

Depoliticization, Repoliticization, and Environmental Concerns – Swedish mining Politics as an Instance of Environmental Politicization

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Abstract

An argument within the wider theory of postpolitics that has gained traction over the last decade is that environmental concerns in general, and climate policy in particular, are especially conducive to depoliticization. In this paper, we take issue with this notion by presenting an empirical case study of the repoliticization of Swedish mining and then, on the basis of this analysis, offer theoretical reflections on how to better understand depoliticization and repoliticization of the environment. We argue for the use of a narrow definition of 'depoliticization', and that sufficient attention must be paid to temporal and scalar differentiation of



continuous processes of de- and repoliticization, and that normative assumptions of what constitutes the genuinely political should be abandoned. We argue that environmental concerns harbour large potential for effective politicization, and that this politicization occurs as a response to depoliticization, through concurrent, cross-fertilizing and intertwined processes of repoliticization across scales both inside and outside of formal channels of government, whereby previously depoliticized state agencies may become crucial.

Keywords

Mining politics; environmental conflict; depoliticization; repoliticization; postpolitics

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to counter claims about the inherently postpolitical character of environmental concerns through an analysis of Swedish mining politics. On the basis of a case study, we will argue that environmental concerns harbour large potential for effective politicization, and that this politicization occurs as a response to depoliticization, through concurrent, cross-fertilizing and intertwined processes of repoliticization across scales both inside and outside of formal channels of government. We further show, that in the process of repoliticization, spheres of government that are usually considered to be instrumental to depoliticization may in fact also be crucial to repoliticization. Discussing our case study in relation to the literature on depoliticization, we will argue that the idea of environmental concerns as characteristic and constitutive of postpolitics does not hold for closer empirical investigation.

The paper is structured as follows: First, we give a brief summary of the theoretical argument that we take issue with and some of the critique that has been raised against it. Some of this critique is aimed at the postpolitical thesis in general, but we attempt to delimit this discussion as much as possible to the critique of the specific application of the postpolitical perspective to environmental issues, since this is the focus of our investigation and also because the literature on postpolitics is too vast to engage with comprehensively here. We then proceed to analyse the depoliticization and then repoliticization of Swedish mining, and use this as the basis for a discussion about how politicization of the environment can be understood in relation to the claim of environmental depoliticization.

The claim that environmental politics is postpolitical

The argument to which we object is related to the wider theory about a general postpolitical condition that the world, and the Western hemisphere in particular, is supposed to have entered in the last couple of decades. There are

important differences among the proponents of this theory and often a high level of sophistication to their arguments that must of necessity be neglected here. However, a core tenet is that a state of postpolitics has been reached through the displacement of conflict and antagonism under a hegemonically enforced assumption of a fundamental and universal consensus around certain principles, such as (neo)liberalism, capitalism, free movement of capital and the need for techno-managerial solutions to socio-environmental problems (e.g. Mouffe, 2006, Rancière, 1998, Swyngedouw, 2011a, Žižek, 1999a, 2002; see Marchart, 2007 for a review).

Within this frame, certain scholars have argued that environmental politics in general, and climate policy in particular, have become a key mechanism for spreading postpolitics (Goeminne, 2010, 2012, Kenis & Mathijs, 2014a, Maesele, 2015, Methmann & Rothe, 2012, Swyngedouw, 2011b; cf. Kenis & Lievens, 2014). In support of this claim, they point to the different sustainability policies promoted by 'political and economic elites' (Swyngedouw, 2013a, p. 10). Arguably the most vocal propagator of this claim has been political geographer Erik Swyngedouw, who relies on philosophers Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek for the formulation of his analysis. Swyngedouw's claim of postpolitics in relation to the environment has gained widespread traction in political research over the past decade (Kenis & Lievens, 2014). It has been applied in a number of empirical studies, for example the Transition Town movement (Kenis 2016, Kenis et al., 2016, Kenis & Mathijs, 2014b), the debate on climate migration (Bettini, 2013), climate change discourses (Kenis & Mathijs, 2014a, Methmann & Rothe, 2012, Pepermans & Maesele, 2016), noise reduction (Oosterlynck & Swyngedouw, 2010), GM food (Maesele, 2015a, 2015b) and protected areas (Celata & Sana, 2012).

Swyngedouw argues that in the postpolitical era environmental politics have a tendency to address global and universal subjects and eliminate the potential for political antagonism, conflict and dissensus by falsely portraying the political struggle as being between all of humanity on the one hand and an external, ecological threat on the other. An idealized vision of Nature replaces genuinely emancipatory political issues, thereby evacuating the truly political from the political arena, along with the real conflicts suffusing society. Instead of addressing and politicizing the inequalities and injustices produced by global (neo)-liberal capitalism, governments and incumbent interests channel political energies into empty signifiers such as 'sustainability' and 'biodiversity' and ascribe techno-managerial solutions to environmental problems in a presumed common interest (Swyngedouw, 2010a, 2011a, 2013a, 2013b, 2014a). It is in this sense, argues Swyngedouw, that Badiou's claim that ecology is a new opium for the masses should be taken seriously (Swyngedouw, 2011b, p. 255; see also Kenis & Mathijs, 2014, p.152).

Referring to, among others, Jacques Rancière and Alain Badiou (see Marchart, 2007), Swyngedouw makes a central distinction between the political

and the police. Whereas the former stands for ‘the agonistic differences that cut through the social, signalling the absence of a principle on which a society ... can be founded’, the police signifies the constructed appearance of order and consensus that takes the form of institutions and technologies of governing (Swyngedouw, 2011a, p. 373). Genuine politicization can only occur when the political manages to disrupt the order of the police through radical claims of everybody’s right to be heard. This right is often formulaically proclaimed, but it is always by definition denied within any given police order (including, of course, self-designated democracies). Within this configuration of power and disempowering, and politicization and depoliticization, ‘environmental and other policies are reduced to the sphere of the police, to the domain of governing and polic(y)ing through allegedly participatory deliberative procedures’ (Swyngedouw, 2011b, p. 267). In other words, environmental politics have become a mechanism for defusing political energies by incorporating them into the hegemonic, liberal-capitalistic order where all actions that take place within the ‘boundaries of the possible, acceptable, and representable’ must fail to politicize the environment (Swyngedouw, 2011a, p. 377). As long as the environment remains an object for technical administration rather than radical politicization, argues Swyngedouw, problems are never solved but only moved around, and the environmental crises of today and tomorrow may never be adequately addressed (Swyngedouw, 2007, 2010a, 2011b, 2013a, 2013b, 2014a, 2014b). The only way out of this impasse, according to Swyngedouw, lies in the power of the imagination to construct ‘radical ... spatio-temporal utopias’ (Swyngedouw, 2011a, p. 378), in thinking outside the box of the given symbolic order, so to speak, and ‘demanding the impossible’ (Swyngedouw, 2011b, p. 273), thereby ‘exploding the infernal process of de-politicization marked by the dominance of empty signifiers like Nature’ (2011b, p. 272). The idealization of nature that, according to Swyngedouw, stands in the way of genuine environmental politics can thus only be broken through by a new way of thinking about the environment.

...and its critics

While the claim advanced by Swyngedouw and others has become influential for the study of environmental politics in the 21st century, it has also been criticized on a few points. Here we will summarize the critique – with which we agree – of two aspects of the claim and its application in research, namely its empirical basis of analysis and its definition of authentic and inauthentic politics.

To begin with, we would like to address the issue of treating the depoliticized character of official environmental policy-making, and in particular international climate policy, as somehow indicative of a general characteristic of environmental politics at large (Berglez & Olausson, 2014, Goeminne 2010, 2012, Methmann & Rothe, 2012, Pepermans & Maesele, 2014, Swyngedouw, 2011a, 2013a, 2013b, 2014a). There are many who claim that environmental politics are a preeminent example of postpolitics and that such hegemonic policy discourse is

pervasive. However, the fact that the analytical focus in applications of the postpolitical perspective to environmental issues is most often on official policy-making (e.g. Bettini, 2013, Celata & Sanna, 2012, Kenis & Lievens, 2016, Maesele, 2015a, Pepermans & Maesele, 2014, 2016), means that tendencies towards depoliticization risk appearing more hegemonic than they actually are (see Chatterton et al., 2013, Featherstone et al., 2013, Featherstone & Korf, 2012, Larner, 2014, MacCarthy, 2010, MacGregor, 2014, Urry, 2011, for similar critique). There is an obvious risk of circular reasoning, given that the definitions of the genuinely political, as provided by for example Swyngedouw (2011b, referring to Rancière) presuppose a hegemonic 'police' order that is by definition already depoliticized. The chances of finding genuine politics within this order would then seem slim from the outset. Treating the manifest expressions of the police, e.g. global climate policy-making and the rhetoric surrounding it, as 'emblematic' of a general depoliticization of the environment, as Swyngedouw does, (2013b, p.3, 2011b, p. 255) seems to us to be a mistake.

We would also argue that such definitions of what constitutes the genuinely political are in themselves highly problematic. The central assumption in the literature on postpolitical environmental politics, sometimes explicit and sometimes implicit, is that politics can be categorized as either authentic or inauthentic, and that only radical opposition to all aspects of an institutionalized liberal-capitalistic order may count as the former (Mouffe, 2000, Rancière, 2005, Žižek, 1999b). Swyngedouw, for example, dismisses all acts of resistance that ultimately 'do nothing but keep the state of the situation intact and contribute to solidifying the postpolitical consensus' as futile measures that serve ultimately to uphold the police order rather than attempt to transgress it (Swyngedouw, 2011a, p. 377). This, we would argue, risks analytical insensitivity to the political potential in acts that may not be explicitly framed as being against capitalism but that nevertheless arise from the contradictions inherent in capitalism's global workings (see Featherstone, 2013, Harvey, 1996, Kenis & Lievens, 2014, Li, 2007, Marchart, 2007, Muradian et al., 2012). The adoption of an idealistic and narrow view of politics means that only a certain kind of political act that is explicitly framed as being against the established system in a very radical sense may count as a sign of politicization. As pointed out by Larner (2014) and Bond et al. (2015), this risks leading to the sweeping conclusion that real resistance is either futile or lacking (see also Flinders & Wood, 2014, Foster et al., 2014, and Urry, 2011 for a critique of the overly generalizing tendency in postpolitical theorization). This differentiation between supposedly authentic and inauthentic forms of politics is not only analytically unhelpful, but also – somewhat paradoxically, given the normatively emancipatory thrust of much postpolitical theory – verging on the reactionary in its ideological nostalgia (Blüdhorn, 2014, MacCarthy, 2010).

It should be stressed that there is no lack of nuance in the literature that advances the claim that environmental politics are generally postpolitical. Bettini (2013), and Kenis (2016), for example, point to the political dimension inherent in

many mechanisms of depoliticization, and indeed the central thrust to the postpolitical claim is that capitalism and (neo)liberalism always engender conflict and contradictions, and that these should be made visible and politicized rather than suppressed or defused through technocratic, consensus-oriented processes of deliberative democracy (Bettini, 2013, Kenis, 2016, Swyngedouw, 1999, 2011c, 2013c). The problem, however, remains the key assumption that politics is only about the radical expression of dissent against a hegemonic order. As both Jessop (2014) and Hay (2014) point out, such an antagonistic perspective soon becomes problematic when removed from the level of high abstraction and general theorization and applied to concrete, empirical cases. The sharp antagonism posited at the centre of this definition of politics threatens the analytically important boundary between politicization and depoliticization, so that everything, in effect, becomes politics on a meta-level in that it serves to either uphold or break down the barrier between system and conflict (see also Jessop, 2014). Thus the mechanisms of governance that are typically thought of as prime examples of depoliticization – austerity policies in Greece is the example used by Hay (2014) – could actually be seen as politicization given the sharp social dividing lines they reveal. The inevitable result of adopting such an idealistically narrow and antagonistic perspective on politics as either authentic or inauthentic is, we would argue, the analytically problematic paradox by which either everything becomes politics, or everything becomes postpolitics. The only way out seems to be the appeal to ‘radical utopias’ (Swyngedouw, 2011a, p. 378), in itself paradoxical since it is premised on the belief in the impossibility of change from within the global capitalistic system, while it professes faith in the possibility of changing this inert system through radical thinking (Swyngedouw, 2011a; Swyngedouw, 2011b, 2014a, Rancière, 1998).

Purpose

The above is a very brief summary of the argument to which we object, namely that environmental concerns have been effectively used to further processes of depoliticization in the past few decades. We have also presented some of the general critique of this claim and its theoretical underpinning. In this paper, we will go beyond criticizing this claim by pointing to instances of politicization of environmental issues, as has been done by Urry (2011), Chatterton et al. (2013), Featherstone et al. (2013), Featherstone & Korf (2012), and MacGregor (2014). Refuting the thesis by showing that environmental resistance does in fact take place is a worthy task, but it does not in itself disprove the claim that environmental issues in general are especially conducive to processes of depoliticization. We will further the critique by showing not only that depoliticizing tendencies in environmental politics are often contested, but also that environmental issues may in fact be used to effectively politicize a political area that has been previously

depoliticized.¹ This politicization may be more than an extra-parliamentary, antagonistic act of protest against the system, but also include politicization of and through formal channels of governance, what Jessop terms 'the polity' (2014).

There is nothing inherently apolitical or depoliticizing about environmental concerns. On the contrary, they harbour strong political potential, and a more nuanced understanding of politics will show environmental politics to be a phenomenon always existing in tension between processes of depoliticization and repoliticization (see also Hay, 2014, Jessop, 2014). Furthermore, we show that processes of depoliticization can often be understood as an active process and analysed, through what is being left out or through what is reiterated in depoliticized (and depoliticizing) discourse, to reveal hidden conflicts and potential for repoliticization.

Note on method

Our empirical analysis has two parts. The first part focuses on Sweden's Minerals Strategy (Swedish Ministry of Enterprise and Innovation, 2013), a document released by the liberal- conservative government in 2013. The second part focuses on the critical response to this strategy and the mining policy it represents. The Minerals Strategy is analysed from the perspective suggested by Kenis and Lievens (2014), who claim that although the 'political' elements in environmental politics are often subsumed under a hegemonic discourse, as postpolitical theory claims, they can be identified on a meta-level. Even if outright antagonisms or oppressed subjects cannot be expressed overtly within such discourses, they are revealed indirectly through patterns of repetition, silence and omission. If, for example, a statement is often reiterated and awarded great importance in the upholding or creation of consensus, this should be taken as a sign of an underlying, suppressed conflict.

The second part of the empirical analysis deals with the critical response to the governmental mining policy and the repoliticization of the mining issue in the public realm and the governmental sphere. First, we analyse the public discourse through a large number of editorials, feature articles and opinion pieces written between 2012 and 2014 and published in the major daily newspapers in Sweden and the most important, relevant journals. In this period, there is a clear surge in the number of articles relating to mining in a more critical way, which constitutes an important sign of one form of repoliticization. These texts dealt with changes in official Swedish mining policy as crystallized in the Minerals Strategy of 2013 and with investments in new mining projects in this period. From 500 initial hits, we identified approximately 100 as critical of the government's Mineral Strategy, and of these we cited 58 to substantiate our claims. Note that the passages cited are

¹ Similarly, Anshelm & Hultman (2015) have shown how the climate issue has repoliticized a depoliticized environmental debate in Sweden.

simply examples that could easily have been supplemented given sufficient space. The texts were closely read, categorized according to a schema developed in the process, and then reread. The analysis was guided by the overarching purpose of identifying the main lines of conflict within the current mining discourse in Sweden. Secondly, we trace how repoliticization spreads through state agencies and parliamentary debate and takes the form of concrete actions. For this purpose, we have used news articles, interviews with the communications director and the CEO of the Swedish Association of Mines, Mineral and Metal Producers (Svemin), secondary literature, parliamentary debate protocols and written statements by state agencies.

Theoretical point of departure

Departing from the criticism summarized above, we would argue that analysis of environmental politics should adopt a perspective on politics that goes beyond the focus on antagonism. We agree with Hay (2014) that while conflict is certainly one important dimension of politics, it is not the only one. If we acknowledge that power relations always exist between those who are governed and those who govern, as well, of course, as between different groups within these two rudimentary categories, then politics could be construed as the mediation between these groups and the imposition of a certain set of rules for the provision of public goods and for collective behaviour. This may be done in highly antagonistic circumstances, but it may also be done amicably. It would certainly be wrong to suppose as an analytical starting point for any study of a specific political context that conflict can be avoided but, conversely, it is equally problematic to found an analysis on the premise that there is conflict and hence that all forms of governance that do not result in antagonistic dissent are a form of depoliticization. This latter term should instead be reserved for the process of obscuring² ‘the inherent contestability of decisions concerning the provision of collective public goods’ (Hay, 2014, p.293).

That something is contestable is not the same as it being contested, however, and an issue may be unpoliticized without being depoliticized. We agree with Jessop that there is no issue that is inherently political and that depoliticization is a relational term that can only be understood with reference to specific ‘points in past and present political space-time’ (2014, p.207). It makes no real sense, in other words, to speak of a general state of ‘postpolitics’ more than as a way of describing on a highly general level the strategic attempt of governments for the last few decades to ‘roll back the state’ (e.g. Hay, 2007, Jessop, 2016). Since depoliticization may only occur in relation to politicization, and the former presupposes the latter, each instance of depoliticization will occur in a dynamic relationship with resistance to the attempts to depoliticize, and an area that

² How depoliticization is to be understood in terms of intent, structural conditions and rationality is beyond the scope of our discussion here.

becomes depoliticized may of course become repoliticized. Thus, in instances where there are obvious attempts at depoliticization, such as in some channels for global climate policy-making, these should not be construed as signs of a general depoliticization through environmental concerns, but rather the opposite, as active attempts at upholding the precarious legitimacy of a form of governance and societal order that is being intensely contested. It follows that any inquiry into the political potency of environmental concerns should not take a discourse of depoliticization as its end but rather as its starting point, which is what we will do here.

In what follows, we will analyse one instance where the conflicts suffusing a political area can be discerned through a reading of the discourse of depoliticization and show how this area becomes thoroughly repoliticized through the raising of environmental issues.

A depoliticized minerals strategy

In the years around 2010, the minerals market was characterized by increasing global prices, with a dip in 2008 being followed by a steep climb. This led to what was often referred to as a mining boom in Sweden, which is the largest mining nation within the EU, producing 91 % of all iron, 39 % of all lead, 23 % of all zinc and 10 % of all copper produced within the EU-27 member states (Geological Survey of Sweden, 2014). In 2011, the number of claim certificates and exploration permits issued or extended reached an historic annual high, numbering close to 600 as compared to well below 300 in 2004. The most obvious sign of the increasing interest in Swedish minerals was the rise in prospecting costs, reaching a high of close to 800 million SEK in 2011, as compared to costs in 2002 that did not even reach 200 million SEK (Geological Survey of Sweden 2014). Although the exact timing of the peaks for different minerals varied somewhat, in general the prices of base metals and iron peaked around 2011–2012, after which they started a rapid decline that is yet to level off.

As Fredrik Envall has shown (2015), a few years into the 21st century Swedish mineral extraction was transformed from an issue characterized by deep ideological rifts to one dominated by extensive consensus and techno-economic managerialism. Mining in Sweden had previously been considered to be suffused with severe conflicts of interest between landowners, local populations and mining companies, and between different national interests, such as nature conservation and resource extraction. At the beginning of the new millennium, these tensions were depoliticized as the idea that such conflicts can be managed through rational, friction-free deliberation gained widespread support in the Swedish parliament. The mining industry, having often been cast as the villain in previously popular narratives of Swedish mining politics, began more and more to be portrayed as a hero. This occurred both on a local level, where mining was seen as a potential saviour for sparsely populated areas facing population exodus to urban regions, and on a national level, where its significant contribution to Sweden's export income

was highlighted. All political parties in the parliament, regardless of ideological stripe, backed this extractivistic discourse, even though some individual members of parliament expressed dissenting opinions.

Another important element of the construction and maintenance of the expansionist discourse was the oft-repeated claim, by both government and opposition representatives, that Swedish legislation on mineral extraction guaranteed that potentially conflicting interests could be rationally and adequately balanced against each other. In fact, the Mineral Law of 1991 granted the mining industry significant power and leverage over competing interests, and it reduced the potential for conflict generated by mining projects by formalizing a permitting procedure for mining permits which favoured the applicant (Liedholm Johnson, 2000, 2010). Thus, the practical implementation of the expansion was delegated from the sphere of active government to a formal, technocratic permitting process, in a transfer of responsibility that Hay (2007) designates as type 1 depoliticization. Prospecting and mining concessions were handled by the Swedish Mining Inspectorate, a subsidiary of the Geological Survey of Sweden, a state agency with a formal mission to further the interests of the extractive industries. In the years 2004-2012, the Mining Inspectorate gave 38 mining concessions, while none were declined (Geological Survey of Sweden, 2016).

According to the general parliamentary consensus, a deliberative and non-ideological approach would facilitate successful expansion of the extractive industries that would, once again, make Sweden a prominent mining nation. The hegemonic discourse that emerged in parliament in this period is distinctly neoliberal in its content, with a focus on economic growth through exports, facilitated by the creation of an attractive investment climate for venture capital. All citizens are assumed to share this common objective, which is also assumed to be equally beneficial for everyone. There was more or less unanimous parliamentary consensus around this in 2013, when the liberal-conservative government published its Minerals Strategy, encouraged by the EU raw materials initiative, which had been launched with the purpose of safeguarding unhindered access to raw materials within the union (Envall, 2015).³

The strategy was premised upon a thoroughly neoliberal view of industrial expansion, as the role of the state is identified as being a facilitator of global capital movements (into Sweden) and a stimulator of market competition. Although the government stressed the need for indirect state support in the form of investments in infrastructure, research and education, the state was primarily cast as a passive actor whose most important function is negative, in the sense that it must remove

³ For parliamentary testimony about a general depoliticization of decision-making within the Swedish parliament and government during this period, see for example Suhonen (2014).

obstacles to the circulation of capital and the establishment of mineral ventures. In terms of mineral strategy this meant, among other things, speeding up the environmental approval process and abolishing taxes. By such measures the government would strive to create fertile soil for mining businesses and to attract investment streams from all over the world. Economic growth, international competition, and a rationalized and intensified extractive industry were all identified as common, national goals that were in the interest of all parties. The possibility that some actors might harbour different ambitions, and that thus social controversy might arise as a consequence of the mining policy, is never acknowledged in the Strategy, which does, however, firmly stress the need for dialogue between concerned actors.

The constant reiteration of the need for consensus in the strategy document is revealing, as is the appointment of a new coordinator for mining matters announced in the document. If there was widespread consensus regarding these issues, why was there a need to mention this again and again? And why would the government see a need for someone to work exclusively to guarantee that no conflicts surface? The much repeated claim that dissent regarding the need for an expanded mining industry is the biggest threat to the mining industry clearly signals that such a threat is real, or perceived to be so by the authors of the Strategy. Paradoxically, however, the document also states that there is widespread consensus regarding the issue. The significant omission of potential lines of conflict indicates their shadowy existence in the wings, so to speak, of the discourse. The rifts cannot easily be bridged by market mechanisms and mining legislation, despite explicit claims to the contrary. Here, the depoliticized discourse reveals its own inverted mirror image, which is dissent and repoliticization.

The imagery in the Minerals Strategy is significant for the way in which conflicts of interest are concealed from view, yet implied by their very absence. Geographical visualizations consist primarily of maps, charts, and photos of minerals and mines. Only two out of twenty-six pictures feature people. One of the two shows a geologist turned away from the viewer, examining a core sample. In the other picture, a miner is positioned in front of a huge vehicle, illustrating the smallness of a human being in relation to the forces at play in mining operations, but also, simultaneously, evoking pride in humans' ability to harness such forces for society's benefit. By eradicating from view the actual places from which minerals are to be extracted and the people inhabiting these places, the Minerals Strategy gives precedence to abstract space over lived place, to use the terminology of Henri Lefebvre (1991). The potential for conflicts that is anchored in the material reality of specific geographical places is buried in the reductionist and highly abstract imagery of maps and diagrams. But as Kenis & Lievens (2014) point out, these conflicts reappear through their very omission, making the Minerals Strategy a highly ambivalent document, despite, or because of, its determinedly depoliticized character.

Thus, while the Minerals Strategy is, by all accounts, representative of a discursive pattern that the literature on a postpolitical condition awards hegemonic status, it also reveals itself to be an effort to paper over conflict in the very discourse it carries. According to the claim of postpolitical environmental politics, the pattern of depoliticization should be enhanced as it is related to global ecological concerns and to demands for environmentally sustainable development. However, as we will show in what follows, this is far from being the case. Demands stemming from environmental prerogatives turn out to be well suited to fusing with already existing conflict lines buried within the hegemonic discourse. Thus ecological concerns are shown to harbour a significant social explosiveness, even in a neoliberally oriented society like Sweden. This is in sharp contrast to the claims made by many postpolitical theorists and to the wishes of many governments hoping for politics dominated by consensus.

A repoliticized mineral extraction

Following the launch of the Minerals Strategy, a multivocal, multifaceted, extensive and radical critique of the government's plans for an expansion of the mining industry began building steam in the public realm (see also Haikola & Anshelm, 2016). To a large degree, this critique was anchored in ecological concerns, and in a short space of time it transformed mineral extraction into one of the most conflict-ridden and debated environmental issues in Swedish society. Many organizations with different perspectives and different aims joined forces against the mining policy. These organizations included Nature and Youth Sweden (NYS), the Swedish Society for Nature Conservation (SSNC), Sami villages and several organizations for the promotion of Sami rights, the Sami Parliament, opposition municipal politicians, leaders of tourism businesses, local action groups formed against specific mining projects, critical researchers and individual intellectuals writing in Sweden's main newspapers. Several of these groups chose to cooperate within the network called Budkaveln ('The Fiery Cross'). The common denominator was that they all used ecological arguments, the concept of 'sustainable development' and the need to consider alternative paths to future development to challenge the prerogative of economic growth through extractivism. Though focusing on the government's mining policy, the critique also carried a broader thrust against short-term thinking and sought to promote a reorientation of national politics towards new visions of a sustainable society in which short-term profit had less political significance. Through this kind of argumentation, the protests against mining managed to exert considerable pressure upon both government and parliament.

A central claim in the emerging critique of the mining discourse was that the government was prioritizing short-term profit over more long-term, often environmentally anchored, interests. Mining was identified by the critics as one of the most environmentally destructive operations performed by society. Within a few decades, all the profitable minerals would be extracted and all that would

remain would be irreparable scars in the ground, poisoned waterways, destroyed landscapes, depleted natural resources as well as ruined indigenous cultures. NYS and SSNC paid particular attention to plans by mining companies to establish mines in the vicinity of protected areas and national parks, claiming that such projects endangered unique environmental values. At the same time, Sami spokespersons emphasised the ecological sustainability of their culture, as opposed to the environmental unsustainability represented by the mines, and argued that their a thousand years old culture, dependent on unspoiled nature, could not survive under the conditions stipulated in the Minerals Strategy (Leffler, 2013, Lemke et al, 2013, Sikku, 2013, Partapuoli, 2013). Insisting that the mining industry had a well-established history of environmental neglect, critics warned that the government's policy would lead to the creation of an unsustainable ecological debt for future generations.

Some critics linked Swedish mining policy to a global context in which the growth imperative was said to spur on an ever-escalating hunt for natural resources. They dismissed all talk of sustainable mining as outright lies (e.g. Abresparr, 2013a, 2013b, Abresparr & Harr, 2012, Bergström, 2013, Danielsson 2013, Engström & Pettersson 2013, Hallberg & Ihrén, 2012, Jangvad, 2012, Lindman, 2013, Ling et al., 2013, Mosleh, 2013, Persson et al., 2012, Persson, 2014, Samuelsson, 2013, Tidholm, 2013a, Tidholm, 2012). Relating their critique to ideas of imperialistic aggression, they claimed that mining expansion in the north of Sweden was nothing less than 'a globally organized assault' on unique environmental values and the right of Sami populations to decide on and safeguard their own distinct cultures. This critique placed the government's Minerals Strategy in the context of a centuries-long colonial history in which global capital was being given free rein to exploit 'the last remaining outpost of nature in the world' (Enström, 2013). Metaphors like this reveal the confrontational position taken by groups that claimed to be defending their home communities against what they regarded as state-sanctioned 'plundering' of their resources (e.g. Thege, 2013, Sandling, 2013, Priftis, 2014, Larsson et al., 2012, Danielsson, 2014).

The critics argued for an alternative, sustainable society in which long-term perspectives and respect for future generations and indigenous cultures are central to all industrial activity. They contrasted this with what they considered to be an approach in which all forms of extraction of natural resources are considered inherently good and desirable. The critics argued that extraction of natural resources should be considered only as a last resort, and should not be something that Swedish society should strive for (Abresparr, 2013a, 2013b, Abresparr & Harr 2012, Danielsson, 2013, Eriksson & Dahlberg, 2013, Harnesk, 2013, Lundström, 2012, Mosleh, 2013, Persson, 2014, Thege, 2013, Tidholm, 2013). In regard to future generations, there were two lines of argument, one related to the environmental debt left behind by mining operations initiated today, and a second related to ownership. The NYS, the Green Party, Sami and other local resistance groups all raised the fundamental question of who has the right to stake a claim to

mineral resources, arguing that future generations have at least the same right as the current generation to secure access to the resources offered by nature. Thus, political decisions today must guarantee both the sustainable extraction of minerals and the safeguarding of environmental values, something the critics felt current policies did not do (e.g. Abresparr & Harr, 2012, Enström, 2013, Jangvad, 2012, Ling et al., 2013, Mosleh, 2013, Persson et al., 2012, Sikku, 2013, Thege, 2013).

According to the Green Party, the NYS, the SSNC, Sami and other local resistance groups, the remedy had to be a strengthening of environmental legislation, which in its current form took environmental prerogatives into account only at a late stage in the permission process related to mining projects. Accordingly permission for projects was virtually a foregone conclusion by the time environmental considerations were taken into account. Here, the Mining Inspectorate of Sweden (MIS), which is responsible for ruling on mining permits, was severely criticized for its perceived weakness in critically scrutinizing mining companies. The critics regarded the fact that the MIS is a part of the Geological Survey of Sweden, a state agency with an explicit mandate to further the interests of the mining industry, as a clear case of 'regulatory capture' (Stigler 1971), as proven by the high unlikelihood of a mining concession being declined. The critics interpreted the protests around the country as a definite sign of the inadequacy of the legislation, and the need to politicize the permission process by making it clearly address the conflicts between different interests that actually exist in mining processes (Abresparr, 2013a, 2013b, Abresparr & Ehn, 2013, Eriksson & Dahlberg, 2013, Danielsson, 2013, Harnesk, 2013a, Jangvad, 2012, Karlsson & Vikström-Olsson, 2012, Lemker & Karlsson, 2012, Lindgren & Persson, 2012, Lindman, 2013a, Lindman, 2013b).

Much of the critique was also based on the premise that the territory claimed by the extractive industry could be better used in alternative, more sustainable ways. Actor groups with differing perspectives and interests, such as Sami villages, tourism entrepreneurs, environmental activists, opposition municipal politicians and critical national economists found common ground in their view that a less destructive management of the environment would in the long term generate more profit than the extractivism promoted by the government's Minerals Strategy. They said that farming, fishing, reindeer husbandry and tourism were all sustainable industries to which mining posed an existential threat. If job creation was taken more seriously, claimed the critics, it would be clear that local food production, nature conservation, recreation and ecotourism should be given priority over an extractive industry that did irreparable damage to the environment during a brief period of active operation. Tourism in particular was proposed as an industry with much larger economic potential than mining. In radical opposition to claims by mining proponents that the two industries could co-exist, it was stressed that an expansion of mining would seriously threaten environments that formed the very basis of tourism. In a related argument, many critics claimed that the government's Minerals Strategy revealed a distinct lack of understanding and respect for the

uniqueness of lived places, and blindness to the threat posed to rural and indigenous cultures and economies by global capital accumulation. In this context, the mining policy was seen as undermining the possibility of 'regional sustainable growth', because rural communities would be locked into a relation of dependence on an extractive industry that, after a few decades of profitable mining operations, would leave them with little remaining legacy other than a ravaged natural environment (e.g. Abresparr, 2013b, Abresparr & Harr, 2012, Bergström, 2013, Danielsson, 2013, Elwing et al., 2014, Enström, 2013, Eriksson & Dahlberg, 2013, Harnesk, 2013b, Jangvad, 2012, Karlsson, 2013, Larsson et al., 2012, Lindman, 2013a, Lindman, 2013b, Ling et al., 2013, Lanta et al., 2013, Lööf, 2012, Mosleh, 2013, Persson et al., 2012, Sirén, 2013).

For some, the critique of mining policy was elevated into more general claims about modern industrial society. The Swedish mining industry was held up as an example of the ruthless exploitation of global resources made by a kind of society, unprecedented in human history, that was steering the world into ecological collapse. Several Sami and other local action groups and the NYS related their critique of the mining policy to a more general critique of mass consumption. They interpreted the Minerals Strategy as a legitimation and generator of an ever-increasing use of finite resources. In this sense, a significant part of the critique amounted to fundamental opposition to the values infusing a society dominated by a growth imperative. It was formulated in calls for a radically different vision of the future (e.g. Abresparr, 2013a, 2013b, Danielsson, 2013, Härén, 2013, Lindman, 2013, Persson, 2014).

Two diametrically opposed future ideals were thus brought into focus through the launch of the Minerals Strategy and the debate it generated. The hegemonic neoliberal agenda of the government was opposed through the repoliticization emanating from a decentralized, extra-parliamentary context. This opposing vision of the future could also be formulated as an alternative mineral strategy, which amounted to a total inversion of the strategy produced by the government. In the alternative strategy, the establishment of new mines would only be allowed as a last resort, after all other options had been exhausted. Society should move towards decreasing its dependence on the extraction of new minerals. When needed, minerals should primarily be sought through the reuse of materials already in circulation within society or from extraction of minerals from tailings. Primary extraction should always be done through existing mines. If greenfield mining did have to be contemplated, such projects should be subject to assessments that took far more note of environmental, social and cultural values than is the case today, and should give indigenous and other local populations as well as future generations a voice in the decision-making process (e.g. Abresparr, 2013a, 2013b, Abresparr & Ehn, 2013, Hallberg et al., 2014, Mosleh, 2013, Olsson, 2014, Persson, 2014). Thus, since 2013, Swedish mineral extraction has been contested by two distinct alternative visions.

The antagonisms triggered by the mining policy were manifested in a number of conflicts at specific locations where mining projects were being planned. Names like Kallak and Rönnbäck in the north of Sweden and Ojnare Forest and Norra Kärr in the south started to appear frequently in the national press as demonstrations, boycotts, occupations and direct actions were staged by protesters. Sami villages and Sami based resistance groups of the north and local resistance groups of the south, joined forces and collaborated in order to put an end to the mining expansion. News media devoted much attention to both the dissenting acts and the resulting legal proceedings and parliamentary reactions. Perceiving the MIS as an agency heavily tilted in favour of the mining industry, the protesters sought other institutional channels to politicize the permitting process. In Rönnbäck, for example, where the MIS had approved three mining concessions sought by the company IGE Resources/Nickel Mountain Group AB, the local, Sami-based resistance group appealed to the UN Committee on Racial Discrimination. The UN demanded a total cessation of all mining activities in the area, the first ever UN intervention in Swedish mining affairs (Holmberg, 2013). In Norra Kärr, where Tasman Metals had been given a permit by MIS for the mining of rare earth metals, a group of private individuals, having seen the legal options almost exhausted, appealed to the Supreme Administrative Court to overrule the governmental approval of the mine on the grounds that it broke EU directives on biodiversity (Supreme Administrative Court, 2016). In the Ojnare Forest on the island of Gotland, where the company Nordkalk were planning to open a limestone quarry, protesters engaged the EU Commission to criticize the Swedish government on the grounds that the project would violate the EU Habitats Directive (Leino, 2015). By thus connecting the local struggles against specific mining projects to EU legislation, to other similar struggles and to universal values, protest groups made deliberate attempts to transform their particular struggle to a wider context.

At the same time, and clearly affected by the widespread, localized resistance across the country, several state agencies involved in the permission process for mining projects began adopting a conflict-oriented stance. In Kallak, for example, the County Administrative Board argued against giving Jokkmokk Iron Mines a mining permit. This forced MIS to pass the case on to the government for arbitration, with the Environmental Protection Agency and the National Heritage Board heavily involved in constructing a case against the planned mine (County Administrative Board of Norrbotten 2014, Swedish Environmental Protection Agency 2014). In the drawn-out process regarding a proposed limestone quarry in the Ojnare Forest, the Environmental Protection Agency became heavily involved in expressing critique of the project and of the environmental courts that gave their permission. Krister Mild, the agency's chief biologist, argued the agency had no choice but to engage in this manner, as it constituted a crucial test of the strength of the Environmental Code. Following both approvals of the project in the Environmental High Court, Mild and the EPA vocally proclaimed that they believed the court's interpretation of the legislation was completely wrong, and

they were joined in their critique by the state Agency for Marine and Water Management (Gahnfelt, 2011, Klefbom, 2012, Lennander, 2012, Röhne, 2012 Sveds, 2012). Following the approval in the second round of legal proceedings, the Director General at the latter called the decision ‘the decade’s most unreasonable and faulty application of the Environmental Code’ (Gustafsson, 2012). In several cases like this, state agencies that in Swedish environmental political history had often been seen by resistance groups as representatives of the established order were suddenly enrolled as effective support (e.g. Anshelm, 1992, 1995, 2000).

As the Minerals Strategy became the target of massive public critique and mining issues became politicized within civil society as well as state agencies, significant rifts opened within parliament. Parliamentary representatives from all three opposition parties – the Left, the Green Party and the Social Democrats – gave voice to the views expressed in the extra-parliamentary debate. By declaring some national interests incompatible, the opposition triggered a repoliticization of the issue within parliament. Whereas they had previously adhered to the imperative for consensus, the opposition now began stressing the difficulty of balancing ecological, social, cultural and economic values, as well as indigenous rights, against each other in mining projects, while also highlighting the ideological differences between the political parties. The potential for conflict was emphasized, as values related to unspoiled nature, tourism and reindeer husbandry were set against the interests of the mining industry. When the environmental consequences of the mining industry thus became a controversial issue within parliament, Sami rights in mining politics were raised by some MPs for the first time (Envall, 2015). Accordingly, the environmental framing of mining issues led to a repoliticization within parliament of the severe conflicts of interest between indigenous cultures and the mining industry. Jonas Eriksson of the Green Party, for example, argued the following in a parliamentary debate:

Better information and increased clarity regarding responsibility does not change the power relations between individuals, municipalities, the Sami people and the Sami villages or the public interest. We members of the Green Party think that bigger changes to both the mineral law and the environmental code are necessary to strengthen the protection of the environment (Parliamentary protocol 2013/14:123, address 43).

The fact that those still adhering to the previously hegemonic, depoliticized discourse were now forced to openly defend and argue their position showed that the period of parliamentary consensus was over. Significantly, they no longer claimed that such a consensus existed.

The strongest critique against the government line within parliament came from the Green Party, whose spokesperson Åsa Romson explicitly denounced the efforts of the government to depoliticize the issue through calls for deliberation on the ground that such deliberations tended to suppress the legitimate claims made by

indigenous and local populations. In a parliamentary debate about mineral politics, she argued:

Last but not least, I am very worried about the Alliance's belief that all conflict can be solved by conversation. One cannot simply tell the Sami people: 'You can get along with the mines and be happy together through counselling, it does not work like that. First, one has to acknowledge people's rights and give them power in a conversation. That is how it works (Parliamentary protocol 2013/14:8, address 70).

The declaration made in parliament by Romson was in line with the demand raised by the President of the Saminuorra, the Sami national youth association:

We demand that all exploitation of Sapmi cease immediately. We demand that Sami rights, in accordance with international conventions, are acknowledged not only on paper but also in practice. We demand that Sapmi, its land and water, be administered by us Sami. We believe this is the time to start negotiating equal rights (Partapuoli, 2013).

The claim of indigenous rights was thus inseparably linked to an environmental framing. With ecologically motivated arguments, Romson went on to question the whole premise of the previously hegemonic, depoliticized discourse (Envall, 2015). She had become Minister of the Environment in the summer of 2015, when the newly appointed Red-Green government declared the Ojnare Forest an environmental protection area, thwarting the advanced plans for a new limestone quarry (see above). The Social-Democrat prime minister Stefan Löfvén did his best to deflect criticism by arguing that the decision was purely dictated by science and that Sweden's obligations under EU environmental legislation forced his hands, but his efforts were to little avail as both the union of metal workers and leading representatives of the mining industry gave voice to heavy critique of the government's intervention (Ahl, 2015, Öjemar, 2015). Nordkalk, the project owner, appealed the decision on the grounds that it constituted undue interference in the legal process, and also accused the involved state environmental agencies and the County Administrative Board of cooperating together with the government against the project (Holmkvist, 2015; see also Calissendorff & Winberg, 2015, Värjö, 2016).

Through that highly unexpected and unprecedented decision, the repoliticization of the parliamentary debate took on concrete significance for the Swedish mining industry. For ten years the Ojnare Forest had been a symbol of environmental resistance to big industry, and the decision seemed to vindicate the environmentally motivated critique of 'extractivism'. The decision came as a result of a ten-year political struggle by a heterogeneous discourse coalition comprising, *inter alia*, local farmers, locally and nationally coordinated resistance groups,

national and international environmental NGOs, environmental state agencies, the County Administrative Board, municipal and national representatives for the established political parties (primarily the Red and Green parties), as well as the European Commission. Using markedly different tactics – state agencies and environmental NGOs writing petitions, the County Administrative Board performing its supervisory role, resistance groups staging actions of civil disobedience – these actors became united in their attempts to halt the progress of the lime extraction project. Through a political division of labour of sorts, the resistance thus managed to exert heavy pressure on parliament and thereby stop the project, despite it being intensely promoted by the mining industry, the union of metal workers and large parts of the incumbent Social Democratic party. The legal process had also been characterized by controversy, as the Environmental Court twice rejected the application only to be overruled by the Environmental High Court on both occasions. (Haikola et al., forthcoming).

The Ojnare decision dealt a severe blow to the extractive industries, who expressed concern over its long-term consequences for the industry and fear that it would signify the beginning of a trend towards mining scepticism within the state (Aghaei et al., 2016, Ahl, 2015, Brandel, 2015, Interview Haikola: E.H & P.A., Swedish Association of Mines, Mineral and Metal Producers, 18/9-2015). Their premonition seemed to be vindicated by another unique ruling half a year later when, in February 2016, the Supreme Administrative Court announced its decision to overturn the government approval of Tasman Metals mine in Norra Kärr. In what is likely to become a legal precedent, the court ruled that mining concessions should be approved only on the basis of an environmental impact assessment that also took into consideration possible effects on sensitive ecological values outside of the immediate concession area (Supreme Administrative Court 2016). In adopting the critical discourse's view that current mining policy was based on a much too narrow framing of environmental effects, the court also went against a well-established legal interpretation of the Mining Code.

The two landmark decisions of 2015 and 2016 clearly revealed deep-rooted conflicts within Swedish society concerning different possible futures and showed how a depoliticized issue could, in the span of a few years, be extensively repoliticized. In the following discussion we will turn to what this could mean for the analysis of environmental politics and relate it to the analytic frame of postpolitical environmental politics.

Discussion

The resistances to official Swedish mining policy analysed here should be seen as political even by a narrowly antagonistic definition of politics. Using various tactics, opponents of the mining strategy managed to upset the given order established by successive governments and upheld by powerful incumbent interests, primarily the extractive industries and the unions. This amounts to nothing less than the kind of 'violent engagement that re-choreographs socio-

natural relations and assemblages' deemed necessary by Swyngedouw. The action groups that have led these resistances have done so through the radical democratic claim of the right of everyone to make themselves heard (Swyngedouw, 2011b, p. 272). Against a mining policy bearing all the hallmarks of depoliticized governance, the mining resistances analysed in this paper raised the radical counter-claim that the neoliberal extractive policy implemented by successive governments does indeed create insuperable antagonisms on the local level. In this sense, regardless of whether one sympathizes with them or not, they should be understood as radical political acts.

The radical, antagonistic claim to a voice by local resistance groups is, however, only one facet of a complex process of repoliticization that has been a consequence of depoliticization and has shifted across scales within the governmental and non-governmental spheres. As Hay (2014) and Flinders & Buller (2006) point out, depoliticization is not a matter of disbanding politics but of displacing it to new arenas.

We will now use Hay's typology of types of politicization and depoliticization (2007) to map out how repoliticization occurs as a response to this displacement in the case of Swedish mining. An important note here is that Hay does not intend these processes as sequential, but rather as mutually reinforcing and concurrent. We will show how repoliticization is channelled through arenas to which political powers have been displaced through processes of depoliticization and through arenas that have become depoliticized by these processes (see also Jessop, 2014).

The depoliticization against which the process of repoliticization analysed above reacted can be summarized as follows:

- **Type 1 depoliticization – demotion from the governmental to the public sphere:** In a process of juridification, scientization and technocratization, mining permits are handled through standardized procedures that tend to obscure irreconcilable values and interests, and that treat value conflicts as translatable to and resolvable through supposedly objective science, primarily through the mechanism of environmental impact assessments. There is also a virtual consensus within parliament on the benefits of expanding the mining sector, and the responsibility for this expansion is delegated (formally at least) to the private sector (e.g. Jessop, 2014).
- **Type 2 depoliticization – demotion from the public to the private sphere:** The contestable nature of mining issues receives little attention in newspapers, and there is little public debate about mining policy (see also Flinders & Wood, 2014 for a further development of this 'societal' aspect of depoliticization).
- **Type 3 depoliticization – demotion from the private sphere to the realm of necessity (what Flinders & Wood, 2014, term 'discursive**

depoliticization’): Mining is described in official policy and in parliamentary discourse as fundamentally beneficial and important to Sweden as a whole, and all social actors are expected to work to facilitate sustainable expansion of the mining industry.

At the local, grassroots level, type 1 repoliticization⁴ - by which issues are moved from the realm of necessity to one of contestation - occurred as resistances took shape around the country, directed against specific mining projects and what they perceived as intrusion into their immediate environment. These resistances were not premised upon the ideal of ‘a thoroughly imagined and symbolized Nature or Sustainability’, as Swyngedouw describes environmental politics in the postpolitical era (Swyngedouw, 2011b, p. 272). Their target was the highly concrete threat of a destroyed living environment, in the present and the future, posed by the imposition of a neoliberally framed capitalistic extractive regime. The ‘nature’ appealed to by the mining protesters is primarily the local and lived environment, the positively loaded signifier that functions as a mobilizing force for resistance. This is different from a purely negative construction of nature as an imagined ideal that, in its abstractness, functions as a threatening symbol that legitimizes all kinds of actions which serve to uphold the hegemonic order (e.g. Swyngedouw, 2010a, 2011b, 2013a). The resistances could be seen as a direct response to a government policy that disavows or has failed to identify the conflict-generating potential in a strategy geared towards the expansion of extractive industries, and that has rolled back the state from direct involvement in communities that are left to face the consequences of mining projects (see Jessop, 2014, Kuzemko, 2014). It is these resistances that are visible between the lines in the government Minerals Strategy of 2013, in the reiterations of the need for consensus and in the omission of fundamental value conflicts.

It is important to note, however, that the local resistances did not respond to the depolitical processes primarily through antagonistic or radical anti-system protests, even though militant actions have also been part of the arsenal of some action groups. Instead, they made great efforts to extend the struggle into arenas that had been depoliticized, using type 2 repoliticization – bringing in NGOs and academic experts as critics of the government mining policy. The local resistances also used type 3 repoliticization. As state regulatory agencies become engaged in the critique of the mining policy, legal cases in the environmental courts become intensely contested and mining policy once again become the target of parliamentary debate.

The extension of dispersed and geographically delimited conflicts into new arenas was done through the reframing of immediately local concerns in terms of more universal issues such as biodiversity, local self-determination and indigenous

⁴ Hay (2007) uses the term politicization without prefix. Here, we prefer the term repoliticization in order to illustrate its occurrence as a response to previous depoliticization.

rights. This allowed these issues to be connected to other arenas, for example, to the EU through the Habitats Directive and the Committee on Racial Discrimination. By thus ‘jumping scales’, as Swyngedouw says (Swyngedouw, 2010c, p.13, citing Smith, 1984), the local mining resistances were able to gain support from agencies within the state that have usually been cast in the role of villain in the traditional narratives of Swedish environmental struggles (Anshelm, 1992, 1995, 2000, 2009, Vedung & Brandel, 2001). In doing so, they have been forced to move beyond the strictly local, to transfer the political potential that lies, as Swyngedouw says, in the act of ‘becoming concretely geographical or ecological’ (2013b, p. 7; see also Rootes, 2007, 2008, Anshelm & Haikola, 2016) to arenas where institutional change may be effected. Thus, just as each step of the different depoliticization processes has discursive components (Hay, 2014), each step of the scaling up of local conflicts and each type of repoliticization is also associated with discursive repoliticization, since every reframing of a local mining controversy also entails a new way of representing the formerly depoliticized issue of mining as something contestable (Kenis & Lievens, 2014; cf. Wood & Flinders, 2014).

It must be stressed, however, that this repoliticization is not a simple and linear process that moves from the local level upwards through the skilled manoeuvrings of local resistances. The repoliticization of Swedish mining is to a significant degree about the engagement of governmental regulatory agencies in almost activist capacities, for this has lent the critique of the official mining policy a unique legitimacy. We would argue that the politicization of these actors can be explained only by the fact that the Environmental Code became a matter of dispute, and that without this change the regulatory agencies would have remained in their usual roles of formally neutral regulators, taking care to be perceived as such. As they engaged in severe critique of the way the Environmental High Court had interpreted science in relation to the Environmental Code in the case of the Ojnare Forest, for example, they effectively revealed the politically contestable nature of the supposedly objective, formal procedures of mining permissions. This was one way the juridical process became politicized in this case, the second one being the oppositional stances taken by the lower and higher environmental courts. It is thus notable that two processes – juridification and scientization – that are usually taken to characterize depoliticization are here used for the reverse process of repoliticization (see Jessop, 2014).

It may of course be argued that the ‘legalization’ of the resistances signalled the end of the political moment, and that the resolution of the legal and parliamentary process also effectively closed the democratic, political energy momentarily gathered around these localities. A more positive, and in our view more correct, interpretation is that the closure of these processes allows for their symbolization as coherent and finite narratives harbouring political significance. Place names like Kallak, Ojnarekogen and Norra Kärr can be said to have received the kind of symbolic meaning that Swyngedouw, referring to Badiou,

identifies as crucial for the opening up of political procedures (Swyngedouw, 2011b, 2014a). The value of the landmark decision in the Supreme Administrative Court in 2016 and the government verdict regarding the Ojnare Forest in 2015 as 'inaugural events' (Swyngedouw 2011a, p. 374) has been reinforced by the realization in law of the insurgents' claims of the right and possibility to prioritize environmental values over business prerogatives. By turning environmental protests into institutional change, the mining resistance in Sweden may well have overcome the difficulty of transforming the original and temporary energy of inaugural political events into an enduring success of the political (see Swyngedouw, 2012, 2014a). It should also be noted that far from being an endpoint, the ruling in the Supreme Administrative Court in 2016 means that a thorough reappraisal of outstanding applications for mining concessions is needed. Several applications have been returned to the applicants for fundamental revisions relating to environmental consequences. This shows, again, how the closure of one moment of politicization, in this case the juridical one, can open up opportunities for repoliticization on other levels. The double function of the law as providing both depoliticizing closure and (re)politicizing impetus deserves more attention in future studies.

Type 3 repoliticization in this case was constituted by simultaneously occurring processes. Bottom-up pressure from an increasingly vocal public opinion made up of local resistance groups, academic experts, public intellectuals, editorial writers and ENGOS, served to make mining a public issue of contestation in need of governmental deliberation and reappraisal, while governmental regulatory agencies and their experts became engaged in specific mining cases to highlight the fundamental conflict dimension inherent in the official mining policy, thus contributing to a politicization of the juridical process. While we have not mapped the chronology of these processes in detail, it is easy to see how repoliticization follows from policy 'blowback' (Jessop, 2014), with societal and discursive repoliticization preceding formal/governmental politicization (Kuzemko, 2014). It is, however, important to highlight the fact that certain governmental agencies are central to the first phases of politicization (the EPA was engaged in the Ojnare case for a decade, for example). It is only the executive government itself that reacts with some temporal delay and as an obvious response to previous repoliticization, following a period of intensified parliamentary debate. Tellingly, testifying to the system-preserving effect of depoliticization in service of government, the government goes out of its way to maintain a discursive depoliticization, arguing that its intervention in the legal process is dictated purely by law and based on objective, scientific grounds. The accusations that follow from the mining industry of unwarranted politicization of the legal process by the government and governmental agencies is also evidence that depoliticization tends to cement a certain hegemonic order, and that incumbent interests stand to lose from repoliticization (see Jessop, 2014).

Re-centring the political in environmental politics analysis

We suggested as a theoretical starting point in this paper that manifest signs of depoliticization should be taken as a starting point for analysis rather than as the end result. As Hay (2014) points out, with reference to Burnham (2014), depoliticization should not be understood as in any sense the ‘end of politics’. Rather, it is the displacement of politics from certain channels open for accountability to other more invisible channels for decision-making (see also Flinders & Buller, 2006). Inquiry into the political potential of environmental concerns thus requires that we investigate the dynamic interplay by which processes of depoliticization move decision-making around within the official and unofficial spheres of governance and how these displacements of authority are responded to with either passivity, resistance or attempts at repoliticization. This movement and the resulting responses from both governing and governed should be tracked across different institutional, temporal and geographical scales (see, for example, Anguelovski & Martínez-Alier, 2014, Bebbington et al., 2008, Dupuy et al., 2015, Urkidi, 2010, Urkidi & Walter, 2010 for analyses of the scalar differentiation of socio-environmental conflicts). It could be conceptualized, for example, in terms of shifts across and within different spheres (Hay, 2007), as different modes or ‘faces’ of politicization/depoliticization (Wood & Flinders, 2014), as chronologically shifting waves of different forms of politicization/depoliticization (Kuzemko, 2014), or as relations between and within the three levels of polity, politics and policy (Jessop, 2014). Analyses should also be attuned to the fact that overtly depolitical gestures and rhetoric may well be signs of silenced conflicts, which are likely to manifest themselves on another scalar level of analysis (see Featherstone, 2013, Kenis & Lievens, 2014, Swyngedouw, 2013c).

For the claim that environmental concerns facilitate depoliticization and have been instrumental in bringing about a general state of postpolitics to be credible, analysis must go beyond merely identifying the occurrence of depoliticization and attempt to follow how decision-making powers are re-routed to new channels beyond public accountability and what the resulting tensions are. Only if such analyses reveal that there is no attendant resistance or repoliticization occurring at other scales would the generalizing claim seem plausible. This, we believe, has never been shown in any systematic fashion whatsoever. On the contrary, we would argue that environmental concerns hold a special potential for politicization (see Kenis & Lievens, 2014a for a similar argument), and that this potential resides in the double character of many environmental struggles as being both highly local and transferable to other scales.

First, the concern about the local, particular and immediate environment triggered by a specific environmental struggle seems far removed from the kind of idealization of a ‘singular Nature’ that Swyngedouw refers to as a key feature of depoliticization through environmental issues (Swyngedouw, 2011b, p. 255; Mellor, 1997, Nikiforuk, 2008, Özkaynak & Rodríguez-Labajos, 2012, Reimerson,

2012, Robbins, 1998, Robbins, 2014). It also serves as an effective barrier to the de-responsibilization associated with processes of depoliticization (e.g. Harvey, 2005, Hay, 2007, Jessop, 2007, Peck, 2010), for people concerned about their own living environment generally strive to find someone to hold accountable for decisions that affect them (although there are, of course, several potential counter-processes of depoliticization that may thwart their pursuit).

Secondly, many environmental resistances have shown a great capacity to make themselves relevant on scales beyond the local level. They have done this by reframing the locally anchored concern in terms of issues that resonate among groups other than those most immediately affected (Bebbington et al., 2008, Conde, 2017, Kenis & Lievens, 2014, Martínez-Alier, 2002, Rootes, 2013, Schlosberg, 2013). If environmental resistances can effectively channel the political potential inherent in a local 'sense of place' (Rootes, 2007, p.734) to national and supra-national levels of governance without losing their political thrust, they can serve as triggers for the repoliticization of issues and spheres that have previously been depoliticized. As our case study in the present paper indicates, strong environmental legislation may serve as an important bridge between the local level and other governmental and non-governmental spheres and may serve to extend processes of repoliticization into the institutionalized apparatus of formal governance that Jessop (2014) terms the polity.

It seems likely that the very flexibility in environmental politics that we see as potentially politically productive contributes to certain proponents of the postpolitical thesis regarding environmental politics as characterized by depoliticization. They assume that because environmental resistances are difficult to analyse in terms of a traditional "left" versus "right" political framework, they are depolitical. Such assumptions underscore the importance of abandoning narrow ideological definitions of politics as either authentic or inauthentic if we are to engage in proper analysis of how environmental issues may be politicized and used for repoliticization.

To conclude, in this paper we have heeded Hay's (2014) admonition that what is needed in the literature on depoliticization/repoliticization is more empirical studies, not further theorization. We have used a case study of Swedish mining politics to problematize the claim made within a section of the literature on postpolitics that environmental issues are commonly used to further processes of depoliticization because they do not lend themselves to politicization. We have offered a radically different interpretation of environmental politics, arguing that the dynamic relationship between the local and other levels in many environmental issues makes them potent for repoliticization of depoliticized areas. Our case study has shown, first, that depoliticized discourse is often a sign that repoliticization is occurring elsewhere, and secondly that environmental issues may trigger a thorough process of repoliticization that involves state actors in key roles and that extends all the way into the polity (Jessop, 2014).

The previous literature that takes issue with the postpolitical claim in relation to the environment is usually content to refute it by showing that depoliticization is contested. Here, we have added to this critique by showing that environmental issues effectively repoliticize a policy issue that has been depoliticized and that this repoliticization also includes governmental agencies. We have shown that the repoliticization occurs through the scaling up of local environmental issues, effected through discursive repoliticization, and that the contestation of the status and application of environmental legislation was key to making the repoliticization as wide-ranging as it became. Looking into the future, we would call for further empirical inquiries into how environmental issues are used to facilitate depoliticization, how such processes in turn result in tendencies to repoliticization, and how such tendencies come to be either stifled or stimulated.

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