



Original article

Saving or destroying the local community? Conflicting spatial storylines in the Greenlandic debate on uranium



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ABSTRACT

A downturn of economic activities the last four years has intensified the debate on mineral resources in Greenland. This paper undertakes a discourse-centered examination, focusing on key storylines about uranium mining in Greenland; here conflicting spatial storylines about “saving” or “destroying” the local community often appear. The analytical focus on storylines and frontier stories reveals that considerable power is embedded in structured ways of seeing, which causes certain things to seem fixed and important, while other elements appear to be problematic or absent. The production of storylines has facilitated a discursive paradigm shift which has turned mining in Greenland into mining for Greenland, as well as stabilized an argument about mining as the primary road to development. This article argues that investments in mining are also investments into different spatial development futures for local communities co-constructed by politicians, the media, NGOs, the mining sector as well as the local stakeholders. The analysis incorporates knowledge and experiences from a continuing ethnographic case study in Narsaq, a community close to Greenland’s potentially biggest mine of rare earth elements and uranium, and also includes insights from the public debate on uranium taking place at various locations.

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1. Introduction: mining in Greenland . . . no plan B?

Greenland might be facing substantial economic problems in the years to come. First, the catch of shrimp, that is economically the most important species in Greenlandic fishing, continues to decline and second, emigration has resulted in a decrease of population which has caused a downturn of economic activities from 2012 to 2014 (Christensen and Jensen, 2014). A small economic growth in 2015 can be expected because of planned investments in the building and construction sector—thus there is still no solution to the great Greenland structural problems with a narrow industrial base (Christensen and Jensen, 2015). Scientists, politicians and the Greenland business community have all accepted this ‘inconvenient truth’ and are trying to look for alternative ways to create growth and attract investors (To the Benefit of Greenland, 2014; Rambøll Rapport, 2014; Fremtidsscenarier for Grønland, 2013). Especially during the last five years, the Danish media have spoken about what they have called the “Råstofeventyr” (in English “the mineral adventure”) (Strand, 2013). When this article was going to press, there were no active or productive mines in Greenland. Whether or not you buy into this

adventure-metaphor (presented by the Danish press), potential mining projects were still in a process and in need of more investors willing to take a chance with mining in Greenland (Mortensen, 2014). The price of minerals and oil declined in late 2014 and post-January 2015 reports suggest that politicians are thinking about a broader base for development. But still, an old ambition of the former Danish colonial power of profiting from the mining of Greenland’s uranium has reappeared. As opposed to then the ambition are now being pursued by the Greenlandic Parliament, seeking independence, while the Danish government are looking for a neutral, respectful position, when it comes to future development in Greenland (Gad, 2015, forthcoming). On October 24th, 2013, the Greenlandic Parliament, Inatsisartut, lifted a decade-long moratorium on mining radioactive elements. It had previously been following a zero-tolerance policy toward uranium. This made it somewhat possible for the country (and the Kingdom of Denmark)—to become the newest Western (and Arctic) supplier of uranium (Vestergaard, 2015, p. 153).

Apart from the public sector, the Greenlandic job market is dominated by a few industries. Fishing is still the biggest export industry in Greenland and will remain so in the years to come (Andersen, 2015). Farming is a small sector, and only in the South of Greenland, but it is a key industry as regards local food supply. Greenlandic politicians often mention tourism as an important

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sector, but the lack of investment and development in the tourism infrastructure seems to hinder further expansion (Bjørst and Ren, 2015). A new growing sector is needed, and politicians see mining as inevitable (Naalakkersuisut, 2014). In a recent study focusing on community impacts and public participation in the development of new industries in the extractive sector in Greenland it was emphasised that “new industries will potentially cause dramatic change to life and culture at the local community level and in Greenland in general” (Hansen, 2013, p. 4). Much seems to be at stake, and Hansen underlines that “While companies if mistakes are made can move on from one project to another, a community may have only one chance for development and it is hence important to get it right . . .” (Hansen, 2013, p. 4). Judging from the political debate in Greenland, Denmark and elsewhere during the last five years, there seems to be no plan B to having mineral resources, oil and gas as a future strategy for economic growth. The government of Greenland seems confident that it is possible “to get it right” and is implementing different types of outreach to engage local communities. The aim of this article is to analyse some of the key storylines which emerged in the public debate centered on the mining of Greenland’s uranium; a powerful resource permeated by local, regional and global agendas and the enactment of investments into different spatial development futures. This is part of an on-going case study centred on storylines produced as part of the public Greenlandic debate on uranium from 2012 to 2015.

2. Method

Since 2012 I have been doing multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork following the debate about the mining of Greenland’s uranium. While staying in Narsaq with my family in June 2013 being a guest researcher at the local museum, I had the chance to conduct interviews with local actors engaged in the uranium debate in Narsaq (16 pers.). In February 2013 I visited Nuuk to follow the parliamentary debate related to the lift of the uranium ban. In May 2015 I revisited Nuuk to attend the business conference Future Greenland with the aim of interviewing and meeting politicians and people from the mining industry (5 pers.). In the same period the movement advocating against the mining of Greenland’s uranium was growing in the urban centers of Greenland as well as in Copenhagen, and I followed the movement’s advocacy at demonstrations and at online platforms (Facebook, Sermitsiaq.ag and Twitter). The dataset also includes insights from the public debate on uranium taking place at various other locations in the same period such as meetings at GEUS (Geological Survey of Denmark and Greenland) and conferences taking place in the Danish Parliament building in 2014 organized by NGOs.

The central contribution in this article is what I have termed the ‘conflicting storylines’ proposition. The storylines can be understood as spatial because of their capacity to perform, produce and promote specific versions of the future for the local community and its surroundings. The storylines’ performative accomplishment depends on the actors themselves, and how they come to believe and to perform in the mode of that belief. Based on the case study from Narsaq, Greenland, two dominant storylines are identified: (1) the story of how uranium mining will destroy the local community and global nature as such, primary produced by the NGO’s, and (2) the storyline produced by the mining sector about how mining could save the community and benefit the Greenlandic economy. This paper will show how particular understandings of scale and potential faiths for the local community are embedded in the two different storylines.

Apart from analysing storylines, an analytical focus on the scale-making processes has been deployed. As emphasized by

Bruno Latour, scale is what actors achieve by “scaling, spacing and contextualizing each other” (Latour, 2007, pp. 183–184). So scales are not just there, but made up and part of the analytical object, which needs to be studied. The next section will introduce the theoretical framework when analysing storylines as part of the discursive interactions.

3. Storylines matter

The article undertakes a discourse-centered investigation of what Hajer (1995) terms ‘storylines’ in his work on politics of environmental discourses. A basic assumption in a discourse analytical approach is that language profoundly shapes people’s views, and actors use simple storylines to continually influence the definition of certain problems (Hajer, 1995, p. 176). Storylines matter to the extent that they have implications for decision-making on a local, regional, national and global level and tend to give permanence to discursive understandings (Hajer, 1995, p. 56). The special attention to storylines in the analytical work makes it possible to follow the stories being told by individual actors and institutions, whereas in a more traditional Foucauldian study of discourse, the personal agency and the ongoing agenda setting by particular actors tend to disappear if the structural discourses are over-emphasised (Peters, 2003, p. 318). Finding the right storyline therefore becomes an important form of agency for actors (Hajer, 1995, p. 56). The story that “wins” can end up being determinant for the scaling and recognition of (and the giving of authority to) a certain understanding of a phenomenon. Originally, the concept of storylines was taken from Davis and Harre’ (1990). Hajer (1995) defines a storyline as follows,

“A storyline, as I interpret it, is a generative sort of narrative that allows actors to draw upon various discursive categories to give meaning to specific physical or social phenomena. The key function of storylines is that they suggest a unity in the bewildering variety of separate discursive component parts of a problem . . .” (Hajer, 1995, p. 56).

Hajer furthermore explains what he sees as the underlying assumption when working with storylines:

“..people do not draw on comprehensive discourse systems for their cognition, rather these are evoked through storylines. As such storylines play a key role in the positioning of subjects and structures” (Hajer, 1995, p. 56).

In other words, people are ‘expected’ to position their contribution in relation to something well-known, which is also what happens when counter-discourses emerge to challenge the dominant storylines. Because of this, actors often use simple storylines (and related understandings of scale) as illustration and as ‘short hand’ in discussions, assuming that the other will understand better what they mean (Hajer and Versteeg, 2005, p. 177).

I will adapt Hajer’s concept of storylines to the particular case of Narsaq and the mining of Greenland’s uranium in order to understand how different actors in the uranium debate inscribe specific forms of knowledge with authority (Foucault, 1972) and how storylines cluster knowledge, position stakeholders and create coalition, conflict and transformation.

4. Analysis: Narsaq and the conflicting spatial storylines

In June 2014, the local community of Qeqertarsuatsiaat on the West coast of Greenland was invited when the Mayor of Kommuneqarfik Sermersooq Aasi Chemnitz Narup (from the political party Inuit Ataqatigiit) and Jens-Erik Kirkegaard (MP,

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