



What local people? Examining the Gállok mining conflict and the rights of the Sámi population in terms of justice and power



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ABSTRACT

The global extraction of minerals is commonly located in areas populated by indigenous people; and while conflicts between multinational corporations and local activists and indigenous people are widespread today, the understanding of their dynamics are lacking. The Swedish government's encouragement to an expanding mining industry has caused resistance due to environmental and social implications, particularly its effect on Sámi reindeer husbandry. The resistance to a mine in Gállok is based on the belief that the right to decide about land use historically falls on the Sámi people, and the right to affect land use is detrimental for the survival of Sámi culture and reindeer husbandry. Although the conflict may be perceived as concerning access to natural resources, we argue that the perceived environmental conflict can be viewed as part of a larger struggle over social status and recognition. Data have been collected using qualitative methods such as observations, interviews and documents. The subsequent analysis relies on a meta-theoretical framework of justice as recognition using a typology of relations of power. Our findings suggest that relations of power constitute different categories of social actors. Stakeholders like the Sámi population are subordinated to more dominant stakeholders such as the government, the company and media, who have 'more' power or 'different' kinds of power 'over' others. Through these asymmetric power relations, historical state-Sámi relations are continuously reproduced within prevailing institutions, and also in this mining conflict. Interviewees from business and the municipality testified to the discourses driven by a neoliberal and profit-focused worldview. Challenging the neoliberal discourse, other stakeholders, namely civil society and Sámi, expressed an alternative discourse based on a local, traditional, cultural, environmental and anti-neoliberal worldview.

1. Introduction

“What local people?” is the answer given by Clive Sinclair-Poulton, chairman of Beowulf Mining Plc, while showing a picture of landscape with no people in it when asked what the local people would say about the mine project in Gállok.¹ The conflicts surrounding the Gállok mining project is known as one of the most nationally debated environmental movements in Swedish history due to the historical relations between the Sámi population and the Swedish government. The Swedish national government has been criticized for not responding to concerns about the expanding mining industry (Government Offices of Sweden, 2013; Norberg Juuso, 2014) while also lacking constitutional rights for indigenous people (e.g. UNRIC, 2017). One of the major concerns is environmental destruction such as resource depletion along

with negative social impacts of mining investments. Furthermore, the critique also extends to how mining projects in particular interfere with the traditional reindeer husbandry of the indigenous Sámi population (Länta et al., 2013) and has on several occasions dealt with the state as a colonial power whose land ownership is contested by Sámi people (e.g. Länta et al., 2013). The resistance to a mine in Gállok is based on the belief that the right to decide about this land historically falls on the Sámi population, and furthermore that Sámi being entitled to make decisions that concern land-use is detrimental for the survival of Sámi culture. Reindeer herding has a central role in Sámi culture, and the land where the minerals are found is perceived to play a crucial role in the survival of the reindeer herding as further development in the area would severely affect migration paths (Länta et al., 2013).

In several parts of the world, global exploration and production of

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¹ Gállok (in Sámi), or Kallak (in Swedish), is the name of a territory located in the municipality of Jåhkåmåhkke (or Jokkmokk in Swedish). This area is also located within the Jåhkågasska 'Sámi village', which is an economic and administrative territory within which its members conduct reindeer herding.

minerals are commonly located in areas populated by indigenous people (Whiteman and Mamen, 2002), and mineral extraction might go hand in hand with marginalization of the indigenous groups through underrepresentation and misrecognition. According to Bridge (2007), the recognition of minerals ‘as resources’ is a political process embedded in different valuation of land and materials (see also Li, 2014). Often conflict over values is represented in indigenous peoples’ mobilization, as native communities resist the companies, governments, and policies which might have aims to create cultural disintegration (Schlosberg and Carruthers, 2010).

Sweden has an expansive mining industry. The Swedish mining industry association (SveMin) estimates that the mining production in Sweden is going to threefold until 2025, directly or indirectly creating more than 50,000 new jobs (SveMin, 2012). According to the Canadian think-tank Fraser Institute’s yearly survey of mining companies, the ratings for 2013 show that mining companies themselves consider Sweden one of the most attractive countries to invest in (Wilson and Cervantes, 2014). According to estimates, Sweden holds 60% of Europe’s identified iron ore deposit and is currently responsible for 90% of Europe’s iron ore extraction (Björling, 2012). According to the government’s recently launched Mineral Strategy, further extraction of minerals is vital for a global economy and good quality of life, and the government wants to reinforce the country’s position as a leading mining nation (Government Offices of Sweden, 2013).

The most significant mineralization in Sweden resides in Norrbotten (af Geijerstam and Nisser, 2011). In the decades around 1900, the region underwent a rapid industrialization, and was described as the “Swedish America” or “Land of the Future” as it had the greatest natural resources of the country – forest, hydropower, and ore – just waiting to be used (Sörlin, 1988; Geijerstam & Nisser, 2011). Dating back already to the 1600s, Crown chancellor Carl Bonde was referring to this region as “an India within our borders” (Sörlin, 1988: p. 30; Lundmark, 1971); supported by an enthusiasm that made references to Spanish conquering of silver ore across South- and Central America (Lundmark, 2008: pp. 42–48). Today, there are eighteen active mines in Sweden, five in Norrbotten, seven in Västerbotten and six in other parts of Sweden (Bergsstaten, n.d.). Importantly, both Norrbotten and Västerbotten also have territories for reindeer herding, of which Gállok serves as a key example of how a planned mine interferes with the reindeer husbandry of Sámi.

Our aim in this paper is to identify the power relations between the stakeholders of this conflict and investigate these relations within the framework justice as recognition. We ask: how, and to what extent, is the relationship between different stakeholders in the Gállok mining conflict affected by politics of recognition? We argue that although the conflict concerns access to natural resources, it also illustrates the everyday struggle of the Sámi population claiming justice through their historical rights and culture. In this endeavour, we also explain, and relate our findings back to, the historical context of Sámi struggles for recognition against the Swedish state. In doing so, we contribute to fill a knowledge gap on contemporary state–Sámi relationship in Sweden against the backdrop of internal and external critiques concerning indigenous rights.

Our analysis is based on a meta-theoretical framework that combines a justice as recognition approach with a typology of relations of power. The results of this paper suggest that relations of power constitute different categories of social actors. This can be shown particularly prominent in the way that more dominant stakeholders such as the government, the company and media have ‘more’ power, ‘different’ kinds of power and/or power ‘over’ other subordinated stakeholders such as the Sámi population. Through such asymmetric power relations and patterns of misrecognition, the historical state–Sámi relations are continuously reproduced within prevailing institutions and also in this mining conflict. By linking this conflict to resource use and rights, we contribute to wider debates on environmental justice as facilitator of socio-ecological transitions and the re-development of environmental

values (Martinez-Alier, 2009).

The study has been conducted as a qualitative explanatory case study drawing data from different sources using multiple methods, namely: interviews, unstructured non-participant observations and a literature and document review. A field visit to Jåhkâmähkke² was conducted in the winter of 2014, giving us a better understanding of what meaning stakeholders in Jåhkâmähkke attribute to different everyday occurrences. To access stakeholders, we employed a purposive sampling strategy coupled with further snowball sampling. In total, we have conducted thirteen interviews which have been categorized into five different groups: authority, civil society, journalists, business and Sámi. The majority of the interviews were semi-structured and took place in Jåhkâmähkke, while one interview was conducted as a narrative walk where we were given the opportunity to accompany one Sámi reindeer herder to the reindeer forest. This allowed us to learn directly from one stakeholder about the impacts of the mine in situ.

The article starts with a brief introduction of the theoretical framework focusing on the justice as recognition and dynamic power approaches. In the third section, we then provide a historical overview on the misrecognition and land rights of Sámi in Sweden. In the fourth section, we focus on the contemporary political economy of mining in Sweden. In the fifth section, we present our findings, categorised according to three different power dynamics. Finally, in the sixth section, we discuss these findings in relation to politics of recognition and provide concluding remarks.

2. Justice as recognition and power

This paper uses the justice as recognition framework inspired by Fraser (1998) and Schlosberg (2004), and the categorization of power provided by the dynamic approach (Avelino and Rotmans, 2009) in order to illustrate the relationship between different actors in the Gállok conflict.

Scholars debate over whether or not recognition is a separate or integrated component of distributive justice.³ Some philosophers argue that recognition along with respect are inherent preconditions for distributive justice and should therefore be incorporated into the concept of distribution (Schlosberg, 2004). Proponents of identifying recognition as a separate component of justice argue that the lack of recognition in the social and political realms cause harm and decreased freedom for those individuals and groups who experience insults and degradations at individual and cultural level (Schlosberg, 2007a, 2007b). While incorporating recognition within the theoretical concept of distribution might work in theory, recognition cannot simply be assumed in the real world and therefore such argument does not hold (Schlosberg, 2007a, 2007b). Further, critical theorist Nancy Fraser argues that recognition should not be treated as a good to be distributed, nor should distribution be accepted as an expression for recognition (Fraser, 1998). Schlosberg (2007a) defends recognition as a distinct element of justice (and not as a part of distribution) arguing that a “lack of recognition, then, is a harm – an injustice – as much as a lack of adequate distribution of various goods” (Schlosberg, 2007a: p. 18).

Procedural justice, targeting fair and equitable institutional processes such as participation, has been put forth as yet another argument for treating recognition as an integral element of procedural justice. In response to that, Fraser argues that when unjust patterns of misrecognition are institutionalized this hinders misrecognized social actors from even participating (Fraser, 1998). Fraser sees misrecognition as an institutional practice (rather than an individual experience) where the social status of individuals and communities are being compromised

² Here, Jåhkâmähkke (in Sámi), or Jokkmokk (in Swedish), refers to both the municipality and the largest town in the municipality.

³ Distributive justice refers to ‘just’ distribution of benefits and burdens within society (Schlosberg, 2004).

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