Faustian Pacts and the War beneath My Feet

https://www.e-ir.info/2015/10/01/faustian-pacts-and-the-war-beneath-my-feet/

PETER VALE, OCT 1 2015

Below the very ground of the leafy suburb from which I write these words, a regional war is under way.

Its intensity and magnitude became plain some weeks ago in a workshop on comparative urbanisms. The young Australian sociologist, Julian Potter, delivered a paper in which he set early gold mining in Balarat (near Melbourne) against the backdrop of Faust's pact with the Devil. For those readers interested in the allure of Faust and its link to mining, here is a teasing verse from Goethe…

The overplus of wealth that lies, lethargic,
deep in the soil beneath your territories,
still waits to be exploited. But no mind
is vast enough to grasp these treasures' full extent;
imagination in its loftiest flight may strain,
but cannot ever do them feeble justice.
Yet minds that can look deep will have
the vast assurance that vast undertakings need.

Splendid stuff Potter's contribution was: one corner of the late-19th global gold rush providing ease of comparison with early discoveries of gold in South Africa at places like Pilgrims Rest, Burkes Luck, and (my personal favourite) a smudge on the map called, Eerste Goud. But it took another participant, Riaan de Villiers (echoing William Faulkner), to point out that Faustian pacts are never past, they are only and ever continuous – beneath the city of Johannesburg, he said, the war for gold continues. This war is as much a puzzle for IR, as it is for southern Africa, because it fingers something that is invariably missed by policy-makers and pundits – sovereign bargains around wealth are always Faustian.

Underground

Mining in Johannesburg ended when the cost of extraction stopped a bull run that had lasted for more than a century. Established mining conglomerates threw in the towel and, in the name of globalisation, took their money to the London Stock Exchange and, presumably, sought new lives in the Surrey Hills. Their places were taken by a new elite – often with impeccable political connections: sadly, their contribution has been to stripped the assets of mining operations and, in some cases, to raid the pension funds of miners – often in the name of nation-building.

This double-blow left those who worked the rock-face with little or nothing!

Their options were recently well put by an authority on South African mining. To paraphrase him: a miner recruited from, say, Mozambique mostly finds that there is no compensation when he is laid off. Faced with this, he must return home, or try to find a better job in South Africa, or turn to the profession he best knows, mining in South Africa.

Rite of passage

It was the discovery of gold in (the-still-to-be-formed Union of) South Africa that drew region's people into a modern

extractive economy which was characterised my migration: as a result, labour in South Africa's gold mines has been a rite of passage for young men throughout the southern African region for more than a century.

Decolonisation and independence did little to change this way of regional life: even at the height of the Cold War, workers from Marxist Mozambique worked in the mines of apartheid (and fiercely anti-Marxist) South Africa. It is not really surprising then, that this belief endures: what lies underneath South Africa belongs not only to that country's people, but to the wider region!

As we have seen, much has changed: gold mining is a shadow of its former self, and the post-apartheid government has tightened up on labour migration and (certainly nominally) control at regional borders are more stringent. But the lure and lore of e-Goli continues deep in the region. This can be no surprise to anthropologists who for almost a century, have been saying that sovereignty – the issue that IR considers most sacred – has little lasting traction in the everyday lives of people.

This brings us to the war beneath my feet…

War

As quickly as mining shafts were sealed, when formal operation closed, they have been re-opened and worked by a new generation miners, colloquially known as Zama-Zamas – most come from the region.

Of course, the extraction, processing and the complicated underground communities which been created have been sanitised by that ever-duplicitous term 'illegal', But the extraction of gold and its distribution continues unabated in conditions which resemble the late-19th Century rough-and-tumble gold mining that Julian Potter address through a Faustian optic. It's illegality means that little of the extracted (and processed) gold ever reaches formal markets – and so is not taxed. Instead, it enters a network known as 'hawala' and, if reports are to be believed, is exported to Japan, China and Britain.

This June, the Premier of Gauteng, David Makura, pointed to the rise (of what he called) 'sophisticated gangs' who, armed with semi-automatic weapons, were at war for control of mines in a 50 kilometre ribbon of land under the country's richest province. The numbers are staggering. Let just one make the point: the respected South African Human Rights Commission reveals that 30 000 Zama-Zamas are involved in this new form of gold mining and the war around it!

Just two days ago, *The Star,* a local daily, headlined with a report on a shoot-out between two gangs. Eerily, the story read like one that might well have led the news in 1887 – the year, *The Star*, first appeared on Johannesburg's streets. Recognising this makes a mockery of inter-state attempts to modernise southern Africa by privileging sovereignty. The regional body – the Southern African Development Community (SADC) – for all its flags and protocols and fancy cars is a make-believe institution.

Crippled by an inability to understand that tidy narratives won't work in messy places, SADC is surely destined for Trotsky's notorious dustbin.

About the author:

Peter Vale is Director of the Johannesburg Institute for Advanced Study & Professor of Humanities at the University of Johannesburg. He is also Nelson Mandela Professor of Politics Emeritus, Rhodes University.