Two Ways of Looking at Abundance

This talk aims to understand how “sustainable” development works in an economy predominantly driven by resource extraction. What does it mean to approach small-scale development projects not as efforts to alleviate poverty, but instead, as the management of resource abundance? I focus on a network of rural villages in the Peruvian Andes’ Colca Valley. Building on scholarship that has examined the relationships between mineral resource wealth, land dispossession, and indigenous communities, my talk critically examines the way indigenous life itself is framed as an untapped frontier resource.

According to many Peruvian development specialists, entrepreneurship is the best way to “tap” the potential plenitude indigeneity affords. NGOs, for example, are deploying indigenous identity to create new business opportunities out of local agricultural knowledge and increasing global demand for cultural tourism. But, as many other Colca villagers see it, indigenous entrepreneurship, often proposed as the only way to improve village livelihoods, at best gives the region a set of cultural stereotypes and a temporary boom-like growth, just like a mine would. Meanwhile, entrepreneurship tends to exacerbate local inequalities and deform the structures of care and obligation long seen as essential to sustaining everyday life. I argue that indigenous-focused, entrepreneurial, “sustainable” development programs and the “unsustainable” development we see in mining are not opposite efforts, but complementary projects for expanding the horizons of extraction.