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Foreword



Peter Schweitzer

Environmental and geopolitical discussions about the future of humanity have recently centred on the Arctic. This development can be seen as having been triggered by a bundle of complex interconnections, ranging from the rapidity of Arctic climate change to the multitude of untapped resources in the North to the technological advances enabling their extraction. These developments are being framed by political processes including signs of a new Cold War and uneven steps toward indigenous self-determination. While the Circumpolar North has emerged as a projection site for southern dreams of resource extraction, marine shipping, or – alternatively – wilderness protection, lived realities within the Arctic are far from homogeneous. It was only in the 1990s, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, that the romantic notion of a Circumpolar North as a shared space, not only with similar environmental conditions but also with comparable social and cultural challenges, took a firm hold. Before that, the dichotomy between a Soviet Arctic and the rest prevented such shared points of view.

And yet those lived realities continue to reflect stark contrasts in social and political processes. It is not just the rising political tensions between the Russian Federation and the ‘West’ that threatens a unified Arctic perspective. Within the Circumpolar North, as the chapters in the present volume clearly illustrate, local and regional developments and living conditions seem not to be developing in parallel. Again, processes of political centralization and authoritarian

leadership have limited the range of options for local and indigenous communities in the Russian Arctic severely. Even if only considering the non-Russian part of the North for a moment, it would be difficult to argue for its homogeneity. While decolonization and sovereignty have been important topics everywhere, the political realities are quite diverse. Greenland, a former colony of Denmark, is the only Arctic territory that will gain state sovereignty in the foreseeable future. The prototypical settler colonies of Canada and the United States, on the other hand, use post-coloniality quite regularly on the rhetorical and symbolic level without providing any prospect of political independence for its indigenous inhabitants. Again, there are important differences between home rule as practised in Nunavut, the northernmost territory that is demographically (and, thus, politically) dominated by Inuit, and Alaskan indigenous groups, whose aboriginal rights were ‘bought off’ by the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA) and, thus, in the interpretation of some, extinguished. Still, even in Alaska certain forms of political self-determination can be found, such as in the North Slope Borough, the largest home rule Borough in the US.

The situation in northern Fennoscandia is complicated by a colonial history that is much older than Columbus’ 1492 voyage and by a subsequent economic and political integration into southern Fennoscandia that makes any political partition unrealistic. Still, the fact that the Sami (or Saami) are the only indigenous inhabitants of the northern tip of Europe and have managed to create a powerful, transnational NGO that effectively represents and vocalizes its interests, the Saami Council, attests to the specific realities of Arctic mainland Europe. The only other Arctic indigenous NGO comparable in size, scope and strength of voice is the Inuit Circumpolar Council, which – similar to the Saami Council, which has member organizations in Finland, Norway, Sweden and Russia – unites Inuit living in Alaska, Canada, Greenland and Russia. In both cases, Russian participation in these organizations is qualitatively and quantitatively different from that of the other countries. Still, the symbolic gesture of acknowledging that the Russian Arctic is inhabited at its eastern and western borders by indigenous groups closely related by linguistic and kinship ties to groups primarily residing in the ‘West’ remains important. Finally, Iceland constitutes a unique northern assemblage: the only Arctic state that is located in its entirety north of 60 degrees northern latitude has no indigenous inhabitants, as the Viking settlers who arrived from the ninth century AD onwards

only encountered some Irish and Scottish monks but no permanent population.

While the multitude of indigenous and non-indigenous lived realities in the Circumpolar North makes it reasonable to speak of 'Arctics' (see, particularly, the contributions by Callison, Ulturgasheva and Bodenhorn, this volume) instead of a supposedly homogeneous Arctic, climate change processes of recent decades have highlighted similarities again. What has sometimes been called the 'New Arctic', that is an Arctic environment threatened by enormous rates of change, might create a sort of community of common destiny in the face of profound changes in sea ice extent, snow cover, the state of permafrost, and other radical changes to the Arctic marine environment.

From the New Arctic to the People of the Cryosphere

Risky Futures, with its special focus on knowledge politics, voice, risk and non-human-centred cosmologies, does not limit itself to the Circumpolar North but extends its view to other world regions where low temperatures result in frozen water and frozen ground for large parts of the year. The cryosphere, as this part of the earth's surface is being called, is, apart from the Arctic, characteristic of high mountain areas. The Himalaya and neighbouring mountain ranges store more water in frozen form than any other part of the globe except for the North Pole and the South Pole, which justifies the label 'Third Pole' sometimes used in reference to the area. While other mountain ranges, such as the Andes or the European Alps, do not have the same extent as the Third Pole, they are nevertheless part of the cryosphere. And, in the same way as the New Arctic has been defined by melting snow and ice, as well as by thawing permafrost, these mountain regions have been among those most visibly affected by climate change. The similarities do not end with parallel environmental change processes. Like Arctic residents, mountain dwellers around the world have a long history of being marginalized by the state powers of the valleys. Similar to the Arctic, high mountain areas have been outside of (or, spatially speaking, above) lands suitable for most forms of agriculture, which has provided these relatively sparsely populated regions with the additional function of refuge from political and religious persecution. While 'people of the cryosphere' (Diemberger and Hovden, this volume) obviously lead extremely diverse lives under very different political, social and cultural circumstances, they share the fact that their homelands are located at the hot spots of

climate change. The necessity to make a living in remote parts of the cryosphere has historically made mining and tourism dominant economic sectors in Arctic and mountainous regions. Today, ongoing environmental change not only enables resource extraction from previously untouched sites but also encourages new forms of tourism, such as ‘last chance’ tourism to the Arctic or to disappearing mountain glaciers. This points to a fundamental conundrum for the people of the cryosphere: industrial societies from (mostly) moderate climate zones have triggered climate change processes, which have affected the cryosphere earlier and more intensively than elsewhere. While there might be economic benefits for some in certain parts of the Arctic or in high mountain areas – through mining or tourism as mentioned above – there are negative (social, economic and cultural) impacts for most. Most importantly, however, climate change not only alters the natural environments for those who have contributed little to the accumulation of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere but it also changes the terms of engagements with these environments to dualistic notions of development vs. protection, conservation vs. growth. People of the cryosphere have neither destroyed nor protected the environments they depend on, for the simple reason that sustained livelihoods in fragile ecosystems require respect for and humility toward the more-than-human forces that govern these ecosystems (Ulturgasheva, this volume). In a way, global climate change has forced the dualistic rhetoric of industrial societies onto people of the cryosphere engaging with, adapting to and battling the impacts of lifestyles that contradict the values and codes of behaviour of their ancestors.

More-Than-Climate-Change

Despite the prominence of climate change in this volume and in the cryosphere, it is important not to fall into the trap of ‘reducing the future to climate’ (Hulme 2011), in the Arctic or elsewhere. Centuries of colonialism, discrimination or, at best, paternalism, have created social, economic and cultural problems that continue to haunt the Arctic and its inhabitants. This creates situations in which environmental change, no matter how dramatic it may be, is being reduced to an issue of secondary relevance. This is not due to ignorance or ecological illiteracy. On the contrary, the ability to live successfully in the Arctic for hundreds and thousands of years rests on careful observations and a deep understanding of the environment, which is

not thought to be distinct from humans but a living system in which people are not the dominant actors.

The heterogeneity of the Arctic mentioned above is also reflected in how groups and settlements within the Arctic world relate to the issue of climate change. For one, different regions within the Circumpolar North are affected differently by climate change processes. For example, geology, building technology and other factors will determine to what degree houses and other structures of an Arctic settlement will be impacted by permafrost thaw. Likewise, coastal erosion depends on the physical make-up of a particular stretch of coastline in combination with what people do on that interface between land and sea. Finally, while many parts of the Arctic belong to regions where the notion of ‘climate change’ has been dominant in scientific and non-scientific discourses alike, other parts (such as the Russian Arctic) have not been part of regional or local conversations about global climate change until recently.

The issue cannot be reduced to the dichotomy of either acknowledging or denying climate change. It is about seeing this form of environmental change embedded within larger contexts of human-environmental relations. This includes, similar to the notion of the Anthropocene, a wider spectrum of ecological concerns rather than one limited to the climate. On the other hand, as the editors discuss in Chapter 1, it acknowledges that humans are part of the ‘climate crisis’ on every level, which involves politics, economics and cosmological understanding. Thus, ‘more-than-climate-change’ is about accepting the severity of climate change and the role of human choices in it, without assuming that people are almighty in their ability to combat or overcome it.

The Future of the Cryosphere and Its Peoples

The volume in front of you takes the reader from Alaska to Siberia, from Canada to the Himalaya and the European Alps. The stories along this journey speak as much of desperation and sorrow as they provide glimpses of hope and strong evidence of ingenuity and long-term resilience (Rasmus, this volume). So, what will the *Risky Futures* referenced in the title of this volume look like? One dramatic way of posing the question would be whether there will be an Arctic as we know it, that is an Arctic defined by snow and ice, the seasonal occurrence of which is an important enabler of Arctic livelihoods. In other words, is there a future for the cryosphere?

Of course, the answer rests with us humans, this strange species that managed to bring our planet to the brink of self-destruction. The good news is that an increasing number of people on earth are beginning to understand that we cannot afford to lose large parts of the cryosphere. While there was a time when people without winter sport ambitions and with homelands outside the cryosphere could shrug off the melting of snow and ice as if it wouldn't matter, today we understand that rising sea levels, reduced levels of reflection of solar radiation from the earth's surface, changes in ocean currents, etc., will affect everyone and not just people living in the Arctic. The 'right to be cold' (Watt-Cloutier 2015) is no longer just an issue for Inuit activists but should serve as a rallying cry for all of humanity.

It is clear that the entire cryosphere will not disappear in the foreseeable future. After all, high mountain areas will continue to receive precipitation in the form of snow for quite some time to come. Still, the climate change processes under way will significantly impact the lives of the peoples of the cryosphere. Thus, climate change will not just have direct impacts on the so-called natural environment of the Circumpolar North and beyond but also, at least indirectly, on its social environment and cultural activities. In short, it will become clear that – in our dependence on complex more-than-human environmental relations – we are all people of the cryosphere, who cannot afford to lose glaciers, ice or frozen ground, and need to insist on our 'right to be cold'.

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