Leviathans at the Gold Mine:
Creating Indigenous and Corporate Actors in Papua New Guinea
Alex Golub (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014)

Alex Golub’s ethnography is based on fieldwork in an Ipili village perched on the edge of a gold mine in Porgera, Papua New Guinea. The book is suffused with the same hopefulness that characterized Golub’s views during his fieldwork (1999-2001): “I chose to study Porgera because the Ipili were a success story – or at least had the potential to be one” (p. 212). Golub intimates that his optimism that the Ipili might benefit from hosting a major large scale mine was ultimately misplaced (p. 21). But only when the reader reaches the brief afterward is all pretense of Golub’s hoped for positive outcome for the Ipili finally, brutally, stripped away “[t]he Porgera experiment is over, and the Ipili are the losers” (p. 213). In the end, it is clear, in spite of the plural in Golub’s title, that there has only ever been one leviathan at the Porgera Joint Venture gold mine.

Golub’s primary presumed leviathans, described as “black-boxed corporate” entities (Callon and Latour 1981, cited on p. 13), are “the Ipili” and “the mine” (p. 3). They are not equal, as the book’s title suggests. While “the mine” effortlessly personates a leviathan’s characteristics (pp. 20, 198), Golub describes “the Ipili” as having potential to become a leviathan. Golub examines the conditions for the “feasibility” (pp. 19, 20) of the leviathans in a failed negotiation between them, to which he was party. Golub specifically examines conditions that would have to be met by the Ipili to become feasible political actors with a chance of success in these negotiations: “the identities of the Ipili people had to be refined and transformed in order to circulate in the national and international arenas of law, policy, and ideas that accompany and buttress transnational capitalism. Thus “the Ipili” needed to exist and have certain features if the legal and ethical requirements of the government and the mine were to be met” (p. 19). Golub focuses on four key “dimensions of feasibility: the authorization of spokespeople, the disambiguation of kinship and ethnicity, pacification, and political agency” (p. 19). The book explores how and why the Ipili failed (pp. 198, 203) to become leviathans as defined by Golub.
An oddity of the book is that it is largely written as though the optimism with which Golub approached his fieldwork fourteen years earlier, regarding the potential “success” of the Ipili in relation to the mine, remained valid as Golub was crafting the book. This impression is enhanced because Golub reserves for the afterword a full acknowledgment of the violence and hardships of daily life experienced by the Ipili in the shadow of the mine, as though it only became evident after the text was completed. As a consequence, the ongoing criminal acts and gross violations of human rights that the Ipili experience remain largely un-described and under-theorized.

Focused on the ultimate failure of the Ipili to become leviathans, Golub only hints at severe acts of violence perpetrated on Ipili men and women by the mine’s security forces and police working in service of the mine. Golub mentions this extreme violence twice - both times to illustrate an extraneous point. Early in the book Golub considers the semiotic complexity of “the mine:” “If a security guard shoots an Ipili trespasser in the back, has “the mine” or “an employee” shot someone?” (p. 7). In a shallow discussion of the differential bases of power of “the mine” and “the Ipili,” Golub recognizes the mine’s power as rooted in bureaucracy and rule of law, while the Ipili’s power is largely based on their ability to disrupt the mine’s operations by damaging the supply road or the essential power lines – “the mine was powerful . . . but it was also vulnerable” (p. 7). Golub does not adequately theorize the Ipili’s fundamental disadvantage: their basis of power rests on a threat of illegal acts likely to result in broad and brutal police actions placing many Ipili at risk, while the power of the mine rests on bureaucracy, regulations, and laws, some shaped by the company, and all have proven to be easily negotiated by the company under weak governance. Golub notes that actual “outbursts” by Ipili that hamper the operations of the mine “are few” (p. 21). One example of such an “outburst” is from 1993, following an incident in which “police officers believed to be in the mine’s pocket killed a young boy” (p. 21).

Golub further describes an incident following a meeting at the mine site when he was driven back to the village after dark in a company vehicle. He says “local people threw stones at it” (p. 138). This incident is not described in the context of an in-depth exploration of evident hostility of local people to the mine or of their forms of resistance, but rather to illustrate that the village he lived in was “dangerous” and “degraded” (p. 138). Finally, Golub recognizes that police periodically deal with perceived risks to the mine by illegally burning down many houses of nearby villagers, allegedly to maintain law and order (p. 104). Golub notes that the first such incident was in 1987, he mentions another in 2007 (p. 210). In fact, over a hundred local houses were again burnt down by police in 2009 (Amnesty 2010) during a state of emergency, and again in 2014, while the leadership of the landowners was away from Porgera in yet another failed negotiation to have people resettled away from the mine lease area.

Golub aims to analyze “the creation and maintenance of a large corporation (and by extension, global capital)” (p. 3) and concludes his book by calling for
an anthropology that is not “overawed” by the mining industry, but is “willing, and able to sport with leviathans” (p. 207). But this book does far more to unpack the Ipili, in largely traditional anthropological ways, than it does to get at the roots of corporate power: the ability to buy and make proprietary expert knowledge about the Ipili; the structures, functions, legal, security, and financial arrangements that enable the mine to do its business. Anthropologists interested in deconstructing corporate power will do well to widen their reading beyond traditional anthropology. For example, Golub would have benefited immensely from the work of O’Faircheallaigh (2006, 2007, 2010, 2012) who has studied hundreds of negotiated agreements between mining companies and indigenous peoples allowing him to determine the necessary conditions for a successful outcome for the community. Those conditions have never existed for the Ipili. Furthermore, despite Golub’s interest in Ipili “feasibility,” defined in part by the “authorization of spokespeople” and “political agency,” he completely fails to recognize these very dimensions when he criticizes attempts by Ipili leadership to seek assistance abroad (p. 211) where they have challenged Barrick’s shareholders directly at the company’s AGM, sought solidarity and leverage in meetings of indigenous peoples at the UN, or sought legal assistance.

Finally, many anthropologists have engaged with the Porgera mine – often in the context of a paid contract with the company resulting in proprietary data on the Ipili for use by the company and very broad restrictions on what the anthropologist can say or write about conditions faced by the Ipili. Others have become part of the structures that perpetuate the mine, such as PEAK (Porgera Environmental Assessment Komiti). This may explain why so few of these anthropologists have spoken out about the abuses perpetrated on the Ipili by the company and its security apparatus. It is to Golub’s credit that he does so, even if primarily in an afterword. Still needed is an anthropologist willing and able to deconstruct the power and the enabling mechanisms of this particular corporate leviathan.

References Cited

Amnesty International

O’Faircheallaigh, Ciaran
