

work, but rather an entanglement of online as well as offline domains which deserves closer examination. On the other hand, the role and use of ICT in social activism is usually focused on issues of national importance. “Banal activism,” issues centered on local day-to-day affairs such as public transport or waste management, often escapes the researcher’s eye when aspects of ICT are involved.

Based on Bourdieu’s field theory as well as the Manchester School of Anthropology which contributed significantly to the development of social network theory, Postill frames his research around a “field of residential affairs”: In this field – the Malaysian township of Subang Jaya, a suburb of the capital Kuala Lumpur – competition as well as cooperation exists between residents, journalists, local politicians, businesses and other social agents over local matters, often times by means of using ICT. Postill makes use of the field theory approach to examine this multi-faceted field of social action beyond the binaries of network sociality and community sociality. Sociality may take on multiple forms and is not necessarily limited to one domain, such as physically-localized collectivities or fleeting, network-based communities. In order to further examine the relationship between internet usage and the emergence of new and plural forms of sociality, Postill takes a closer look at what he terms “residential sociality” – engaging oneself in committees, neighborhood patrols, or discussion forums. In these case studies, ICT plays a significant role, yet it is not the central domain of interaction. Rather, the appropriation of the internet is done selectively for specific, localized purposes by local actors, both activists as well as politicians. Despite varying levels of success, however, his findings clearly show that the hierarchical structures of the “offline” world remains unchanged and local actors have no choice but to adapt their actions accordingly. The vision of flattened hierarchies through the use of ICT, therefore, continues to be a far distant one as activists remain embedded in the hierarchical structures which surround them.

Postill’s contribution to the body of scholarly work on ICT is to break up static as well as homogenizing concepts and dichotomies usually associated with research on ICT, such as network/community or local/global. By acknowledging and examining new forms of internally differentiated fields of residential sociality and “banal activism” in a non-Western township, his work is truly “going local” on an issue that is all too often dealt with mainly from a global or nation-state perspective.

True to the subject matter, the book ends with a very typical internet genre: a set of Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs). Here, the author compiles a set of questions and criticisms that have been brought up during his research and the discussions of his findings. This not only makes for an interesting approach for an academic “offline” publication but also provides the reader with insights into the debates that Postill’s findings have evoked already and makes this work even more worth recommending.

Frederik Holst

Robins, Nicholas A.: *Mercury, Mining, and Empire. The Human and Ecological Cost of Colonial Silver Mining in the Andes.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011. 298 pp. ISBN 978-0-253-35651-2. Price: \$ 45.00

This book contributes in important and novel ways to the understanding of the dramatic environmental and social consequences of silver mining as carried out from mid-16th century to late 18th century in the then Spanish viceroyalty of Peru. The core of the book focuses on two places: First, the city of Huancavelica and the Santa Bárbara mine, an important source of mercury; and second, the silver mine and city of Potosí. At the core of its analysis is mercury as it became fundamental in the process of silver amalgamation that started to be carried out in Potosí in the late 16th century. The book combines several disciplinary approaches and methods: Archival work as well as published primary and secondary sources, current medical knowledge regarding the effects of mercury on human health, and state-of-the-art air pollution modeling.

One of the important contributions of the book that innovates in historical environmental studies is the use of air pollution modeling. Building over a close understanding of the technologies for refining, storing, transporting and using mercury in silver production, the location of smelters and the population, the estimation of total production of mercury in Huancavelica and the amounts of mercury used in Potosí, as well as the physical characteristics of these places, the author is able to estimate the concentration levels of mercury in the air for Huancavelica and Potosí at different moments of the colonial mining cycle. The author analyses the documentary evidence in light of the multiple ways in which different levels of contamination affected the health of the populations. The forced indigenous laborers – the *mitayos* – were those who suffered the worst consequences of exposure to higher concentrations of vaporized mercury while working in the smelters. However, the levels of contamination were extremely high in general so that all the population in these cities suffered from mercury poisoning. For both cities, the concentration of mercury was many times higher than current US standards for maximum exposure. For example, the estimates for the city of Huancavelica in 1680 show that the concentrations of mercury in the air was 30 to 100 times higher than today’s US maximum limit, while in the area next to the smelters it was 30,000. The corresponding modeling for the city of Potosí shows a very similar range of concentrations, while for the vicinity of the river course, where the mills and smelters were located, the concentration was about 300 times higher than the contemporary US standard. It would have been useful to include within the maps of the air quality modeling more information about the structure of the cities at the different time periods, in order to better grasp the social distribution of the different levels of mercury concentration.

Mining work inside the Santa Bárbara mine as well as work in the smelters of Huancavelica and Potosí was strongly associated with death by mercury poisoning. *Mitayos* who survived the *mita* of Huanavelica returned to their communities with a broken health, extremely weak-

ened, without teeth, suffering uncontrollable trembling, coughing blood, becoming insane to soon die suffering from terrible pains. Lower levels of mercury poisoning affected the whole population. Paying attention to the contemporary knowledge about how mercury poisoning affects human beings, the author discusses several aspects of these cities as related to these levels of contamination. High levels of miscarriages and the prevalence of monstrous fetuses might have been related to mercury poisoning. Just as well, abrupt changes of temper, irritability, loss of memory, and insanity may have been some of the causes of the prevalence of constant quarreling, extreme cruelty and sudden bursts of violence that characterized the social landscape of Potosí.

When summed up, colonial mining in Huancavelica meant approximately 17,000 metric tons of mercury spilled over the soil and river courses. For Potosí, 39,000 metric tons of mercury were burned off and 6,000 were released into the soil and water courses. These amounts not only contaminated populations due to direct exposure but entered into these regions' food chains contaminating through them larger ecosystems of which some consequences may be suffered today in what the author considers to be "one of the largest and longest-lasting ecological disasters ever known."

While mercury is at the focus of the environmental impacts of silver mining discussed in the book, it also briefly analyses the process of deforestation and highland grass exhaustion in the areas surrounding Huancavelica and Potosí due to firewood demand. Robins also explains the social consequences of the Spanish reshaping of the *mita*, an Inka institution, in order to provide labor force for the mining industry. Silver mining deeply disrupted and decimated indigenous communities, forced to provide their labor under extremely cruel and horrific working conditions, that were only possible to carry out by negating indigenous people's shared humanity. Most of the colonial legislation seeking to protect *mitayos* from abusive exploitation in the mines were hardly implemented. While several priests and other colonial officials described the horror of the mining *mita*, there was not a real concern to address the humanitarian disaster within the colonial state and less among mining entrepreneurs.

Beyond the deadly mercury poisoning, the author reconstructs the harsh and dangerous working conditions faced by the *mitayos*. Deaths and injuries due to falls, falling rocks, sinkholes, and cave-ins were highly frequent. As the colonial times passed by, the quota of ore extracted only increased and the depth of the mines grew. The increase of silver production that took place in the 18th century was not due to a technological innovation or a richer ore, but only to worsening levels of exploitation of a continuously declining number of *mitayos*.

The author outlines the mechanisms working in the disruption of indigenous communities. The depopulation of communities forced to provide *mitayos* for Potosí or Huancavelica and obsolete censuses worked in such combination that the indigenous population was under an increasingly higher pressure. As time passed by the proportion of community members to be sent as *mitayos*

increased and the interval between the same individual's different *mita* turns decreased. The escape from the mining *mita* was fundamental for the emergence of *indios forasteros*, a new legal category for Indians who left their communities and established themselves elsewhere, thus losing their rights over lands.

This research also points out how these social and environmental disasters were inscribed in a broader context. The impressive amount of silver that was produced in Peru, and also in the then New Spain, came to be the economic backbone of the transoceanic Spanish Empire and, as the author emphasizes, played a crucial role in the development of global capitalism and the world system. The large quantities of silver arriving to Spain barely stayed in the peninsula as it quickly flowed – through commercial deals, debt payments, and the economic costs of wars – towards not only the rest of Europe but also the Middle East, North Africa, India, and China. The author points out the connections between the emergence of the global capitalist system and the genocidal practices deployed by the Spanish colonial regime through which silver mining was made possible and soon became necessary for its reproduction.

This book is a outstanding contribution not only to the better understanding of the colonial silver mining in the Andes but also as a innovative way to combine different methodologies and multiple disciplinary engagement for illuminating a complex historical process. This research is not only of interest of those concerned with the history of the Andes but also of a broader readership interested in environmental scholarship and the impacts of extractive industries.

Guillermo Salas Carreño

Salomon, Frank, and Mercedes Niño-Murcia: *The Lettered Mountain. A Peruvian Village's Way with Writing.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2011. 369 pp. ISBN 978-0-8223-5044-6. Price: £ 16.99

"The Lettered Mountain" is an exceptionally rich ethnography of Peru's "lettered and knotted countryside" – of rural graphic traditions and interactions over a long historical time span. The countryside in question is the Andean region of Huarochirí in the central department of Lima, and more specifically the peasant community of San Andrés de Tupicocha, and its 10 kinship corporations – *ayllus*. This study takes texts and not people as its main research subjects, and combines analytical strategies from New Literacy Studies and ethno-historical approaches. The two authors, one anthropologist (Salomon) and the other sociolinguist (Niño-Murcia) connect an understanding of contemporary society with deep historical insights. The Huarochirí area is in a special position concerning research on Andean literacy, hosting the unique Huarochirí manuscript written in Quechua in the beginning of the 17th century by an unknown indigenous person.

Salomon and Niño-Murcia's study discusses critically the idea that the Spanish conquest and the social and political dynamics generated over the centuries could be described as an exchange between an oral culture (the native Andean) and a culture of literacy (the Spanish, and