state.

Complexes of iron ore extraction in Brazil usually encompass an open pit mine with a tailings dam as a by-product reservoir. In other words, the mineral wastes from such extractions are disposed and stored in areas as big as thousands of Olympic swimming pools.

As a correlated illustration, in a diamond for a ring, for every carat of a diamond almost 3 tons of mineral waste is generated. In tailings dam, waste is stored together with water and other substances. In the Fundão dam, it was calculated that between 30 to 55 million cubic meters of the slurry, or simply put, “mud”, went down, reaching the Doce river and, 17 days later, the Atlantic Ocean. That is the equivalent of approximately 25,000 Olympic swimming pools.

This event, changed the course of the mining industry in Brazil, changed the course of my doctoral studies and changed the life of many people. Nineteen people died, thousands were terrified by having experienced a “mud tsunami” invading their villages, their houses, their lives. Forever changing their perception about the future, about mining, changing, in many ways, their reality.

The indemnification process for the victims is ongoing still, facing a series of disagreements between the authorities and companies involved. Events such this are very unfortunate. Besides all entailed environmental, social and economic consequences, it exacerbates the controversies inherent to mining activities. Authors such as Bebbington (2015) and Svampa (2019) have been studying mining controversies within the Latin American context.

The main controversies surrounding mineral extraction are: the uneven distributions of risks and benefits at the local level; local land use versus the use of land for the expansion of multinational projects; and the still remaining question on whether it is possible to consider mining exploration a sustainable and equitable activity. These controversies are even more salient in peak periods of extraction, such as the last mineral boom in the early 2000s.

The mining industry’s global production networks usually follow boom-bust cycles, with rapid increases in demand and production followed by periods of recessions. Mineral extraction stages several conflicts around the globe. As pointed out in a study by Franks and colleagues (2014), conflicts are extremely costly to mining companies. The research identified conflict as a further means through which environmental and social risks are translated into business costs and decision making. Mining companies are constantly facing the risk of a production stoppage due to a blockade, a scratch on their reputation due to a protest or campaign, witnessing watchdog organizations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) gaining legitimacy and threatening corporate decisions and actions.

Martinez-Alier and his team developed an Environmental Justice Atlas project to document and catalog social conflict around environmental issues. More than 3,000 conflicts around the globe were mapped. Temper and colleagues (2018) have used data from the Atlas and concluded that the cumulative number of new mining conflicts in the world have repeatedly increased from 2000 to 2016.

My literature review on mining conflicts revealed that they are happening regardless of the national level of development or good governance status: Australia, Papua New Guinea, Finland, Sweden, Namibia, Canada, South Africa, and Latin American countries. Activism is common where these types of conflicts arise. Consequently, my research demonstrates how context not only is relevant but also plays a large part in explaining anti-mining activism. Having a better understanding about the context in which activism establishes and develop allows to a deeper appreciation on why activism happen, who takes part in it, what kind of strategies and actions take place. Also, it allows interpretations on how activism is influencing the mining sector.

Resistance and activism against mining cannot be merely translated into or interpreted as the non-acceptance of the mining industry existence. Nor can they be interpreted as an obliviousness towards the relevance minerals and metals have in our current society. As the American historian Blanc (2019) explains, rural movements in Brazil not necessarily object to development projects, but they are against corporation policies that take place when planning and executing such projects. In my thesis, ‘anti-mining’ is used to qualify groups of activists resisting and opposing mining debates, activities, and decisions.

Activism is the most important activity of people who join social movements. Social movements are “networks of interactions between individuals, and organizations, engaged in political or cultural conflicts, and based on shared collective identities”, according to Dianí’s (1992, 1) definition. Thus, shared identities and beliefs are in the core of what a social movement is. These are socially constructed and rely inside the social fabrics of societies. Thus, for the purpose of this research, anti-mining activism is considered an inherent part of the Brazilian societal context. In particular, anti-mining activism is considered part of the social movements and conflicts context. This line of thinking

follows Touraine's (1971) suggestion that the most relevant conflicts are in the cultural realm and in the historical context of a given society.

The title of my work is "against the plunder of our ores" (Lyra 2021). It is between quotation marks because it is part of the anti-mining movement chant.

They would say: *Towards a sovereign and honorable country! Against the plunder of our ores!* Protests have always been closely connected with sound. It is an action concerned with the amplification of a message – wanting to make sure it is heard. Protesters' voices have found power in unison. Call and response chants are somewhat common among activists to create a social synchrony and feelings of social belonging. Activists use them in their organizing meetings and, also in action, during protests, documents, or blog posts.

Access to a research setting is never a given. It was difficult to find the gatekeepers and gain access to the activists. My objective was to understand their world in their own terms. My methodological choices have to do with recognizing activists as knowledge-producing subjects, following Chesters (2012) study, without however accepting their narrative as the ultimate truth.

The goal of learning how a movement actually establishes and grows instead of testing a detailed hypothesis a priori calls for an exploratory study. Current theories on mining and society and anti-mining activism are underdeveloped. In fact, Bebbington (2015) argued that both scholarly and activist worlds are not well-tooled to work on extractivism.

Thus, my research is mainly qualitative. Qualitative methods are used to explain complex phenomena. And I inductively focused on the research participants' views to understand their perspectives and experiences rather than framing them in pre-determined categories or concepts. I have collected data from interviews, participant observation, books, reports, discussion forums, webpages, and pamphlets as source of information. I have used the historical sociological approach as method to re-collect past events in social movement's history, case study methods to investigate the events associated with the mining code draft and the Fundão dam disaster. I have also used literature review as a method. For the analysis, I have performed content analysis followed by cluster analysis to correlate the findings with the primary literature reviewed.

I have introduced my results in terms of context, response and influence. First, to explain the context in which the anti-mining movement was established and developed. Then, what strategies and actions took place as a response to events that happened between 2013–2017. And finally, to interpret the influence the movement had in the mining sector in the same period.

By using historical sociology approach, I was able to evidence the proximity of actors, symbols and actions when three social movements were born in Brazil: the landless workers' movement, the anti-dam movement and the anti-mining movement. This was an effort to better understand the context in which the anti-mining movement was born, and to prove that resistance is not happening only when a mining project is about to start, but comes from long before, has historical roots, and those roots are deeply connected to rural and land struggle in Brazil.

My analysis showed that the front against mining in Brazil has a variety of actors. They range from groups struggling with mining impacts and using disruptive ways to protest against it to groups seeking to enhance procedural justice as a way to alleviate environmental injustice. This latter group, that I called rights-based one, also worked bringing and translating information and knowledge to help the ones struggling with mining.

Not only that, but these two groups forging the coalition were putting efforts to balance their differences, seeking for consensus, negotiating agendas, and even making use of strategies such as deliberately not consulting some members before making decisions to avoid internal splits in the coalition.

I trust that despite how much one understands about mining and its consequences, we can all agree that mining disasters should be prevented and avoided.

In the Fundão dam failure case, I decided to understand how different actors have responded in the first 60-days after the dam collapsed. That choice was made so that I could understand to what capacity companies and authorities have dealt with the disaster remediation. Considering that little or no activism responses would have happened, have the capacity to deal with the aftermath been effective.

The analysis revealed how activists mobilized themselves and changed the political dynamics in the aftermath. Due to activism, companies involved in the disaster had to change their strategies and course of actions. Besides, activism had played an important role in raising the awareness about the risks and consequences inherent to mining activities in Brazil. Also, more activist skills and knowledge came out of this experience.

Finally, using literature review as a method together with North American colleagues from the environmental sociology field, we built theoretical links between natural resource extraction and intersecting injustices. It adds to the discussion the lack of inclusion of marginalized voices in the extractive decisions and debates, and intersections of privilege, and oppression for the ones impacted by mining, such as workers, rural farmers, and local community members.

My results contribute with evidence to spillover discussions on social movements' theory. By demonstrating the movement-movement influence across time and space in rural Brazil, I contribute not only to Meyer and Whittier (1994) conceptualizations, but also, and perhaps more interesting, I push the social movement research agenda forward, as suggested by Oliver, Cadena-Roa and Strawn (2003), by expanding the theory view to regions such as Latin America.

I complement Rosa's (2007) work on movements mirroring the Landless Workers Movement's symbols and actions, by adding rural movements such as the anti-dam and the anti-mining movement which were not contemplated on his studies. My work contributes to movement outcome's discussions on social movements' theory. It corroborates with Staggenborg's (1995) categorization of social movements' outcome, considering, too, the efficacy of mobilization as a successful result of social movements.

My results provide novel theoretical contributions in the social scientific mining literature by linking environmental justice and natural resource extraction in the Brazilian context, which remains very under-researched.

Finally, my work has societal impact. The activists' responses to mining events can work as useful roadmaps for social movements in general and other stakeholders to learn how the anti-mining movement engages in disputes with powerful actors.

By shedding light on the social and economic injustices associated with mining and perceived by the activists, my research allows new avenues for reflections on ways to make the mining industry more sustainable and just.

Curiously, the word for extracting natural resources from the earth is extractivism. The word extractivism has *activism* in it. Meaning that extractivism and activism co-exist even there. Thus, there is no extractivism without activism. How to make better outcomes of this interplay? That is the question.

## References

- Bebbington, A. (2015) Political ecology, policy networks and moments of government. In Perreault, T. A., Gavin, B. & McCarthy, J. (eds.) *The Routledge Handbook of Political Ecology*, 198–208. Routledge, New York.
- Blanc, J. (2019) *Before the Flood: The Itaipu Dam and the Visibility of Rural Brazil*. Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781478005322>
- Chesters, G. (2012) Social movements and the ethics of knowledge production. *Social Movement Studies* 11(2) 145–160. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2012.664894>
- Diani, M. (1992) The concept of social movement. *The Sociological Review* 40(1) 1–25. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-954X.1992.tb02943.x>
- Franks, D. M., Davis, R., Bebbington, A. J., Ali, S. H., Kemp, D. & Scurrah, M. (2014) Conflict translates environmental and social risk into business costs. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 111(21) 7576–7581. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1405135111>
- Lyra, M. G. (2021) "Against the plunder of our ores": the anti-mining movement in Brazil between 2013–2017. Dissertations in Social Sciences and Business Studies No. 257. University of Eastern Finland, Joensuu. [https://erepo.uef.fi/bitstream/handle/123456789/26346/urn\\_isbn\\_978-952-61-4335-4.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](https://erepo.uef.fi/bitstream/handle/123456789/26346/urn_isbn_978-952-61-4335-4.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y)
- Meyer, D. S. & Whittier, N. (1994) Social movement spillover. *Social Problems* 41(2) 277–298. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3096934>

- Oliver, P. E., Cadena-Roa, J. & Strawn, K. D. (2003) Emerging trends in the study of protest and social movements. *Research in Political Sociology* 12(1) 213–244. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0895-9935\(03\)12009-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0895-9935(03)12009-8)
- Rosa, M. (2007) Para Além do MST: O Impacto Nos Movimentos Sociais Brasileiros. *Antropolítica* 2 23.
- Staggenborg, S. (1995) Can feminist organizations be effective? In Ferree, M. M. & Martin, P. Y. (eds.) *Feminist Organizations: Harvest of the New Women's Movement*, 339–355. Temple University Press, Philadelphia.
- Svampa, M. (2019) *Las fronteras del neoextractivismo en América Latina: conflictos socioambientales, giro ecoterritorial y nuevas dependencias*. Transcript Verlag. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783839445266>
- Temper, L., Demaria, F., Scheidel, A., Del Bene, D. & Martinez-Alier, J. (2018) The Global Environmental Justice Atlas (EJAtlas): ecological distribution conflicts as forces for sustainability. *Sustainability Science* 13(3) 573–584. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11625-018-0563-4>
- Touraine, A. (1971) *The Post-Industrial Society; Tomorrow's Social History: Classes, Conflicts and Culture in the Programmed Society*, vol. 6813. Random House, New York.