

Teaching Extraction and its Discontents

A Conversation with Anna Zalik

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Anna Zalik, Associate Professor at York University's Faculty of Environmental and Urban Change, teaches a course called *Extraction and its Discontents: A Social History and Political Economy*. The course builds on and extends her work on the politics of industrial extraction in Nigeria, Mexico and Canada, her more recent research on seabed mining, and her writing and reflections on the politics of fieldwork on natural resource extraction. What follows is a lightly edited transcript of an interview she had with Gayatri Menon, editor of the *Teaching Commodity Frontiers* section, in August 2020.



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Gayatri Menon: *One of the reasons I wanted to talk to you is because you work on seabed and ocean floor mining and I was wondering if you could talk about the distinctiveness of seabed mining, situating it within your broader work on extraction, and as well as how it informs your course?*

Anna Zalik: Sea-bed mining relates to my broader interest on resource nationalism and resource sovereignty, and the debates around 'nationalisation' of industry (including the critiques by indigenous sovereignties movements in Canada that highlight the colonial dimensions of 'nationalisation'). But when we think about

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movements around resource sovereignty those, at least historically, had some very progressive dimensions, they were anti-colonial or anti-imperial in their formation. What makes seabed mining interesting is that the regulatory environment around it emerged out of the same movements and aspirations even though seabed mining is beyond national jurisdiction, falling under the auspices of the UN Convention of the Law of the Sea. What makes that significant and relates it to this resource sovereignties dimension is that in the lead up to the formation of the International Seabed Authority, which is the UN agency that is responsible for regulating minerals beyond national jurisdictions, the G-77, the New International Economic Order, and former colonized states were really important actors and they sought to create a regime that would be redistributive of these resources that were understood to be the common heritage of mankind, of humankind. So there were these redistributive, economic justice aspirations that undergirded the creation of the International Seabed Authority. The regulatory history of seabed mining is a complex one, but it was very much about reclaiming those resources from global capital.

For me the study of seabed mining evokes the longer history and debates around who would control the revenue from mining - so it allows students to think about mining outside of the purely anti-extractivist, ecological mindset but one that also gets them to think about how humans sought to put more-than-human nature to use in a form that could be redistributive.

Seabed mining is also interesting because being the deep ocean it is perceived to be beyond spaces that humans were previously able to dominate. There is all of this elite interest and investment in oceans-oriented philanthropic endeavours to protect these zones, in ways in that in many respects are diametrically opposed to the Global South's aspirations. Although they claim they have philanthropic interests, there is this notion

of the ocean as external to human problems that somehow makes super-elites comfortable, it is this space where social inequity is somehow separated out because it is the oceans - and thus apart from human dynamics. One of things that I think is important for students to problematise in the contemporary conjuncture is the idea that there is this space that is external to the current sets of dynamics, and to understand that the 'frontier imaginary' is part of the problem because it allows for exploitation.

GM: *How do you approach the pedagogical task of conceptualizing extraction, and more specifically mineral extraction?*

AZ: While it is important to think through the concept of extraction in broader terms, there is the tricky problem of retaining a sufficiently bounded concept to make it meaningful. If extraction becomes synonymous with all forms of exploitation than it can mean both everything and nothing at once. While we talk about (human) labour exploitation as mutually constituted with the exploitation of nature, I tend to define extraction as the physical removal, through human labour or machines, of non-renewable (on most human timescales) non or more-than-human nature.

Part of the objective of the *Extraction and its Discontents* course is to think conceptually about the mutual constitution of nature and human labour. In the early weeks of the course, I've assigned readings by scholars such as Melissa Wright on the maquiladora sector, Nancy Scheper-Hughes' work on organ trading, and others that push us to think through the ways in which the typical definition of extraction is part of broader processes and histories - among them the extreme exploitation of labour through enslavement and capitalist value chains. We also read a piece that Sonja Killoran-McKibbin and I wrote which talks about production and extraction as concurrent processes, to have students think a little more about the ways in which extraction

cannot really be conceptualized apart from the broader value chains into which it feeds. Mining doesn't just exist to extract the thing from the ground, it exists to make it into a commodity which involves processing natural resources and ways to sell it.

I also introduce students to different kinds of critical approaches to extraction – one being a Marxist perspective – and the other being one that is informed by indigenous epistemology (but that clearly also has dimensions that emerge out of post-structuralist thinking). There is concern to engage epistemologies that do not hold up western ontology's separation of humans and 'nature'. Understanding humans as embedded in nature conceptually requires us to complicate the idea of mineral extraction as only about the removal of physical material – and clearly the value chains to which it is connected.

GM: *One issue with the sovereignty debates - as Greenpeace and other groups have pointed out - is the issue of 'hiding behind the poor' to justify extraction. Would you speak a little about how you engage that in your course?*

AZ: Ultimately the overall thrust of the course does kind of support that 'hiding behind the poor' view. Certainly when we look at contemporary extraction, under neoliberalism, aspirations of some sort of redistributive model have been flushed down the toilet. Part of my research on the International Seabed Authority is around the ways in which those aspirations were basically shut down due to the fact that the International Seabed Authority was inaugurated into existence at the same moment as the WTO came into effect - with all sorts of neoliberal elements that privileged the contracting firm. The whole exploitation regime that is currently being rolled out is about privileging the contracting firm. Ultimately that is one of the key take-homes of the course. There's a lot of discussion right now about transition and renewable energy transition and so I've been involved in a few virtual

groups recently talking about recycling of minerals and one of the things that is being promoted instead of 'greenfield' extractive sites is the recycling of existing minerals through proper waste management that would reduce the need for mineral extraction. There is debate around the extent to which these kinds of minerals are needed for the transition to renewable energy and so in the final weeks of the class we move away from the question of 'hiding behind the poor' to the debates around the 'need' for these minerals that are so-called 'required' for the transition to renewable energy.

Under our current economic model, unless we move to something that is low or no-growth, we are in a situation where the amount of resources that are required for the transition to renewable energy is going to bring about another round of over-exploitation of natural resources, that will lead to another boomerang effect that we might not yet foresee. This is the thing with seabed mining - the implications of seabed mining over the long term are unclear and we've not necessarily learned anything from the past - the disruption that this might potentially cause to oceanic ecosystems and the possible future implications of this are beyond current knowledge.

So I end the course with a discussion around debates about transition - what kinds of minerals are needed, alternatives that could involve recycling, the debates and struggles around lithium extraction for chargeable solar batteries etc. Even though there isn't a climate change focus in this course it is always looming in the background and I feel like that the debate about alternatives to ongoing extraction for transition is particularly important to broach.

GM: *You and Michael Watts wrote this interesting article about data and knowledge production around natural resource extraction which challenges people to think critically about data, and I was wondering*

if you could talk about how that gets incorporated into your teaching practice.

AZ: That piece is a critique of transparency discourse and part of that broader project is recognising either when there is so-called transparency, (a) the data that is disclosed is not necessarily the data that is useful, (b) its disclosure doesn't necessarily lead to any substantive actions against power holders and (c) the data itself is questionable. One of the reasons I got interested in industrial extraction when I set out to study corporate philanthropy was the level of opacity in these industries, there's a lot of murkiness around the actual figures and this is recognised internationally. There are initiatives at the global level that are trying to create better knowledge about how these markets actually function that I think it is important for students to learn. It is not a radical relativist thing where any figure you read is incorrect but getting people to question official sources of data and look at different ways of interpreting the data that they are presented.

GM: *What do you want a student of your course to walk away with?*

AZ: It's complicated in part because I teach this course to a very broad audience of students but I want them to come away with a bit of an understanding of the history of sovereignist movements around natural resources because I think a lot of students now, younger students, aren't aware of that history, that there was a significant history of mobilisation around such issues. I want them to understand the Latin American debates around neo-extractivism that shows that extraction in the current economic order is still for export and ends up primarily recreating the South to North flow of resources. I want them to come away with the interconnections between the exploitation of the earth and exploitation of human labour. I want them to have an understanding of the policy and regulatory context that is shaping the community struggles against particular mining or oil and gas projects.

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