
A drab, low-contrast image of a desolate open-pit mine graces the cover of Marina Welker’s book. The pit’s diameter exceeds the cover’s width, emphasizing its breadth. A thin trace of vegetation lining the horizon, dwarfed by the sombre clouds above and exposed rock below. It is no Burtynsky, but one nevertheless gets the impression that we’re meant to see “extraction as an industrial sublime” (Crang 2010: 1094). I can think of no image more misrepresentative of the book’s contents—this despite the fact that Welker intensively interrogates the firm responsible for the giant crater depicted: Newmont Mining Corporation.

Perhaps its intent is ironic. The sublime open-pit mine is a favourite icon for critics of extractive industries. It symbolizes and invokes the scale of the industry’s power and destruction, its terrible ability to move mountains, literally. A mining corporation did this, it censures. Conversely, Welker argues that the taken-for-grantedness of what a corporation effects often comes at the expense of enquiring into who and what effects a corporation. Welker takes up the latter in *Enacting the Corporation*, studying a wide range of actors engaging in the eponymous process: enacting Newmont in various ways as a collective actor “with particular components, relations, interests, and boundaries” (p.4). She argues throughout that a corporation only exists through its enactments—that it is multiply authored rather than a discrete subject.

Welker, an anthropologist, conducts a multi-sited ethnography. The majority of her study takes place in and around southwest Sumbawa, an Indonesian island where
Newmont runs its Batu Hijau copper and gold mine. She conducts extensive research throughout the nearby villages, even learning a local Sumbawan dialect. Unlike others who consider it a virtue to keep a distance from the mining company, Welker also spends much time with Newmont employees and officers at the mining site and elsewhere (p.10). In addition to more than a year and a half of research on Sumbawa, she spent a summer in Denver studying Newmont’s corporate headquarters.

We meet executives in the company’s corporate social responsibility (CSR) department, Sumbawan and expatriate mine employees, environmental activists, contractors, community outreach managers, social auditors, village residents, and various nonhuman actors, all of which enact Newmont in different and often competing ways. With such a large and diverse cast asserting stakes in Newmont, Welker asks, how could it possibly be seen as a singular, intentional entity? She argues that a dominant assumption persists in scholarly, activist and popular accounts where the corporation figures as *Homo economicus*, a (collective) economic subject with prior interests that it single-mindedly pursues. Instead, Welker proposes that it is the enactments—the interactions and contestations among an assortment of actors—that combine to create the multiply- and relationally-defined corporation.

Welker detects some affinity between her relational account of the corporation and J.K. Gibson-Graham’s “anti-essentialist” view of the firm (p.5, 216), but I think there is an important difference that reveals a limit to Welker’s approach. In their work, Gibson-Graham also illustrate what the internal diversity of a given multinational mining firm might look like (see Gibson-Graham 2006: 74-75). However, they outline this diversity through a methodical and classificatory approach—one that not only thwarts a conception of the enterprise determined by “mechanistic logics” but also does so in a
decidedly diagnostic manner. For example, in their study of Australian mining giant BHP, Gibson-Graham assess the firm through alternative (Marxist) accounting categories. They recognize these categories rely on “discursive artifacts that attempt to impose an order on somewhat chaotic and hard-to-define transactions”, but they employ them anyway because it enables them to locate “opportunities for intervention and distributional struggles” (Gibson-Graham and O’Neill 2001: 65). Welker, on the other hand, seems reluctant to impose any diagnostic or orienting order on the corporation, lest it be seen as anything but “inherently unstable and indeterminate” (p.4).

Orientation is key here. Citing Weber, Welker admits that the predictable, profit-maximizing model of the corporation “is an important orienting device” (p.1), yet one that poorly explains what the corporation actually does. It orients a firm around a common goal, but only as “a large and loose target, an imprecise orienting device rather than a clear roadmap prescribing a fixed route for corporate managers and staff to follow” (p.27). It also orients its critics as a “claim-making device” used to support a particular viewpoint or course of action, yet it corresponds “imperfectly to what corporations actually do” (p.30). But then so too for any rule of thumb. The profit-maximization assumption isn’t watertight, but it is quite reliable and useful for scholars and activists alike who encounter corporations in their work but are unable to interrogate them with the same depth as Welker. It strikes me that Welker, in an effort to distinguish her own approach, too often opposes the common orienting device—the profit-maximizing corporation—with her disorienting device—the enacted corporation—when each are in fact used for different purposes altogether.¹

¹ Welker insists on page 1 that she does not deny profit is a motivation for corporations, but even this insistence suggests that profit is merely one among many motivations. Other motivations do exist, but they
Perhaps the enacted corporation shouldn’t be seen as a replacement for the profit-maximization model but as an extension of analysis. Welker implies as much at one point, tersely challenging those accounts of corporations in which “the bottom line of corporate profits is also the bottom line of critical analysis” (p.15). Certainly, as she suggests, many more factors that are not solely explained by profit-maximization influence a corporation’s course of action; as a chronicle of the particularities, contingencies and surprises that Newmont regularly and inevitably encounters, her book demonstrates just that. For example, chapters 2, 3 and 4 address two competing enactments of Newmont as an agent of community development. Under the patronage model, Newmont is like a “pot of money”, disbursing provisional funds for local hiring, infrastructure, welfare and more (p.69). Under the sustainable development model, conversely, Newmont is imagined as a “spaceship” whose responsibility should be, since it will eventually leave, to build the locals’ capacities to provide for themselves by incubating capitalism. (Ibu Comdev, an outspoken exponent of this model and the leader of Newmont’s Community Development Department, also delivered the book’s most delectably candid quote: “My job would be far easier if locals were already capitalists” [p.108].) Both the patronage and sustainable development models fit within the profit-maximization model of the corporation, but profit per se does not dictate which of the two models Newmont will pursue, because profitability is overdetermined by and contingent upon other factors. For example, in 2002, Ibu Comdev managed to shrink the community spending budget in order to enact the sustainable development model, while at other times groups of villagers enacted the patronage model by interrupting mining operations to demand, successfully, various disbursements from Newmont. The profit motive is by no means debunked in this
tend to be minor and short-lived if they directly thwart the overruling profit motive.
case, but Welker demonstrates that there are complex and competing enactments teeming below the bottom line.

Less convincing is the argument that the *Homo economicus* model of the corporation is fundamentally problematic. Very early on, Welker ungainly infers that because critical scholars have come to recognize *Homo economicus* as an impoverished basis for understanding individual human beings, the same must follow for complex collectives (p.2). She extrapolates too readily from humans to corporations and neglects how, say, utility maximization is sought differentially by individual and collective subjects. Consider discipline as an example, which Foucault (1995: 122-123) directly links to the cultivation of *Homo economicus*. Surely even the most ardent Foucauldian would admit that disciplinary technologies function differently (and more successfully) within the contemporary corporation than for the self. Welker investigates one such technology, the social audit, in chapter 6. While she never understates the disciplining function of the audit (see p.186-189), she is more interested in how “corporations always have in their midst various agents who thwart the fantasy of the well-oiled machine” (p.199). She documents several mine managers who are antagonistic toward “bean counters” and who hinder their efforts in various ways, but this is less a revelation than a requirement, as there would be little need for discipline if there wasn’t already disobedience: “Discipline increases the forces of the body (in economic terms of utility) and diminishes these same forces (in political terms of obedience)” (Foucault 1995: 138). Despite the mine workers’ obstructionist intentions, Welker herself shows that, as is common among unwilling subjects of effective discipline, there was only feeble resistance, petty negotiations, and ultimately acquiescence. The utility maximization function of the audit, then, was rather successful. The figure of *Homo economicus* may be
too perfect to fully represent any complex subject, individual or collective, and when we look at some parts of a massive, publicly-traded company like Newmont contradictions do emerge; yet when we assess these parts in relation to the whole, it also becomes clear that corporate disciplinary technologies vigorously serve to iron-out such inconsistencies, fostering a coherent collective that indeed, in practice, unsettlingly resembles *Homo economicus*.

In her conclusion, Welker suggests moving beyond the strong theory/weak theory dichotomy, and I couldn’t agree more. I anticipate, though, that she will be both celebrated and criticized for espousing the latter; which is to say that proponents of weak theory will likely find an ally, while advocates of strong theory will probably not be swayed by her approach. Few, however, should be disappointed by Welker’s ethnographic storytelling, which is consistently interesting and often fascinating (I particularly enjoyed reading her description of Newmont-sponsored training for small-business owners in chapter 3, which features some jaw-dropping entrepreneurial indoctrination and priceless reactions to it). Those interested in extractive industries will be especially rewarded by her insider’s account of a mining firm at work; while it is not intended as an exposé, it is rich with detail of a complex environment that is too frequently snubbed by anti-mining activists as ‘the place where the evil happens’. Chapter 1 is especially revealing, illustrating the ways in which corporate social responsibility is taken up, sometimes earnestly and often problematically, at many levels within the headquarters in Denver.

In spite of the interest Welker generated in me while reading her account of Newmont’s exploits in Sumbawa, I failed to be persuaded by the model of the enacted corporation. Welker states that she takes inspiration from Sara Ahmed’s (2012) *On Being Included* in proceeding with a sense of uncertainty about what corporate responsibility
does (p.222n20). In asking what the enacted corporation does, I’m just left with uncertainty. Welker conducts some strong research, but it is never clear how her findings are dependent on her analytical orientation, which tends to adorn rather than undergird her empirical work. Enquiring into who and what effects a corporation, then, cannot come at the expense of what an enacted corporation itself effects.

References


