Artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM): Power and Territorialization in the Global South

Deadline for article submission: 30 June 2024

This special issue proposes to examine what is known as “artisanal and small-scale” mines through the lens of the geography of power. ASM has considerably increased over the past decades and is now thought to provide direct income for 40 million people (IGF, 2017). While gold is the main artisanally mined mineral, other minerals are also extracted in ASM, such as those considered “critical” to energy transition (Damonte and Schorr, 2022) or precious and semi-precious stones. The appeal of ASM must be put into the context of poverty-stricken settings. In such places, in spite of the precarious conditions it offers, of the great risks that must be taken by the workers – sometimes due to the intertwining of its economy with armed conflicts or illicit activity – and in spite of its environmental impact, ASM still holds out bright prospects (Parra and Valbuena, 2020; Chevrillon et al., 2019).

Most of the scientific work and debates on ASM have proceeded from these issues. They often fall into different categories depending on the area studied (South America or Africa, for instance), and/or according to the mineral itself (gold, 3Ts, for instance). The aim of this special issue is to compare and contrast viewpoints in order to explain the differences and similarities in the far-reaching transformations stemming from the expansion of this activity worldwide (Dessertine et al., 2022 for West Africa and Sahel). More specifically, this issue will examine the said diversity by focusing on the power relations and the territorialization linked to ASM.

Even though ASM is often considered an “informal” activity, it is quite significantly a space for political production and socialization (Velut, 2021; Le Tourneau, 2020, Cerceau and Laurent, 2023). ASM governance is shaped by power relations through dynamics of spatial control and of territorialization (Côte and Korf, 2018; Grajales and Vadot, 2020). The phrases “artisanal mining” or “small-scale mining” themselves express power relations: they are used as distinct from large-scale industrial mining operated by transnational mining companies which are far more powerful political actors than those of ASM, yet no less controversial, as they are criticized by local populations in particular (Capitant, 2017; Côte, 2023). Those actors maintain ambivalent relations with ASM, whose criminalization they often take part in (Kaufmann and Côte, 2021). ASM is thus fashioned by political and territorial logics which this issue intends to analyze, to highlight the lack of balance in the power held by each group of actors, who play unequal parts in producing ore outside of globalized
capitalism. The aim is also to lay emphasis on the dynamics of spatial control at stake in these power relations. Several themes may be developed, each of which includes power and counter-power, contestations, claims, such as:

**Forms of ASM organization and governance**

Our goal is to examine the different ways in which ASM contributes to the territorialization of power. This includes the role played by public authorities and their policies in ASM governance – for instance, their role in its formalization or criminalization, especially when it comes to the control of space, and their potential discrepancy with the way the activity is actually organized. This study also implies the endogenous dynamics of territorialization, for example through the plowing of ASM profit back into the control of new sites and to develop the mechanization of activities, or, outside the mine itself, into goods more or less tightly linked to the activity (real estate investing, shops) that contribute to urban dynamics while working as processes to politically control the territory. These processes are often halfway between the formal and the informal as they hinge upon the current regulation and the profit made from border crossings. Understanding how ASM contributes to territorializing power thus entails looking into the ways in which the logics and relations of ASM control and oversight, by the state or not, are drawn on, skirted, disputed, overridden...

**Networks and global production lines**

What is at stake here is to examine how ASM-related forms of territorialization interlock with production and marketing networks and to investigate the governance of production lines. For instance, the role played by some middlemen in the value chain may be analyzed: financiers, mineral brokers, exchangers, customary or state authorities – all of whom are thought to be able to control specific areas of ASM. Beyond the mining sites, the role played by some organizations involved in the mineral supply chain may also be analyzed: buying stations, business clusters, refineries, jewelers, financial institutions, electronics companies, customs posts, etc.

Current international regulatory frameworks tend to require ore-producing countries to trace artisanally-mined minerals, with the aim of making these supply chains “clean” or “risk-free” and to ensure that their sourcing is “responsible”. A critical approach to these mechanisms condemns the systematic blaming of the weakest links in the chain, who bear the burden of a system that yet intrinsically feeds on the ills that are denounced (LeGouill and Herbozo, 2023). How to interpret these efforts of governance when it comes to responsibility? What are the underlying perceptions of ASM-related “risks” and who do they benefit, in the end? How are these initiatives structured around the current modes of ASM management, how are they appropriated or disputed, and thereby, how do they contribute to territorializing the political and economic control of these production lines?

**Forms of collective organization of ASM work**

Scientific research on ASM strongly focuses on how difficult it is to formalize the sector, through the dynamics of land access and mining permits. This leads to underestimating the power relations within ASM and the underlying relations to capital, as well as their impact on territory. Various forms of work organization may be seen in ASM and they are more or less collective and institutionalized. A common type of formal organization in the sector is the “association”, or “mining cooperative”, of which many instances occur, depending on the setting. What dynamics of control of space arise from this mode of ASM-governance?

ASM work is heterogenous, depending on the tasks performed, which are often linked to social class and status. According to the differences in geology, technology, capital, etc., different types of
artisanal mines develop. How do these characteristics contribute to the dynamics of control of space? Here gender is quite significant when bearing in mind that ASM productive work is often sustained thanks to reproductive labor, whether paid or unpaid, and which is most often gendered (Grieko, 2016; Kassa, 2020). Additionally, pooling and solidarity groups and networks, whether at work (trade unions, subscriptions), in families or in leisure time (a communal fund for soccer, for instance) may be focused on. How do such associations and networks interplay with ASM territories?

**ASM and social resistance**

Alongside forms of solidarity, what forms of social resistance are built around ASM, against what or whom, and how do these forms shape the spatial control of ASM sites and supply chains? Do these fights dovetail with those denouncing capitalism and its organization of labor and profit at a global scale, which intrinsically feeds on territorial inequalities (Engels, 2022)? Beyond the meaningful worlds and practices that have been previously analyzed, the purpose is to examine the shape of the collectives, the nature and the tone of their claims and to see how the miners who get involved are politically represented. In the light of the protests against industrial mines (Allal et al., 2018; Géronimi and Mainguy, 2020), it is worth analyzing whether ASM could be seen as a role model of development for ore-producing countries. The role of collective actors such as trade unions and associations may also be examined in settings where the social State is hard to find. How do these actors convey their workers’ claims? And if the ASM workforce fails to unite in protest, why aren’t there any networks to demand political rights, as may be seen in defense of indigenous lands and native peoples, for instance? Or do they just evade the researcher’s perception?

On this last point, please note that besides the articles dealing with the themes of this special issue, we also encourage proposals tackling the general theme of this call for papers, which may be submitted through the other sections of *EchoGéo* (“Sur le Métier”, “Sur l’Image”, “Sur l’Écrit” – in which case it is necessary to comply with each specific set of criteria, as per the editorial policy: [https://journals.openedition.org/echogeo/22070](https://journals.openedition.org/echogeo/22070)). In particular, the proposals may focus on the methodological and ethical challenges inherent to research on ASM, which is a precarious and sometimes dangerous work developing outside legal frameworks. Many methodological aspects are at stake and these sections offer so many opportunities to tackle them.

-------------------

The articles in this *Sur le Champ* dossier, written in French, English or Spanish, will be approximately 35,000 to 40,000 characters long (plus illustrations). Please refer to the recommendations to authors for standards of presentation of the text, bibliography and illustrations ([https://journals.openedition.org/echogeo/18155](https://journals.openedition.org/echogeo/18155)). **All texts must be sent before 30 June 2024** to Raphaëlle Chevrillon-Guibert (raphaelle.chevrillon-guibert@ird.fr), Muriel Côte (muriel.cote@keg.lu.se) et Géraud Magrin (Geraud.Magrin@univ-paris1.fr) coordinators of the dossier, with a copy to Karine Delaunay (EchoGeo@univ-paris1.fr), the editorial secretary, who will forward them to the evaluators.

**Coordinators of the issue: Raphaëlle Chevrillon-Guibert** is a political scientist and research fellow at the Institut de Recherche pour le Développement - UMR PRODIG. **Muriel Côte** is a geographer and lecturer at Lund University (Sweden). **Géraud Magrin** is a geographer and professor at Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne - UMR Prodig.

-------------------

**References**


