

Zinc's Time in the Sun? Tracing the Reopening of the Riso and Parina Valleys' Mines from Precarious Optimism to Affective Indeterminacy

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An office in the village of Oltre il Colle in the Northern Italian Orobic Alps and a makeshift sign on the road to the hamlet of Zorzone signal the presence of the Australian mining company, *Alta Zinc*. The sign points to a dirt road and the graffiti-covered shell of the *laveria* (figure X.1), a former flotation plant now reclaimed by nature. The ruin is a reminder of the once-thriving mining economy that shaped and continues to structure core aspects of the socio-cultural life of the Parina and Riso Valleys. The surrounding slopes bear witness to a mining history now only immediately visible in the abandoned pylons that once carried excavated ore. Further along the gravelled track sits *Alta Zinc*'s compound framing one of a number of entrances to the extensive galleries and their mineral deposits. Workers wearing high-vis vests, portable buildings, diggers, and clusters of equipment indicate fresh activity and the possible revival of extractive operations, with a recent sign announcing the present holder of the area's mining research permit as *Energia Minerals: Alta Zinc*'s prior incarnation. In 2013 *Energia Minerals* acquired exploration rights to the existing 230km of underground galleries and one mining concession setting up a presence in the valley in 2015.

This chapter addresses a peripheral feature of global extractivism and of the exclusionary practices discussed in this volume: the revitalization of European mining via renewed extraction activities in long-closed mines. The Valleys' mines were closed in the early 1980s as Italian resource policy shifted priorities. We locate the Parina and Riso Valleys case as lying on one of the 'multiple frontiers of extraction' that represent the

extractive industries' intensification and expansion into new geographical and conceptual domains (Mezzadra and Neilson 2017). Extractivist economies and social exclusion-related research in the global North has typically focussed on marginalised communities, threats to traditional livelihoods, property rights, and contested governance (Rodon and Therrien 2015; Tiainen, Sairinen, and Sidorenko 2015). Our approach draws inspiration from such studies and more generally recent neo-extractivist literature (e.g. Veltmeyer and Petras 2014) by reflecting on mining communities' perspectives, economic optimism and potential conflict in the cultural sphere.

The sense of 'precarious optimism' suggested by the chapter's title hints at the cautious hopes that the local communities projected onto the reopening of the mines. We suggest on the basis of our preliminary findings that faith in anticipated benefits brought by the return of mining activity is over-optimistic despite *Alta Zinc*'s presence instilling hope in the resurgence of the mineral market and the financial prospects of the mines' reopening. These anticipated benefits become visible on both material and symbolic levels in terms of the Valleys' economic revival and the sustainability of a collective mining identity. However, the emergent 'optimism' is no longer grounded in the feeling of trust suggested by early interactions between the company and community, now undermined as the reality of disparities of power become recognised. We conclude by arguing that as a consequence of these shifting relationships, the local community is caught in the grips of 'affective indeterminacy' and contemplating the reality of cruel optimism (Berlant 2010, 2011) as hopes of a revitalised collective subjectivity and material security remain in limbo.

Drawing on observations, informal conversations and documentary analysisⁱ, this chapter traces recent developments aimed at reopening extractive activities in the Valleys. Not only does the prospected revival of the mines bear economic implications for the valley,

but it also dissects at a phenomenological level what Raymond Williams (1961, 1977) identified as the ‘structure of feeling’.

For Williams, the structure of feeling serves as a reference point for the ‘felt sense of the quality of life’ at ‘a particular place and time’ wherein the arrangement of material activities intersect with ways of thinking and living generating a specific cultural space and its affective dimensions of experience (Williams 1961, 63). The ‘structure’ articulates the feel of presence and relational practice constituted in the past yet enabling a sense of continuity in terms of a ‘structure of identification’ and investment in ‘common social culture’ (Grossberg 2010:, 24-28; Highmore 2016, 147ⁱⁱ). This notion of ‘feeling’ as form-giving and determined by the residual experience of a labour process invites attention to the power of affect as it is generated, sustained and in this case confronted by the arrival of, for better or worse, an external actor.

Our focus here is therefore on the role that the structure of feeling plays—as the embodiment of collective subjectivity—within local communities as the plan to reopen the mines unfolds. We also identify what we refer to as ‘affective indeterminacy’, a useful concept in making sense of the complex intersection of hope, anticipation, fear, uncertainty and disillusionment that forms the fabric of such a structure.

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The rise, fall and long-awaited resurgence of mining in the Valleys

Active since before the Roman period, the exploitation of the zinc and lead reserves of the Parina and Riso Valleys’ mines were significantly expanded in the 19th century when the prices of minerals rose under increased demand across Europe. In the early 20th century,

Belgian and British companies bought the mines from local entrepreneurs and expanded infrastructures further. Under the autarkic policies of the fascist government in Italy, mining concessions were acquired by an Italian public-private company and, at the close of World War II, substantial Allied reconstruction investment channelled through the Marshal Plan allowed the Valleys' mines and related activities to flourish. In the late 1970s, following a succession of management companies, the mines became part of the state-owned *Italian National Energy (ENI)*. At that time a new national resources strategy focussing solely on oil and natural gas meant that all mineral extraction enterprises across the country were terminated. Despite infrastructural modernization in the 1970s and the discovery of new deposits of zinc, lead, and silver, activities in the Parina and Riso Valleys' mines ceased between 1981 and 1982 (Alta Zinc 2019b; Furia 2013; Locatelli 2012).

The economic impact of the mines' closure was not immediately felt as the then booming economy, bolstered by thriving textile and construction industries and related job opportunities, maintained high levels of regional employment. From the late 1980s onwards, economic contraction, locally, nationally and globally, resulted in job losses followed by depopulation as people relocated to larger cities in search of better employment prospects (informal conversations with locals). Today the two main municipalities of the Valleys, Oltre il Colle and Gorno, count just over 1000 and 1500 inhabitants respectively, having reached over 1800 and 2000 inhabitants in the 1960s (TuttItalia 2019a, 2019b).

Global mineral markets, local economies and affective attachments

As this historical snapshot suggests, the fate of mining in the valleys has been subject to economic variance and the changing priorities of exogenous institutions over an extended period of time. Whilst locals worked in and around the mines with mining central to

livelihoods and ways of life, over the decades a succession of national and international companies owned, took control of, and made decisions over extractive activities in the valleys in response to ever-shifting global geo-political conjunctures. In this respect, the arrival of *Energia Minerals* in the late 2000s following several decades of inactivity represents a reiteration of centuries-long operations decided by people and organisations external to the local community, as has generally been the case with extractive activities globally (Harvey and Press 1990).

To place this in a broader context, a rise in mineral commodity prices at the turn of the millennium, following extended periods of weak prices in the 1980s-90s, triggered a boom in the fortunes of the global mining industry (Humphreys 2015). This resulted in the latter's structural transformation with increased investor interest amid heightened competition in the global mineral market as the growing economies of countries such as China, India, Russia and Brazil vied for an increased share of raw materials (Tiess 2010). In some instances, this led to the 'dusting off' of long-sidelined projects and the buying-up of rival companies resulting eventually in what appeared to be a relatively stabilised market (Humphreys 2015). The subsequent economic optimism would survive through a series of inevitable market fluctuations following the initial boom period. *Energia Minerals'* interest in the Valley's historic zinc deposits is representative of how today's industry surfs the peaks and troughs of the market seeking investment opportunities by breathing 'new life' into neglected European mining environments. As *Energia's* managing director put it in a press release at the time, 'it's going to be zinc's time in the sun' (Sanderson 2015).

The industry is also newly sensitised to the public's poor perception of mining's exploitative and environmentally dubious practices inviting new perspectives on its responsibility towards communities (Broad 2014; Bice 2016). This seeming concern for substantial relationships underwrites a core thread of our argument in the case of *Alta Zinc*

and the Valleys' population. Communities' acceptance of the mining (and other) industries' presence –commonly referred to as 'social licence to operate' (SLO)– is increasingly important, being centred on expectations of derived economic value and a sensitivity to local identity and values. An SLO articulates in part a community's 'feeling' of possessing a vested interest ranging from increased employment and ancillary services (Zhang et al. 2015; Litmanen, Jartti, and Rantala 2016; Heffron et al. 2021) to recognition of cultural characteristics (Waterton & Smith, 2010). Any sense of trust suggested by the SLO is therefore largely conditional, not merely on the realisation of economic benefits, but on the company's capability for 'quality' dialogue and will to comprehend local culture and history (Moffat and Zhang 2014; Litmanen, Jartti, and Rantala 2016; Mercer-Mapstone et al. 2017). Below we point to the structure of feeling as implicated in the Valleys' initial level of acceptance but also indicate that, at the time of writing, the interactions that define the relationship between company and community suggest the relative hollowness of SLOs and their intangible, opportunistic, nature (Bice and Moffat 2014; Owen 2016ⁱⁱⁱ).

Through our documentary research and conversations with locals it seems clear that during the early stages consultations with locals and a demonstration of interest in the region's mining legacy amounted to a substantial outreach aimed at procuring the project's legitimacy within the community. Subsequently, the company's operation was framed in an appeal to the structure of norms, values and indeed deeper beliefs that shape aspects of the everyday life of the municipalities. It is precisely the (in)coherence of an intangible and at times volatile relationship that promises, on the one hand, to meet the communities' economic hopes but which also speaks of alignment to, and respect for, the cultural field that we address through our concept of 'affective indeterminacy'.

As outlined, the sense of social licence entails the requirement to be sensitive to cultural expression and ways of living around which mining revolved alongside economic

needs. Thus, the social licence implies a sensitivity grounded in a politics of recognition of the multiple layers of community identity. If anything, companies have to address not just the materiality of rich industrial pasts, but also the symbolic residues that mining communities endeavour to keep alive through the remembering and performance of labour heritage (Smith, 2006; Coupland & Coupland, 2014). As research has shown, while there are evident signifiers of decay and de-investment in landscapes of industrial decline these are increasingly coupled to attempts to prevent the ‘collective forgetting’ of industrial pasts and rather to use such signifiers as a ‘stepping stone to the future’ (Harfst 2015, 218). Consequently, buildings, infrastructures, skills, traditions and human knowledge have been considered as bearing ‘post-mining potential’ to be preserved in the form of museums, exhibitions, art and tourism. Add to this the symbolic potential of mining-related events, traditions and mining identity. These are not to be thought of purely as confined to the ‘past’ but rather utilised in the strengthening of local identities, income generation, educational purposes, and a general fostering of tourism.

Attempts to utilize the Valley’s labour heritage in the reinvigoration of the local economy were pursued unsuccessfully in various forms from the 1990s mostly due to financial mismanagement. Nevertheless, today the Valleys have three active mining museums which have received regional funding. Their display of artefacts takes the form of a practical consciousness where living and interrelating continuity with the past is represented through the staging of narratives conveyed through the museums’ explanatory notes. The cultural heritage of mining is also visible in its continued performances. For example, annual mining processions and religious mass to honour Santa Barbara, the patron saint of mining, and through various mining fetes and commemorations organised throughout the year.

<figure X.2 near here>

In this sense, the structure of feeling carries the emotional bonds that link personal to social history and in turn points to the narratives of affect that shaped and continue to structure a communal sense of cautious optimism towards a future with *Alta Zinc*. As we explain in the next section, the importance of ensuring that initiatives of heritage preservation and valorisation remain active was, and is, a key demand that local authorities in the Valleys made from the outset when interest in the mines was first shown.

Precarious hopes, uncertainties and the arrival of ‘the Australians’

When *Energia Minerals* made its appearance in the Valleys and was granted exploration licences in 2013 the locals responded with cautious expectancy. As commented in local newspapers, some feared that the reopening of the mines might have potentially negative environmental impacts and dreaded a return to high-risk jobs. Others saw an invaluable opportunity that could bring employment and economic opportunities to the Valleys (Filisetti 2013a), finally putting an end to depopulation in the area (Ghisalberti 2013). Local Mayors reportedly viewed the possible development with prudent hope and emphasised ensuring that the Valleys’ mining heritage and touristic potential would have to expand together with any possible revival of extraction activities (Filisetti 2013b).

The organisation of a symposium in Gorno in March 2014 on the valorisation and development of mining in the Valleys with the participation of representatives from *Energia Minerals*, and the commencement in August 2014 of the company’s trading on the Australian Securities Exchange, injected new hopes on the feasibility of a contemporary life for the mines. *Energia Minerals* named the ‘Gorno zinc project’ as its flagship project and over the following months, both in its marketing material and in communications with local

newspapers, issued continued reassurances over its commitment to the mines' reopening whilst respecting the environment, the local community, and the Valleys' mining heritage (Ghisalberti 2014a).

As the months passed, the local media painted a picture of surging enthusiasm on the part of local authorities. Local Mayors had been reassured that the company was committed to the environment and would leave one of the drifts available for touristic activities (Ghisalberti, G 2014b). Villagers were also presented as mostly supportive of the project; they had now started to believe in it and were waiting to see it happen (Filisetti 2014; Furia 2014). The wait during these first stages was not long as *Energia Minerals'* plans unfolded promptly. In December 2014 it awarded a rehabilitation and decline contract to an Italian company to refurbish old portals and begin its exploration program. In January 2015 it opened an office on the main street of one of the villages making its presence even more visible. At least 400 job applications were sent to the company (Ghisalberti 2015) and 'expectations, hope and moderate optimism'^{iv} (Irranca 2015) remained in place according to local media, whilst local administrators asserted the need to be kept informed on progress and to have their requests fulfilled (ibid.).

The 'Community' pages of *Energia Minerals'* (now closed^v) website praised the support and collaboration of the local communities and authorities whose trust, it claimed, the company was happy to have secured. Local knowledge and hard work had greatly benefitted the development of the project, the website also stated, and the company was excited to have contributed to the region's economic growth. Videos and statements by local Mayors reinforced the conveyed message of a strong, unfaltering and trustful relationship between *Energia Minerals* and the local community.

However, not everyone appeared to have so unquestioningly embraced developments. Already in September 2013 someone had mown the message "Australia, no thank you" in

two-meter high letters on a local meadow (Filisetti 2013c). In September 2014, hostile graffiti appeared on a wall in one of the villages: “Hands off the mines!”, “Uranium is close and it’s alluring”, “Jobs for a few, cancer for all” (Eco di Bergamo 2014). Around the same time a local resident published a controversial article in the local media implying that the local population had never been consulted by ‘the Australians’ – as people referred to the company – and had been duped with the promise of new jobs without knowing that the now highly technological mining industry requires specialized skills that most locals lacked (Epis 2014). The article also claimed that the company’s planned works would erase the old mining tracks and structures, over- and underground, and hinting at the graffiti’s messages concluded that the company’s historical interest in uranium should alert locals of the possible real aim of the project: to get closer to uranium mines in the adjacent valleys should Italy return to extracting the mineral. In January 2017, another article in a local newspaper advanced the theory that the Australian company, owned by an investment fund, is not really interested in reopening the mines, but is merely conducting explorations to inflate the value of its shares (Araberara 2017a). The relationships between *Energia Minerals* and the local community were thus not as ‘unfaltering and trustful’ as the company’s marketing material suggests.

Indeed, some of the arguments presented in the articles were also shared with us by locals during our visits in 2016 and 2017. Those we spoke with were hopeful that the mines would eventually reopen, but also uncertain and anxious about when this might happen and with what implications for local infrastructures and heritage. They were also concerned with the rumoured short duration (ten to fifteen years) of the extraction plan and what might happen to the Valleys in the longer term. Our conversations also revealed a less than optimal relationship between the locals and *Energia Minerals*, revealing a discrepancy with the ideal strong bond of trust publicized by the company. In September 2016, for example, one former miner explained to us that he had attempted to organise a community event with ‘the

Australians’ to allow them to share information about project developments. The company had confirmed their willingness, albeit not compelled by any regulation to do so, but never committed to anything. Consequently, he told us that in reality ‘they are not really that available’. Similarly, another former mine-worker reported that ‘the Australians’ seemed to have no interest in communicating with the locals. Old miners were particularly keen to know what was going on in ‘their mines’ but were not relayed any information apart from the occasional article in local newspapers. He added that the publicity posted by *Energia Minerals* on their website, in local media and various tourist information brochures, and even their office on the village main street, were mostly aimed at showing off to potential investors the company’s integration into the community. He perceived these initiatives as a ‘façade’ that did not reflect a genuine and trusting relationship with the locals. When we met in June 2017, a local administrator was keen to emphasize that *Energia Minerals* had established a dialogue with the local authorities from the very beginning. However,

after a year or more of positive conversations, in concrete they have not written down a single word. [...] Today we are a little disappointed. [...] They made videos, they wrote to the newspapers [...], it’s part of the game when you deal with an international market you have to show positivity [...] that’s important to know that there are no conflicts with the local populations. [...]. But we need to know what they want to do. [...] We cannot really understand their intentions.

Conversations held in 2017 in particular signalled frustration over the uncertainty surrounding the project and need to be understood in the context of developments that unfolded in the first half of 2017. As an Australian mining magazine reported, whilst ‘at the end of 2016 Alta [Zinc] appeared to have everything going for it – a strong zinc price

environment, a robust resource at its Gorno zinc project in Italy and positive share price movement’, complexities emerged with the revising down of resource estimates combined with the delaying of a feasibility study in Spring 2017 which ultimately ‘curtailed that momentum’ leaving the company ‘devoid of market support’ (Piper 2018, 79). When we visited the Valleys in the summer of 2017 the company was ‘gathering itself’ (ibid.) and was therefore possibly less keen to engage with the locals before knowing how to respond to unfavourable market conditions.

In September 2017, having been informed of the setback a local Mayor commented in a local newspaper: ‘we can only wait and see what the company is going to decide, hoping that soon a project will be presented formally to the region, something that has not yet happened in the last years’ (Araberara 2017b). When the decision to continue with the Gorno project albeit on a smaller scale-staged approach was communicated to the local authorities the response reported in local media revealed increasing frustration. As one Mayor commented: ‘They are talking about a possible beginning of the works in 2020 but it’s all up in the air, in essence there is nothing concrete [...] They keep postponing and postponing and in the meantime time goes by, months and years’ (Araberara 2017c). In September 2018 a public meeting was held in one of the villages and the project re-developments presented to the community, but without a feasibility study yet compiled the overall sense of uncertainty over the future of the project was intensified (Araberara 2018a).

While the website of Alta Zinc continues to be regularly updated with news of further exploratory drillings, quarterly reports and updates to shareholders, since the end of 2018 the decreasing coverage in local media on the ‘never ending story of the mines’ (Araberara 2018b) emphasised feelings that also emerged from our direct contact with locals. Most prominent is the frustration and powerlessness of being kept in the dark over the future of their own territory and for having to wait indeterminately for external ‘others’ to make

decisions based on forces and calculations that have little to do with their lives. Some of the locals we remained in touch with suggested that many people believed the company had now left and felt disappointed that, without being able to fully understand why, once more their hopes for the rebirth of their mines remain unfulfilled.

'Cruel optimism'? The ethereal promise of subjectivity and security

Mezzadra and Neilson (2017) make the case that, under the logic of contemporary capitalism, there are now 'multiple frontiers of extraction' that lay beyond the literal sense of 'mining', and which are now being transformed into resources ripe for extractive exploitation. This suggests potential for the appropriation of once-relatively autonomous cultural and affective characteristics being subsumed into the business and marketing strategies of companies such as *Alta Zinc*. As shown throughout this chapter many in the Valleys' communities have optimistically embraced the promises and potentials that have emerged following the arrival of 'the Australians'. As the previous section outlined, this level of optimism has been challenged and weakened through a neglect of the early-established relations that underpinned the intangible nature of the SLO and the lack of concreteness regarding the actual course of the mines' reopening. This exposes vulnerable elements that point to the instrumental reality of a formulaic interpretation of 'social licence' in promotional material. Even though the closing of the mines' meant the loss of a once secure economic base, today the Valleys remain an 'affective space' (Reckwitz 2012) with regard to the mining experience that has lived on following the closures. Despite the oft-conflicting views held among the Valleys' population, this affective space generates a collective subjectivity forged through the highs and lows of historic mining experience: a subjectivity that *Alta Zinc's* outreach to the communities promised to make sustainable. As the Mayor of Oltre il Colle states, albeit

prematurely, in a promotional video for the company: ‘they have brought a windfall to our community’ citing the pregnant promise of employment opportunities (Alta Zinc 2019a).

Berlant (2010, 2011) describes optimism as an ‘affective form’ in which ‘the subject leans towards promises contained within the present moment’ (2010, 93). Optimism relates to desire, whereby ‘desire’ speaks of embedded promises and endurance in our supposed relationship to the world. In short, optimism and desire amount to the affective sense of continuity and investment connecting subjects to their life. If the Valleys’ ‘structure of feeling’ provides for a relatively assured subjectivity refreshed by promises for the Valleys’ future, then we argue by way of conclusion that this may indeed be a ‘cruel optimism’ (Berlant 2010, 2011).

We have seen above that the fate of the Valleys’ communities has been subject historically to the combined force of politics and capital. For the reasons set out above, the promises of job security and future cultural sustainability have become, we argue, ethereal at this stage of the mining project perhaps betraying the Valleys’ trust and goodwill. This has resulted in a state of what we term ‘affective indeterminacy’ as the sense of certainty that characterised early responses to the project no longer corresponds to the cultural (and optimistic economic) structures of feeling due to the loss of transparency in the promised future. This is compounded by the loss of any sense of control over when and if that promised future might materialize, and a shared feeling of exclusion from knowledge of the present situation.

The nature of some sections of the extractive industries today seems to be, as we have suggested, one of ‘surfing the peaks and troughs’ of global demand and increasingly hypersensitive to the precarity of the market. The sun may have risen for zinc, but it will likely set. At the turn of 2019, and amid volatile share prices, zinc resources were insufficiently defined preventing the company setting clear production and financial targets (Mining Journal 2019).

We argue further then, although cautiously, that the sense of ‘cruel optimism’ takes shape with regard to the promise of jobs: as Macdonald (2018, 591) puts it, the reality of today’s extractive industry is that ‘[I]local benefits in terms of new employment opportunities frequently disappoint in terms of their magnitude’. This in the case of the Riso and Parina Valleys has seemed to be an understatement from the start. Equally, the increase in extractive companies demonstrating their ‘positive contributions to their host communities’ (ibid, 511) as reflected in the concept of the SLO also raises questions as to future intentions of *Alta Zinc* in relation to the incorporation of local heritage into its strategy. The performance of heritage within the communities facilitates the expression of autonomy, acting as a ‘cipher’ for collective experience tied to locality by bringing to the surface affective and subjective contexts as a measurement of the past’s value for the future (Dicks 2008). However, the desired future has become indeterminate and ambiguous preventing what many in the Valleys had hoped to be an evolution that would guarantee both collective subjectivity and financial security.^{vi}

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ⁱ Observations and informal conversations with locals took place during two visits to the Valleys in September 2016 and in July 2017. The documentary sources analysed include local newspapers, online news and other relevant websites, as well the Australian company’s websites (both *Energia Minerals*’ – now unavailable – and *Alta Zinc*’s). Moreover, one of the authors has good knowledge of the area and the Valleys having spent many summers vacationing there since the 1980s.

ⁱⁱ Whereas Williams’ original analytical use of the structure of feeling was related to the literary representation of material culture, Highmore (2016) shifts the concept into the realm of everyday shared living practices and the ‘sensual forms’ of objects. ‘Feelings’ are therefore taken to be form-giving social forces.

ⁱⁱⁱ Owen (2016, 102-3) argues that in reality there is a paucity of empirical evidence of where SLOs have ‘demonstrated a sustainable future-orientated program for host communities’ and that conceptually the SLO is a ‘pseudo-permitting instrument’. As our argument can only briefly cover here, *Alta Zinc*’s promotional literature makes much of its relationship to the Valleys’ communities and recognition of mining history. However, this perhaps has much to do with image management and is instrumental in ensuring a positive reading of social performance.

^{iv} All translations from Italian into English are by the authors.

^v www.energiaminerals.com/community

^{vi} In March 2020, extraction activities in the Valleys were suspended in the wake of a high Covid-19 infection rate in the Lombardy region leaving it ‘unclear when, if ever’ the company would be able to resume work (Iannucci 2020; Casey 2020). However, some drilling operations were restarted in July 2020 (Melanko 2020).