Polar Record

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Phasing out coal on Svalbard: From a conflict of interest to a contest over symbolic capital

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Research Article

Cite this article: Vold Hansen T. Phasing out coal on Svalbard: From a conflict of interest to a contest over symbolic capital. *Polar Record* **60**(e8): 1–10. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0032247424000020

Received: 3 July 2023
Revised: 5 January 2024
Accepted: 11 January 2024

Keywords:
Svalbard; energy transition; power; symbolic capital; Longyearbyen

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Abstract

In 2021, the decision to close the last Norwegian coal mine on Svalbard was made, and with that, the Norwegian coal adventure on the archipelago came to an end. This was a result of a political process, which is the focus of this article. Drawing on fieldwork conducted during the fall of 2022, I argue that the political process of phasing out coal changed from a conflict over interests to a contest over symbolic capital. The article contributes to the understanding of Norwegian Svalbard politics and the "balancing act" that this represents. I focus on how power, in the form of shaping people's perceptions and as prestige, influenced what interests prevail and why. The article addresses (1) why the decision to phase out coal was not made earlier, (2) what ultimately made this decision possible and (3) why and over what the key actors were still competing after the decision to phase out coal was made.

Introduction

In January 2021, the Norwegian government's decision to phase out coal energy in Longyearbyen was made public (The Ministry of Petroleum and Energy, 2021). Not long afterward, the Longyearbyen Community Council (Longyearbyen lokalstyre, hereafter the Community Council) decided to liquidate the coal purchasing agreement with the coal company Store Norske Spitsbergen Kulkompani AS (hereafter Store Norske) in September 2023. In the local newspaper's interpretation, they "decreed the death of coal energy" (Bårdseth, 2021). Store Norske's immediate response was that because the basis for production was gone, the coal adventure on Svalbard had received its closing date (Haram, 2021).

Phasing out coal on Svalbard is not just *one* process but concerns the end of coal as a source of energy and coal production for export purposes. Whereas some analysts and politicians believe that the two decisions do not necessarily depend on each other, I argue that many of the same external factors and aspects of power helped phase out coal production and coal energy. I focus on how power, in the form of shaping people's perceptions and as prestige, influenced what interests prevail and why.

The article contributes to our understanding of Norwegian Svalbard politics and the "balancing act" that this at times represent (Hovelsrud et al., 2020, p. 425). It addresses (1) why the decision to phase out coal was not made earlier, (2) what made it possible to make this decision in the end and (3) why and over what the key actors were still competing after the decision to phase out coal was made. To provide context, the article begins with an outline of the history and role of Norwegian coal production on Svalbard. I then introduce the concepts of interest and power, followed by the study's methodology and research design. Last, I present my analysis of how the political process of phasing out coal shifted from a conflict of interests to a contest over symbolic capital.

The role of Norwegian coal production on Svalbard

Halfway between Norway and the North Pole lies the archipelago of Svalbard. Although it was discovered in 1596, the islands were to maintain the status as a "terra nullius" – a no man's land in terms of international law – for centuries (Jensen, 2020, p. 83). This was to change with the turn of the 20th century, as prospecting coal mining expeditions initiated "the coal rush on Svalbard" (Arlov, 2019, pp. 243–247). With several countries displaying their interest in the coal resources, the question of sovereignty was actualised (Arlov, 2019, p. 279). Despite several attempts to settle Svalbard's status at the beginning of the century, it was only in the aftermath of World War I that an agreement was reached. The changed power dynamics of the war had consequences for the Svalbard issue, as had Norway's role as a "neutral ally" (Arlov, 2019, pp. 293–294).

The result was the Treaty Concerning the Archipelago of Spitsbergen of 1920 (the Svalbard Treaty), in which Norway's "full and absolute" sovereignty over Svalbard was recognised (article 1). The Treaty also granted the nationals to the contracting parties rights to fish, hunt and conduct commercial operations "on a footing of absolute equality" (article 3). While Svalbard undeniably is a part of the kingdom of Norway, all nationals to the Treaty parties thus have equal rights to conduct

the activities specified in the Treaty, under Norwegian rules and regulations. The Treaty further obliges Norway to apply measures to ensure the preservation of the fauna and flora (article 2; Jensen, 2020, p. 88). It also sets out limitations on tax regulation and certain kinds of military activity (articles 8 and 9).

One of the initial rationales for establishing an administrative arrangement such as the Treaty was to clarify the legal conditions for the mining industry (Arlov, 2019, pp. 272–273). The First World War, however, had made coal mining on Svalbard difficult and expensive, leading most companies to abandon their activities. This "void" was effectively filled with new Norwegian companies, most importantly Store Norske, which was established in 1916 and bought the mine in Longyearbyen the same year (Arlov, 2022, p. 33). Store Norske's economy was however ruined shortly after the Svalbard Treaty was signed, when a severe accident led to the shutdown of the productive mine at the time. Intent on "making Svalbard as Norwegian as possible" despite the Treaty's somewhat disappointing result, the Norwegian government subsidised the coal company to ensure Norwegian economic activity on the archipelago (Arlov, 2022, pp. 43–44). This made Store Norske an effective instrument for Norwegian authorities to improve their position on Svalbard before the Treaty went into force in 1925 (Arlov, 2022, pp. 43–44). As the coal company continued to struggle economically, the Norwegian government decided to make it a fully state-owned company during the 1970s (Meld. St. 32 (2015–2016), p. 90).

The 1970s also represented a break with the "company town" model, and Longyearbyen gradually became more similar to the communities on the Norwegian mainland (Arlov, 2019, p. 377). The diversification of the economy in Longyearbyen was initiated, and by the 1990s, the government sought to make research and tourism economic pillars next to the coal industry. In 2002, the Community Council was established. It was based on the principles of the mainland municipality, with a democratically chosen leadership and similar responsibilities. Unlike the mainland municipalities, however, the Community Council also had responsibility for energy supply.

Since the mid-1980s, the Norwegian government (Meld. St. 32 (2015–2016), p. 5) has presented the same overriding objectives for the Svalbard policy: consistent and firm enforcement of sovereignty, proper observance to the Svalbard Treaty and control to ensure compliance with the Treaty, maintenance of peace and stability in the area, preservation of the area's distinctive natural wilderness and maintenance of Norwegian communities in the archipelago. Despite the developments from the 1970s onward, the coal mining company remained the keystone in the Longyearbyen community and in Norwegian activity on Svalbard throughout the century. It provided year-round, Norwegian jobs and energy, which were prerequisites for a stable community and for Norwegian presence, in line with the government's Svalbard policy objectives.

Even though Store Norske experienced a brief heyday during the 2000s, the coal prices soon declined again. In 2016, two out of three mines were put to operational rest, and the following year, it was decided that they would be shut down permanently (Ministry of Trade, Industry and Fisheries, 2017). Only one active mine was left: Mine 7. The purpose of this mine was primarily to supply Longyearbyen with energy (Meld. St. 6 (2022–2023), pp. 62–63; Store Norske, 2022, p. 5). When the Community Council decided to liquidate the coal purchasing agreement and pursue new energy solutions, the company lost its purpose for maintaining production in Mine 7. With Russia's war in Ukraine, coal prices rose again, and Store Norske therefore decided to produce for commercial purposes for two more years. Afterward however, the Norwegian coal era on Svalbard would come to its end. Beginning in September 2023, coal energy in Longyearbyen would be replaced with energy from diesel generators, which used to be the backup solution whenever an issue arose with the coal power plant. However, no long-term, renewable energy solution has been decided on.

Recent and ongoing research has highlighted the geopolitical aspect of coal production on Svalbard. Coal has been placed in the overall narrative of the history of Svalbard as a history of exploitation of natural resources, and the mining activity has been seen as a means for Norway to ensure its sovereignty (Arlov, 2022; Avango et al., 2011, p. 30; Berg, 2012, p. 183; Grydehøj, 2019, p. 270). The shift from a mining-based economy to one based on research, education and tourism caused changes in the population, because the latter was more international in nature (Sokolickova et al., 2022, p. 7). Some scholars have pointed out that this can challenge Svalbard's "Nowegianness" and ultimately fuel misperceptions about its legal status as subjected to Norwegian sovereignty (Hovelsrud et al., 2023, p. 100; Pedersen, 2017, p. 105). Others, however, argue that closing the mines shows that Norway is taking environmental responsibility and that this represents a new way to show national presence (Ødegaard, 2022, pp. 11–12)

In addition, the various ways coal mining has influenced culture and politics have been highlighted (Steinholt & Rogatchevski, 2022, p. 1). For instance, the dismantling and "turning back to nature" of the Svea mine have been described as a "turning point for narratives about Svalbard's transition from a mining community to a showcase for the future" and are part of the Norwegian government's official environmentalist narrative about Svalbard as "a site for innovative environmentalist initiatives and solutions" (Ødegaard, 2022, pp. 2–9). Local perceptions of and adaptation to the socioeconomic change of phasing out coal have also been emphasised (Hovelsrud et al., 2020; Olsen et al., 2022; Sokolickova et al., 2022). Furthermore, it has been recognised that the transition represents a "balancing act" for the Norwegian government because it must navigate several and sometimes conflicting priorities (Hovelsrud et al., 2020, p. 425). Indeed, the closing of the mines reveals various conflict lines in the government and between the government and local actors (Ødegaard, 2022, p. 11). With this article, I contribute to the understanding of this current change by exploring the political process of phasing out coal on Svalbard and relating it to how power, in the form of shaping people's perceptions and as prestige, influenced what interests prevail and why.

Gaining a better understanding of the political processes of Norwegian Svalbard politics and the interplay between interests is important for several reasons. The processes of Svalbard politics are increasingly complex, spanning more topics and actors than before. For the stakeholders directly and indirectly involved – on Svalbard, on the mainland and internationally – the study helps navigate this landscape. Meyer (2022, p. 11) in particular emphasised the need to follow Longyearbyen on its envisioned green transition from a social-science point of view.

Svalbard and Longyearbyen differ from other Arctic communities in several ways. It has no Indigenous population but a large number of international citizens. The infrastructure is well developed, and the economy is diverse. The Svalbard Treaty is a unique international agreement. As Kaltenborn et al. (2020, p. 27) noted, however, Svalbard nevertheless "epitomizes pan-Arctic challenges in a nutshell". Most remote Arctic communities rely on fossil fuels as their primary energy source. To address challenges of climate change and energy security, a shift to renewable energy is

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0032247424000020 Published online by Cambridge University Press

necessary. The insights provided in this article are therefore relevant for understanding future processes of energy transition in the Arctic.

The concepts of interests and power

Processes of energy transition are generally associated with the need to address climate change, in which Svalbard is on the front line (Carley & Konisky, 2020, p. 569; Meyer, 2022, p. 1; Sokolickova, 2022, p. 1). Without attention to how various aspects of power play out in the political process of the energy transition, tensions are likely to occur, and it will be more difficult to succeed (Finley-Brook & Holloman, 2016, p. 1). Drawing on the perspectives of Lukes (2021, 2015) and Bourdieu (1985, 1996, 1998a, 1998b, 1999; Bourdieu & Waquant, 1992; Bourdieu & Waquant, 2013), this article directs attention to power in the form of shaping people's perceptions and as symbolic capital. These perspectives are particularly relevant because they relate the notion of interest to that of power. They also help highlight the less individualistic and conscious aspects of conflict and power.

"Why is the word interest to a certain point interesting?" Bourdieu (1998c, p. 75) once asked. The short answer is that the notion of interest reminds us that something is at stake (Bourdieu, 1998c, p. 75). Likewise, Lukes (2015, p. 269) found the concept of interest valuable because "it indicates *what matters*". Lukes (2021, pp. 42–43) explicitly theorised his concept of interest in relation to that of power in his famous works of the three dimensions of power. In brief, the first dimension of power pertains to specific outcomes of decision-making processes to determine who and what interests prevail (Lukes, 2021, p. 22). This perspective on power, however, "cannot reveal the less visible ways in which a pluralist system may be biased in favour of certain groups and against others" (Lukes, 2021, p. 44). This is the key point of the second dimension of power, because it directs the attention to the barriers that persons or groups can create or reinforce to the public airing of policy issues (Lukes, 2021, p. 25). The second dimension of power involves a focus on non-decisions, that is, decisions that keep issues off the decision-making agenda (Lukes, 2021, p. 27).

Lukes (2021, p. 30), however, argued that this perspective is too narrow still, because it ties the concept of power to individual decisions, although "the bias of the system can be mobilized, recreated and reinforced in ways that are neither consciously chosen nor the intended result of particular individuals' choices". Power can be exercised in more mundane ways, Lukes (2021, p. 32) asserted. The third dimension of power therefore concerns the "shaping of agents' desires and beliefs by factors external to those agents" (Lukes, 2021, p. 139). Through, for instance, socialisation processes, people can be led to believe that there are no alternatives to the status quo (Lukes, 2021, pp. 32–33). The third dimension is often in play at the same time as the former two. Lukes (2021, pp. 45–52) presented Crenson's work on the study of air pollution in the U.S. city Gary as an example. Here, the issue of air pollution was kept off the agenda because of the position that the steel industry held in the community, Lukes (2021, pp. 50–52) explained. Whereas the second dimension of power captures how the issue was made a matter of nondecision-making, one need the third dimension to consider that this was not based on individual, conscious decisions (Lukes, 2021, p. 52).

Recognising that power may involve shaping people's perceptions, the analysis can be further advanced by including Bourdieu's (1985, 1996, 1998c) concept of symbolic capital. "Symbolic capital" refers precisely to the power to construct reality, or more accurately to get others to believe in a certain world view (Bourdieu, 1996, pp. 40–45). More commonly, this form of capital is known as prestige, reputation, renown, authority, honour and so on (Bourdieu, 1985, p. 724; Bourdieu, 1998c, p. 47; Bourdieu & Waquant, 2013, p. 297). Symbolic capital is a kind of social authority accumulated and won through history and previous struggles (Bourdieu, 1989, p. 23; Bourdieu, 1999, p. 337). The state is a "bank of symbolic capital" that may distribute authority to other actors (Bourdieu, 1998c, p. 51). This bureaucratises, organises and hierarchises the symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1998c, pp. 47–51). A judiciary body and public ministry is established (Bourdieu, 1998c, p. 49).

This "symbolic order" may, however, be subjected to political struggles in which different visions of the social world and its social order clash (Bourdieu, 1985, p. 729; Bourdieu, 1998a, pp. 55–57; Bourdieu, 1999, p. 337). "In fact," Bourdieu (1989, p. 22, original italics) stated, "*there are always, in any society, conflicts between symbolic powers that aim at imposing the vision of legitimate divisions*". In such struggles, what gives symbolic capital, or rather the exchange rate between various species of capital and prestige, may change (Bourdieu, 1998b, p. 34; Bourdieu & Waquant, 1992, p. 99). Actors may work to transform this exchange rate to discredit the form of capital their opponents rely on in favour of what they possess (Bourdieu, 1998b, p. 34; Bourdieu & Waquant, 1992, p. 99). This means that what once counted as prestigious may not do so in the future. The insights Bourdieu provided with his concept of symbolic capital may therefore contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how power in the form of shaping people's perceptions works.

Methodology and research design

This article draws on a qualitative, interpretive multiple-case study in which the general research question was "What interests prevail in Norwegian Svalbard politics and why?" The interpretive approach here means that the theoretical concepts are used as analytical tools (see Reed, 2011). The political process of phasing out coal represented one of the cases in the study. The case study design was considered especially relevant because it could offer an extensive description and explanation of a contemporary social phenomena (Yin, 2018, p. 4).

The study was informed by short-term, multi-site fieldwork conducted during the fall of 2022. The conventional ideal in ethnographic research is single-sited, long-term fieldwork (Fleming & Rhodes, 2023, p. 53; Hannerz, 2003, p. 202; Marcus, 1995, p. 96). The object of this study was political processes, however, which implies that the object of study was not located at one site. To follow a policy process and its actors is what Rhodes (2018, p. 11; 2017, p. 48) refers to as "study through" and resembles Marcus's (1995, pp. 106–110) strategies for multi-sited ethnographies. A multi-site ethnographic research design enables tracking policy processes "beyond the geographical and organizational boundaries" (Lo, 2021, p. 30).

Following the political processes of phasing out coal led me to several sites: Longyearbyen (Svalbard), Tromsø, Trondheim and Oslo (the Norwegian mainland). I visited Svalbard three times during the project period, one of which was a full month stay. The keys to a high-quality short-term ethnography are familiarity with the culture and language, a clear and specific research question, and a proactive approach (Bernard, 2006, pp. 349–353; Brett et al., 2022, pp. 369–370; Knoblauch, 2005, pp. 1–2; Lo, 2021, p. 35; Pink & Morgan, 2013, p. 355). Growing up in Norway and being involved with Norwegian politics meant that I was familiar with

the culture and language in the field. “Being there” helped me achieve a better understanding not only of the local actors and their perspectives but also of how the national policy actions played out on the local stage (Baiocchi & Connor, 2008, p. 141). Following the process made it possible to talk to and often visit the offices of key actors in the political process at the local and national levels. This effectively helped disaggregate the organisations and open the black box of government (Rhodes, 2017, pp. 59–67).

Overall, the fieldwork approach in this study corresponds to Gusterson’s (1997, p. 116) description of contemporary ethnography as “polymorphous engagements”: interacting with interviewees across several sites and collecting data form various sources, including observation, interviews, reading newspapers and official documents. In total, 36 semi-structural interviews were conducted with interviewees who in various ways had been involved in the political process of phasing out coal. This included representatives from the Community Council, the Norwegian government and Store Norske as well as other Longyearbyen residents with weaker political ties to the process. The aim of conducting interviews was to collect information about how the various actors had contributed to and perceived the process. Informal conversations were conducted with persons identified as potential interviewees who did not want to participate in a formal interview but agreed to talk “off the record”. The information gathered in informal conversations contributed to my understanding of the overall picture and made me more aware of the diverging views that existed. The formal interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, but only written notes were taken during the informal conversations.

I read relevant government documents and newspaper articles throughout the research period. They helped me reconstruct the chronology of the political process, provided important background information and helped me identify potential interviewees. The latest Svalbard white paper (Meld. St. 32 (2015–2016)), the white paper on ownership policy (Meld. St. 6 (2022–2023)) and the press release initiating the political process of closing of the last Norwegian coal mine (The Ministry of Petroleum and Energy, 2021) received special attention. In addition, some of the Store Norske annual reports were consulted.

Observations were conducted to add “depth and richness to the account obtained via interviews and other public sources” (Boswell et al., 2019, p. 84). They also proved to be a useful source of information to include and probe with in interviews. The observations helped me ask sensible questions and made me better able to understand the interviewees accounts of events (Bernard, 2006, p. 355; Lo, 2021, pp. 35–36; Tope et al., 2005, p. 481). As Lo (2021, p. 32) stated, observation may entail “a great deal of ‘hanging around,’ engaging in informal conversation with people … listening in on conversations and anecdotes and participating in informal meetings”. Although this was true for parts of the fieldwork, more specific observations were also conducted, which included attendance at several meetings in the Community Council body. Of particular relevance for this article was a Community Council committee meeting during which Store Norske presented their efforts to transform into an energy company.

A handwritten research diary was kept throughout the project period, including in the fieldwork period (this part of the research diary is referred to as the field diary). The field diary contained a mix of descriptive, methodological, analytic, log and diary notes. Here, I recorded everything from events and immediate impressions, notes on how I dealt with data collection techniques, brief and reflective bits of analytic writing, more elaborate reflections, accounts of what was done and emotional experiences (Bernard, 2006, pp. 391–397; Boswell et al., 2019, p. 80; Emerson et al., 2011, p. 20; pp. 80–81; p. 123;). The fieldnotes contributed to situate the study within a larger context, guide the study further, enhanced the analysis and reflexivity and helped me deal with the hardships of fieldwork and keep track of what I had been doing during fieldwork (Bernard, 2006, pp. 391–392; Boswell et al., 2019, pp. 77–80; Emerson et al., 2011, pp. 1–17; Lo, 2021, p. 35; Phillipi & Lauderdale, 2018, pp. 381–383).

The analytic framework that was used was thematic analysis, leaning on the works of Braun and Clarke (2006, 2016, 2019, 2021a, 2021b, 2022). Thematic analysis can be described as “a method for developing, analysing and interpreting patterns across a qualitative dataset” (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 4). Braun and Clarke (2022, pp. 35–36) outlined thematic analysis as a six-phase process, which includes (1) familiarising oneself with the data; (2) coding; (3) generating initial themes; (4) developing and reviewing themes; (5) refining, defining and naming themes; and (6) writing up. In practice, I applied this framework by

1) transcribing, keeping a research diary and writing in-process memos;
2) carefully reading through the data, stopping whenever something interesting or potentially relevant was spotted, and tagging this part of the data with a code label; going through the codes to see if some of them were too broad or too narrow; dividing, merging, making new and deleting codes accordingly; and reading through and coding the data material in a different order;
3) arranging and rearranging the codes in PowerPoint and writing out the line of argumentation of provision themes to determine whether they allowed for a coherent and meaningful story to be told about the dataset;
4) considering whether the candidate themes had an identifiable central organising concept, rich and diverse data and conveyed something important;
5) writing theme definitions; and;
6) writing this article.

The software program NVivo was used as a tool to facilitate the analysis, which proved useful to organise the large amount of data. I would, however, like to emphasise that NVivo is nothing more than a tool, because “the *analytic process* is still taking place in the mind” and that “analytic rigor comes from knowing the foundations of qualitative research, not from the touch of a few buttons in a program” (Evers, 2018, p. 65; Gibson, as cited in Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 69). The analysis is presented in the following sections. The material is organised chronologically to emphasise the nature of the political process as a study object.

The conflicting interests of phasing out coal

The political process of phasing out coal began as a conflict among environmental, economic and energy security interests on the one side and the industry, its workers and the related geopolitical interests of the government of maintaining presence on the other. It was a conflict of interests in the classic sense, in which contradictory interests clashed. In a climate perspective, coal is considered the worst of the fossil fuels because it is the single largest source of global temperature increase. As several interviewees noted, coal mining in what is supposed to be Norway’s best managed wilderness was often thought of as a climate paradox.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0032247424000020 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Therefore, and as a government representative stated, "Isolated, phasing out coal has always been an environmental issue". Several government representatives recalled that the debate about coal as an environmental issue had been going on for more than two decades in the Storting (the Norwegian parliament) and the ministries.

In addition to the environmental considerations, there were economic and energy security rationales for phasing out coal. In the latest Svalbard white paper (Meld. St. 32 (2015–2016), pp. 46–47), the government recognised that the coal power plant was near its maximum capacity and that the Community Council was facing severe challenges in maintaining the energy infrastructure. The interviewed Community Council leadership was painfully aware of this and highlighted issues such as lack of technical expertise, difficulty in obtaining parts and incidents regarding the related infrastructure. The state of the power plant meant that the existing energy solution could not provide heat and electricity reliably and that running the coal power plant was very expensive. In the latest Svalbard white paper (Meld. St. 32 (2015–2016), p. 46), the government explicitly pointed out that supplying Longyearbyen with energy was one of the Community Council's most expensive tasks. This was confirmed in interviews with the local politicians.

Similar to producing coal energy, the production of coal was an expensive business. With only a few exceptions, coal production had been an unprofitable activity (Arlov, 2019, p. 346). One of these glimpses of profitability emerged in the 2000s, the so-called heyday. In 2001, the Svea Nord mine was opened, and in 2014, Lunckefjell Mine followed. During this period, Store Norske and the mining industry played a significant role in sustaining the community. The interviewed Store Norske workers described their jobs as solid and safe as well as integral to maintaining the family community. "We have been the stability in the community", one of them stated, "People stayed, and people thrived, and we had good working conditions here. It is a stable and good workplace". The coal mining industry contributed with stable, Norwegian jobs. This made Store Norske an important geopolitical instrument in securing the Norwegian government's objective of maintaining Norwegian communities on the archipelago.

The importance of Store Norske and the coal industry may explain why the environmental awareness concerning coal was rather low in Longyearbyen at this time. "If you went down Karl Johan [the high street in the Norwegian capital, Oslo] and asked if it should still be coal mining on Svalbard, people would probably say no in 2011. But on Svalbard, the support was huge", one of the Community Council politicians said. He believed that because Store Norske was a corner stone of the Longyearbyen community, people were socialised to support coal mining. Following Lukes (2021, p. 32), this socialisation process may be interpreted as an expression of the third dimension of power. Through this process, the issue of phasing out coal was in effect kept as a matter of nondecision-making in the local political arena. The case of not phasing out coal in Longyearbyen bears a striking resemblance to Crenson's (1971, cited in Lukes, 2021, pp. 49–58) case of not raising the issue of air pollution in the steel producing town of Gary. As in Crenson's case, the industry's reputation made it difficult for the environmental issue to flourish (Crenson, 1971, cited in Lukes, 2021, p. 51).

For the Norwegian government, coal production on Svalbard represented a true "balancing act" among environmental, economic and geopolitical interests (Hovelsrud et al., 2020, p. 425). One government representative recalled that as a youth politician, he had argued for phasing out coal because of environmental considerations but stated that he was voted down partly because "arguments of sovereignty were made". Although the government recognised the negative environmental effect of the coal production, they saw it as integral to maintaining the community. As one government representative stated: "That you are doing something that is hostile to the environment in such an area … you can to some extent defend based on an assessment that you want a strong Norwegian presence and a population presence in Longyearbyen". Therefore, although the government was well aware of the climate impact and the infrastructure and economic challenges of producing and using coal, they saw no alternative that could adequately provide for the community and the related geopolitical aims. This means that the third dimension of power was at work because the issue of phasing out coal was kept as a matter of nondecision-making also in the national political arena.

Store Norske has for the last 100 years been the pillar of the Longyearbyen community and in Norwegian Svalbard politics. Their world view has certainly been influential in the Longyearbyen community but also in Norwegian politics. Store Norske's accumulated symbolic capital can help explain why the interests in favour of phasing out coal were played down locally and in the national government. This helps explain why the Norwegian government or local community did not previously emphasise the financial and environmental issues of coal production.

Settling the conflict of interests

In 2021, the Norwegian government, the Longyearbyen Community Council and Store Norske agreed on phasing out coal. I highlight several external factors in the 2010s that help explain how this was possible. First, coal mining lost much of its importance in sustaining the community and, by extension, as a geopolitical instrument. During Store Norske's heyday, rotation practice changes made it possible to hire workers who commuted to and from the mainland instead of Longyearbyen residents. In hindsight, many viewed this as a challenge to the coal activity's legitimacy. "You could have rotations that made it possible to commute to the mainland, which of course destroys some of the justification for the coal mining", one government representative said. "It was a big blunder in the long run if you wanted to legitimise Store Norske as a key player in Longyearbyen", a Community Council politician echoed in another interview.

At the same time, Longyearbyen's economy became increasingly diversified. As one Community Council politician stated, "Often, one points to the miners being responsible for the family community up here, but very many families work in the tourist industry, too". With these changes, the basis for the coal industry as a geopolitical instrument was altered too. Coal activity no longer represented a "credible presence", as a Community Council politician expressed. This idea was repeated in an interview with a government representative: "We do of course wish to have activity on Svalbard, but it should have a justification on its own".

Second, the economic framework for coal production changed. With the financial crisis in 2008, the coal market imploded, and the persistently low coal prices put Store Norske in a tough situation. This development led to operational rest and eventually the shutdown of the Svea and Lunckefjell mines. Unlike with these mines, the purpose of Mine 7 never was to be profitable but to ensure a "stable production of coal for the coal-fired power station in

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0032247424000020 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Longyearbyen" (Meld. St. 6 (2022–2023), pp. 62–63). The mine did nevertheless export a substantial portion of its production for industrial purposes. With Russia's war against Ukraine, the rise in prices made this export extremely profitable.

In light of this, the production in Mine 7 was prolonged for two years, effectively breaking the linkages between Mine 7 and the coal power plant in Longyearbyen. The activity was to go on even though the purpose was no longer to provide the community with energy resources. In principle, therefore, one could imagine continued production in Mine 7 for commercial purposes only. In the long run, however, this would not be a viable option for Store Norske. As the company leadership remarked, "Dealing with coal is a large constraint in finding collaboration partners and capital". To shut down Mine 7 would remove the stain of being associated with the resource considered the worst of the fossil fuels. The leadership therefore considered the closure a company decision and, from an economic long-term perspective, a no-brainer.

Third, the environmental issue had been increasingly emphasised. As one interviewee put it, "It has changed so much. Before, it was not this environmental hysteria". Some pointed to the discourse of "the green shift" as integral to the political campaign to phase out coal. Others had noted that the media had given Svalbard increasing attention regarding the climate change and the melting Arctic. As the environment issues became more important, the reputation of coal became increasingly worse. One of the Community Council politicians stated that "For every year that passed, it was less popular politically speaking to continue coal mining on Svalbard". This was a challenge for the Norwegian government on the international arena. Simply put, "When Norway has this high climate banner, the optics of doing coal mining does not look good".

In Longyearbyen, the idea of phasing out coal for environmental reasons also seemed to have gained more support. One contributing reason may have been the establishment of The Green Party Svalbard (Miljøpartiet De Grønne Svalbard). This may be interpreted as a concrete expression of the growing climate awareness in Longyearbyen. At the same time, climate change was increasingly visible in Longyearbyen. The 2015 snow avalanche that took two lives helped promote the climate issue on the agenda locally. "These drastic things, I believe, changed something in people's minds", one interviewee stated. "After some time, it was not only the most eager environmentalist that spoke about phasing out coal, but also regular people and local authorities and the community as a whole".

Last, the coal power plant was only growing older and more worn out. The costs of running the facility were increasing, while the energy's reliability was decreasing. This led the local politicians to initiate discussions on energy transition in Longyearbyen, and the government to investigate possible energy solutions (innst. 88S (2016–2017), p. 4).

Combined, all these changes can be seen as external factors that shaped the desires and beliefs of the local politicians, the leadership in Store Norske and the Norwegian government. Again, this can be viewed as an expression of the third dimension of power. In effect, barriers to the decision to phase out coal disappeared.

This does not mean, however, that nobody opposed the decision. Particularly the miners, but also other residents of the Longyearbyen community, argued that phasing out coal could harm the local community, Norwegian sovereignty, energy security and even the environment.

Despite the changed rotation practices and the diversified economy of Longyearbyen, the miners naturally feared for their jobs and were joined by many locals who worried that the Longyearbyen community's stability would be at risk. "It used to be stable jobs and people living here for years with their families", one local resident said. "Now they are gradually disappearing". Although the basis for the coal industry as a geopolitical instrument had changed, too, an often-heard argument against the decision to phase out coal was that it would weaken Norway's position on Svalbard. This was because Store Norske's mining claims would be up for grabs, one miner explained: "Without credible mining activity, these areas can be claimed by the Russians".

Arguments were made against the transitional diesel solution as well. "I don't trust that solution", one miner stated, "I have actually bought a gas burner for myself so that I know that I don't freeze to death". It would not even help the environment much, because "Svalbard coal is the cleanest in the world" and "transporting diesel all the way up here will leave to equally high CO2 emissions", some miners and other locals claimed.

It is safe to say that the closing of the mine touched a nerve in the Longyearbyen community. "Phasing out coal is something that has to do with identity. What is Longyearbyen supposed to be now?" a Longyearbyen resident explained. "What is the Karlsberger pub if there are no miners there anymore? What is Longyearbyen without them?" There were still some people in Longyearbyen who dreamt of a new Mine 8. The majority of the local politicians, however, argued that "You can't avoid initiating a necessary transition because of nostalgia". Likewise, the Store Norske leadership stated that "Of course our history will always be based on coal mining, but our future will not". A decision had been made. The government, the Community Council and Store Norske were all headed towards transitioning. Even though there still were critical voices locally, this meant that as a conflict of interest, the issue of phasing out coal was settled.

Phasing out coal as a contest over symbolic capital

From the consensus to phase out coal, however, a new conflict grew. Following the decision to phase out coal, the Community Council, Store Norske and The University Centre in Svalbard were trying to establish cooperation to test renewable energy solutions. The idea was that this would not only provide an energy solution to Longyearbyen but also that Longyearbyen could be used "as a showcase for Arctic renewable energy solutions". If Longyearbyen managed to demonstrate how more sustainable energy systems could be applied, this knowledge and infrastructure could potentially be exported to the over 1500 off-grid, fossil-fuelled Arctic communities (Store Norske, n.d.).

However, despite their common aim, the collaboration among the Community Council, Store Norske and The University Centre was difficult. Several interviewees, including Community Council politicians and Store Norske employees, spoke about tensions between the council and the company. Some speculated that this had something to do with the energy transition project being prestigious: "The project – the goal on creating a zero-emission community, almost at the north pole – it is a prestigious project, which is huge and can profile not only Longyearbyen, but also those people who promote it". Others put it more bluntly:

> It is a large degree of – this Northern Norwegian expression – "dick fencing", between people in the local board and people in Store Norske to be the one that control that transition because in ten years you will be given the credit for being the one who made Svalbard a much more sustainable community.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0032247424000020 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Moreover, a disagreement arose over whether it was the Community Council or the government that had initiated the energy transition. According to a Community Council politician, the government's press release that announced that Longyearbyen would get a new energy solution was a "ministerial exercise in nonsense":

> Then, I simply think that the national authorities got a little angry because they were not allowed to bask in the glory. So, when we sent out information to the ministries that we had made the decision to phase out coal, it was quite a short time before the press release came from the ministry because it should look like they had made the decision to move Svalbard into the renewable world.

What was at stake was ultimately who would get the prestige for leading the energy transition. From being a conflict of interests, phasing out coal had become a contest over symbolic capital. The very symbolic order was contested, as the Community Council, Store Norske and the government wanted to be perceived as the legitimate leader of the process and, in a broader sense, of the Longyearbyen community. For the Community Council, it was important to be seen as a competent, action-oriented political actor with the ability to take the community into a more sustainable future.

> We are a small municipality with a lot of state visits, also a lot of international visits, and what is the first thing that people encounter in the place that is most threatened by climate change? Burning of coal! It's a huge paradox. So, if a renewable solution could be shown instead, that would be much better. To be able to show that we are actually taking action here.

The Community Council also wanted to ensure that the responsibility for the energy infrastructure remained with them. Although they were not strangers to the idea of cooperating with Store Norske, some politicians felt that Store Norske were overstepping: "It's not really a collaborative model they want. They want to take over and operate". This was seen as a threat to the Community Council's authority in the long run:

> So, then the question is, if they do not manage to do it [providing energy], should we just give them renovation then, to see if they succeed in that? Maybe give them the responsibility for the harbour, to see if they succeed with that?

From Store Norske's point of view, the Community Council undermined the mutual benefits of the cooperation in fear of losing its role as an energy provider:

> There is almost a resistance in the local council against Store Norske. The desire and willingness of Store Norske to think of sustainable solutions for off-grid energy systems . . . there is zero understanding of that in the Community Council, to see this as a totality. Some people are extremely concerned with keeping that power or that role, which is actually a bit funny because it is rarely a matter of struggle in municipalities to retain responsibility for energy supply.

For the company, the energy transition was a chance to manifest their transformation to something else than a coal company: "We want to see the transition in the context of our wish to transform Store Norske into an energy company that focuses on renewable energy in the Arctic", the Store Norske leadership stated. If Longyearbyen transitioned successfully with Store Norske's help and the new energy solutions became a new product for them, the transition could be viewed as evidence that the company had succeeded in maintaining its relevance and position in and beyond Longyearbyen. As noted by a government representative noted "When Svea was closed . . . I think they realised that they had to find another purpose for being there. They take a position that means they can have something to say beyond what happens in Longyearbyen".

A deeper understanding of Store Norske's process of reinventing themselves as something else than a mining company is achieved when symbolic capital and its relations to other resources are taken into the consideration. Being a mining company had meant that Store Norske was the cornerstone of the Longyearbyen economy and the related geopolitical strategy, in line with the government's political objectives. It was these traits that were translated into symbolic capital. Because the environmental issue was evermore emphasised, however, it became increasingly difficult for Store Norske to conserve the exchange rate that had put them in a privileged position in Norwegian Svalbard politics. The capital that Store Norske's political standing had relied on was devaluated. To remain a key player in the Longyearbyen community and Norwegian Svalbard politics, Store Norske therefore had to accumulate a new form of capital. This is what the reinvention to something else than a mining company, by for instance providing renewable energy technology suitable for Arctic conditions, could provide.

Last, the energy transition was a chance for the government to show that "Norway is best in class", as a miner put it. "The Paris meeting and all this . . . There is a pressure on us to be a showcase. As Støre [the Norwegian prime minister at the time] told me, 'coal is controversial'". Some believed that the coal mining activities were "weakening Norway's international climate credibility", and it had become too heavy a weight to bear in international climate negotiations. For Norway, then, its reputation as a credible environmental actor was at stake. As one interviewee put it: "If you want to be credible as an environmental nation, which Norway maybe tries to be, running a coal mine in Europe's largest wilderness area is not . . . at the top of the list of what we *have* to do". From having the coal industry on Svalbard as a stain on their reputation as a credible environmental actor, phasing out coal could be an advantageous for Norway on the international arena. As a government representative explained

> Of course, there is a symbolic value in the fact that many people think it is very strange that an area that is so vulnerable to climate change, where it is so visible that it is happening, at the same time contributes to climate change through coal. So, the symbolic value of Svalbard becoming greener goes far beyond Svalbard . . . It is important for Norway's credibility internationally when we talk about the need for transitioning.

In a changed political reality, all three actors – the government, the mining company and the Community Council – needed to position themselves in new ways to remain relevant. Whoever was perceived as the leader of the energy transition would win the prize of symbolic capital. This would in turn be something that could play into the contest of symbolic order.

This contest relates back to the historical development of the Longyearbyen community. First, Norway had to secure its sovereignty over Svalbard in international negotiations. Although the sovereignty issue was settled with the Svalbard Treaty in 1920, the Norwegian government has had to balance the interests and presence of other states in their Svalbard policies. The firm environmental management regime has been an important way to signal Norwegian enforcement of sovereignty on Svalbard. In addition to helping maintain a reputation as a credible environmental actor, leading the energy transition process therefore can be read as an expression of Norwegian sovereignty.

Second, for most of the last century, Longyearbyen was a company town and Store Norske was the very spine of the

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0032247424000020 Published online by Cambridge University Press

community. The Community Council, on the other hand, was a newcomer in Svalbard politics. The council has had to establish itself as a power factor to be reckoned with alongside the corner stone company. It is possible to read the ongoing dispute between the two as a prolongation of this battle.

Concluding discussion

The political process of phasing out coal began as a conflict of interests. Environmental, economic and energy security interests were clashing with the coal industry's importance for the community and the government's related geopolitical aims. Through socialisation and the perceived lack of alternatives, the issue of phasing out coal was kept as a matter of nondecision-making locally and nationally. This status quo was also related to the exchange rate between symbolic capital and other resources at the time, which favoured Store Norske and its ability to promote a certain world view.

Then external economic, environmental and physical events removed the previous barriers to phasing out coal. Eventually, environmental, economic and energy supply security interests all *mattered* and prevailed. Although critical voices remained locally, the key actors had decided. They were all interested in repositioning themselves in the changed political reality, in which the exchange rate between various forms of capital had been altered. Phasing out coal became a contest over symbolic capital, in which the Community Council, Store Norske and the Norwegian government fought for the prestige as the party leading the energy transition. Thus, unlike the classic conflict over clashing material interests it had once been, phasing out coal had become a conflict over symbolic values.

This does not mean that the conflict did not have more material aspects as well. The tensions between the Community Council and Store Norske regarding the responsibility for the energy infrastructure is a good example of this. In addition to giving prestige, controlling the energy in Longyearbyen clearly would be a material power factor too. Moreover, while remaining a relevant player in the Longyearbyen community and Norwegian Svalbard politics was the key concern for Store Norske, the reinvention to something else than a mining company can also be related to economic interests. Although Store Norske is an instrument for the Norwegian government in advancing their Svalbard policy objectives, it is also an actor capable of pushing forwards its own interests. For the Norwegian government, the prestige related to the energy transition can in turn be exchanged into political capital. By leading Svalbard into a more sustainable future, Norway at the same underlines that Svalbard is subjected to Norwegian sovereignty. This is not least important in light of the ongoing international dispute over Svalbard's surrounding maritime areas and its resources (Dyndal, 2014; Østhagen & Raspotnik, 2018).

As a conflict over symbolic values, the energy transition dispute can be read as a prolongation of the contestation over whom was considered the legitimate leader in and of Longyearbyen. This means that although the contest over symbolic capital represents a new stage in the process of phasing out coal, it is in a certain way not new in Svalbard politics. Not only are there traces of past struggles, but it is partly the same key actors that are competing. One may argue that the contest over symbolic capital in Svalbard politics is in a way renewed rather than suddenly appearing in the wake of the decision to phase out coal, the overarching question being "Who are to decide in and over Longyearbyen?"

This question cannot be answered adequately without considering the Norwegian government. It is a widespread perception in Longyearbyen that "When the state has said 'This is how it is going to be', that is what happens", as one of the interviewees stated. Recent studies have confirmed that many locals feel that the Norwegian state controls what is done locally, and that the local community's decision-making space is limited (Brode-Roger, 2023, p. 10). With the recent removal of non-Norwegians right to vote, the local community's ability to stand up against the government in decisions affecting their everyday lives seems weakened. Much uncertainty remains regarding in which direction the Norwegian government will take Svalbard. What the long-term energy solution for Longyearbyen will be remains to be seen. The results, however, will affect the contest over symbolic capital and which actors and interests will be involved in shaping Svalbard's future. Some clarity, however, may come with the government's next Svalbard white paper, which is expected in spring 2024. Climate change, energy development and increased geopolitical tensions are likely to continue to influence Svalbard and Norwegian Svalbard politics.

Although research has highlighted the geopolitical aspect of the politics of coal, this article calls for an emphasis on the relation between interests and power. To understand the balancing act that Svalbard politics often is, one must pay attention not only to the contrasting political objectives of the various actors involved. Symbolic aspects of power and interest also play a role and can in themselves be a source of conflict. Power may involve people's perceptions being shaped, but a more nuanced understanding of these processes is obtained when one considers that this ability's underpinnings are not static. In this article, I have therefore demonstrated how Lukes' third dimension of power can be advanced when combined with Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital.

This does not make the processes of Svalbard politics any less complex, but it provides a more accurate account of what is at stake. These insights can help us understand why tensions occur in energy transition processes in Svalbard and beyond and thus mitigate their ability to prevent success. To make sense of how symbolic power relates to diverging interests in political processes is therefore a continuous task for social-science researchers, not least in the context of climate change in the Arctic. In this endeavour, the social science researcher has a large toolbox of theoretical concepts to assist them. By applying a few of those tools, this analysis has shown how the political process of phasing out coal changed from a conflict of interest to a contest over symbolic capital.

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S0032247424000020 Published online by Cambridge University Press