

**From Coal-mining Settlement to the Wilderness: The Ethnography of Svalbard Archipelago**

*The town is changing, Store Norske is smaller and smaller part of Longyearbyen. Still big one, big player, but not The Company. Not the company the whole environment was circling around, as before.*

Store Norske Mining Company, 2016

Store Norske Spitsbergen Kulkompani (SNSK) – a Norwegian mining company on Svalbard used to be the main actor forming the life on the archipelago. Until approximately 1990's, Longyearbyen (the bigger of two Norwegian towns on Svalbard) was mainly mining settlement with very basic infrastructure, isolated in the middle of Barents Sea, half way between Northern Norway and the North Pole. Last decades tourism and scientific research slowly started to grow, the infrastructure changed, but the influence of mining was still quite significant. Nevertheless, in general, SNSK is getting weaker and weaker and especially last years it seems that their position in current form is not sustainable anymore. The company is scaling back its workforce (from about 400 in 2012 to about 100 today), the amount of produced coal is decreasing, and the money in equity dropped from nearly 1,3 billion Norwegian kroner last year, to 73 million kroner this year (IcePeople, 2016).

The situation of the former dominant actor is also raising quite a strong reactions on a political level, and it brings questions about future of life on the archipelago as well as concerns about the affection of the strength of Norway's presence on one of the country's most important strategic assets. The local press informs about revisions of governmental strategies on Svalbard:

*IcePeople, 2016b: The Norwegian government released its first white paper in 1990, stating the intension was up to update the document roughly every ten years. Parliament approved the last revision of the paper in 2009, but Justice Minister Anders Anundsen announced in early 2015 a hasty revision would be drafted a few years earlier than planned*

*due to a collapse in coal prices that left Store Norske in financial peril and unlikely to continue as Longyearbyen's cornerstone industry.*

SNSK is facing a question of how to keep their presence and influence on Svalbard. In order to do that, and to replace lost coal mining jobs, SNSK is – among other – making use of their possessions and creating some tourist attractions from what they have. Mine Nr.3 is one of the old, decommissioned mine close to Longyearbyen, the biggest town on Svalbard. Until this year, the mine was closed to the public, but this winter was the first season when the organized tours inside the mine has started .

*SNSK, 2016: So due to the falling mining activities we are looking to other ways of doing business. It is important to us to see what do we have and what can we do with it. We have the land in Longyearbyen and other parts of Svalbard as well which we are making use of. (...) And we have objects of cultural history, heritage – Mine Nr. 3 is one of them. (...) Especially in the first period of exploiting the possibility, or asset, we are cooperating with tourist agencies.*

The strategy to cooperate with tourist agencies and attempt to get into tourism business is not random, for at the same time that SNSK and coal mining is decreasing, the tourist industry is growing rapidly. Some sources talk about 60 % increase of overnight tourist stays from 2009 (IcePeople, 2016c; Palm, 2015). New companies providing guided tours are starting a business; the established ones are providing more trips for more visitors, buying new houses to have events in, etc. The Svalbard archipelago is changing and it is happening now. To use a quote from Bruno Latour, it is “in action” (Latour, 1987).

Though what is it that is so appealing for tourists to come to Svalbard? The Arctic, in general, is considered as one of the most fragile and most afflicted places on Earth. Svalbard Archipelago is – as part of the Arctic – one of those places and moreover, it is considered as last wilderness in Europe. “The wilderness” is what is possible to find in almost every advertisement, tourist agencies web pages, guide book or on postcards. It is actually hard not to find it. But what actually is “the wilderness”?

The aim of this research is to examine the process of transformation of Svalbard from a place that has been a center for mining to a place that is (considered as) a wilderness. However, the focus is not on the process of transformation itself, but on what is created in this process – that is, wilderness. How is wilderness socially and materially created? How does

this process include coal mining, one of the most environmentally damaging activity? What can it say about the specific discourse producing knowledge about nature?

The methodological-theoretical inspiration for my research is among other Actor-Network Theory. The current situation offers an opportunity to study the socio-material connection between coal, wilderness, and society in the process of creating social reality. As Latour points out, this should be the moment to study the phenomenon in order to see the whole scale of actors, collectivities, controversies and interpretations that all together co-create alliances and form (social) reality, knowledge, facts and/or artifacts (Latour, 1987). The products of knowledge are thus products of collective action, negotiation, conflicts and alliances of various actors-networks (ibid).

The actor-network is a complex range of actors, both human and non-human, that are active in a process of constructing social reality (Latour, 1999). One of the theoretical inspirations could be also a book *How Forests Think* by Eduard Kohn who „...seek to contribute to (...) posthuman critiques of the ways in which we have treated humans as exceptional—and thus as fundamentally separate from the rest of the world—by developing a more robust analytic for understanding human relations to non-human beings.” (Kohn, 2013: 7). From other relevant literature it is Klaud Eder providing an analysis of “nature” becoming a symbol of modernity and at the same time starting point of specific ecological discourse (Eder, 2005).

### **Research Methods and Field Site**

The research will take place on Svalbard Archipelago, mainly in its biggest town: Longyearbyen. The qualitative ethnography will be the main research method: participant observation and semi-structured interviews, complemented with document analysis and possibly visual data analysis.

In order to detailed description with emphasis on diversity, and in order to avoid selectivity in the research, my aim is to include all actors who had an irreplaceable role in the studied phenomenon (see Stake, 2005: 443). The actors are then following:

- **Sysselmanen (The Governor of Svalbard)**
  - o The Norwegian Government’s highest ranking representative on Svalbard. Their task is to maintain law and order and to manage Svalbard according to laws and regulations for the archipelago.
- **Norwegian Ministry of Environmental Protection**

- Regulating the coal mining activities on Svalbard
- **Norwegian Ministry of Justice**
  - Outlining the Norwegian's policy goals for the archipelago (later ratified by Parliament)
- **Lokalstyre (Municipality)**
  - Municipality functions; operates power plant (based on coal), discussing other sources of energy etc.
- **Store Norske Spitsbergen Kulkompani (mining company)**
- **Tourist Companies**
- **Arctic Nature Guide education (ANG) / Spitsbergen Guide course (SG)**
  - Guiding education (ANG, SG) is an important part of the growing tourism –
    - Part of guiding education
      - “don't cause erosion” (biological course)
      - Storytelling: trappers, nature, cultural heritage
- **Non-human actors**
  - if relevant (and that should not, in the ideal case, be a decision of sociologist)
- **UNIS (University Centre, scientists)**
  - If it shows as an important actor; participant observation if possible? Visual documentation as a source of data?

The semi-structured interviews will include all mentioned actors. The participant observation will include guiding (with myself working as a guide in few tourist companies, i.e. guiding hiking, kayaking, snow scooter and other trips to nature around). At this point, I will have to deal with an ethics of such research practice. I will also observe the space and its materiality since such data might bring interesting insights into how is the wilderness visualized in space, on buildings or in streets. Therefore, I will consider visual documentation as a source of data (e.g. advertisements – pictures and videos, brochures, souvenirs etc.).

The document analysis will include laws and regulations concerning Svalbard, guidelines and web pages of tourist companies, curriculums of guiding courses and media reports (both inter/national and local press).

The analysis will be based on a careful combination of both theoretical and methodological operations during which I will focus on keeping the connection between theories and empirical data (Ragin and Becker, 1992: 221). For this purpose, I will use the scientific software for qualitative analysis Atlas.ti. This software enables to analyze all the

interviews, documents, and academic texts, to find repeating patterns and the links between them. It also enables to structure the whole analysis in a way that it neatly follows the topics and questions arising in the interviews. Interpretations growing out of such method are thus based on data sources and grounded in theories and the selectivity is minimalized.

### **Ethics**

This research will be conducted according to the European Commission's Ethics for Researchers (European Commission, 2013). Identities of all social actors, informants and communication partners of this project will be anonymised unless there will be explicit and informed consent of the actors involved.

### **Relevance of the project**

In an atmosphere of endless information and discussion about climate change, the consequences of human action on environments, discussions about future strategies on the political (trans/national and local) level, the outcome of this research might help to understand the process of social construction of nature. As Caroline Watertone notes in her analysis of European botanical classification system: "...taking a look at what contemporary 'European' classifications of nature are like, how they are made, translated and adapted in specific contexts helps us reflect not only on their lack of stability and the ways in which they change and interact but also gives us some insights into the ways in which Europe itself is in practice being allowed to unfold" (Waterton, 2002: 198).

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