



# Mapping mineral resources in a living land: Sami mining resistance in Ohcejohka, northern Finland

Maija M. Lassila<sup>\*,1</sup>

University of Helsinki, Faculty of Social Sciences, Development Studies, Doctoral Programme of Political, Societal and Regional Change, Finland



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## ABSTRACT

During the past decade, Finland has been the target of a global boom in the quest for untapped mineral resources. Based on the mapped information of mineral potential provided by the state, multinational mining corporations are making reservations for and conducting mineral explorations particularly in Finland's peripheral regions. This paper investigates the emergence of an anti-mining movement in Ohcejohka, in northernmost Finland, in 2014–2015, and the ontological conflict manifested in the outside mapping of the land as “mineral rich” as well as the local people's various knowledges of the land as a lived place. By producing a holistic counter-mapping of their social, ancestral and meaningful landscape, the movement questioned the state's and the company's homogenising knowledge in the production of land and resources. While the reality-making effects of modern maps have previously been studied, the entanglements of such mappings in environmental conflicts with local ontological realities and knowledge spheres have not been extensively studied. This paper argues that rather than imposing a “one world ontology”, maps and mappings of land and resources are culmination points in environmental conflicts, where they become renegotiated, challenged and redefined in the local and dynamic enactments of reality.

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, the extraction and use of raw materials has intensified around the globe. It is estimated that due to the growing needs of industries and consuming classes alike, there will be a further increase in raw material extraction, along with its detrimental social and environmental effects (UN, 2016). New geographical locations become entwined with global resource industries and a state's existing land control practices, which lay claim to and territorialise land for its natural resources (Peluso and Lund, 2011, 668). Finland, and particularly its peripheral regions, has been one of the key targets of the recent global boom in the quest for untapped mineral resources (Kröger, 2015). Many kinds of resistance movements have followed this boom in several places (although this has not occurred everywhere). This paper investigates the emergence of a mining resistance movement and claims for space in 2014–2015 among the indigenous Sami and other community members in the village of Ohcejohka,<sup>2</sup> in northernmost Finland, in response to the mineral prospection plans of a multinational company. The resistance movement, called the “Anti-Mining Coalition of

the Deatnu Valley”, emerged after the company Karelian Diamond Resources (henceforth KDR), a company in partnership with the multinational Rio Tinto, had reserved an area of the Sami lands for preliminary investigations for mineral exploration.

The paper studies the development of a local resistance movement in Ohcejohka, where the scientific imagery of the mineral-rich area and the circulating rumours about rich underground deposits are an important means of creating the place anew and yet also stimulate resistance efforts and the organising of counter-knowledge. As the people in the resistance movement challenged the visions of mineral extraction that came from the outside, they renegotiated boundaries and articulated plural understandings to replace homogenised worldviews of nature, land and resources. The movement actively communicated such knowledge by sending complaint letters to the court and mining companies. The local resistance resulted in the mining company Rio Tinto eventually responding to the activists and KDR withdrawing the reservation.

A central question to be examined in this paper is whether an outside vision and mapping of a place as mineral rich, even if this vision is

\* Address: Faculty of Social Sciences, Development Studies Department, Unioninkatu 37, P.O. Box 54, 00014 University of Helsinki, Finland.

E-mail address: [maija.lassila@helsinki.fi](mailto:maija.lassila@helsinki.fi).

<sup>1</sup> Permanent address: Hämeentie 81-83 B 56, 00550 Helsinki, Finland.

<sup>2</sup> Most of the place names in the paper are in the northern Sami language, the language spoken by the Sami in the region. Other Sami languages spoken in Finland are Ánar Sami and Skolt Sami.

based on speculation and guesswork, affects the local people's relationship to their land. I am especially interested in whether this triggers or makes visible the local, differing understandings of land relations: Through what kinds of knowledge practices and counter-narratives do the indigenous Sami people possibly make and represent their reality differently than that found in the outside representations of the land as "mineral rich"? As [Boucquey et al. \(2016\)](#) have noted, people are not just passive consumers of the environment or comfortable with their stakeholder position, as indigenous peoples might have profoundly different and varied relationships to the environment from an ontological standpoint than the decision makers expect.

While the social and environmental impacts of large-scale mining excavation have been widely studied (e.g. [Nash, 1979](#); [Ferguson, 1999](#); [Bridge, 2000](#); [Banks, 2002](#); [Horowitz, 2004](#); [Kirsch, 2006](#); [Robbins, 2006](#); [West, 2006](#); [Akiwumi, 2012](#); [Bebbington and Bury, 2013](#); [Gilberthorpe et al., 2016](#)), there is a need to also study how contemporary mining struggles in the Nordic countries form and how resistance is produced, and even more so, how places become contested due to differing knowledge spheres and ontologies regarding "nature". Typically, academic inquiries that focus solely on the social or environmental impacts of mining as a research subject examine sites where mining excavation has already occurred and where the material and social impacts are visible and being immediately experienced. Much less work has focused on the perceived threat or initial stages of mining exploration in areas that are new to extraction, especially in the Arctic regions. Looking at these initial stages of mining, when speculation over possible mineral resources is more dominant than an actual mineral reserve, and focusing on the local community's ways of responding to such speculations, are essential to understanding what kinds of people's existences are at stake, why people mobilise and the means by which they articulate and represent a different relationship to the environment than the one proposed by the state and the mining companies.

The path from prospecting to opening up a mine is typically long and tumultuous, and very few mining projects result in notable physical changes to the land – this is especially the case in contexts involving the rule of law and the harsh Arctic environment. However, even mines on paper have impacts, many of which have nothing to do with mining itself, as I will discuss here. I illustrate how in the initial phases of mining the mapped and scientific data about natural resources becomes significant in creating visions and defining areas as "mineral rich", in reducing areas to merely extractive futures. Prior studies have shown how mapping has the power to articulate and create new realities ([Harley, 1989](#); [Scott, 1998](#); [Wood, 2010](#); [McCarthy and Thatcher, in press](#); [Fogelman and Bassett, 2017](#)). Maps that delineate land and resources further emerge from what many theorists have argued is the *ontological divide* between nature and culture inherent in modern, capitalist societies, which view nature as a commodity and external to humans ([De La Cadena, 2010](#); [Blaser, 2013](#); [Descola, 2013](#); [Moore, 2015](#); [Escobar, 2016](#)). What has not been extensively studied is the effects of such environmental conflicts at the local level, where differing ontologies clash and where mapping functions as a central reality-making process.

This paper argues that maps and mappings of the land as knowledge practices and enactments of reality actively become part of the ontological, environmental conflicts over natural resources and participate in the negotiations present in those conflicts centred on the crucial question of how life will continue in particular places. Maps and mappings of land and resources are culmination points in environmental conflicts, where they become renegotiated, challenged and redefined in the local and dynamic enactments of reality. These moments of contestation are moments of "friction" ([Tsing, 2005](#)), when "action and effect" are produced and things change. When the mapping of places as resource rich enters local ontologies that exist beyond the dualist nature/culture divide, where people have long-standing but also invariably evolving relations to a place, to the landscape and its

nonhuman and spiritual aspects, the outside mapping may stimulate the creation of counter-knowledge against the claims coming from the outside. The paper shows how local resistance enacts reality by relying on to their own "mapping" of the land and sends a positive, internationally salient signal that land holds plural values locally and is not open to untrammelled penetration by the mining industry.

The case brings out especially well the overall incommensurability of mining and the indigenous Sami way of life in northern Finland, where mining currently poses substantial threats to the rights and livelihoods of the indigenous Sami. The structure of the paper is such that after briefly describing the methodology used, section two discusses the theoretical and conceptual background to the paper and provides a starting point for further analysing the empirical material that follows in section three. Sections four and five offer some discussion and concluding comments on the case study.

### 1.1. On the methodology and material of the paper

The data for this paper was gathered while conducting ethnographic fieldwork in Ohcejohka in the summer of 2015 as well as from secondary literature, such as available news articles. Most of the data came from interviews that I conducted and recorded with Ohcejohka residents. The interviews followed a natural course, meaning that the interviewees themselves determined the main direction of the interview. The interviewees were selected following a "snowball" effect, such that one interview led to another. Additionally, I interviewed several people working for government institutions, a representative of the state land owner Metsähallitus, a representative of the administrative court and two representatives of the Geological Institute of Finland. Typically, mining in northern Finland is both favoured and resisted in municipalities. In this case, the resistance was nearly unanimous and I wanted to explore the reason why. I discerned that the resistance had a cosmopolitan character but that the main strategies of creating counter-knowledge gained their strength from a place-specific knowledge of the land area that KDR had reserved. That is why I decided to frame my research mainly around the indigenous Sami characteristics of land in Ohcejohka. In addition to the Sami counter-narrative of land in the region, I concentrated on the strategies of the resistance movement, which emerged from a mix of knowledges. I interviewed those who had actively participated in the resistance movement and persons who had followed the events more as onlookers and had not been active in the resistance.<sup>3</sup> I began analysing the interview data already during the fieldwork phase.

## 2. Mapping and counter-mapping natural resources

In this section, I discuss the key theoretical and conceptual starting points of the paper to shed light on the tensions present in the case study. The question of differing ontologies is meaningful, i.e. how the world is actively made and enacted. Ontological plurality as a concept has gained importance in research on environmental relations and the local processes of resource exploitation. The world is not a universe, but a pluriverse, composed of many different human and nonhuman worlds, as [Viveiros de Castro \(2004\)](#), [De La Cadena \(2010\)](#) and [Blaser \(2013\)](#) have argued. Contrastingly, maps serve as critical tools for what many theorists argue is the transformation to the particular modernist ontology of a universal world, the "one world" vision of capitalist globalisation, which at its core is based on the nature/society divide that currently impacts territories and defines spaces everywhere ([De La](#)

<sup>3</sup> As a researcher coming from the capital area in southern Finland, one with no Sami connections, I was an outsider to the case. The events originally caught my interest when I read a small news item about the reservation process and resistance in Ohcejohka in the national news broadcaster's local news in the winter of 2014.

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