

'Mining for Development? A Socio-Ecological Study on the Witbank Coalfield,'

John K. Filitz

Coal mining, in particular on the Highveld has historically, and continues to serve as an indissoluble cog in South Africa's development. The study contends the inherent speculative character of coal as a finite resource, results in bearing costs beyond the financial sphere. These costs at some stage of the mine life-cycle have to be accounted for. By using a Polanyian interpretation of *double movement* and *crisis*, the study argues the manner in which natural factors such as coal have historically been inscribed in the production process, along with social factors such as labour, and technology to a large degree determine the character of productive relations and outcomes in a particular society. More fundamentally, it is argued, this *interaction* between capital, society and nature determines the extent to which the State is able to perform its role of *counter-movement* against the over-exploitation of society and nature.

This is demonstrated by situating the development of a former coal mining village, Rietspruit colliery, within the necessary historical phase of South African development – as hinged upon the *accessibility* and *availability* of coal, in particular from the Witbank coalfield. It is specifically however, in a post-coal mining context that study alludes to the unintended social costs arising from a coal-led development; arguing social costs and inequality as evident at Rietspruit colliery, as effectively *institutionalised* – this due to the historic function of State *vis-à-vis* facilitating mineral extraction.

The study argues the notion of mineral extraction and coal mining in particular, serving as the means *de jour* for achieving sustainable development as flawed. This is illustrated at Rietspruit colliery, by alluding to the manner in which a post-mining sustainability plan was implemented. At the core of the issue, concerns the *dis-embedding* of social costs related to mining, including mine closure, from the necessary historical socio-political and socio-ecological context. Compounded by a poorly enforced regulatory environment, this approach views mine closure in a de-politicised, technocratic manner of rationalising closure and post-mining ecological rehabilitation as cost-effectively as possible, with limited liability or concern for meaningful post-mining social development outcomes.