Negotiation of responsibility and representation of time in corporate-community relations

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Introduction

Coal is a finite, non-renewable natural resource. In the case of open-pit coal mining the extraction is of such a material force that the temporality is difficult to imagine. Yet, despite the impressive spatial presence a coal mine is a temporary phenomenon. Its duration depends on the concentration and quality of the mineral in the soil but also on the demands of the global market and the decisions of shareholders and investors. This paper is about that simultaneity of temporal limitation and spatial dominance as mediated in the relations between a mining company and local communities. In particular, I explore a specific representation of the simultaneity which had been introduced by the Social Team of the mining company Prodeco Group: a future oriented discourse of closure. Drawing upon anthropological approaches to time I argue that the discourse of closure represents a strategic temporalisation and is the outcome of time work. The folding of the closures into the present influences the negotiation of responsibility for potential and materialised harms to the livelihood of local communities.

The first part of this paper introduces the discourse of closure instituted by the corporate person in distinction to past-oriented narratives about the time before the transnational mining businesses arrived. In the second part, I briefly review some anthropological approaches to time in order to support the analysis of my own empirical findings. Thereafter, I discuss how what I propose to call the 'ontologisation of closure' influences the 'on the ground' negotiation of responsibility between the company and local communities. I conclude with the hypothesis that the discourse of closure leads to a decomposition of the corporate person as a subject of responsibility.

My contribution is based on participatory observation undertaken with the Prodeco Group (Prodeco) in Colombia in 2017. Prodeco is a mining company fully integrated into the global value

chain of the multinational Glencore plc. with headquarters in Switzerland. It operates the two coal mines La Jagua and Calenturitas in El Cesar, a Northern department in Colombia, and is headquartered in Barranquilla. Most of the time, I accompanied the 'Social Team' which is part of the sustainability department and responsible for the relations of the company with its societal environment, in particular the local communities, NGOs and the government agencies.

The times of a coal mine

In Santa Marta, a city on the Caribbean Sea in the northern Colombian department of Magdalena, different non-governmental organisations (NGOs) invited to a meeting on the issue of mining and water. Several activists from local communities took the stage to remind the audience of their lives before the transnational mining had arrived in the region: "We were happy and had everything". The members of the Social Team of Prodeco were aware of residents' recourses to a past perfect. They described the local evocations of the past as myths and a strategic discourse of the NGOs. The Social Team countered the recourse to the past with evocations of the future. "Soon the mines are closing and we will be gone". The coal mines would have no past and only a present which is oriented towards the closure. Explaining a reforestation programme one mining worker noted that "as soon as the mine opens one has to think of its closure". The 'thinking of the closure' had come to accompany the day to day running of the coal mines. In a workshop series organised by a junior manager of the environmental team risks regarding the closures of the mines were discussed. Representatives of all the different departments brainstormed about the different kinds of risks that might arise with closing the mines. During the workshop, the risk analysis moved in various directions. The brainstorming session touched upon risks to the interests of the company, managers and mining workers, but also to the wellbeing of local communities, the region and country as wholes. Within the meeting, the head and a senior manager of the sustainability department reported on their visits to closed extraction sites in Chile the week before. The visit was organised by the International Council on Mining and Metals (ICMM) with the aim of learning about best practices. However, the head of the Social Team explained that the closure processes differ according to natural resources and country. The mine which they had visited in Chile extracts cobalt and had been running for more than 100 years. In Colombia, in contracts, they would have a lot of mines with a duration of 20 to 30 years which amounted to a very different, and difficult to compare situation.

Within the headquarter building the closure of the mines is presented as a fact with an uncertain outcome. However, as the brainstorming session made apparent the uncertain outcome can be broken down into manageable risks. Outside the headquarter building, a lot of mysteries entwine the closures. Residents had heard about the closures but have the feeling that they are not allowed to talk about them. In the local communities, the closure appears as a myth, a secret and a tale better not to be spoken about. An anti-mining NGOs in Bogotá described the closure discourse of the company as a lie. Even if the mineral in one coal extraction site was to come to an end the company would already possess new titles to mine either a different mineral or at a different location. Instead, the NGOs and representatives of the local communities stressed the physical changes and adverse impacts the extraction has brought to the region. That emphasis necessitates a basis of comparison which was to be found in the idea of the better past. Hence, the closure related future orientation of the Social Team differs considerably from the past orientation of NGOs and local communities.

For the Social Team of Prodeco it was a priority to change the perception of the closure as a myth or a lie to a certain occurrence. Accompanying the intended change in perception was the objective of turning the past oriented discourses of adverse impacts into a future oriented discourse of closures and, related, challenges and chances. A difficulty consisted in the fact that also to them the closure lies in an uncertain future. A combination of two factors, the error rate of the models estimating the concentration of the mineral in the social with the dynamics on the global market coupled and the decisions of shareholders and investors, turn the closure into an event which is indeed going to happen but in unpredictable conditions. The uncertainty of the conditions of closure is amplified by the unequal access to the knowledge about the two factors just mentioned above. Local communities see and feel the spatial dimension of a coal mine but not its temporal limitedness. In light of the overwhelming spatial sensation, the closures are doubted and with this turned into myths. The efforts of the Social Team to turn the closures into a real 'thing' in the present amounts to what anthropologists have describes as a temporal technique, time work or strategic temporalization. As a modern institution, the multinational company can "mediate representations, techniques, and rhythms of human and non-human time".[1] In the following part, I briefly review some anthropological accounts of time which underlie my own analysis of the role of the discourse of closure in the negotiation of responsibility.

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[1] Laura Bear, 'Doubt, Conflict, Mediation: The Anthropology of Modern Time' (2014) 20 Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute 3, 6.

The anthropology of time

David Harvey famously defined the annihilation of space by time as a condition of postmodernity. New technologies lead to the acceleration of economic activities which surpass spatial barriers. This 'time-space compression' is, according to Harvey, the driving force behind globalisation. Relative distances between places disappear leading to a higher speed in commodity production and capital accumulation. The anthropological gaze, whilst not questing the accelerating effects of new communication, transfer and transport technologies, views the abstract time-space compression only as one mode of modern time. The economic anthropologists Bear, Ho, Tsing and Yanagisako argue that there "is no singular or uniform social timespace in contemporary capitalism".[2] Instead, capitalism's time-space compressions are transformed into concrete experiences of time.[3] Thus, "social times in capitalism is heterochronic and the circulation of capital will repeatedly emerge as an ethical, affective problem of attempting to reconcile diverse, recalcitrant rhythms and representations".[4] Alfred Gell in the 'Anthropology of Time' differentiates between three forms of time: the non-human timespace phenomenon traced in Einsteinian physics, the social framing of time and the personal experience of time. Gell argues that humans develop specific time-maps in order to mediate the different forms of time. In Felix Ringel's work on temporality in post-socialism cities Gell's time maps appear as a set of contingent and contested everyday practices. Accordingly, the "work that goes into upholding certain temporal orders, structures, rhythms and endurances" should form the object of an ethnographic engagement with time.[5] Ringel calls that approach to time "non-ontological" since it does not depart from the assumption of existing discrete temporalities but looks at the creation of temporal multiplicity in the present.

Nancy Munn observes that "time is not merely "lived", but "constructed" in the living".[6] She grasps the construction of time with the concept of 'strategic temporalization'. Time is produced in everyday practices as a medium of power and governance. In that regard helpful, Michael Flaherty introduces the notion of 'time work' defined as the "individual or interpersonal efforts to create or suppress particular kinds of temporal experience".[7] In the meetings with local

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[2] Laura Bear and others, *Gens: A Feminist Manifesto for the Study of Capitalism* (2015) <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/652-gens-a-feminist-manifesto-for-the-study-of-capitalism>.

[3] Bear (n 1) 7.

[4] Laura Bear, 'For Labour: Ajeet's Accident and the Ethics of Technological Fixes in Time' (2014) 20 Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute 71.

[5] Felix Ringel, 'Beyond Temporality: Notes on the Anthropology of Time from a Shrinking Fieldsite' (2016) 16 Anthropological Theory 390, 393.

[6] Nancy Munn, 'The Cultural Anthropology of Time: A Critical Essay' (1992) 21 Annual Review of Anthropology 93, 109.

[7] Michael Flaherty, 'Time Work: Customizing Temporal Experience' (2003) 66 Social psychology quarterly 17, 17.

communities, during consultations in the job centre opened by the company and the local community offices and in the social programmes company officials as well as third-party operators time and again remind the residents that the mines will be closing in a couple of years. That 'time work' institutes a discourse of closures, and thus a specific representation of time. The future event of closure is folded into and made meaningful in the present. The residents begin getting to know the mines as already closing despite the very contrasting impression given by their spatial presence. In company internal meetings the closure is discussed in uncertain terms and perceived of as a risk. In respect of the societal environment, particularly including the local communities and the governmental mining agencies, the closure is presented as a non-negotiable fact.

The making of temporality as closure is in Munn's words a "mode of governance grounding the person and daily activity in a wider world order".[8] The wider world order is that of global value chains as an agile socio-economic institution which co-constructs and can react quickly to the temporalities of the global market.

Ontologising the closure

One of the main objectives of the Social Team consisted in turning the coal mine into a temporally limited phenomenon. Officials of the Social Team but also third-party operators constantly referred to the closures of the coal mines. Further, the reference to the closure built the foundation of several social programmes and initiatives. For example, in one of the companies' community offices every Thursday morning and afternoon local schoolchildren met under the guidance of two young female leaders of the project 'Redes de Vida', life nets. The project had a duration of three years and should help the children and teenagers of the local villages to find their ways in life. The first year of the project was dedicated to figuring out what they want to do in their lives. In the second year Becerril as 'their' village would be discussed. The young project leader explained that dealing with the closure of the mine is about understanding the history of the place before the opening of the coal mine. She connected the life paths of the residents of the local villages not only to the coal mine but to the *time limitedness* of the extraction.

For the Social Team, it was of paramount importance that the project leader of the 'Redes de Vida' project repeatedly mentioned the closure. They hoped that as a result of the discussion, young people would not anymore seek to train in mining related professions. A member of the Social Team explained that already now the main complaints of residents concern the their (un)employment. In fact, during the many hours I spent in the oficinas de atención, Prodeco's

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[8] Munn (n 6) 110.

community offices, almost all of the people entering the office asked for jobs. The high demand for labour puts a lot of pressure on the company and it is a source of unrest in the region. Every time a person enquired in the community offices about a job opening the present member of the Social Team reminded him or her of the closure. Thus, even if they were availabilities or open training position they would not offer a long-term perspective and income. In order to channel and divert labour demands, Prodeco founded and funds the Centro Regional de Empleo y Emprendimiento (C-Emprende), an employment and training centre that works with community members to either find an employment or, more often, start an own small enterprise. Those sole trades should be run independently of Prodeco. As Prodeco's officials never grew tired of repeating the small enterprises need to be 'autosostenible' which means that they should be self-sufficient and, very importantly, have nothing to do with the mining business.

By aligning the social activities of the mining firm with the discourse of closure the latter had become an essential part of the former. Despite the uncertain and unpredictable conditions of the closure it is folded into the present. The closure becomes an ontological entity which structures and governs relations between the mining company and the local communities in the present.

The making and un-making of a subject of responsibility

The conventional theory of responsibility bases on three pillars: the subject of responsibility, the object of responsibility and the grounds for responsibility.[9] The negotiation of responsibility is about assessing who is (or can be) responsible for whom (or what) according to which criteria. The remainder of this essay is concerned with the first pillar, the subject of responsibility.

Identifying a subject of responsibility in complex settings: Spatial presence

The NGO Centro Regional de Empresas y Emprendimientos Responsables (CREER),[10] the regional hub of the Institute for Human Rights and Business, organised several meetings with the multinational coal mining companies operating in Colombia and several state institutions on the

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[9] Heidbrink Ludger, *Kritik Der Verantwortung: Zu Den Grenzen Verantwortlichen Handelns in Komplexen Kontexten* (Velbrück Wissenschaft 2003).

[10] CREER is was founded with the help and still coordinates its work with the London-based Institute for Human Rights and Business (IHRB) which is one of the leading think tanks on business and human rights. CREER aims to be a regional hub and centre of South-South learning on business and human rights in Latin America. It is located in Bogotá and runs a project on early warning systems and emergency measures with the Grupo de Trabajo de Derechos Humanos y Carbón that consists of the mining enterprises Prodeco, Cerrejón and Drummond. The project is located within CREER thematic strand 'non-judicial remedies'. That specific project is funded by the Dutch embassy and the Colombian Consejería Presidencial de Derechos Humanos.

subject of human rights violations and environmental pollution. The meetings were part of a larger project on early warning systems and emergency measures in the case of human rights related or environmental harms to the local communities. The representatives of the coal mining companies were accompanied by their respective consultants on the issue of human rights. A member of CREER begun the meeting with explaining that the purpose of the project consisted in developing a model which clarifies the role of public institutions and corporations concerning 'local problems'. The corporations would have a territorial presence which allows them to understand and react. But "how far does their responsibility reach?" CREER asked. The representatives of the jumped in lamenting that the local communities always, and sometimes also the local authorities, would turn to them to solve problems. They had been made responsible for reacting to harms regardless of whether they had been the cause or not. The various participants of the meeting seemed to agree that it would often be very difficult to determine the nature, frequency, intensity and location of the harm.

The risk and materialisation of harm to local communities in mining areas defeats simple cause effect relationships. Different potential causes blend into a complex web of relations between corporations, local communities and public authorities. In the meeting organised by CREER, uncertainty and ambiguity about the harmful effects of mining on local communities dominated the negotiation of responsibility. From the companies' perspective, their territorial exposure and visibility served as a short cut to reduce the complexity of the web of relations in order to assign responsibility. They had been made a subject of responsibility as result of their spatial presence independent of own acts or omissions.

Un-making the subject of responsibility

The anthropology of time teaches us that temporalities can be made through specific practices and for certain aims. As I have sought to explain in this article, the turning of a coal mine into a temporally limited occurrence requires a great amount of discursive and material work of the Social Team and third-party operators. Yet, a temporal perception which is oriented towards the closures is able to counteract the assigning of responsibility based on a territorial exposure and visibility.

The discourse of closure lets the mining firm appear smaller, less spatially present, than it actually is. It conveys the impression that the company is not really here, only just passing by. The corporate person appears like a brief impression which will not leave any traces and which will soon be forgotten. Based upon the fact that Prodeco will soon be gone the Social Team worked against the perceived tendency of the local communities to rely on the company for preventing and mitigating harm. In particular, residents are advised not to rely on the corporate person for

the provision of their welfare. They should either function in a self-sufficient manner or direct their demands to the state.

Further, the 'just passing by' impression of the discourse of closure signals to the NGOs that assigning responsibility to the corporate person will not yield much success. A coal mine seems like a stable and enduring entity but only at first sight. Its logic is rather contingent on the agility and mobility of global value chains. Therefore, the state or the local communities would constitute a more reliable unit of responsibility in the long term.

Conclusion

Time work in the form of strategically temporalising turns the coal mine from a primarily spatial into a temporal occurrence. Discourses and practices of the Social Team and its third-party operators fold the future into day to day relations between the corporate person and its societal environment by ontologising the closures. Stripped off their uncertainty and unpredictability the future closing of the mines becomes meaningful in the present. The ontologisation of the closures thus already yield effects in the "now". An effect is the dissolution of the corporate person as a subject of responsibility. The assigning of responsibility which relies on the spatial dimension of a coal mine loses its anchor in the light of its strategic temporalisation.

Anthropological approaches to time which emphasise the contingency of concrete social experiences of time as well as the work, contestations and conflicts that go into making temporality served as a framework for understanding the discourse of closure regarding the harms and responsibilities in the context of global value chains in the extractive industries.