

You can't stand in the way of progress. **Icelandic tale about a heralded relocation**

In August 2014, the US aluminium giant, Alcoa, decided to permanently close its Portovesme plant in the poorest province of Italy, Carbonia-Iglesias, in southern Sardinia. With the loss of several thousand jobs, the region is now a social desert ... and an ecological one too, given that the waters around the industrial site are contaminated with heavy metals and chemical residues. Struck by this disaster, the Italian writer Angelo Ferracuti undertook a journey to Iceland to meet residents and workers at one of the sites that took over from the Sardinian plant.

Angelo Ferracuti

Journalist and writer

The Alcoa Fjarðal factory located in the midst of a majestic but threatened landscape.
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(p. 47, 49, 50)



"The politicians were repeating the engineers' words without understanding what they were saying."

Ólafur Páll Sigurdsson

When I learnt that Alcoa had relocated part of its aluminium production to Iceland, I started my research. Here's a country, I thought, where you can't venture alone, particularly if you need to go to a place 750 km from the capital, to a bay that's off the tourist trail, and travel along the entire south coast in a 4x4. I drew the route with a ball-point pen on a map of the island and, for several months, I was obsessed with the idea of getting there at any cost.

Alcoa had decided to produce aluminium in these as yet pristine polar lands, where energy is cheap and where, through an exemption from the Kyoto Protocol, higher levels of pollution are permitted. The Kárahnjúkar project involved the destruction of 3 000 km² (around 3% of the country's entire surface area) of pristine landscape and the creation of a system of three dams to collect glacier water from the Jökulsá river in the Hálslón reservoir. This water is then conveyed, through 73 km of buried pipes, to a 690 MW hydroelectric plant to power a smelter and produce 320 000 tonnes of aluminium per year. The single largest wild area in Europe, which is home to the continent's biggest national park, was therefore, in short shrift, flooded not only with water in three artificial lakes, but also with the dross from a major plant, all under the management of the Italian company Impregilo, which employs Chinese, Polish and Portuguese workers on low wages and under highly questionable working conditions.

When, one fine day, I received a response from Cosimo Einarson saying that he would be happy to lend me a hand, the time for my departure for Iceland had finally

come. And when the plane touched down on the island's soil, the first thing that struck me was the view of this dark and deserted land, which resembled a crater and provoked a feeling of intense disorientation. Cosimo suddenly appeared to meet me in the bus terminal: a small man, wearing a coloured bandana in his hair, with the displaced air of an eternal foreigner. Born in Turin to Neapolitan parents, he had arrived in Reykjavík 35 years earlier on a student exchange – a precursor to the Erasmus scheme – and had never left. He was living a tough existence as a cook, always struggling to make ends meet, in a country affected by the crisis to its very core, particularly among its middle classes. Even now, like so many others, he was having to share his apartment with five flatmates.

Connecting the fate of two islands

A few hours later, my first appointment brought me face to face with Ólafur Páll Sigurdsson, an artist and radical anarchist, leader of the Saving Iceland movement, which had been set up precisely to combat the construction of the Kárahnjúkar hydroelectric plant and the installation of the Alcoa smelter. This movement had organised demonstrations in various forms across the country, with the most spectacular being the work of Haukur H. who, in November 2008, had climbed onto the roof of the Althing – the Icelandic Parliament – where he had replaced the national flag with that of a famous chain of discount stores: Bonus. Immediately arrested, he had been sent to prison for two weeks.

Crossing the threshold of his door, I discovered a middle-aged man, with a typically Nordic face, dressed all in black. I explained to him my idea of connecting in a story the fate of two islands, Sardinia and Iceland, both attacked by unbridled capitalism that, in the name of profit, is capable of sacrificing everything: beauty, nature and people. He supported my idea: "It will end here as it did in Portovesme: they will pollute the bay, and then they'll go and pollute somewhere else." His movement was born in 2004, but even before that, in 2003, he had written a long article for *The Guardian* that started as follows: "North of Vatnajökull, Europe's biggest glacier, lies Iceland's most fascinating and varied volcanic landscape. Ice and boiling geothermal infernos meet at the edges of the glacier, and then the largest remaining pristine wilderness in western Europe begins ... A large part of this is due to disappear under 150 m of water by 2006, when the Kárahnjúkar dam is completed."

My interviewee explained with satisfaction that his article had been like a bombshell: "It caused shockwaves across Iceland: the politicians had done all they could to ensure that no one published any articles on the plant", he told me, "and suddenly I launched SOS Iceland onto the European social scene. After the international call to arms, whereas previously no one had been concerned about the issue, between 2005 and 2008 we organised major demonstrations against the construction of the dam. At the time, we even managed to block the work for a few hours. The first winter, it was mainly Portuguese who were working there for Impregilo: many of them suffered frostbitten toes and fell ill, and after a while the trade union stepped in."

Ólafur now seems to be disillusioned, and his movement is currently less active. "The Icelandic politicians went in search of investors, and bowed and scraped before them", he said in a sarcastic tone. "Icelanders have lost their innocence; they have been corrupted by the craving for money." He told me that he had recently been busy with a visual installation: 30 people were buried up to their necks, each holding a banner between their teeth that read: "You can't stand in the way of progress". In the background of the photograph, there

are apocalyptic scenes of collapse. We left and, after saying our goodbyes, Ólafur got into a grey vehicle parked in the adjacent car park, and then disappeared at high speed towards the outskirts of Reykjavík.

A writer's duty

My appointment the next day, with Andri Snær Magnason, took place in a café located between the port and the Parliament: the Stofan Café. When I arrived, he was already there, sat in the main room typing, hunched over his PC. He was young and fair-haired, with a rosy and chubby face, wearing a pair of reading glasses. "Alcoa", he told me first, "always chooses small countries where the people are weaker, where it's easier to exploit people because they need work; it's also what Rio Tinto and Glencore do".

He explained to me that, when he found out about the dam construction project, he was immediately concerned about the fate that awaited Iceland's uplands, places that he adores and that he has frequented many times since his childhood. "Between 1998 and 2000", he told me, "many of these landscapes, some of the most beautiful in Iceland, were under threat. I was 20 years old and just starting to write, and I couldn't understand the possible link between an aluminium plant and the

production of energy, so I started to research the subject." He delved into the documents at the ministry, where those in charge told him that his concerns were simply an obsession, that he should stop thinking about such things, that they were studying the situation, that everything was under control, that he could rest easy. "In all those documents, there was always a figure – 30 TWh/year, 30 terawatts per hour, 30 000 MW – which was the maximum amount of energy that could be obtained without any environmental impact, but I didn't understand. So I made a calculation by adding together the energy produced by all the main rivers, waterfalls and watercourses in the north and south of Iceland, including on the high plateaux, and I never got 30 terawatts, unless I included the Gullfoss waterfall, the most beautiful in Iceland."

This initial research was down to his imagination, his desire to understand what was hidden behind this formula. "No one had linked this element with the rest of it. The imagination of a writer can prove useful once in a while. The politicians kept citing this figure of 30 TW", he stressed, "when they didn't even know what they were talking about, you know? They were repeating the engineers' words without understanding what they were saying. So it was also a question of language, of translating the technical language into political language, into a language that everyone

could understand." When the economic and financial crisis then began in 2008, he was interviewed by journalists from around the world, from *The New York Times*, *Le Monde*, the BBC, and *The Guardian*.

He told them that he would continue to be concerned about civic issues, that it was a writer's duty. At the time he was in the process of writing a book recounting his parents' story. "When they were young, during their honeymoon, they spent four weeks on the Vatnajökull glacier, in the southeast of Iceland, taking measurements. But, according to studies by the University of Iceland, we now know that by 2100 our glaciers will have disappeared, that we are in the process of destroying them and that we have also gone beyond the limits of sustainable development, even though we should be able to transform industry and production." It is well-known that smelters are highly polluting and one of the main causes of the greenhouse effect.

"A dead body that no one will know what to do with"

A short distance from the bar, in a small green house, lives Hildur Rúna Hauksdóttir, mother of the singer Björk and wife of the trade union leader Guðmundur Gunnarsson, who is also a political and environmental activist in her



Preservation of the Icelandic natural heritage is a concern close to the heart of writer Andri Snær Magnason whose book *Dreamland* published in 2006 denounces the policy governing dam construction.

"The trade unions couldn't get into the sites as the workers seemed to be the property of Impregilo."

Hildur Runa Hauksdottir

1. Two other multinationals in the non-ferrous metals sector.

own right. Very slim, with a gentle face and low soft voice, she bade us enter a small living room. She was accompanied by a younger friend, blond and sturdy, who is also an activist in Icelandic environmental groups. Hildur spoke to me slowly and quietly: "When we learnt that the project had been entrusted to Alcoa, Elisabetta, a friend who was working for national radio, without saying anything to anyone, made a direct announcement over the radio. She said that, at a given time, everyone should go to Parliament to protest against the plan, which could set a dangerous precedent in such a pristine land as Iceland. Many people came and the demonstrations continued for several months. Then, when the work began, pressure groups formed, including on the internet, and we collected many signatures against the dam."

She subsequently went on hunger strike and, when I reminded her of this, she smiled. She confided to me that the idea had come to her because, in 2002, none of the media were talking about the issue. So, to attract attention, in October she ate nothing for three weeks, but simply drank Icelandic tea. "It was very difficult to fight the right-wing government, which had already decided everything. We couldn't win: the only positive thing was that there was a protest", she added. "When I started my hunger strike, because I'm the mother of Björk who is a world-renowned artist, journalists came from all over to interview me, and this helped to raise awareness among the people."

She asked me goadingly whether I knew about the activities of Impregilo, and she was keen to tell me that it was predominantly Portuguese and Chinese workers who were employed at the sites, and that they fell ill due to the cold. "The trade unions couldn't get into the sites as the workers seemed to be the property of Impregilo, but we still tried to intervene by demanding that wages match those laid down by Icelandic law", stated Hildur with a peremptory tone. "They were underpaid and those who protested were dismissed." She added that foreigners did not understand why Icelanders were not really concerned about nature; perhaps they are not concerned because they have it in abundance. The political work carried out by environmental associations such as hers, Landvernd,

which continues to fight against projects that destroy the landscape, is therefore important. "Yet once the work was completed, the local residents who had been in favour almost all changed their mind. In addition to the damage and pollution, no jobs have been created and, what's more, workers' rights have been trampled underfoot."

A philosophical carpenter

The next day, at 8 a.m., Cosimo and I were already on the road. A journey of 750 km awaited us, along the entire southern coast, from Reykjavík to Reyðarfjörður. Once out of the city, we soon reached the high plateau of Hellisheiði, mid-way between the capital and

the coast, where there is a large geothermal plant. What is striking about Iceland is the constantly changing landscape with a few brightly coloured houses scattered among the infinite space, generally self-sufficient farms. During the journey, we met very few vehicles. Once we got to the coast, we continued our journey with beaches on one side and, on the other, sandy rocks, expanses of yellow grass tested by the snow and wind, and carpets of moss in a landscape of gentle hills. Further on, a huge mountain range appeared on the horizon and spread out across the immense space of the landscape, where the asphalt ribbon ran along opposite the Hvannadalshnjúkur volcano, the highest peak in Iceland, within the confines of the Skaftafell national park, under the Öræfajökull glacier.

"One worker in four couldn't cope; there was a constant turnover of staff."

Ólafur Hr. Sigurðsson

The farmer Gudmundur Arnannsson one of the first local residents to resist construction of the dam.



We arrived at the farm at dusk. In front of the house was an old white Volvo Polar and a 4x4, with a tractor a bit further away beside the cowshed. Gréta Ósk welcomed us with a smile as she opened the door, with her husband Guðmundur Ármannsson just behind her. She was slim and blond with a pink face and rosy cheeks, warm and smiling as she invited us to enter. The house was welcoming, with the kitchen and box room on the first floor and, on the upper floor, at the top of a wooden staircase, the bedrooms and living room: large, well-furnished and very light with big windows overlooking the countryside. There was also an old man, a carpenter by profession, but with the air of a philosopher: Völundur Jóhannesson. He also took part in the demonstrations but, despite his rather subversive reputation, had such a gentle air that you would never have thought that he could harm a fly. In the living room, Guðmundur and Völundur settled on the sofa, ready to tell their story. Völundur explained that multinationals like Alcoa, when they arrive in certain countries, while destroying the rivers and marvellous landscapes, in order to look good with the people, finance national parks (as happened in this case), create associations such as "Friends of the Glacier" or organise trips to the United States of America for Icelandic students.

Guðmundur is a farmer and stock breeder and was one of the first to fight against the construction of the dam. He looked at me with a shrewd expression and then said: "I knew that they would destroy the Kárahnjúkar valley and all the magnificent landscapes around it, so I immediately took part in the demonstrations. The dam caused a lot of damage: when the water started to reach a certain height, it flooded into the surrounding land. There is an old proverb that says: *it's at the start that you see how it's going to end.*" Völundur then interrupted him to recall that on 19 July 2002, during the signature of the contract with Impregilo, even though all the residents in the area were in favour, he went out of his house and hoisted an Icelandic flag to mid-height as a sign of mourning. He then went off in his car to the various travel agencies in the region, those organising expeditions

for tourists, to convince them to do the same thing.

Both talked to me about Lagarfljót lake, which, according to legend, hides a terrifying monster in its depths – the Lagarfljótsormurinn – a gigantic aquatic serpent. Völundur explained to me: "The lake has inspired many poets. And in the past, it was a vital artery for the entire region." Greta showed me a book and said that, in her opinion, the damage would be felt across a much wider area, with a radius of over 100 km, ruining the environment, including in neighbouring fjords. "The dam waters flooded everything; they went in every direction carrying mud and destroying the land", added Guðmundur. "The fauna and flora have been entirely destroyed, the fish are dead, the water is no longer blue, crystal-clear and transparent as it was before; now it has the colour of a murky puddle. But the plant has contributed nothing, not even jobs, and when it shuts down, we will have a dead body that no one will know what to do with."

12 kg of sulfur dioxide per tonne of aluminium

Next morning we left very early. Before reaching Reyðarfjörður, I had an appointment at the port of Seyðisfjörður, where vessels arrive from Denmark, with Ólafur Hr. Sigurðsson, in his small house in the centre of the village. He was about 50, with a body that was still muscular and athletic, and had worked for eight months at Alcoa as a driver. He had then been promoted and, until 2014, had managed 40 workers at the plant. "Initially everything went well, but in the last two years, due to the fluoride, there was a lot of pollution not only inside the plant, but also outside", he confided to us. He recounted that the last two summers in the region had been very hot with no rain and that, to reduce external pollution and keep it under control, the plant's managers had taken to closing the smelter's underground passages, causing the temperature to rise to 50°C and damaging the health of workers who were struggling to cope. He had warned his superiors on numerous occasions. "We cannot work under these

conditions", he complained to them. Eventually, he came into open conflict with them and his defence of the workers led to his dismissal, without the trade union being able to intervene because he was a manager. "The workers were exhausted, many of them fell ill because of the stressful working conditions and climate and then, in the plant, there was a lot of magnetism caused by the energy used: one worker in four couldn't cope; there was a constant turnover of staff." He has now returned to what he used to do: crewing on a fishing vessel. He told us that life was much better and that the atmosphere at the plant was not made for someone like him, who was used to living in this paradise.

Shortly after getting back on the road towards Reyðarfjörður, we entered a cold and snowy mountain area. Surrounded by the Hádegisfjall and Grænafell mountains, this enchanting fjord lies close to one of the largest glaciers in the world, after those in Greenland and the Antarctic: Vatnajökull. When we arrived, there was no one in the streets, except for a cyclist who told us the way to the plant. Everything was silent at Alcoa Fjarðaál. A worker behind the fence spoke on the telephone and the surveillance camera filmed me while I photographed this strange body in the surrounding enchanting landscape: a body consisting of metal sheets and pipes.

Alcoa obtained permission from the Icelandic Environment Ministry to produce 12 kg of sulfur dioxide per tonne of aluminium in this paradise, 12 times the limit laid down by the World Bank for smelters such as this one. There, like in Portovesme, in this deep blue sea, in years to come people will see lead levels rise, and the children of Reyðarfjörður, like those of Portoscuso, the town close to the former Sardinian industrial flagship, will have higher levels in their blood than those in other places and will suffer from cognitive impairment precisely due to the presence of this deadly metal. But, as Ólafur Páll Sigurdsson angrily proclaimed in his artistic installation, it is forbidden to protest or oppose development. This violence against nature and people is being perpetrated by a neoliberalism that every day tells each of us that it has won, that it is pointless fighting: "You can't stand in the way of progress". ●