P eru has always had an uneasy relationship with mining, which has arguably been its most controversial economic activity. The debate about mining and economic development has many angles, but one that has marked Peruvian history is that of the asymmetry between those who profit and those who bear the costs. The most recent mining boom has placed extractive industries once again at the top of the list in terms of export value and tax receipts.¹ This boom has occurred in a new domestic and global context, where the social duties of mining companies are being redefined and a new set of actors are influencing the way companies behave on the ground.

Domestically, centralized trade unions have lost their leverage as a result of the process of structural reform of the early 1990s—especially the privatization of state-owned enterprises and the deregulation of the labor market. The national government has remained a negotiating party, but is committed to a neoliberal agenda that has the promotion of foreign investment as a paramount interest, and has offered little resistance. Local governments have increased their say as the country rolled out a process of decentralization that gave a stronger political mandate to elected subnational actors that had access to considerable resources through the mining canon.² Finally, the recent boom has been closely associated with the arrival of new transnational mining investments that enjoy generous tax exemptions from the national government but face higher pressures to comply with social and environmental standards from their home governments, their shareholders, and transnational activist networks (Keck and Sikkink 1998). With weakened trade unions, a permissive national government, stronger
local governments, and influential transnational actors, the social duties of mining companies have been reshaped and are not primarily defined by national governments or centralized organizations but by a range of actors that are above (transnational) or below (subnational) the nation-state.

This new context has animated new academic discussions about mining and development, in particular about the social duties of transnational mining companies toward local populations. It has given way to a revamped research agenda on the social impacts of mining in Peru and has encouraged scholars to engage with different theories and concepts to understand the social and political implications of large-scale mining for the country. Current analyses incorporate frameworks that highlight the importance of local processes over national ones, focus on social and environmental movements rather than labor movements, and take into account transnational actors and how they influence domestic affairs. These novel ways of looking at the social impacts of the latest mining boom have redrawn the boundaries of the literature on extractive industries in Peru.

In the spirit of contributing to the new research agenda on the relationships between mining and development in Peru, this chapter offers an analysis inspired by the ideas of James C. Scott and explores the possibilities they open to rethink the connection between mining companies and rural populations in Peru. But what can we learn from an academic, working at the boundaries of political science and anthropology, who has devoted his life to studying rice farmers in Southeast Asia, if we want to understand the situation of local populations in mining areas in the highlands of Peru? If, for a moment, we abstract from disciplinary and geographic differences, I argue that the answer is: more than we think.

In this chapter, I consider three key notions developed by Scott that shed light on the social impacts of mining in Peru. The first and powerful insight that Scott offers is that the study of situations in which there is no apparent conflict should be as important as the study of conflicts themselves (Scott 1976, 1985, 1990). It is indisputable that studying things that happen is easier than studying things that do not (Gaventa 1980) and open confrontations often reflect situations of injustice for which urgent action is required and this draws the attention of researchers and policymakers. Yet, decades of comparative and historical research in Southeast Asia taught Scott that political mobilization is in fact a luxury for poor people and that, historically, situations of open confrontation in the face of perceived injustice are the exception rather than the norm. Through the study