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A social work perspective to the neoliberal mining boom in Finland and the possibility of an ecosocial response

Introduction: the resources question and the need for an ecosocial sustainability transition

The future of humankind is bound to the wellbeing of the planet and its ecosystems. Yet, in the (controversial) era of the Anthropocene, so named to signify the shaping power of humanity over the rest of the planet and its multitude ecosystems, the Earth is all but well. The condition stems from a set of economic and political choices made during past few centuries that have led to the current triumph of capitalism in the world economy and ecology (of the latter, see Moore 2003; 2016). Other names suggested for the age that further underline the centrality of capitalism as the driver of the epochal transformations going on are the Capitalocene (age of capitalism, Moore, 2016) and the Plutocene (age of plutocracy, Ulvila and Wilén, 2017). Ulvila and Wilén emphasize that capitalism has brought material welfare mainly to a relatively small (ibid.), predominantly male and white minority (Ulvila and Pasanen 2009, pp. 24-26). For the time being, modern and postmodern consumerist lifestyles, while still beyond the reach of everyone, reach a scale that threatens the wellbeing of everyone in the form of the anthropogenic global warming and other planetary risks (Borgnäs, 2015, p. 15).

Noting the importance of energy and raw materials for the functioning and the material basis of societies past and present (e.g. Lynch, 2002; Lähde, 2013), one key to the current ecological crisis is the resource (raw material) question, in essence how to solve humanity's resource dependency in a sustainable manner. So far, the predicted future scarcity of resources together with the population growth globally and the increasing demand in growing economies like China and India has not led to more sparing use of resources. On the contrary, past decades, especially the period from mid-2000s to early 2010s, distinguish as a global rush for the remaining resources (Nem Singh and Bourgoiun, 2013; Kröger, 2016; King, 2017). Notwithstanding the global economic downturn that originated from the financial crisis in the U.S. in 2007-8, the volume of the global natural resources trade increased over 60 per cent between 2000 and 2015 (ibid). Chatham House (ibid.) estimate is that by the year 2050 the global resource extraction and the value and volume of resources trade has further increased around 70 per cent from the 2015 level. Such an increase can cause irreversible environmental damage and undermine efforts to stabilize the climate.

This chapter adheres to the analysis that the world is in the midst of a broad systemic crisis or transformation, at the heart of which lies the crisis of capitalism and which the ongoing economic, ecological/environmental, social and cultural crisis/transformations also manifest (e.g. Harvey, 2011; Wallerstein, et al, 2014; Loftsdóttir and Jensen, 2014; Borgnäs, 2015). Further, it joins the understanding that the situation calls for a rapid, broad based ecosocial (Matthies and Närhi, 2014; 2017) or ecosocialist (Borgnäs et al., 2015) sustainability transition. Supposing that the speciality of social work is its nuanced understanding and knowhow about marginalization

and vulnerability combined with ability to organise and manage care and support in different contexts and with a wide array of people or service users, social work could contribute the transition by working on the social aspects and embeddedness of the changes required (Yadama, 2013; Matthies and Närhi 2014; 2017). Yet, this task cannot be achieved in any half-baked manners. To succeed social work has to transform itself, which requires nothing less than an ecological paradigm shift in social work (ibid).

Overall, one of the major challenges in the ecosocial transition is how to tackle the current resource crisis. Therefore, this chapter focuses on the resources question by discussing metal mining and its social (work) ramifications in the context of northern Finland. Empirically, the paper relies on computer assisted thematic analysis (data-driven coding by Atlas.ti7.5) of 15 semi-structured interviews, added with insights generated through participant observation and casual conversations conducted as part of the author's postdoctoral researchⁱⁱ in one mining region in northern Finland for altogether 2 weeks in September 2015, October 2016 and May 2017. The interviewees were asked about their perceptions about mining related changes in the social and economic life and circumstances in the region, as well as their assumptions regarding the future. Furthermore, the interviews dealt with mining-related social work needs and responses, social work being understood in a broad sense as the work of various social professions, and not only as the work of qualified social workers in municipal welfare offices. The interviewees were various social professionals and other people professionally or otherwise well positioned to reflect upon the changes that had occurred during and after the intensification of the metal mining in the region. In practice, the latter included the development and opening of a large scale mine less than ten years earlier, as well as prospects that one or more new mines could be opened in the future.

In what follows, I will further contextualize the mineral extraction in Finland with a review of the Finnish neoliberal mining boom that started in mid-2000s, thereafter proceeding to discuss the current situation of and relationship between mining and social work in northern Finland. I conclude the article with a discussion on the possibilities of ecosocial practice in relation to mineral extraction in Finland.

The neoliberal mining boom in Finland

For much of the 20th century, the official truth in Finland was that there are no valuable natural resources in the country besides forests and some hydropower. In 1990s, the common understanding in the Finnish mining companies was that all the major deposits in the country had been extracted and the downturn of the field was inevitable. Accordingly, especially metal mining was tapered down as unprofitable and large deposits were privatised by selling them to foreign companies and members of the Finnish mining elite. (Kröger, 2016, p. 554.) Contrary to expectations, from early 2000s onwards Finland has emerged as a promising site of mineral extraction and one of the main destinations for global mining investment, having deposits of nickel, chromium, gold, phosphorus, iron, uranium, zinc, copper, cobalt, platinum, palladium,

lithium, silver, ferrochrome, as well as industrial minerals like phosphate. During 2008–2012, several large-scale mines, namely Talvivaara (nickel), which was later renamed to Terrafame, Kittilä (gold), and Kevitsa (nickel, copper, platinum) opened in Northern and Eastern Finland. There are also several (more controversial) large projects in the pipeline, such as the Sakatti Project by Anglo American (copper, nickel, platinum group metals) and the Sokli Project (phosphate, uranium) by Yara, both in northern Finland. In 2016, Finland had 42 mines, of which 10 were metal mines and the rest excavated industrial minerals and stones. While Finnish companies operate most of the mines and quarries, majority of the metal mines are in foreign ownership.

The Finnish mining boom can be explained with a number of factors. Besides the development of mining technologies that enable extracting more low-grade deposits than earlier the Finnish boom alike the global resources boom (Nem Singh & Bourgouin, 2013, p. 3) was preceded by neoliberal reforms that accelerated transformations in resource control (Kröger 2016). Markus Kröger (ibid.) further emphasises that the Finnish mining boom was located within the paradigmatic change of the Finnish state from the Nordic welfare state towards the workfare (e.g. Helne, Hirvilammi and Laatu, 2012, p. 53) or the competitive workforce (Kantola and Kananen, 2013) state. Further, as neoliberalism assumes the state to actively create, maintain and protect the preconditions of market self-regulation (Connolly 2013, p. 21), the Finnish regulatory framework for mining investment and extraction makes a case in point. Finland neither retains ore or mineral ownership when leasing or renting the excavation rights, nor is there mining royalty or tax, which de facto means that the companies get the minerals free. At the same time, the corporate tax (20 per cent), the compensations to land owners and the restrictions of profit repatriation are relatively low. The state also provides incentives to starting companies and may contribute to the costs of training qualified workers or building necessary infrastructures, while the stable social and political climate assures the companies of the security of tenure. (Kröger, 2016, pp. 545-548, 553, 568). Apart from the challenges set by the Arctic conditions, the operational environment in Finland is relatively easy in terms of available infrastructure (e.g. roads) and the high-level technological knowhow, some Finnish and Swedish companies (e.g. Metso, Outotec and Sandvik) being global leaders in mining technology.

Social work and the mining industry in northern Finland

In Finland, large-scale metal mining concentrates on northern and eastern Finland. Northern Finland, also known as Finnish Lapland or *Lappi*, covers nearly one third of Finland, but has a mere 180 000 inhabitants. Accordingly, social work in northern Finland features by long distances to services especially outside main population centres and the small number of people. The communities being small, the community cohesion is often tight, which usually translates into significant informal social support but can be exclusive for those who do not quite fit in. Further, while some villages are lively and vibrant, others suffer from skewed age and gender ratio. Sometimes all the young people and women have migrated elsewhere in search of better opportunities and only ageing men have stayed put. For the municipalities, who are the main

providers of welfare services in the area, the low population density and small amount of taxpayers poses a constant challenge. Yet, it has also motivated to develop innovative solutions, such as e- and distance services, as well as nature related working methods, one application being the forest therapy (more of which in Heikkilä, 2014). (Kilpeläinen and Romakkaniemi, 2014.)

Northern Finland is known for its unique arctic nature, and the natural environment continues to play a significant role in the everyday lives of people. Although not everyone is an outdoors person, for example fishing, hunting, and berry picking are a common part of the Lappish lifestyle, bringing also food to the table. (Kilpeläinen and Romakkaniemi, 2014.) Overall, livelihoods old and new from reindeer herding, fishing and forestry to tourism, mining and bio-economy rely on the natural environment and its resources. Therefore, they are also potentially in conflict with each other either symbolically, in terms of images attached to the land (e.g. pristine nature vs. large-scale mineral extraction), or practically, if different livelihoods have overlapping claims over the same land. So far, conflicts of interest have been common between forestry or mining and reindeer herding, which needs large areas (suitable) as reindeer pastures. Further, while not every reindeer herder is Sámi, the position of the indigenous Sámi people and their rights to the land remain precarious and disputed, as Finland has not ratified the ILO 169, the international convention concerning the rights of the indigenous and tribal people (ILO, 1989).

Livelihoods matter. Northern Finland has long suffered from chronic lack of jobs, a situation worsened by the downsizing of the welfare state and structural changes in forestry. The employment opportunities being few, the main justification for mining is its job-creating potential – in the small municipalities hundreds of jobs in the mining industry can be simply revolutionary. When mines in Finland employ around 2500 workers directly either as permanent workers or private entrepreneurs, 1300–1400 of these jobs are in central and upper Finnish Lapland^v. Accordingly, in the northern mining regions the attitudes towards mining remain fairly positive (e.g. Sompio, 1.2.2017; Kuisma and Suopajarvi 2017) even after the much-publicised environmental hazards and bankruptcy by the Talvivaara mine in eastern Finland. Moreover, one job in metal mining is expected to generate approximately two jobs in other fields of the society (Hernesniemi, et al., 2011, pp. 116-118), especially in transportation and services. Taken together, as several informants addressed, especially in northern Finland the mining and related jobs have a significant intergenerational impact, for they provide younger people opportunities to stay in or to return to the region.

Notwithstanding the benefits, mineral extraction however encompasses a number of complex problems. Mineral resources being finite, their current over-extraction and over-consumption is unsustainable and likely to lead to scarcity of many important minerals already in the near future (Theis and Tomkin, 2012, pp. 216-226). Despite attempts for greener practices, mining is energy intensive and thus climate heating, as well as (potentially severely) polluting field of industry. Beyond the climate heating impact, the environmental and the totality of land use changes remain in the mining regions, whereas the mining profits flow largely outside. Similarly, when the bulk of mineral extraction tends to take place in (impoverished) hinterlands, the consumption of minerals concentrates elsewhere, in affluent population groups, regions and countries. The irony is that hinterlands or resource peripheries are commonly labeled unproductive even when they

sustain the economic growth of the centres (Leadbeater, 2014). In the national economic and political discourse, also northern Finland has been often reduced into a mere burden to the national economy (Moisio, 2012, p. 277), its role as a resource pool of timber, hydropower (Massa 1994), minerals, and for tourism being thus dismissed. Overall, the pros and cons of mineral extraction reflect longer patterns of wielding of political and economic power globally and locally, and in so doing exacerbate older spatial, ecological and intergenerational debts that are not paid back to those who have to bear the losses. (Padel and Das, 2010.)

In northern Finland, where the kind of nature conservation advocated by the environmental movement and even by scientists has traditionally had bad press, among other things due to experienced neglect of local knowledge and views, many^{vi} are particularly worried of the environmental consequences of mining. Whilst acknowledging the need of jobs, they fear that eventually mining may “spoil the Lapland they love”. Some further point that they do not want to be remembered as members of the generation that allowed “Lapland go” and the mining industry take over. At the same time, however, people are acutely aware of the political and economic marginality of the region and their own powerlessness against the interests of multinational mining companies and the regulatory framework that leaves the locals hardly any say. The experience being that protesting has no impact beyond the possibility of being ridiculed for daring to believe so, the common attitude is that come what may “ei täällä mihinkään barrikadeille mennä” (we are not going to barricades here). When in positions to do so, people nevertheless negotiate their interests the best they can, being aware of the enormous knowledge, resource and power gap between the locals and the companies in favour of the latter. For example, when a local reindeer herder’s cooperative has to negotiate about compensations for the losses (pastures, animals) suffered, the members of the cooperative are constrained in time, needing to take care of their reindeer, and information, with little prior knowledge about the operations and impacts of a mine.

Social work concerns over the mining industry have traditionally limited to the health and safety of the miners, the impacts of the industry on families and communities, the need of social services and support in the mining communities, and the need to develop alternative visions and sources of employment in retrograding mining communities. The former is largely the situation also in northern Finland, where universal welfare services based on residence are usually the norm and the work of various social professionals concentrates on meeting the service needs of different client groups. While the work does not deal with the mining industry as such, according to the social professionals interviewed, mining nevertheless influences the work and its circumstances. The main positive impact is the improved employment situation; mining jobs have solved the problems of those whose only problem was joblessness. On the other hand, those with multiple and more complex troubles are not eligible for such demanding work, so besides rising costs of housing their situation remains unchanged.

Overall, when mining and its impacts were paid attention in social and welfare services, the focus was on the issues of the day. While considering and preparing for the longer term impacts was considered as a luxury that cannot be afforded in the midst of the present workload and institutional contexts of the work, time was nonetheless an issue also in the present. For example,

many pointed that the mineworkers' rhythm of life, which consists of 12h/12h shifts several days in a row followed by a longer break, differs from the schedules of the rest of the society, including their family members. This complicates mineworker's participation in civic activities and is particularly taxing in families with small children, especially if both the parents work in the mine. At any rate, also the service infrastructure has to adjust so that also mineworkers can be reached when needed and can have access to services. This includes, for example, organizing childcare 24/7 and extending appointment hours in child protection so that also parent(s) working in a mine can participate in important meetings.

Conclusions: Scopes for ecosocial practise in mining regions and beyond?

As discussed above, the mining industry does not fare well in intergenerational equity and long-term sustainability (e.g. Halland, et al. 2015, p. 2). Rather, "exhausting the non-renewable resource is the very nature of mining" (Knoblock and Petterson, 2010, p. 73). Besides employment and other positive impacts during the construction and operation periods of mines, at stake is also net outflow of economic surplus and wealth from the mining regions, as well as the necessity to deal with the ecological aftermath once the mining is over. Social work, in principle, could have a role in shaping responses to the resource and environmental crises, but so far this is not the case. In Finland, the 'official' (municipal) social work in mining regions and beyond is constrained with numerous statutory tasks, which limits opportunities to incorporate ecosocial and intergenerational orientation in the work. While changing the situation requires major structural and paradigmatic changes, for the time being scopes for ecosocial work could be more realistically found in various social and environmental movements (Matthies, 2017). However, this should not obscure the fact that ideas similar with the ecosocial approach can sometimes be found live and well in some other counters of the public sector, especially in regional and municipal planning and development, and in multidisciplinary projects, where sustainability is the norm. Also some green(ing) businesses share similar ideals.

At any rate, the ecosocial project cannot proceed without reorganizing some of the core processes and practices of contemporary societies so that both private and public consumption of non-renewable resources is radically reduced. The usual idea is that to start with building a more ecological democratic society requires broad-based critical awareness and radical re-politicisation and re-localization of life, in essence bringing the political back to the everyday life (e.g. Klein, 2014). However, while there are promising signs of something like this going on in the form of different downshifting, recycling, and anti-consumerist projects, this approach has many challenges, including the post-political one (e.g. Blühdorn, 2014). In other words, postmodern subjects of today are no longer the kind of political subjects as, for example, those who participated in the different political movements of 1960s and 1970s. Instead, people have far more fragmented identities, or multiple selves, and are therefore not easily politicized or able to commit much time for the sake of just one identity of theirs. (Ibid.) Moreover, as identities are commonly built and maintained through consumer choices, multiple identity projects are easily stirring up rather than limiting consumption. Many also find it unpleasant to think about their

own complicity to the environmental crisis, and deny or avoid the topic altogether. Furthermore, even when people resist, it is not always easy to identify truly effective strategies. As Maija Mattila's analysis (2016) of the Talvivaara mine attests, power is subtle and may be rendered so impersonal that it is difficult to identify the party who could actually change the state of affairs. When economy is separated from what is understood as political and the realm of politics shrunken, even political actors like ministers find their sphere and modes of influence severely limited. (Ibid.) In Finland, where mines are administered in a fairly technocratic manner as singular projects, the existing anti-mining movement is small and scattered into local struggles.

While any attempts to question the bigger picture of mineral extraction and consumption might not be welcomed in the regions dependent on the mining jobs, the standpoint of this article is that social work cannot eschew complex social and environmental justice issues, including those related with the mining industry. For the needed sustainability transition to occur, one way ahead could be systematically encouraging people to think about their own attachments to place, to consumption, what they consider as good and worthy life, and what kind of legacies they want to leave to the future generations. Moreover, noting the emotional depth of the changes required (e.g. Skirmshire, 2010), social work could work on the affective and emotional aspects of environmental woes, including the difficulty to give up taken-for granted material abundance. In other words, rather than surrendering to a game-over mood or avoiding ecological reflection for the discomfort or difficulty of it, social work could enter into analysing what keep us stacked to destructive patterns of behaviour. In so doing, it is however equally important to nurture our individual and collective capacities to imagine a radically different, yet better world and maintain radical hope (Amsler, 2010). Noting the heretofore substance matters of the field, social work should be well versed to deal with both, issues uncomfortable and those requiring hard-headed faith that change is possible. Why not to apply this knowhow for the sake of the Earth?

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ⁱⁱ The Consequences of the Mining Industry for Disadvantaged Groups in Northern Finland and Northern Odisha (Academy of Finland 2014-2017).

^v Estimate based on the employment figures mining companies report at their websites.

^{vi} Of the 15 interviewees for this article, everyone noted the environmental risk and 2/3 (10) were particularly concerned of it.