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The Emerging Arctic Humanities

A Forward-Looking Post-Script

We live in troubled times, and so does indeed the Arctic. So, what about Arctic scholarship? As this set of articles demonstrates the opposite may be true. These fine examples of historically informed research on important features of Arctic environments, economics, ideas, and aesthetics are evidence of a broadening movement to draw the Arctic firmly into the domain of the humanities and of a new integrative writing about environment, history, and future through the lens of the politics of the present. They prove that there are humanities for the Arctic.

This may seem an obvious comment, but it is rarely made. Of course, nobody could doubt that the Arctic has been inhabited since time immemorial. Nor could anyone dispute the presence or significance of religion, music, and history within Northern indigenous cultures. Indeed, significant scholarship has been carried out in Arctic languages, anthropology, archaeology, ethnology, and other disciplines, many of which are usually considered as part of the humanities.

For a long time, however, this scholarship was considered a marginal phenomenon in relation to the massive efforts in what was always called Arctic “science,” a concept that followed on the heels of the earlier Arctic, or polar, “exploration” (Leverre 1993; Bravo & Sörlin (eds.) 2002). Despite a certain presence in some academic departments and some museums of Arctic culture—one of the most significant collections being built in Copenhagen through Denmark’s colonial relationship to Greenland (Thisted (ed.) 2005)—the humanities were really very small by comparison. The massive research effort during the International Geophysical Year 1957–1958, which privileged the poles

and counted as the third of the hitherto four “polar years,” mobilized some fifty thousand scientists from more than sixty countries—virtually none of whom was a humanist (Krupnik *et al.* 2005).

This has now changed. The Fourth International Polar Year, which in reality covered three calendar years, 2007 to 2009, counted about one-third of its scientists and scholars from the humanities and social sciences (Krupnik & Hovelsrud *et al.* 2011). Considering that the population of the region north of the Arctic Circle is no larger than four million people, less than the total population of even some of the smaller polar states, such as Denmark and Norway, the Arctic now draws considerable scholarly interest, not least among historians (e.g. McCannon 2012; Farish 2013; Sörlin (ed.) 2013; Jørgensen & Sörlin (eds.) 2013; Christensen, Nilsson & Wormbs (eds.) 2013; Dodds & Powell (eds.) 2014; JHG 2014), surpassing anything we have seen in the past. The present forum is a case in point.

Why is this? Clearly, there have been concerted efforts in many countries to promote a broadened Arctic scholarship. Research councils and other funding agencies and foundations have set up initiatives to move the contributions of the humanities and social sciences forward. When the International Arctic Social Science Association (IASSA) was founded at a meeting in Fairbanks, Alaska in 1990, it saw no need to articulate a specific role for the humanities; they were somehow tacitly subsumed and included, although they have taken an increasingly prominent role in recent years. IASSA was part of the preparations for one of the largest funding initiatives for transnational Arctic humanities and social sciences, the European Science Foundation’s BOREAS programme. Organized through ESF’s multinational structure of coordinated resources, this programme ran from 2006 to 2010, thus encompassing the IPY. Recently the Nordforsk agency, based in Oslo and uniting all the Nordic countries including Greenland, initiated a programme to build several Centers of Excellence across the Nordic region, with the humanities clearly visible and signaled as on a par with science, medicine, social science, and technology.

Still, none of all this would probably have happened unless there had been a sense that something was missing from the usual range of knowledge. In a recent article that reflected on the rapid rise of the Anthropocene as a concept and a frame of understanding, some of us made the observation, in the light of the growth of an environmentally activist “planetary science,” that “there is no planetary humanities” (Pálsson *et al.* 2013: 11). At the same time, the article was meant as a plea for precisely this. In order to understand the discourses of the planetary, and to navigate an increasingly planetary era of integrated fates of nations, cultures, economies and environments, there is an urgent need for a humanities that can address these

issues and decipher their meaning and underlying patterns of power, ideologies, and directions. We did not think that natural science or conventional predictive social sciences (Andersson & Rindzeviciute (eds.) 2015) alone would suffice.

We deliberately took the role of a Minerva's owl, wishing to offer a word of caution as the human enterprise was moving towards what seemed a global dusk. But, in retrospect, and as so often is the case, we were perhaps already being overtaken by newer tendencies in the humanities that took precisely this planetary view, proudly proclaiming concepts such as the "environmental humanities" (Rose *et al.* 2012; Sörlin 2012; Sörlin 2013) or the return of the "long term narrative" (Guldi & Armitage 2014; see also Chakrabarty 2009), none without an appropriately broadening and critical discussion (on Guldi & Armitage, e.g. Cohen & Mandler 2015). A new kind of humanities seems already to be emerging, to which many contribute, and that relies on the classical virtues of the humanities fields. At the same time, the new humanities insist on a new relevance and a sense of urgency that is crucially, albeit far from solely, about the planetary. This programmatic side of the new humanities, which we might term grand scale and challenge oriented, is necessary. But we must remember to pay attention to the local, the individual, the precise, rather than give in entirely to the sweeping, the overly broad, and precisely therefore less sharp; the *un-gefährlich*.

It seems to me that we are seeing a similar development occur with regard to the humanities in the Arctic. There used to be no concerted humanities of, for or even about the Arctic, at least not taken as a whole. There did not seem to be any common issues. Nor was there any common agenda, at least not one that the humanities seemed fit to deal with. The humanities needed to start their own change first, navigating rapidly transforming university systems (Collini 2012). Planetary change, tremendous challenges, looming threats and fabulous opportunities have, somewhat bewilderingly and often quite illogically, been proclaimed for the Arctic ever since the short period of peaceful region-building in the North (Keskitalo 2004) came to an abrupt end in the early years of the new century. Whatever lasting truth there may be to these grandiose statements there has been enough of *Realpolitik* to this rhetoric to make a response meaningful. Perhaps the most forceful of all academic response has come from the humanities, and certainly the least expected.

Just as we have seen the emergence of the environmental humanities as a reflection of the *planetary* crisis, I think we should also see the intense and careful humanities scholarship currently emerging on the Arctic as the legitimate outcome of an *Arctic* crisis. What may seem a new gilded age of golden opportunities and a bonanza of minerals and fossil fuel resources on

the Arctic rim is in reality a period of utmost stress and profound shake-up of cultures and societies facing global change with the added challenge of what has been called an “Arctic amplification” (Bekryaev *et al.* 2010; Pithan & Mauritsen 2014). Thus, we begin to see reinterpretations of the standard narrative, renegotiating the relationship of the Arctic local with the global (Hastrup 2013), and drawing the long lines of Arctic security (Doel *et al.* 2014), precisely the kind of work that the humanities are increasingly suited for and now also seem willing to do.

Most of this work has yet to come; it is emerging literally as I write these lines. But so much has been coming forth during the last few years that it is fair to say that we have entered the time when we can rightfully talk about our work as a scholarship of Arctic humanities. The papers in this forum truly mirror this emerging body of work, self-consciously addressing the environmental history—in its broadest sense—of the Arctic in innovative ways. The themes they bring out—that of commodification of vulnerable nature turned icon (the iceberg), that of languages of extraction through the invention of Arctic business models, that of the proto-politics of climate change during an era of cooling rationalizing early modern colonial presence, or that of Arctic futures, constantly reinvented to suit economic expansionism—all these themes call for new and innovative narratives of the Arctic region; more precisely, reinterpretations. As we read them we realize that they require broad, integrative knowledge gleaned from many disciplines, as well as imagination and awareness of the larger scheme of things in which Arctic change happens. They thus also speak to the responsibility of the Arctic humanities, not only to live up to the highest possible scholarly norms, but also to bring the insights from the archives and the field to bear on current debates.

A forum like this one does not appear *ex nihilo*. Several good initiatives over the last decade or two laid out some of the fine Arachne threads that can now be collected and woven into wider webs of wisdom. Nonetheless, it is the indispensable mission of insightful and visionary editors to see the opportunities, grasp the loose ends and bring the appropriate talent to the task. It bodes well for the emerging Arctic humanities to find their leaders among a truly international cohort of early career scholars.

This forum will serve as yet another stepping stone towards what will not only be a better and more nuanced understanding of the Arctic, but also the dusk of the long day of Arctic exceptionalism, when this part of the world was largely seen as a reserve for those who studied nature, mostly in splendid isolation. Those scientists did admirable work, and it is their ice cores, climate data, sediment measures, and readings of the buoys that now get a second lease on life as they are taken up and integrated into human

story lines and social explanations. Likewise, humanities from other regions of the world become relevant. The Arctic of the new humanities faces outward, to the tropics, the oceans, the deserts, the plains, and the cities. It is not different. Like “every man” in John Donne’s poem, the Arctic “is part of the main.” Arctic humanities, like the environmental humanities, will work well only if they work in lock step with the humanities elsewhere. Ours is a time when also the exceptionalism of humanistic forays into the Arctic should be coming to a close.

Our times may be troubled, but the Arctic scholarship we see reflected in these papers and the editorial craftsmanship that brought them to us should not trouble us. On the contrary, they make me confident that there is salvation in sight.

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