

Science and politics intertwined

– Case studies from the polar regions

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Sverker Sörlin (ed.)

Science, Geopolitics and Culture in the Polar Regions: Norden Beyond Borders.
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The book *Science, Geopolitics and Culture in the Polar Regions* revolves around the presence and significance, which is “far above their weight in terms of population, geographical size or economic activity” (p. 1), that the Nordic countries have historically had far beyond their territorial boundaries. Through a focus on the polar regions, where the spheres of science, culture and the military are seen as closely intertwined, the book not only argues for the importance that the Nordic countries have in terms of the polar regions, but also highlights the ways in which the Arctic and the Antarctic as “symbolic territories” (p. 4) are crucial in terms of understanding the self-production of the Nordic countries themselves.

The book, which consists of case study chapters focusing on a wide range of topics, is arranged into four parts, each of which focuses on a different “extension” (p. 5) of the Nordic presence. The first part of the book focuses explicitly on the Nordic countries, the Arctic and the Antarctic. In his own chapter, Sverker Sörlin takes a look at the “life, career and ideas of a Swedish scientist” (p. 23), Hans Ahlmann, with a focus on his efforts to bring the ‘Nordic’ together in polar science. The following chapter by Peder Roberts has a twofold goal, as it aims to demonstrate the “contested and messy nature” (p. 55) of discussions on polar cooperation as well as to highlight the underlying causes preventing further collaboration. In their chapter, Peders, Dodds and van der Watt turn their attention to the Antarctic and the process by which a Norwegian-owned research base was transferred to South Africa, viewing the ownership transfer as a reflection of the shifting priorities of both governments as well as the diplomatic and political

relationships of both countries in general.

The case studies in the second part of the book revolve around the relations between Russia and the Nordic countries, all relating to the continued connections and research ties amidst changing political relations and realities. In her chapter Julia Lajus describes the emergence of scientific field stations in the Russian Arctic with the aim of contributing to the largely unwritten history of Russian field stations and highlighting the political concerns behind the establishment of the research stations. In the sixth chapter, Stian Bones “seeks to identify and explain not only the driving forces behind the wider cooperation in polar research between Norway and the Soviet Union, but also how and why such contacts were contested” (p. 143). In her second contribution to the book, Julia Lajus looks at the fish resources and the communication between individual scientists in the Nordic countries and Russia in order to contribute to “a broader understanding of the Nordic experience” (p. 188) of communicating with neighbouring countries and establishing a presence in the North. In his chapter, Urban Wråkberg focuses on Nordic views of how science was turned into an efficient geopolitical and economic tool in the context of the Soviet Union.

In the third part, the book expands its geographical scope westwards through chapters which deal explicitly with or touch upon Greenland. Kirsten Thisted’s contribution focuses on Greenland’s branding efforts and shifting discourses of indigeneity in the changing societal context of contemporary Greenland. In the following chapter Jessica M. Shadian looks at the narratives of the Nordic region, examining how they have been changing in connection with global political and economic developments and the ways in which Greenland “sits at the crossroads of a changing Nordic region” (p. 279).

The fourth part of the book focuses on what are called “cultural extensions” (p. 291) of Nordic ideas and institutions. Anders Houltz’s chapter looks at museums and their relations to the narratives of the “golden age of polar exploration” (p. 294), as well as the relations of these narratives to national cultures through a comparison of two Nordic museums. The twelfth chapter of the book, by Dag Avango, analyses the role that cultural heritage sites have as rhetorical tools in nationalist rhetoric and in competing for influence and legitimizing sovereignty claims in the polar regions. Meanwhile, Aant Elzinga studies Nordic polar expeditions and International Polar Years from the viewpoint of their geopolitical dimensions and connections to ‘Nordicness’ in the context of science, industry, and national cultures. The last chapter in the book is published in unfinished form and is based mainly on Lisbeth Lewander’s extended abstract and fieldwork notes, as, sadly, the author passed away before finishing the text.

As a whole, the book is extremely detailed, covering a broad range of historical and contemporary case studies and concerns related to the polar regions. However, at times the connections between the individual contributions and one or more of the key themes of the book explained in the title – especially the theme of *Norden* – remain implicit or in some cases slightly artificial. If the goal of the authors is to “present evidence for the existence of a hitherto rather unarticulated Nordic region” (p. 1), the book would have benefited greatly from a concluding chapter making the ‘Nordic’ in the individual chapters more visible and explicit. However, as such, the value of the book’s contribution lies elsewhere than stated in the title: the detailed descriptions of the diverse case studies highlight the close and changing interplay of science and politics and the ways in which research agendas and priorities reflect political situations and concerns and vice versa.