Belonging by confrontation: living, working, and struggling next to a mine in Halkidiki, Greece

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HUMAN RIGHTS AND THE ENVIRONMENT IN THE EU // TOWARDS AN INCLUSIVE DEBATE

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HISTORY OF MINING = HISTORY OF CONFLICT AND (CLASS) STRUGGLE

"The mines now wrought are about half an hour from Nizvoro, between two hills, in a deep ravine, where a stream of water serves for the operations of washing, as well as to turn a wheel for working the bellows for the furnace. The whole is conducted in the rudest and most slovenly manner. The richest ore is pounded with stones upon a board by hand, then washed and burnt with charcoal; the inferior ore is broken into larger pieces and burnt twice without washing. The lead, when extracted from the furnace, is carried to Kastro, where the silver is separated, in the proportion of two or three drams to an oke of 400 drams. When the present shafts are exhausted, the mines will probably be abandoned[1]".

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Already since the 19th century, large-scale ore extraction had been carried out in various mines in the region of Halkidiki, Northern Greece as the English historian, geographer, and traveller William M. Leake, has recorded in detail in his four-volume book *Travels in Northern Greece* (1835). The extractive activities were massive in terms of production but unregulated, with significant negative effects on the health of the inhabitants and the environment. Working conditions for the miners were particularly painful, as Leake describes. There were also frequent riots by the workers and the local communities, because of the unfavourable working conditions, the unpaid work, and the regular deaths of workers or local inhabitants due to accidents.

The so-called "newer history" of the mines begins in 1893 when mining rights were granted by the Ottoman Empire to the famous Franco-Ottoman Company. As was the typical case in several areas in Greece at that time (e.g., the mines of Lavrio near Athens, the Cycladian islands of Serifos, Milos, etc.), the lack of Greek capital and the lack of extractive expertise, paved the way for international, mainly European, companies that rushed to exploit the rich mining reserves of the Greek land. This situation continued to current times. Since its birth, mining in Greece is internationalised, in such a way that the place of extraction is merely a hub to international speculative

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[1] Leake, W. M. (1835:164). Travels in Northern Greece, Volume III. J. Rodwell.

interests. The mining explorations have always been invariably accompanied by a vocal and widely propagated discourse, wherein notions of underground metals as "subterranean treasure", "instrument of fiscal salvation" and "method of geopolitical empowerment" are firmly intertwined with opaque technical terms borrowed from geology[2].

In the long-mining history of Halkidiki, several discontinuities can been observed. Let us remember, for example, that on 14 March 1977, the company's metal workers went on strike for 28 months, highlighting their harsh working conditions and low pay. Let us remember the 1990s when the residents for almost 10 years from 1995 to 2003 reacted to the installation of a gold-mining plant in the area, by the then Canadian company TVX Gold. The local population's mobilization was hit hard by state repression both in the 1970s and the 1990s.

Following a history of commercial transactions and different owners, Eldorado Gold, a Canadian gold and base metals producer with mining, development, and exploration operations worldwide, became the owner of the Halkidiki mines in 2003. Some years later, in 2011, the Greek government approved the company's business and exploration plan. It has granted Eldorado Gold rights over land, permits for mining, fiscal incentives, and a fast-track approval procedure for the expansion and intensification of gold extraction. Despite delays in the project's implementation between 2015 and 2020, the company got a renewed permit in early 2021.

The project faces great opposition locally since 2011. Environment, health, and quality of life concerns aside, in a region where the economy mainly depends on tourism, farming, beekeeping, and fisheries, increasing gold extraction puts into serious jeopardy the sustainability of existing local economic activities.

These short excerpts show that mining has always been an economic, social, and political capital for Halkidiki in different periods. But there is no seamless mining history. On the contrary, mining has been and still is a history of conflicts, contestations, and intersections of labour and the environment, whereas local communities and/or the workers have been organised in social movements to defend their rights. It is, in other words, a class history where the subaltern classes have brought up their demands and occasionally, have come up with alternative visions for local development, the environment, and everyday life.

These visions are not always shared by everyone and create a terrain of conflict even between the locals. Local environmental activists mobilize against the project as it excludes them from access to collective goods and resources (e.g., the environmental commons) while it unequally distributes

[2] Karampatsos, C., Tzokas, S., Velegrakis, G., & Harlaftis, G. (forthcoming). "Is There Oil in Greece? - Oil Exploration and Scientific Conflict during the First Years of the Greek Geological Survey (1917-1925)". Historical Review/ La Revue Historique (accepted, under publication).

environmental and social costs precipitated by intensive resource extraction and appropriation of land[3]. In sharp contrast to them, pro-mining actors, mainly miners working in the company, demonstrate their indispensable bonds with their work and place by supporting the project. *"Mining is the only future of the area"* (Nikos, 43-year-old, miner, personal communication, March 2015[4]), it is argued.

The understanding and analysis of these visions, and their meanings, is at the core of this chapter. We shed light on how a socio-environmental conflict acts as a terrain for generating diverse and conflicting future visions of local development for the area. We also inquire if, and how, social conflict and confrontation to mega-projects creates a feeling of 'belonging by confrontation' for the locals that cuts through their visions and conceptualisations of well-being, everyday life, and above all visions of the future. We argue that a feeling of environmental, social, and political suffocation is generated that influences imaginaries and transforms everyday life. We, then, analyse (how and by who) the environment is socially, constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed in Halkidiki because of the conflict. We bring up the concept of 'the conflictual negotiation of the environment' as a key focal point for understanding place-specific environmental conflicts and main actors' positioning within them. We, finally, revisit workers' alienation as a key concept for their (positive in many cases) attitude towards the growth imperative, which is entrenched not only in existing institutions but also in overall societal norms, values, and discourses to the point that it operates as a mental infrastructure or a subtle mode of subjectivation[5]. All these inform our attempt to broaden the discussion on labour environmentalism by understanding it also as a terrain of conflict. Methodology-wise, we rely on qualitative research, interviews / informal conversations with local key-players, in favour and against the mining project, and participatory observation.

LIVING BY CONFRONTATION AND SUFFOCATION

As Robbins[6] notes in his famous "thesis on environmental conflict" there are two main aspects that are recognised and studied in the field of political ecology: the first concerns the politicisation of environmental problems when state agencies or private capital control and have exclusive access to

[3] On the unequal distribution of social and environmental costs, see also Beltrán, M. J., Connolly, C., Ertör, I., & González-Hidalgo, M. (2016). Engaging environmental conflicts in political ecology in Beltrán, M., J., Kotsila, P., García-López, G., Velegrakis, G. and Velicu, I., (eds.) Political Ecology for Civil Society, σ. 19 - 48. CDCA and ICTA, ISBN: 9788894071467.; Robbins, P. (2015). "The Trickster Science" in Perreault, T., Bridge, G., & McCarthy, J. (eds.) The Routledge Handbook of Political Ecology, pp. 89-101. Routledge.; Martínez-Alier, J. (2002). The environmentalism of the poor: a study of ecological conflicts and valuation. Edward Elgar Publishing.

[4] To secure anonymity of the interviewees, we use fictional names.

[5] See Brand, U., Muraca, B., Pineault, E., Sahakian, M., Schaffartzik, A., Novy, A., Streissler, C., Haberl, H., Asara, V., Dietz, K., Lang, M., Kothari, A., Smith, T., Spash, C., Brad, A., Pichler, M., Plank, C., Velegrakis, G., Jahn, T., Carter, A., Huan, Q., Kallis, G., Alier, J., M., Riva, G., Satgar, V., Mantovani, E., T., Williams, M., Wissen M. & Christoph Görg C. (2021). "From planetary to societal boundaries: an argument for collectively defined self-limitation". Sustainability: Science, Practice and Policy, 17:1, 265-292. DOI: 10.1080/15487733.2021.1940754; Adloff, F., & Neckel, S. (2019). "Futures of sustainability as modernization, transformation, and control: a conceptual framework". Sustainability Science, 14, 1015–1025. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11625-019-00671-2.

[6] Robbins, P. (2004:173). Political Ecology: A Critical Introduction. Blackwell.

collective goods (natural resources) at the expense of some or all local communities. The second concerns the 'ecologisation' of pre-existing conflicts because of changes in development policies or access to resources.

Both aspects are obvious in Halkidiki. For over a decade now, the local social movement challenges the legality of the environmental permit issued to the project by the Council of State (Greece's highest administrative court), by organising protests, scientific and cultural events, and solidarity actions with other national and international movements. In this process, through their direct engagement with everyday political action, they make sense of the world and develop new socio-environmental relations, in ways that transform one's everyday life and one's subjectivity – a typical case of the Gramscian philosophy of praxis[7]. On the other hand, the "other vassals", the employees of the company, also build active and conscious socio-environmental relations. For them, environmental protection cannot take precedence over work, labour power, and income.

These conflictive performativities of the local activists and the miners take place in the forest of Halkidiki where the mines are located, in their villages, in the streets of big cities where they demonstrate, in the court rooms, in their public discourse and in their everyday life. Therefore, the conflict is formed by many, small and daily conflicts. Through this process, the locals create and support not only different claims about the here and now, but also different narratives and reproductions about the identity of the place, its history, and visons on its future development.

Maria, a 65-year-old pensioner (personal communication, November 2014) argues *"I have 3 children, 2 boys and a girl. My sons are both immigrants in Germany. Once they thought about coming back. I don't want them to return if they are going to work for the mining company and betray our community."* On the contrary, Alexis, a young miner of 25, illustrated the general feeling of the miners: *"Our grandfathers were miners, our fathers were miners, and we will be miners as well. It is our only option to survive in our villages; our only alternative to migration"* (personal communication, March 2015). Each side brings to the public discourse their personal stories, their own considerations, representations based on their social status, and gender.

Within the conflict, the demand for immediate action is the dominant one. The protesting locals are prepared, at any moment, to clash with the police, to stop with their bodies a truck or a company machine, and to enter the company's "private" and forbidden to the public areas such as the mine in the Skouries forest. The belief that "we are right" is predominant among the local activists: *"I feel that the state is unfair to me. I feel the police are unfair to me. I feel the court is unfair to me. But I say we're*

[7] Velegrakis, G., Calvario, R., & Kaika, M. (2022). "The politicised ecologies of austerity: Anti-austerity environmentalism during and after the Greek crisis" in Calvario, R., Kaika, M., & Velegrakis, G., (eds.), The Political Ecology of Austerity: environment, social movements, and economic crisis, pp 115-134. Routledge - Explorations in Environmental Studies. DOI: 10.4324/9781003036265.

right, it can't be otherwise. Justice is all we have left. And that is what we will continue to fight for" (Lina, 25-year-old, university student, personal communication, November 2014).

However, workers for their part also consider that they have been subjected to violence and injustice by members of the anti-project movement. This sense that there is a community that puts them in the opposing spectrum is important in interpreting their attitude. As one miner puts it: *"A few months ago, my mother went down to the village for shopping. Some people stopped her on the street and spoke badly to her. Just because her son works at the mine. Is this fair?"* (Elias, 32-year-old, personal communication, March 2015). The various personal, social, and political identities of both the activists and the miners were troubled and transformed, even ephemerally, in the emerging space of conflict, violence and a constant feeling of injustice from both sides[8].

Moreover, they bring up their different interpretations of the environment. *"For us, the local forest is not just an image. It relates to our everyday life, it's where we go on weekends to collect herbs, its where we keep our beehives, its where we enjoy the landscape. Therefore, our fight is both symbolic and material. If we lose, we will not just lose a forest, we will lose our life and place"* (Kostas, 50-year-old, teacher, personal communication, November 2014). Stefanos, a 48-year-old miner, in contrast argues *"Do you think we don't want the best for our place? We too breathe the same air, drink the same water. But technology has advanced. There is not much environmental harm by mining. We can't lose our jobs for 10, 20, 100 "environmentalists""* (personal communication, March 2015). Local activists understand the environment as "what defines our place and life" and which "we are called upon to protect" against a project that "encroaches on it, destroys it, and denies us access to it". On the contrary, again, the supporters of the project believe that mining wealth, "the deposits of hope" should be continuously exploited since it is a comparative advantage for local prosperity and development. This so-called "hidden treasure" describes the area.

A discourse of 'mining as the only possible future' influenced the movement's approach. Those who oppose mining range from the chronically unemployed, low-income, unskilled workers, seasonal employees at the local tourist industry to young people with no job opportunities locally. This diversity of people, united in their struggle for their livelihoods and future, lives in this region. Therefore, local activists have addressed issues of development and elaborated alternative proposals for the development of Halkidiki, critically approaching austerity-driven pathways of development. The alternative they elaborated is based on the creation of jobs, within a sustainable economy and environment, through the promotion of small-scale agriculture, ecotourism, local fisheries and forestry activities, and a network of local cooperatives. In creating a space for experimenting with alternative

[8] Tsavdaroglou, C., Petrakos, K. & Makrygianni, V. (2017). "The golden "salto mortale" in the era of crisis". City, 21(3-4), pp. 428 – 447. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13604813.2017.1331563.

visions of local development, the local integrates in its struggle a philosophy of praxis for forging an alternative conception of the world beyond neoliberal notions. *"Anyone who thinks that the company only steals the environment is wrong. It steals our land, our lives, and our future. And the state supports it. And the police are beating us (...) All of them, apart from poisoning our environment, they also made sure to poison the society of our villages so that they could impose themselves"* (Eleni, 45-year-old, entrepreneur, personal communication, November 2014).

For their part, miners who are forced into a very specific specialisation far from other possibilities of utilising their labour power, identify their reproduction, their well-being, and their working and social future with the viability of the extractive activities. There are several stories worldwide on how difficult it is for many workers to even consider the possibility of losing their job, no matter how dirty and dangerous, in the absence of viable alternatives[9]. As Aris, a 55-year-old miner argues *"The question is not whether I am for or against the mine or the company. The question is how I can and want to live in my place. And rightly or wrongly I must work in the mines. That's what I learned to do and that's what I can do. That's the history of the region"* (personal communication, November 2014).

All the above stories show that in Halkidiki a lingering feeling of suffocation[10] is being cultivated historically. The local communities, for or against the extractive activities, learn to live with and next to the mines, and at the same time learn or be forced to live with a feeling of suffocation, which is translated into a constant confrontation.

Suffocation is primarily environmental. Very often the members of the socio-environmental movement use the word "crime" to describe what is happening in their area. A crime that begins with the destruction of the environment. A specific economic activity poisons the land, the forest, the waters, and the wider natural landscape of the region while undermines their right to nature and access to the environmental goods and natural resources.

Suffocation is also social. A discourse of 'mining as the only possible future' influenced both the movement's and the miners' approach. The actions of the company, the state and the police create a generalized feeling of injustice, which has a direct impact to everyday life of the local population. Violence, conflict, tear gases, special police forces, criminalisation, and repression has invaded into that space.

Finally, suffocation is political. Local repertoire of action includes a performative political act, a collective "indiscipline" against the consensus processes surrounding the project. The inhabitants of

[9] Barca, S. (2017). "The Labor(s) of Degrowth". Capitalism Nature Socialism, 30:2, 207-216. DOI: 10.1080/10455752.2017.1373300.

[10] We use the term suffocation in dialogue with Ahmann & Kenner 's concept of "Breathing late industrialism" (Ahmann & Kenner, 2020).

Halkidiki, have implicitly sought to create "subaltern geographies of connection" and expand their struggle. The social movement itself and the alliance-building with other movements give content to the "dynamic geographies of subaltern political activity and the generative character of political struggle[11]". Solidarity-making is embedded in a philosophy of praxis that empowers participants to critically approach and actively struggle against an undemocratic and violent development pattern that overlooks social needs and local practices. In the process, they go beyond particularistic and limited local interests and bring forward alternative ideas and practices of land use, local development, and society-environment relations[12]. The great social mobilisation, the long duration, the transcendence of locality and the development of legal and "illegal" practices (from all actors) are signs of political suffocation.

THE CONFLICTUAL ENVIRONMENTAL NEGOTIATION

The environment in Halkidiki is socially constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed. Locals involved in the socio-environmental movement create an imaginary of the environment as the land for their reproduction and well-being, a place for enacting socioecological transformation, practicing resistance and articulating counter-hegemonic demands. The miners, on the other hand, socially construct it merely as a source that needs to be constantly modified for providing raw materials, the objects that labour power utilises to make its products. The company constructs the environment as a mere host of its extraction. The state constructs it initially with the institutional framework of land use and protection, only to revise it later to the benefit of the private company. It also constructs it as the terrain for movement's oppression and violence.

In this path the environment is not only constructed but in fact negotiated between the different actors through conflict and confrontation[13]. The activists, through their own limitations, contradictions, excesses, and omissions, adopt, as Gramsci (1971: 346) puts it[14], a "new, systematic-contextual and logical conception of the world". This new conception is produced through and because of the conflict. The other subaltern group, the miners, within the conflict and through their labour, also develop "(...)active and conscious relationships (…) [and] an understanding of social relations and of themselves in nature and in the world[15]".

Nevertheless, the struggle goes beyond a simple standoff between the forces of 'development' and environmental-local protection concerns. It is an active and ongoing challenge to development patterns and an

[11] Featherstone, D. (2013:66). "Gramsci in action: Space, politics and the making of solidarities" in M. Ekers, G. Hart, S. Kipfer, & A. Loftus (Eds.), Gramsci: Space, nature, politics (pp. 65–82). Wiley.
[12] Calvário, R., Velegrakis, G., & Kaika, M. (2017). "The Political Ecology of Austerity: An Analysis of Socio-environmental Conflict under Crisis in Greece". Capitalism Nature Socialism, 28(3), P. 69-87. DOI: 10.1080/10455752.2016.1260147.
[13] Velegrakis, G. (2017a). "Marxism and Socio-environmental movements" in Velegrakis, G., & Andritsos, T. (eds.), Radical Geography Notebooks (in Greek), pp. 260-284. Athens: John S. Latsis, Public Benefit Foundation.
[14] Gramsci, A. (1971: 346). Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci. Nowell-Smith, G., and Quintin Hoare Q. (eds). International Publishers.
[15] Gramsci, A. (1971:352), Ibid.

articulation of diverse visions for local development and sustainability. As Barca notes[16], when we study cases around investments and projects that rally both the residents who oppose them and the workers of the company in question, we must never forget the alienation that the mode of production 'imposes' on the latter. In most cases, as in the case of Halkidiki, the local activists form and shape a narrative 'for their place', their well-being and what can be understood as 'development of their region'.

For their part, workers, especially those in the extractive industries who are forced into a very specific specialisation, far from other possibilities of utilising their labour power, identify their reproduction, their well-being, and their working and social future with the viability of these industries. In many cases they know and experience the environmental consequences in their locality and the impact on their health and well-being, but they consider it a necessary price to pay for the benefit of employment[17]. They also produce different and highly contested imaginaries of the future. These imaginaries then structure their distinctive practices of sustainability in the fields of politics, local economy, and development and everyday life.

Alienation, as a constitutive and corrosive element of capitalist mode of production [18] can be held responsible for such logics, narratives, and imaginations. The miners are alienated from their product as well as from nature and all other aspects of social life during the time of the labour contract and usually beyond. A state of deprivation and dispossession is internalised as a sense of loss and frustration of creative alternatives foregone. This process takes different forms in the different geographies of the global political economy and production.

But this is not enough, and we should look beyond. We cannot understand the corresponding conflict around resources, common goods, or the environment without also considering the voices of workers, who depend for their reproduction exclusively on activities and companies that - in the name of development sometimes - lead to extensive accumulation and waste of resources, and the creation of high environmental and social costs. The remaining political problem that derives from all this is to identify, confront, and overcome the many forms of alienation, while supporting the subaltern to gain control over, not only the labour process and product, but also the political process where decisions are made over the best route to prosperity and local development. This process is a process of (re)politicising both the environmental issues and the local development questions.

This is one of the core elements of labour environmentalism, although it is less discussed. Labour environmentalism should not be limited to a convergence of environmental and labour struggles. It should be broadened up. It should be understood, conceptualised, and practiced as a constant attempt to criticize the hegemony of traditional growth imperative and "delimit more clearly the past era, capture it in its otherness, and make it discontinuous with its discursive practice[19]", while being connected to community and communal relations. This approach builds upon an understanding of the environment as a contested concept that crosses through labour and environmental fields, being conceptualized, and acted upon in different ways within each[20].

[16] Barca, S. (2017), Ibid.
[17] Velegrakis, G. (2017a), Ibid.
[18] Harvey, D. (2014). Seventeen Contradictions and the End of Capitalism. Profile Books.
[19] Escobar, A. (2014). "Development, Critiques of" in D'Alisa, G., Demaria, F., Kallis, G. (eds) Degrowth. Routledge.
[20] Barca, S. (2017), Ibid.

Therefore, labour and environmentalism are two composite fields of political action that are highly differentiated within themselves, and whose areas of intervention are overlapping in several ways.

This is catalytical for the in-depth understanding of place-based, socioecological struggles that rally locals in different ways, according to their conflictive interests (environmental protection or securing employment), as well as for the rethinking of ecological politics in class terms today. As the Halkidiki case illustrates, labour environmentalism and alternative imaginaries of the future are always created, practiced, and supported around a symbolic and political stake: the conflictual negotiation of both the environment and labour. The outcome of this conflictual negotiation remains open.

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