

Land-grabbing procedures and social resistance in the European continent. The case of Chalkidiki (Greece) movement against gold mining.

ABSTRACT

Subject of this research are the transformations of space due to the operation of mining activities in the territorial unity of the North East (NE) Chalkidiki. The changes occurring in the field of application of the extractive development model, are investigated.

The procedures of changes in social relations of mining activities in the territorial unity of the North East (N.E.) Chalkidiki and the transformations of spatial planning (in the existing framework of relations between the state and market) constitute fields to be investigated in the research process. In addition, the paper will examine the environmental implications of the investment and will explore the compatibility of mining with other productive activities.

This study approaches the research questions with bibliographical research and fieldwork. Throughout the fieldwork, the new social relations and forms of action that are emerging within the local movements in Chalkidiki come into the spotlight.

Keywords: Chalkidiki, mining, land-grabbing, local community, social movements.

Narrative step: Facing the current crisis: critique & resistance.

INTRODUCTION

The current conjuncture of economic crisis and the dynamic entry of the extractive capital in the European continent (an area which until recently had not accepted the extraction of natural resources on a large scale in its area) coincides with global trends of investment of speculative capital on earth, trends which are identified as green grabbing. These land-grabbing procedures are categorized into three main areas. In the area of the city it is presented as seizure of property, calling into question the right to housing. In rural areas it is found as land grabbing, first in croplands for biofuels or GM products and second as an application of development mega-projects such as the mining frenzy of minerals and hydrocarbons.

A typical example of these trends in Greece is the positioning of mines of copper and gold in the area of Chalkidiki in the north of Greece. The urge of the Greek state for large development projects and direct profit is reflected in the fact that the application was made possible through an unconditional assignment of large parts of public forest land to ambiguous investment initiatives.

The reading of the arguments cannot be regarded as complete but under process of change and evolution. This peculiarity consists in the time period in which the field research takes place in the study area while the mining exploitation is in its beginning stage.

Figure 1: Map of northern Greece, including mining spots



Source: Deutsche Welle

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH APPROACH

The empirical work was carried out in the territory of the North-east (N.E.) Chalkidiki, a region that is characterized by its long history of mining activities. In

addition, localized case studies were made in the area of the Municipality of Aristotle in N.E. Chalkidiki, which includes all the areas of potential mining.

At local level, research is conducted using qualitative methods such as interviews with informants (local citizens), focusing on cutting-edge social groups, and participant observation.

Furthermore, based on this literature and empirical study, this paper attempts to contribute and add value to academic research, related to development issues, the management of mineral resources and social movements. In the analysis, the focus is set on the ways that local citizens, activists and local authorities engage in the struggle over the development and the governance of natural resources.

The article is organized as follows. In the first section, the above mentioned global trends of investment of speculative capital on earth are set out as an application of development mega-projects such as the mining frenzy of minerals. In these economic conditions, it is analyzed how the foreign direct investment from mining companies has been advocated as a form of neoliberal development by the Greek state that is approached as an analytical tool to investigate why the mining capital has entered dynamically in European continent. Second, in the section on spatial planning and environmental legislation, the compatibility of mining with other production activities is explored.

Furthermore, it is posing in the debate the alliance between the Greek state, the mining company and the media against the majority of the local population who resist.

Then, in the section on community resistance, the article deals with the new social relations and forms of action that emerge within the local movement of N.E. Chalkidiki. In the subsequent two sections, the references of the local movement in spatial and social geography of the region are investigated through the forms of organization and the multi-scalar character of it. Finally, the paper set out into discussion the different meanings of development arising from the speech and the actions of the social movement. The article ends with the main conclusions.

MINING CAPITAL IN THE EUROPEAN CONTINENT

The prevailing logic of Western-style anthropocentric democracy in combination with the current conjuncture of economic crisis, is leading European states to implement a neoliberal policy on the environment, to treat it as an entity under exploitation, rather than as a specific dialogue on natural resources. Nature, in the conjuncture of the crisis, constitutes a commodity for the benefit of speculative capital, which is now located in the European territory. Skouries of Chalkidiki in Greece, Rosia Montana in Romania and Corcoesto of Galicia in Spain are examples of application of these neoliberal policies. In these three cases, the efforts to extraction of gold and to a general exploitation of mineral resources by the side of the power of State and of multinational capital, stumble upon local movements who refuse the imposed development and claim the role of the modulator in the management of

natural resources in order to protect and preserve the local heritage from the multidimensional negative impact of gold mining.

This chapter will initially explore the reasons why multinational mining companies enter and invest capital in mining mineral resources in the European continent. These investments have dual targeting. To broaden the potential mining areas, *via a regression from a developed to an extractivist state ... whose sole function is to provide the global economy with cheap raw materials, often at the cost of its own people and its own development* (Kallis, 2013) and to expand their zones of influence and therefore sources of profitability.

The tools that are used to achieve their goals are based on the alliances they make with the states-receptors. This alliance goes through various levels and affects the welfare and daily life of the local communities, transforming social relations and the natural environment.

A crucial point for these investments, is the changing of environmental legislation in order to overcome legal obstacles regarding the protection of the environment. In addition to their experience in provoking social debates in local communities of developing countries, now they attempt to engage in the heart of the periphery of the capitalist system, i.e. countries that are more severely struck by the economic crisis where the mining costs are getting cheaper. In the case of Chalkidiki the company El Dorado Gold and the Greek governments have studied the misdoings of the former Canadian company TVX¹ and they have adapted the realization plans for the abatement of social resists into the following directions: technically proved studies of the environmental impact, new institutional framework, public relations and propaganda, affiliation of part of the locals, and last but not least the extreme recession by police, private guards and justice practiced upon those of the locals who choose to resist.

In combination with the rates of gold in stock markets being at a historical high, due to the turning of investors towards safer investments, the mining extractions of gold which in former pre-crisis years would never be possible, now are presented to be salutary to local people, while they ensure safer profitability to the investors.

SPATIAL PLANNING AND ENVIRONMENTAL LEGISLATION

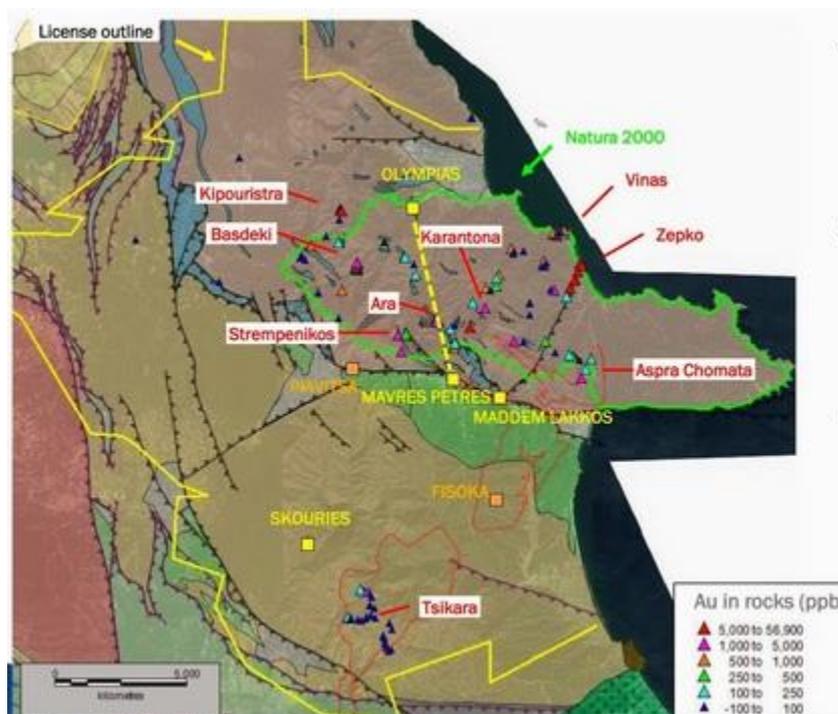
N.E. Chalkidiki consists of 16 villages. It is categorized in the mountainous area (the main settlement is called Megali Panagia) with a large proportion of woodland and farm-livestock areas and in the coastal area (the main settlement is called Ierissos) with a coastal zone, that has tourist facilities of small-scale tourism and important primary activities.

The public land that has been granted by the Greek state for mineral exploitation and is now owned by the mining company is 317,000 acres of the mountain Kakavos.

¹ which operated the mines of Olympias until 2003

On this land, the mining company, Hellas Gold S.A.², has the rights to expand the mining operations and construct new mines, and it also disposes of the ownership of two pre-existing mines of Stratoniki and Stratoniki (lode of black stone), which is currently in production and also the exploitation of waste tailings since the epoch of TVX at Olympias. In the Skouries area, the mining activity includes an open pit gold mine, two streams of drinking water which will be converted into waste lakes and the construction of factories such as metallurgy of gold, copper and a chemical plant of sulfuric acid production.

Figure 2: Mining property

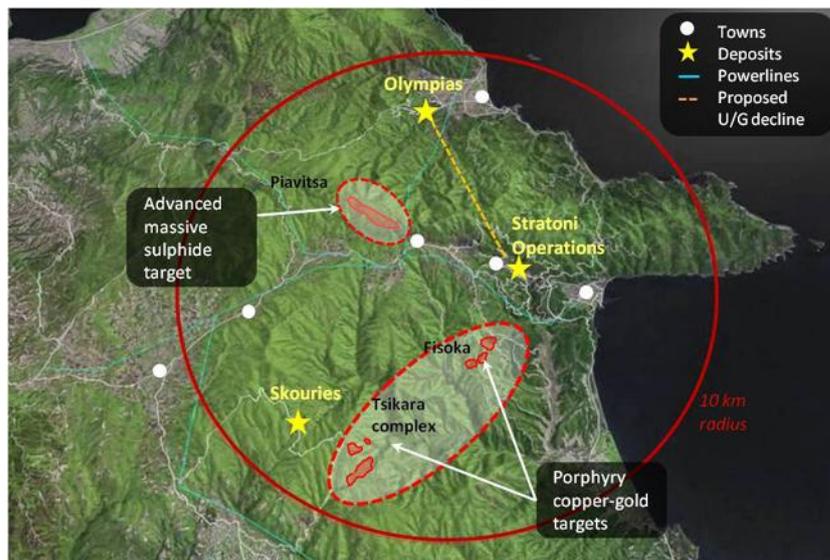


Source: Eldorado gold 2011

The violation of European environmental legislation finds a breeding ground in the Greek case, where local governments assign public property rights to attract investment. Environmental regulations are considered as "obstacles" and are skipped through rapid licensing procedures and implementation of investment strategies, a process that is called «fast track». The incentives that are offered to multinational companies by the governments, include tax exemptions, facilitation through 'friendly' environmental laws, promises of social stability and privileges for reinvestment and repatriation of the profits at their will.

² Eldorado Gold Corporation, now controls 95% of Hellas Gold shares and the rest of 5%, was held by Ellaktor S.A., Greece's biggest construction and civil engineering company.

Figure 4: Next Generation of Projects



Source: Aktor (subsidiary of Ellaktor) Company Profile 2012

Furthermore, the sitting of wide scale mining extraction contrasts with the mining history of the study area. *Eldorado Gold plans to extract roughly 380 million tonnes of ore over the life of the mine, over 10 times as much as has been mined in the region in the past two millennia. The company estimates it will need to clear cut 180 hectares of ancient forest and farmland in order to put the mine into full production, a process that is already underway.*⁴

Metallurgy has always been of small scale and the exploitation was carried out underground, and despite the fact that the region had achieved some kind of balance between mining and the other productive activities; the contamination is evident both in water resources and the environment. A typical example is the contaminated water of the region of Neochori⁵ with arsenic concentrations well above the permitted, and the effluences of wastewater deriving from the enrichment plant of Hellas Gold in Olympias. In addition, the bad environmental image of former and non-restored surface exploitations is still evident. The failure of restoring waste lakes, with old ponds, still contaminates the soil in the region of Olympias.

Additionally, no measure is taken for the protection of the touristic character of settlements⁶, which have nothing to do with metallurgy and are now forced to subject to the consequences of it, with the monoculture of mining imposed on them.

THE ALLIANCE BETWEEN THE GREEK STATE, THE MINING COMPANY AND THE MEDIA.

⁴ <http://newint.org/features/web-exclusive/2013/10/09/mining-greece/>

⁵ village which is included into the mining property

⁶ These settlements are Ierissos, Nea Roda, Ouranoupoli and Ammouliani.

The protectionism the government shows to the mining 'development' at the expense of the sustainability of the environment and the local community is multidimensional. The contribution of the Greek state in the promotion of corporate interests is not limited to selective spatial planning. The Greek state attempts to resolve social tension in the region of Skouries, by using the legal system to put people outside legitimacy, and repression to marginalize them. The objective remains the pursuit of the adaptation of citizens in any development decisions, suppressing the adverse effects of this neoliberal policy.

In the name of the economic crisis, criticism on state repression is illegalized, while the de-democratization of society escalates. The police arbitrariness used as the main infliction tool of the investment, expands on many levels. Initially, there was the use of tear gas in the woods, chases and injuries of protesters, who were participating in a demonstration expressing their disagreement with gold mining in the area. Authoritarianism has reached another level. There has been set up an industry of prosecutions against residents and solidarity demonstrators, including briefs of felony for seven of them, in a total of three hundred forty (340) defendants, as well as a database of genetic material (DNA) of even more residents, not accused of any offense, which were taken without their will.

The attitude of the police is considered an attempt to terrorize, intimidate and repress the local movement. As emphasized by interviewed residents regarding the police operations in the forest and repression against the movement that resists, "in Chalkidiki now is being carried out an experiment dealing with social movements in times of crisis, secondarily targeting the displacement, and hence the degradation, of the speech of the resistance of the movement opposing to the environmental and social destruction of the area to a police news bulletin". The current situation in the field of the mining operations, which as mentioned above are owned by mining company, is a state of permanent social tension. Residents claim that any attempt to carry out a protest in the forest of Skouries, is faced with police displaying a selective imposition of lawful exercise and of arbitrary violence and abuse in favor of private interests. They also claim that the company Hellas Gold SA funded Greek police sponsorships and donations to cover the "operating expenses" of guarding its premises in Chalkidiki.

The general repression by the state occurring in the territory of Chalkidiki is part of the abovementioned framework for managing social tension, with a sense of collective responsibility and inclusion of citizens who react to legal frameworks for "participation in a criminal organization," which has resulted in violence to escalate, creating rifts in society that can hardly be restored or mitigated.

In addition, the company and government agencies proceed to a policy of division of the society and rupture of social consistency. This tactic of multinational companies is proven and successful since the early 80s in Latin America's countries, who experience until today the impact of the economy of mining. That is, the policy of the Canadian multinational El Dorado Gold in both recruitment methods and the attempted division of society, is not an isolated Greek example. However, with the additional advantage in the case of Chalkidiki of studying various wrong

manipulations of the past by TVX on recruitment, El Dorado Gold follows a policy of targeted cleavage of the society. They hire workers with the only criteria of having a large family in the villages around the mines, especially in Megali Panagia (M.Panagia), with the obvious aim of manipulating public sentiment in favor of the company. Also they install in settlements newly-hired workers and security guards to enhance the population of supporters and reverse the negative atmosphere in local communities.

The media, for their part, are in direct correlation with the business interests in the region, and beyond the projection of the advertising campaign of the company, they specialize in the denigration of the resistance movement. Hush up the real dimensions of the struggle of the local community, the voices of those who speak about the environmental and social costs in the region, which appear to be disproportionate of any future benefits. The propaganda in favor of the extraction is based on "national need" for private investment and new jobs, promising to stimulate the economy in this period of general recession.

The local communities where not ignored by the media, are treated by government officials and the business capital as anachronistic and reactionary social groups which do not aspire to progress and the exit from the economic crisis. They should be set aside from the public sphere of politics and of their social rights as citizens of the Greek state.

Faced with the above situation, the residents of Chalkidiki are fighting in the defense of Article 24 of the Constitution that protects the forests, while defending the Greek Constitution. They prefix a conversation of relations and interdependence of their way of life in accordance with the laws of sustainability. They approach the concept of sustainability in a direction of austerity, not economic as dictated by international financial centers, but as respect towards nature.

The next chapter studies the indications that transform the local society and its social relationships that define and shape it.

INVESTIGATING THE REFERENCES OF THE LOCAL MOVEMENT IN SPATIAL AND SOCIAL GEOGRAPHY OF THE REGION.

HISTORICAL INFORMATION AND FORMS OF ORGANIZATION OF THE MOVEMENT

The starting point of the movement actions in the study area dates back to 2006 and is positioned in the village of M.Panagia. Initially, an event was held in the area against gold mining, entering into a new era with the entry of Eldorado Gold, which obtained the mines of TVX Hellas. The locals faced with the new situation, began to react and formed the "Struggle Committee of M.Panagia" by local residents, with the participation of members of the "Initiative Against Harmfulness" that had begun parallel actions to inform people of the region about the catastrophic investment that was preparing happen.

The starting points of local resistances have differences in time between the various settlements in the region. As has been said, in M. Panagia in 2006, where about the issue of mining the population of the village was informed with workshops, events and assemblies, the majority of the population started to overturn the support towards mining investment, and mining exploitation in general at the expense of the natural wealth of the region. Until then M.Panagia was a village where a lot of men became miners and movements at the mines did not exist. The fact that a former mining village became the front line of the movement was a milestone in its evolution. In 2009-2010 Ierissos joins the forehead of the struggle, where 'the Coordinating Committee of Stagira-Acanthos against gold mining' is instituted. In 2012, the movement was widened with the areas of N. Roda, Ouranoupoli and Ammouliani. Since then, it has grown in local communities and reaches its present form with the spatial peaks of activity the bigger settlements of Ierissos and M.Panagia.

Nowadays, the local movement gives a polymorphic struggle that has taken multiple forms across these years. The highly active local community highlights the needs and priorities for the intended socio-economic and environmental situation of territoriality in which it lives and acts.

The local movement through its actions, including manifestations and demonstrations in the territory of Chalkidiki and across the country, has managed to be at the center of the political debate. It has become a symbol of social struggles contesting the implicit, a positive concept of development in the era of neoliberal sovereignty, which they question realizing that this by the dominant side as so called-"development" is a process of 'primitive accumulation', i.e. a common rapture of natural and social resources that are integrated in the capital.

THE MULTI-SCALAR CHARACTER OF THE MOVEMENT

The local movement has been able to bring together around it a wide range of solidarity collectives, organizations and individuals, which transcends the borders of the country, intervening in public discourse more and more audible. The emphasis sought by the movement in extrovert action and intervention to a range of levels, reaches to build social relationships with corresponding movements that are resisting to large-scale development projects in an internationalized environment of resistance and struggle.

After the three days actions that they have conducted jointly with the local movement against large-scale waste management of Keratea in Greece, they have passed on a common day of action with the local movement of Rosia Montana in Romania, and organized a common Europe-wide action day with the movements of NoTav (North Italy) and ZAD (North France). In addition, representatives of the movement met in Comodoro Rivadavia in Argentina local committees against open pit mining. It is worth to be mentioned that the collectives of Argentina emphasized the fact that the actions of this kind of corporations are similar in every part of the world and only with grassroots international struggles can be defeated.

Also, the role of solidarity collectives and individuals is significant. In Thessaloniki, in Athens, but also in other parts of the country local solidarity initiatives are engaged in an effort to cancel in every way, the famous investment and publicize the fight against mining.

All these movements support the need to create needs of action and solidarity and, despite having a specific spatial reference, their requests are turning at all scales of decision making. Their claims and actions are focused on present circumstances of exclusion and inequality that they are experiencing in their daily movement in the area, because of the violent change of everyday life that is imposed on them by the state, with its brutal repression. In this everyday life they react and put forward new collective ways of social organizing. The forms that take these changes vary.

In the villages collective kitchens and self-organized concerts are organized. In Ierissos the residents stand on the barricades collectively, defending their village from the police. It is characteristic that this touristic town does not have a police station and administrative authorities. If any problem occurs, it is solved collectively by the competent committees of the movement.

TOWARDS A DIFFERENT FUTURE THROUGH THE NEW SOCIAL RELATIONS AND FORMS OF ACTION THAT EMERGE WITHIN THE LOCAL MOVEMENT

N.E. Chalkidiki (which is part of the peninsula of Chalkidiki) is the 3rd most popular destination in the entire Greek territory, therefore has significant tourist facilities as well as significant potential for attracting further tourist flows. But the challenge for the local society who resists is not the development of the tourism industry in the antipode of the mining industry. The predominantly tourist areas which gain minimal employment benefits from the mining process, joined the local movement between the years 2010-2012. From that moment there seem to exist indications of overall changes in development choices about the area. The above local communities have exercised criticism to the financial and operational surplus values that derive with the promotion of the tourism product of their region (which is located close to Mount Athos). What is certain is that now the inhabitants of these tourist areas perceive through their frequent presence at the processes of the movement the limits of tourism development, which themselves reinforce as well. Plus, in the popular assemblies counter proposals are heard, aimed at the consolidation of cooperative forms of work in the tourism industry in conjunction with the defense of their natural environment. However, the actions of the local movement are not limited to a speech through counterarguments against the mining investment. In the events and scientific meetings that are organized, proposals are presented that attempt to compose and make possible a collaboration of the local productive activities. They promote local agricultural products through tourism companies; establish anti-hierarchical cooperative agribusiness and crafts.

Furthermore, they organize ecotourism activities and also they promote the cultural and rural heritage of the area. They put forward a cooperative perception of their

everyday life and of employment relationships that define and shape it. So the changes that appear in social relationships between the inhabitants are these that will judge largely the limits of the movement.

These small steps of reconstruction of the area are a practical and substantial answer to the question what type of development they want. In addition, they argue through their grassroots assemblies that, regardless of the ownership status, the decision of initiatives / committees of the struggle is against any kind of mining activity on the mountain. Overall, they assert the declassification of N.E. Chalkidiki as "Mining Area", with gradual restoration of the existing mines and of the bald forest land.

Finally, the extensive mining activity appears to be a way to grab common resources, which are granted to private firms that on the one hand speculate on land and on the other hand exclude the real holders of the resources and of the area from any management option. Based on this logic, the local movement rejects the overall management of the abovementioned mineral resources even with a potential exploitation via a mining company under public control.

CONCLUSIONS

In the geographical area of Greece, the alliance of State - venture capital using the blackmail of unemployment, is trying to "fence" places that it considers counterproductive for its profitability in order to install large development projects. With the mask of green sustainable development and environmental restoration, capitalist production is trying to usurp material and social commodities, which remained free and available until recently, i.e. commons. *The land is an integral part of the "commons" and its grabbing for the conversion of a fictitious commodity from private individuals, church and state are timeless conflictive* (Hadjimichalis, 2013). Moreover, historically, capitalist production generally is known not to be interested in the production of use values, social goods etc. but in the production of gain.

The transformations of political and economic conditions in Greece which the local movement is facing, are summarized in the fact that *the special status of Memorandum that has been imposed from 2010 gives to the Greek territories an institutional specificity theoretically attractive to investments, which consists of systematic weakening of political independence, degradation of democracy and abolition of the constitutional order* (Hadjimichalis 2013). Before 2010, in the era of fictitious capitalist welfare, the dominant economic and political power was looting areas that they wanted to exploit and the inhabitants were thrown out in the name of "environmental protection and sustainability." Today, it does so in the name of 'development', by ignoring intertemporal the priorities and the needs of local communities. As it is mentioned by Carlos Taibo,

the need is added to maintain the right to judge whether the actions of public authorities are appropriate or not, when as a rule, huge financial corporations operate in the background by dictating, with the consent of those who govern us, the

majority of the rules of the game, according to the famous maxim 'privatizing benefits, socializing losses'.

This form of grabbing has a particular importance in the case of Chalkidiki. David Harvey, in his book named 'The Enigma of Capital: and the Crises of Capitalism', analyzes that this process of "primitive accumulation" continues until today, in a parallel and complementary way to the normal capitalist accumulation, that is based on the detachment of surplus value. The capital in other words can be widened not only producing but also incorporating during its cycle more and more material and social goods, which until then remained free and available, or said with one word, commons.

The usurpation of the commons does not seem to be so easy for the power, which they covet for its own exploitation and profit. That happens because for the struggling local community the commons are part of its life, memory, work and entertainment. For these reasons the local movement does not show willingness to cede to them and to accept the agreements of the Greek state to concede exploitation rights of the mineral resources to Hellas Gold Corporation.

The contrasts that unfold through this process of land grabbing that happens in the mountains of N.E.Chalkidiki reflect conflicts of land use, development operations and economic interests. Essentially, the spatial conflicts are conflicts about the management of natural resources. Natural resources, i.e. mountains, forests, waters and seas, that nowadays Hellas Gold wants to usurp, constitute a challenge for the local community, relating to the use that they can take and through what production process it is possible that these resources can be altered under exploitation.

This analysis has taken into account the dipole of heavy mining development with mild management of natural resources, but expects to exceed it at the base of material and social references of the movement in relation to these "common resources". The looting and destruction of common resources conforms with the inevitable environmental degradation and eventually to the dignity and life of the local community who resist. However, the social processes within the local movement and solidarity collectivities do not stop here. It is a social struggle that is going on and thus many issues are open and under claim. Finally, this research that happens in parallel time with these processes introduces issues of social relations and spatial practices which will be judged in the future by the local movement. The opposition to the "golden death" and the clear position that has the movement against the extractions of mineral resources in a global level (and not only in its region) gives to it significant opportunities to deepen its speech and extend its practice in an anti-development project. In environmental terms, it is obvious that the answer is easy and clear about none at all mineral extraction activity on the mountain. But with eventual blockage of this looting (i.e. permanent inhibition of mining activities), the movement will be found in front of difficulties regarding the management of the new situation that would be arising. Its future will then be judged by its ability to manage to inspire the local communities in a way of creating "community commons", i.e. spatialities and relationships based on new forms of communication and therefore on non-exploitative social relations.

In this context, the overcome of the claim for one spatial development based on the comparative advantages of each settlement, is crucial. This happens because the above logic includes forms of exploitation in economic relations among people, as well as violent spatial transformations in the geography of the area.

The preservation of natural resources and the deepening of social relations are more profound issues than the opposition to an extractive development model and pertain to the overcoming of the communication relationships between the active subjects within local and social movements.

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