

# Books

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## North as a Way of Knowing

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Thomas Hylland Eriksen, Sanna Valkonen and Jarno Valkonen (eds.): *Knowing from the Indigenous North. Sámi Approaches to History, Politics and Belonging*. London: Routledge, 2019, 176 pages. ISBN 978-041-57-9074-1

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The North is still often imagined as a relatively remote natural area, untouched by humans. The prevailing mental images of the Arctic are those of ice, void, and occasional polar bears. Even though human beings have inhabited the North for more than 4000 years, it is as if the anthropocene would touch the area only as external effects. That is, at least before the melting of the icecap allows major oil and mining companies to start large scale quarrying and drilling.

Such imagery actively forgets the humans in the North. Time

and again the 13.1 million people living in the area of the circumpolar North vanish in Western imagination into the blue shade of ice. Of these inhabitants of the North, ten per cent are indigenous peoples: Sámi (Finland, Sweden, Norway and Northwest Russia), Nenets, Khanty, Evenk and Chukchi (Russia), Aleut, Yupik and Inuit or Iñupiat (Alaska), Inuit or Inuvialuit (Canada), and Inuit or Kalaallit (Greenland). The inhabitants of these alleged hinterlands of the planet have for a long time been marginalized and despised. They have been held to be backward and, without state or other official apparatuses, belonging to the past, having at best exotic value for tourists.

The book at hand is published at a moment when all this might be changing – at least in the Sámi case that is in focus here. After centuries of neglect and oppression the indigenous peoples of the North have become visible in new ways.

Whereas the members of these peoples in past did not always want to mention that they belong to their group, now the membership of these groups has become a contested issue, analysed in the volume by Saara Tervaniemi and Päivi Magga as well as Sanna Valkonen.

If anything, the ethos of the book is that the marginal position of the North and its peoples should change – politically, culturally and epistemologically. If there are to be political and cultural changes, what is needed is a profound change in the ways of knowing. The North has its “own understanding of what knowledge is and how it is produced” (p. 5), and this understanding should be no longer marginalized. Instead, it should be seen that the North is “a particular way of knowing and being, with its own needs, practices, concepts and imaginings” (p. 6).

In the book, the North is not called the Arctic, since that

would represent the area “as affording a surface to be colonized”, as Tim Ingold (p. 112) writes. The effect of such colonization would be flattening the land, collapsing it into a two-dimensional plane akin to that of the cartographic map (p. 113). In the same spirit, the book is not about “knowing *of* the North” or “knowing *about* the North” but “knowing *from* the North”. Such knowing *from* transforms that what is known. The void is now “imbued with cultural values and meanings”, even when these have no visible imprint in the landscape – that is, accessible to “cultural outsiders”. From this perspective, the North “can seem natural and still be imbued with cultural values” (p. 4).

The volume is edited as if it were a small symposium. After two introductory (keynote?) chapters there are three parts, each containing two (plenary?) texts and a commentary. In the best dialogical spirit, all the texts, not only the commentaries, refer to each other and at points also question certain premises of other texts. The topics discussed include everyday resistance (Veli-Pekka Lehtola), Sámi collections, including *duodji* (Eeva-Kristiina Harlin), the idea of Sápmi, including *gákti* (Saara Tervaniemi and Päivi Magga), the snowmobile in reindeer herding (Jarno Valkonen and Petri Ruuska),

the art of Nils-Aslak Valkeapää (Tapio Nykänen), and the debate on who belongs to Sámi (Sanna Valkonen). The topics may not be new, but the new perspectives open fresh insights into each of them.

In short, the new perspectives of the book concern the ontology of becoming. The book argues against seeing local knowledge as something given and fixed. To the authors, nothing “is ever finished; everything is on the way to being something”, as Tim Ingold writes (p. 114). Instead, the writers are interested in how knowing takes place in its becoming, how it “changes in time and place”, and “combines different knowledge and knowing according to what living and dwelling in a place requires” (Sanna and Jarno Valkonen, p. 16). Local in here is not something restricted to one place. Instead, Sámi culture is seen as having “always lived on the border of many worlds, at the cross-roads of diverse influences” (p. 17). These influences include also those of the nature. There is no distinction between culture and nature. Instead, “the relation to nature is part of the worldview narrative of Sámi culture” (p. 22).

In short, the book argues that knowing from the North means that local indigenous knowledge meets the critique of the hegemonic modern notions of

the North. For the authors, the lived North cannot be comprehended nor solved if we remain inside the prevailing modern notions of our world. Not only is the lived North incomprehensible inside such notions, but the indigenous North and its everyday also represent a serious challenge to these very same notions.

This is a strongly recommended reading not only for those interested in the future of the indigenous North but also for those who are interested in the future of our planet. Among other good things, the book includes a very useful guide to the debates on who is Sámi in Finland, offered by Sanna Valkonen.

As Tim Ingold writes (p. 116), “harmony is not without a tension”. On the contrary, it is the tension that causes things to hold. The tension in the book is between the notions of particularity and universality, experiences and structures. Sanna and Jarno Valkonen and Tim Ingold write in the introduction: “we prefer to leave it to the people themselves to situate their lives socially, and to create our theories based on their knowledge”. In the concluding chapter of the volume Michael Skey writes: “This type of emic perspective is, of course, a useful starting place. But it perhaps neglects, or at least downplays,

the wider social structures that enable certain pronouncements or understandings of a given situation to hold good." To me, too, it seems that the next welcome step in rethinking the indigenous North might well be connecting the institutional with the individual and the inter-subjective. In this most welcome volume, "politics" is placed in the subtitle. For the next volume, it might be lifted to the main title.

**Mikko Lehtonen**