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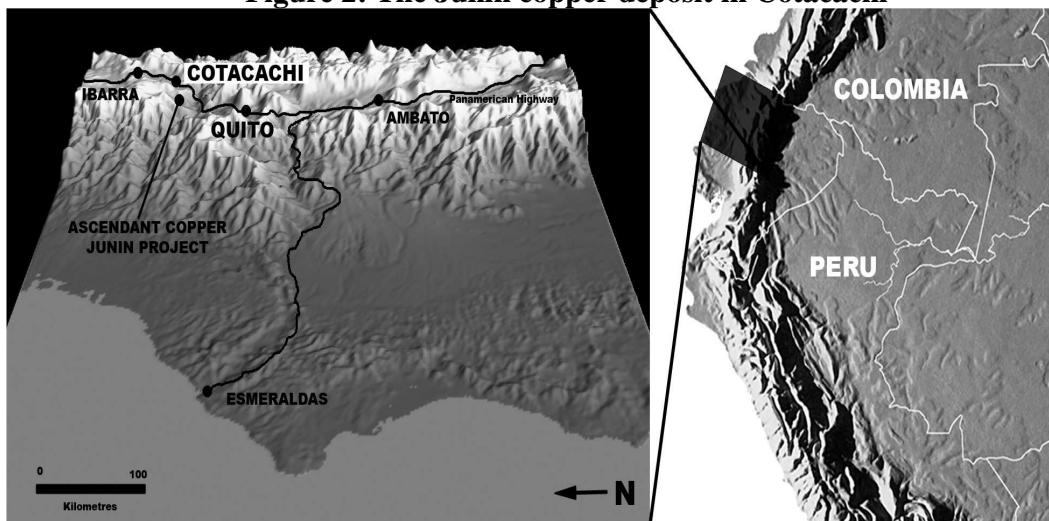
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(Full paper)

Cotacachi: articulated movement and truncated mining

[Cotacachi is] located some two hours' drive to the North of Quito, Ecuador and covering both high altitude grassland (with a dominantly Quichua population) and humid tropical valleys (with a colonist and mestizo population). This humid sector, known as Intag, is also the site of a copper deposit commonly referred to as the Junín deposit (Figure 2), and identified during the 1980s under a geological exploration agreement between the Ecuadorian and Belgian governments. In 1990 the Japanese International Cooperation Agency (JICA) financed more thorough exploration by the Metal Mining Agency of Japan (MMAJ) that confirmed the existence of a large and potentially profitable deposit. In 1993 the exploration of the deposit passed to the company Bishi Metals, a subsidiary of Mitsubishi. However, Bishi Metals abandoned the site in 1997 as a result of escalating conflict and the concession remained idle until 2002 when it was once again purchased. By 2004 the concession had been acquired by Ascendant Copper Corporation, a "junior" mining company incorporated in British Columbia, Canada,¹ and in 2005 Ascendant transferred ownership of the property to its subsidiary Ascendant Ecuador (Ascendant Copper Corporation, 2005). Though still not developed, this will – like Yanacocha – be an open-pit mine. Unlike MYSA, however, this (potential) mine operates in a context in which mining is still unimportant in the national economy, in which there is little history of mining, and in which the economy – though far from dynamic – is not emerging from a collapse of the type that occurred in Peru in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Figure 2: The Junin copper deposit in Cotacachi



Source: Own elaboration.

While in Cotacachi the initial granting of mining concessions was – as in Cajamarca – a process that happened off stage and in the capital city, in this case external actors became aware of these concessions before any significant mining development had occurred. They then passed this information to local actors, and slowly a process of social mobilization unfolded that preceded mining activity. Although this has ultimately proven to be critical in influencing subsequent territorial and livelihood dynamics in Cotacachi, it occurred largely by accident. A Bay Area environmental NGO had become aware of Japanese mining interests in Northern Ecuador, and mentioned this to one of their Ecuadorian counterparts, Acción Ecológica (until recently a part of Friends of the Earth International). Acción Ecológica began to pursue the case and soon made contact with communities in the Intag zone of Cotacachi. They then began environmental education activities oriented towards making communities aware of the costs of mineral-led development and, indeed, towards generating strong local opposition to mining.² At the same time, as in Cajamarca, a parish priest began speaking of the risks of mining in the area both from the pulpit and in his activities with a local youth group. In parallel, though completely unrelated, a small-scale ecotourism entrepreneur and environmentalist had begun working with a different youth group on environmental issues (though not mining). Soon, however, these three processes converged and local actors began to speak more explicitly about mining and the risks it would imply for environment and society in Intag. Though not using a language of dispossession or colonization (cf. Harvey, 2003; Habermas, 1987), these groups began developing the argument that an irruption of mining into the area would colonize ways of life that residents had largely taken for granted and steadily dispossess them of a landscape, environmental quality and form of society that they had until then taken for-granted. With time a hard line emerged, further solidified by residents' personal experiences during Acción Ecológica-sponsored visits to other mining sites in Ecuador and Peru, the effects of which were to create a strong anti-mining sentiment among participants.

This process led to the formation of the first explicit SMOs in Intag: DECOIN, an NGO that brought together the two youth groups, the priest and the ecotourism entrepreneur and environmentalist; and a community-based organization in the areas most directly affected by the mine concession. In 1997 this committee ultimately decided to attack and burn down the mine camp. This event not only led Bishi Metals to withdraw, it also pulled both the central and local state more deeply into the conflict. A ministerial visit led to a central government position that – unlike the Cajamarca case – did not automatically assume a pro-mine stance. Meanwhile, the local government played a role of intermediary in the conflict at the same time as it created spaces that ultimately allowed this incipient movement to become stronger.

As in the case of the arrival of Acción Ecológica to Intag, there was an element of serendipity surrounding the relationship between the process of social mobilization and the local state. In 1996, the national indigenous movement decided to present candidates for municipal elections. On the wave of the increasing strength of the movement, and the increasing visibility of indigenous issues in national political debate, several of these candidates won mayorships. One of these was Cotacachi,³ and the elected mayor (still in

power in 2006) initiated a model of municipal governance that emphasized participatory planning and the steady incorporation of a range of social actors into municipal affairs. A centerpiece of this model was the creation of the Assembly for Cantonal Unity (AUC in Spanish), a non-governmental counterpart of the municipality that was designed as a vehicle to monitor local government, foster organized links between the municipality and the canton's population, and host a range of social change initiatives in the canton. One of these activities revolved around environmental issues, and the AUC hosted a newly created Committee for Environment Management (CGA in Spanish). This space was partly created and then assertively taken by DECOIN and other groups in Intag. Through this space they succeeded in getting Cotacachi to pass a municipal ordinance declaring itself an "ecological canton" that, inter alia, rejected any place for mining in territorial development activities.⁴

In 1996 the electoral position of the mayor of Cotacachi (Auki Tituaña) was neither environmental nor anti-mining. However, by creating vehicles for organized participation in municipal affairs he allowed the emerging environmental movement to move beyond Intag and project itself canton-wide. This in turn allowed it to develop links and promote its agenda with both urban and highland groups such that by 2005 seventy-one per cent of the canton said that mining was prejudicial to nature and people, and only 29 per cent felt that mining should be allowed in the canton (Ospina et al, 2006). Just as importantly, highland indigenous organizations in the canton and the province of Imbabura began to offer their political support should Intag ever need it to resist the entry of mining. Partly as a consequence of such changes – as well as any of his own personal convictions – the mayor began to assume a more clearly environmental position in subsequent electoral campaigns.

The departure of Bishi metals in 1997, and the absence of any mining related actions until 2002, gave these movement organizations the chance to consolidate themselves, develop a series of national and international links, mobilize resources and also elaborate proposals for forms of rural development that would not be based on mining. In this process, they were helped by the fact that Cotacachi was a nationally and internationally visible canton as a result of the local governance experiments underway there. These experiments attracted NGOs and volunteers to the canton, and so increased the availability of financial and technical resources. The links to Acción Ecológica also helped to make the case more visible nationally and internationally (as did books published by local residents: Fluweger, 1998), though the lead activists in DECOIN and later in the AUC also dedicated considerable effort to opening up these links. The willingness in later years of the mayor to publicly assume visible positions critical of mining, and to write directly to international groups on the same issue, also helped.

These linkages served a range of specific purposes which, taken as a whole, sought to prevent mining from taking root in Cotacachi. Some links were developed in order to pursue legal actions against mining, others to build solidarity relationships, and others to mobilize funds to support local development initiatives. Indeed, both SMOs and the municipality invested considerable resources in this period to develop new economic activities in Intag, in particular organic coffee production and marketing, handicrafts, and

community managed ecotourism. The rationale for this work was the notion that "we are convinced that, if we are to block mining, we must offer practical productive alternatives ... that generate employment." Throughout the process – and in particular via the activities of the AUC – all this was combined with a sustained program of environmental education in schools and communities. This time spent consolidating organizations and generating a more or less shared view of territorial development that was grounded in rural livelihoods rather than mining was something that SMOs in Cajamarca did not enjoy. Thus, when in 2002 the mine concession was once again activated, and when in 2004 it was acquired by Ascendant Copper, both SMOs and the environmental movement more generally were consolidated and enjoyed a far wider set of local, national and international linkages than they did in 1997.

Once Ascendant acquired the concession it sought to re-commence exploration activities. As part of its entry strategy it began a program of community relations that sought to develop the community links on which access to the exploration site depended. While this generated some local support (and thus also conflict with anti-mining organizations and activists), the companies' own financial limitations meant that it was unable to operate a social investment program at anything like the level of MYSA. Nor was it able to do any significant local sourcing of services or inputs. Consequently, it has not yet had any significant effects on local or urban livelihoods, and there are very few people whose livelihood opportunities depend in any measure on the existence of the mine. This has made it easier for movement organizations to keep the social movement and its shared environmental agenda relatively coherent and intact – as reflected in the figures quoted above on the level of anti-mining sentiment in the canton.

This situation – along with the need for investment capital – has made it vital that Ascendant raise finance on the stock market (up to late 2005 its resources were limited to those of its Directors). This capital is necessary not only to develop mining operations, but also to create the incentives that would lead at least an important part of the local population to see their livelihoods as depending on the mine. To do this it began proceedings to get itself listed on the Toronto Stock Exchange in order to sell shares. This elicited a response from SMOs in Cotacachi, the US, Europe and Canada that sought to challenge the accuracy of Ascendant's stock offering prospectus and thus prevent it from acquiring the approval necessary for it to be listed on the Toronto market. While this effort succeeded in slowing down this approval it ultimately failed and in November 2005 Ascendant's first shares were sold (Ascendant Copper Corporation, 2005). Less than three weeks later, members of the settlements located near to the proposed mine once again attacked and burnt down the mine's centre of operations (Canadian Press, 2005; DECOIN, 2005).

To date, though conflict continues, there is still no significant exploration underway.⁵ In this sense movement processes have so far resisted any forms of dispossession that might otherwise have accompanied mining. Mining has, however, already transformed Intag. Activists and community leaders alike speak of the fact that they now have to live the rest of their lives knowing that there are potentially exploitable mineral resources under their feet, and that such exploitation may one day become a reality. In this sense,

the very idea of mining, and the possibility that at some future date Intag may become a mining district, has colonized people's lifeworlds in a way that is, to all intents and purposes, permanent. Their certainties and ideas about the future will never be the same again.

¹ Its main office is, however, located in Lakewood, Colorado

² Acción Ecológica is opposed to mineral development in Ecuador.

³ Another was Guamote, discussed in Bebbington, 2000.

⁴ See Municipalidad de Santa Ana de Cotacachi, 2000.

⁵ In September 2007, the Ministry of Energy and Mines required Ascendant to suspend all its activities on the grounds that it did not have the support of the Municipality of Cotacachi. This does not suspend the concession, and the Minister left open the possibility that the company could return if it could reach a negotiated agreement to do so with the communities and local government. However, this decision can be seen as a further "win" for the social movement in Cotacachi.