



# Politicizing environmental governance – A case study of heterogeneous alliances and juridical struggles around the Ojnare Forest, Sweden

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper we use a case of resistance towards a proposed limestone quarry in Sweden to raise certain theoretical points regarding environmental politicization. Departing from ideas about depoliticization and neoliberal environmental governance, we first analyze the case in terms of scaling-up of the local conflict through actor alliances, discourse coalitions and through the juridical process. We then discuss how this case may indicate effective ways to politicize areas that have been depoliticized through neoliberal environmental governance. Most particularly, the chosen case highlights how depoliticization may be reversed through the politicization of the very channels through which depoliticized forms of environmental governance occur, here the juridical, formalized and nominally neutral processes of environmental planning.

## 1. Introduction

The historical development of liberal capitalism in relation to the environment can be described in terms of a double movement between ever-expanding resource extraction and a growing capacity for the state to technically administer environmental degradation (e.g. Beck, 1995; Frank et al., 2000). An important factor in the evolution of environmental protection has been a growing environmental awareness within civic society, which has put pressure on the state to impose regulation on its environmentally destructive activities. Neoliberal governance, often characterized as depoliticization, poses certain specific problems for environmental protection, as it tends to put a priority on the protection of private capital rather than public goods, while it delegates responsibility for the environment to formalized procedures of expert, technocratic management (Hay, 2007; Jessop, 2014; McCarthy and Prudham, 2004).

To understand the tension between neoliberal governance and the environment, and how environmental politics could be developed to progressively respond to socio-environmental problems, we need more empirical analyses of instances where neoliberal governance has given rise to socio-environmental conflicts and of the way resistance in such cases has been constituted (Hay, 2014; McCarthy and Prudham, 2004). As several authors have argued, depoliticizing forms of governance associated with neoliberalism tend to hinder environmental concerns from becoming subject to politicization, as the political potential in environmental issues becomes defused through technocratic processes that disallow underlying value conflicts (Goeminne, 2010, 2012; Kenis

and Mathijs, 2014; Methmann and Rothe, 2012; Swyngedouw, 2011a). However, as McCarthy (2013) argues, environmental concerns have also proven to be, and may yet prove to be, key to effective resistance to the deleterious effects of such governance.

In this paper, we report on an empirically grounded, exploratory investigation into environmental politicization and identify some theoretical points raised by the inquiry. We will focus on a case of resistance to mining where a process of extensive politicization around a planned limestone quarry occurred between 2005 and 2015. Many commentators regard this as the most significant environmental conflict in Sweden in decades (Klefbon, 2012). We argue that the way the issue was politicized through a historically unique alliance of rather unlikely actors points to certain crucial aspects of how the deleterious effects of depoliticized environmental governance may be countered through repoliticization.

We begin by briefly summarizing our theoretical point of departure as regards how neoliberal depoliticization works in relation to the environment and how politicization through mining conflicts has occurred in the 21st century. After a section on method, we present and analyze our case study. We conclude with a discussion of the lessons to be learned regarding the possibility of effectively politicizing the environment despite the negative effects of neoliberal environmental governance.

## 2. (De)Politicization and mining resistance

In presenting the theoretical background to this paper we focus on

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three points in the vast literature on depoliticization and politicization. The first is that depoliticization is a specific form of neoliberal governance that obscures the contestable nature of governing, that promotes consensus to the detriment of democratic disagreement, and that fortifies incumbent interests that stand to gain from the preservation of the supposedly “free” market paradigm (Burnham, 2014; Flinders and Buller, 2006; Hay, 2007, 2014; Jessop, 2014; Mouffe, 2006; Swyngedouw, 2011b; cf. Blüdhorn, 2014; Fawcett and Marsh, 2014 about the specific relation to neoliberalism). Depoliticization is thus primarily to be understood as a way of governing in general, rather than an active process of making something that is political become unpolitical. It follows that the prefix in the term *repoliticization* is not to be taken as indicating by definition a preceding depoliticization of a once politicized issue. The repoliticization of Swedish mining that we describe in this paper occurs in response to the general depoliticization of environmental governance – as well as to the neoliberalization that triggers many of these mining conflicts – rather than in relation to a previous politicization of the specific issue of mining.

The second, related point, is that this diagnosis of deferral and obscuration should not be taken to mean that “politics” have disappeared, but rather that they have been moved elsewhere (Hay, 2014). With depoliticization, formal decision-making tends to be moved from official governments to formalized procedures of technocratic management that are based on ostensibly objective science and scientific consensus. This removes accountability for political decisions and makes them appear to be the result of common sense rather than something inherently contestable.

The third point is that this deferral may result in repoliticization as social groups that see themselves deprived of political influence act to reassert their political voice, or as depoliticized policies give rise to unforeseen consequences that may serve as politically mobilizing issues (e.g., Jessop, 2014).<sup>1</sup>

It would be wrong to suggest that neoliberalism is inherently hostile to the environment. There have been many attempts to reconcile neoliberally oriented economic policies with efforts to mitigate society’s harmful effects on the environment, most often under the influential heading of “sustainable development”. However, the very basis of liberal, free-market capitalism is the opening up of nature for commodification and resource extraction, and this is a process that neoliberalism is designed to facilitate. As such, neoliberalism can be said to harbor a fundamental tension between the dependence of moneyed interests on resource extraction, on the one hand, and interests devoted to environmental protection on the other (McCarthy and Prudham, 2004). The depoliticizing process described above serves to smooth out and defuse these tensions through technocratic, consensus-promoting environmental management. However, the policies by which depoliticization occurs may backfire and result in repoliticization as different actor groups mobilize around environmental values to counter the extractivist logic dictated by the incumbent interests and raw materials-based capitalism that are served by neoliberal policies.

In the case of extractive industries, the 21st century has seen a globally occurring repoliticization in response to neoliberally ordered, depoliticized governance of mining that has been ongoing for the last decades (Bridge, 2004; World Bank, 2011). Neoliberalization of mining has been characterized by the facilitation of natural resource extraction through privatization, lowering of taxes, and easing of environmental regulation (Bebbington and Bury, 2013; Bridge, 2004; Bury, 2005; Krever, 2011; Liedholm Johnson, 2010; McDonnell, 2015; Naito et al., 2001; Otto, 1997; Warhurst and Bridge, 1997). The resistance to these processes has been directed against state-sanctioned intrusions by

companies into sensitive environments, where local communities perceive themselves to be deprived of a voice and a positive stake in the project.

In her extensive review (2017), Conde shows that controversies surrounding extractive industrial projects in the 21st century have been characterized by *diversification*, a process that seems also to have been prevalent in other forms of environmental resistance in recent decades. This diversification plays out on three interrelated levels. First, resistances have become increasingly heterogeneous in their makeup, being constituted by groups of actors highly different from each other as regards values, social class, ideological orientation, and political affiliation (see also Dahlin and Fredriksson, 2017; Delina et al., 2014; Diani and Rambaldo, 2007; Hardt and Negri, 2004; Saunders, 2008). Secondly, the strategies employed by these resistances have become more diverse, ranging from the very local (e.g. sit-in protests and physical blockades) to the international level, and from extra-parliamentary acts to resistance through the channels of formal institutions (see also de Rosa and Caggiano, 2015; Smith, 2001; Tarrow and McAdam, 2005; Perez et al., 2015; Dahlberg-Grundberg and Örestig, 2016). Thirdly, resistances have become more translatable between different discursive frames as specific grievances are strategically connected to similar claims or to more general issues and values that resonate among broader groups of people (see also Griggs and Howarth, 2004, 2008; della Porta and Piazza, 2007; Rootes, 2006; Saunders, 2007).

These three interrelated processes have led to resistance to extractive industries becoming less contained within the boundaries of the immediately local, despite their common denominator being the struggle against a specific project targeting a highly limited, geographical area. This shifting of scales is not without pitfalls as regards the sense of identity, credibility and political potency of the resistance. (See Rootes, 2007, 2008, for discussion of the trade-offs between the local “sense of place” and the policy influence that comes with successful scaling up of local conflicts.) There is much to be said for the importance of environmental resistances being able to reach beyond the local to gain a legitimacy that may be converted into concrete political gains. However, the tension between the local/particular and the supra-local/universal is a crucial dilemma not only for mining resistance but for all forms of environmental resistance. We shall return to this in the concluding discussion.

In this paper, we argue that the struggle against a limestone quarry in the Ojnare Forest, Sweden, can be seen as a case of environmental politicization where the diversification process of environmental and mining resistance movements has been taken to a new level. Our claim here is not that the Ojnare resistance is completely new or unique, but rather that it is a continuation of the diversification of environmental resistance, a resistance that occurs in response to a general depoliticizing movement in Swedish environmental governance. However, this process of diversification does create phenomena that are new to the Swedish environmental scene: new constellations of resistance actors, and new dividing lines between political parties. The most striking aspect of the Ojnare resistance is the degree to which it involves state agencies as active and crucial actors in the process of politicization (see further della Porta and Rucht, 2002, and Rucht, 2002, for discussions of the diversification and complexity of modern environmental protests). In the concluding discussion we will reflect upon the ways we believe environmental legislation is crucial for extensive environmental politicization of this kind.

### 3. Note on method

The analysis in this paper is based on material gathered from all major Swedish newspapers, the environmental press, and other relevant papers mentioning the Ojnare case. The conflicts and legal process surrounding the Ojnare Forest limestone quarry were extensively covered in a wide array of media outlets, local as well as national. The

<sup>1</sup> The literature on “collaborative governance” (e.g. Emerson et al., 2011) can be seen as a theoretical complement to the depoliticization literature, as it instead highlights the possibility of diverse actor groups – public agencies, governments on different scales, actors from the private and civic spheres – working together towards a common goal in a constellation of dispersed power.

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