



# South Pacific experience

Michael C Howard, *Mining, Politics and Development in the South Pacific*, Westview Press 1991.

Reviewed by Thomas Jordan

Trade in primary commodities is the most important economic link between the rich industrialised countries in the North and the developing countries in the South. The dependency on the global primary commodity supply system is common to producing and consuming regions, a fact which places this issue at the centre of international studies. Trends in consumer preferences, prices, technology and investment patterns have far-reaching repercussions in the fields, mountains and cities of all parts of the Third World. This means that a person who seeks to understand the causes and mechanisms of the social and economic inequalities pervading the modern world can hardly find a better study object than the global primary commodity supply system. A most important task for academic scholars is to make the global interdependencies visible and intelligible through case studies. A number of books on the consequences of the international mining activity written by scholars concerned about the state of affairs in the world has been published during the last 10–15 years. One could mention Graham's study (1982) of the West African aluminium industry, Ogunbadejo's (1985) on Africa's strategic minerals, Bauer et al (1989) on

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Alusuisse and Moody's recent (1991) documentation of the activities of RTZ.

Michael Howard, professor of International Studies at Simon Fraser University, British Columbia, has spent the last two decades researching into the local and national impact of the mining industry in Australia and the islands of the South Pacific. In his recent book *Mining, Politics and Development in the South Pacific* the main themes of this research are summarised and elaborated upon. The bulk of the book is a collection of case studies on Papua New Guinea, New Caledonia, Fiji, Solomon Islands and the Phosphate Islands of the South Pacific, assessing the effects of mineral exploitation on local societies during the last century.

Howard's approach is firmly based in the political economy tradition, interweaving a number of issues in the historical case studies: power, labour relations, ethnic tensions, distribution of wealth, land right issues etc. In the introductory chapter the author surveys the literature on development issues concerning the South Pacific, especially studies related to mineral exploitation, noting the scarcity of in-depth studies. As in other parts of the world, critical social scientists were influenced by the Dependency school in more complex approach, focusing on the internal social and economic relations: the role of local elites and modes of production.

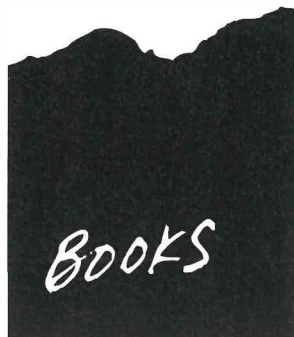
The case studies are conceived as narratives of the history of mining in the countries concerned, analysing the complex interaction between the colonial authorities, foreign capital, the domestic elites, the labour force and the local population. PNG (copper and gold) and New Caledonia (nickel) may be familiar to the reader through a fairly extensive media coverage during periods of intense internal conflict. However, Howard's detailed analysis of the role of mining in these conflicts will surely deepen the understanding of every reader. Fiji, the Phosphate Islands (Nauru, Banaba, Rabi, Makatea, Angaur), and the Solomon Islands will probably be new ac-

quaintances for the student of the mining industry. In these cases as well, Howard's detailed and complex analysis will reward the effort of reading.

A number of intricate issues surface in various constellations. One of these is the role of mining in financing authoritarian regimes (Fiji, Nauru), another is the effects of migrating labourers, upsetting the ethnic and political structure of vulnerable island societies. For this type of research issues, Howard demonstrates that the political economy framework is the unsurpassed method of research.

In the final chapter a concluding assessment is made of the impact of mining in the South Pacific. The author discusses the empirical evidence in the context of the literature on mining and development in other parts of the world. One of the advantages with the case study approach is the richness of the analysis. No simplified conclusions or recommendations will do full justice to the complex historical processes analysed by the author. However, Howard's conclusions are rather discouraging. I would like to quote the last paragraph of the concluding chapter at some length, since it constitutes something of the state-of-the-art in this particular research tradition:

"In reviewing mining in the South Pacific, the developmental record of the industry has not been very good. The mining sector has not proven to be particularly effective at encouraging the development of other productive sectors. In fact, mining has tended to undermine them, especially where people are turned into mere renters. At best, mining has provided some cash to prop up at state's bureaucracy [...] The practices of foreign companies sometimes have been at odds with national interests, but [...] the shortcomings of the mining sector must also be placed within the context of the local societies themselves. To benefit more from mining, the governments of the states discussed face the difficult task of overcoming many of the contradictions facing their own societies. Fail-



ing in this task, the mining wealth that does not go to foreign interests will continue to be dissipated and contribute little to national development. (p 233f).

Michael Howard has contributed a range of valuable case studies on mining in developing countries. This book should not be missing in any library serving students of international relations, politics or economics. It might be too specialised for normal university courses, but should prove very valuable for students writing theses, or for lecturers in search of interesting case material.

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