

Arctic Modernities

Summary

Although the circumpolar Arctic since the late nineteenth century has become incorporated in global modernity via science, technology, tourism and international politics, it is still often perceived as “the other” of modernity, and little research has so far been done on the impact of modernisation/modernity on the Arctic as a cultural formation. In particular, we lack knowledge about how a previous history of heroic Arctic images – whether such traditions are affirmed, contested or repudiated – has shaped, influenced and informed modern discourses of the Arctic. This project will investigate aspects of Arctic modernity in its rich cultural and literary dimensions. It will concentrate on three nodal points that are often interlinked within discourses of Arctic modernity: gender, indigeneity and ecology. Gender is key to our understanding of modernisation processes in the Arctic, while indigeneity and ecology are inextricably linked in discourses of Arctic modernity that respond to the complexities and risks of Arctic developments – locally as well as globally. All three nodal points provide the possibility of critique and a necessary focus on the grey zones ignored in much present-day decision making about the Arctic. The potential for exposure of underlying attitudes will be exemplified in studies of material encompassing a wide spectrum of textual genres, from media debates, documentation, travel writing, guidebooks and memoirs on the one hand, to fiction and poetry on the other. The geographical span of the material is equally wide. In addition to representations of specific geographical locations across the transnational circumpolar area, the project covers the generalised North of travel writing and fantasy (as in utopian fictions of the North Pole). The perspectives on the Arctic in the selected material are both external/touristic, as exemplified by fantasy literature, travel writing, expedition narratives and sociological reports, and internal/indigenous, based on residency and intimate local knowledges. The project will also include such visual genres as painting, architecture and film.

1. Relevance

The Arctic is undergoing rapid changes both in its physical state and in the way it is presented and perceived, creating in the short term imbalances and blind spots in our understanding of the processes involved. Currently, the melting of the Arctic ice is taken both as a warning of ecological risks and as a promise of economic opportunity in terms of transportation (goods and tourists) and resources (mostly energy, but also minerals, food and genetics). Powerful interests, both political and commercial, are closing in on the Arctic and the circumpolar area in ways which are often both contradictory and simplifying. For obvious reasons both private and state research funding is mainly focused on the natural sciences: the understanding of climate change, the management of biodiversity, and the mapping and extraction of resources. Some secondary funding goes into social-science approaches to tourism development and problems in indigenous societies. Common for all these forms of research is that their perspectives are mostly contemporary and that their object of research is the Arctic itself.

The Arctic Modernities project will contribute to the correction of these research imbalances by addressing the very basis of our Arctic decisions and desires: namely, our attitudes to the Arctic as formed by the history of perceptions and images of the Polar Regions. Some considerable research has already been done on “Arctic discourses” in an older “heroic age” of exploration, with its often masculinist and imperialist perspectives, but we will be addressing a post-heroic age in which our relationship to the Arctic has undergone a consolidated process of modernisation. The immediate relevance of this stage in the process is that it leads up to the ongoing challenges we are facing in the Arctic arena. In order to create a better understanding of the complexity of these ongoing challenges, Arctic Modernities will address the cultural and aesthetic field. It seeks to evaluate the field’s potential for a “de-simplifying” critique and exposure of the underlying

historical attitudes. The project is therefore relevant to the Polar Research Programme (POLARPROG).

2. Aspects relating to the research project

2.1. Background and status of knowledge

This section outlines the background of the project in 1) studies of Arctic discourses and 2) theories of modernity, as well as the key challenges to current knowledge.

1) Studies of Arctic discourses. During the so-called heroic age of polar exploration the Arctic was typically represented in atemporal terms, as a battling ground for the superhuman struggles of a few exceptional men against the forces of nature – in which the values and masculine virtues of the hero figures were also seen to symbolise those of the nation. Remnants of this masculinist rhetoric survive in many contemporary narratives of technology-supported polar adventures (see e.g. Kagge 1990; Ousland 1994). But at the present time, and with the melting of the polar ice cap, the Arctic is increasingly represented as the site of urgent economic, geopolitical and/or cultural conflicts of interest affecting the global community, while the national and local focus has also been on issues such as indigeneous rights, resource development and the environmental impact of gas and oil production (cf. Grant 2010; Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Meld. St. 7, 2011–2012).

The political and social implications of climate change, industrial development and technology for the future of the Arctic, as well as of the militarisation of the Arctic during and after the Cold War, have been thoroughly documented in recent years (e.g. Tamnes 1991; Grant 2010; Sale and Potapov 2010; Williams 2010; Smith 2012). Likewise, there has been a growing interest in the history of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century polar exploration (e.g. Bloom 1993; Spufford 1996; Moss 2006). We have also seen the publication of studies of the Arctic in national cultures, usually connected to one specific geographical location, Canada in particular (Atwood 1995; Grace 2001; Hulan 2002). Several collections of articles encompassing Arctic discourses from the whole circumpolar area are evidence of an expanding field (Bravo and Sörlin 2002; Hansson and Norberg 2009; Ryall, Schimanski and Wærp 2010; Schimanski, Theodorsen and Wærp 2011). While some of this work deals with recent history, the focus has rarely been on the Arctic as a site of discourses of modernity. Likewise, with a few exceptions (Bloom 1993; Hauan 2007; Ryall 2007; Hansson 2009, Ryall 2009), there has been little extended emphasis on gender in studies of Arctic discourses.

In the history of Arctic exploration, 1930 – the year the famous Norwegian explorer Fridtjof Nansen died – marks a symbolic end of the masculinist heroic age. But for over half a century, at least since the 1870s, the Arctic had increasingly been seen under the sign of the modern, and even the famous polar explorers had made themselves increasingly dependent on modern technologies of transportation, as when Roald Amundsen, Lincoln Ellsworth and Umberto Nobile concluded the quest for the North Pole in 1926 by flying over it in an airship (Fleming 2001). During the past century the Arctic has gradually become a space of scientific investigation, tourism and industrial developments – *The Spitzbergen Coal and Trading Company*, for example, was founded in 1904 (Arlov 2003) – rather than geographical discovery and “firsts”. In fact, if tourism is a defining feature of modernity, as Dean MacCannell has claimed (MacCannell 1989), it may be argued that the Arctic became part of modernity through its growing accessibility and its discovery as a tourist destination from the late nineteenth century onwards. All these processes of modernisation are complexly related to changes in the practices and conceptions of gender. But the impact of such various factors as air travel, industry, tourism, urgent environmental concerns and changing gender norms on discourses of Arctic modernity remains largely unexamined.

2) Theories of modernity. The exact geographical delimitation of the Arctic is contested, and the same could with even more justification be said about the terms “modern”, “modernisation”, “modernity” and “modernism”. It has often been taken for granted that modernity, in the words of

Anthony Giddens, is “distinctively a Western project” with roots in European history and radiating from there to other parts of the world (e.g. Giddens 1990; Giddens 1991; Punter 2007). Models of power relations based on a centre/periphery binary still sometimes form an unexamined framework of studies of modernity/modernism. However, in recent decades theorists of modernity have rejected what the geographer J.M. Blaut has called “Eurocentric diffusionism”, a narrative of universal modernity based on the notion that metropolitan Europeans make history through progress and innovation while the rest of the world represents a permanent periphery that imitates the centre(s) and therefore always lags behind (Blaut 1993).

Abandoning a diffusionist perspective, many theorists now argue in favour of a polycentric view in which every location constitutes its own centre and represents a multiplicity of continually evolving and diverse modernities (e.g. Felski 1995; Eisenstadt and Schluchter 1998; Wittrock 1998; Booth and Rigby 2000; Eisenstadt 2000; Felski 2000; Friedman 2006). Theorists of both culture and literature therefore call for a new geography of modernity in which modernity/modernism is seen as transnational breaks with tradition (Appadurai 1996; Doyle and Winkiel 2005; Friedman 2006; Ramazani 2009). Such spatialisation of modernities, emphasising “the temporal rupture of before/after wherever and whenever such ruptures might occur in time and space” (Friedman 2006), has also necessarily had a crucial effect on historical periodization. Although this new work on plural modernities has usually focused on southern postcolonial discourses, its findings encourage investigations of discourses of Arctic modernity outside of the framework of a conventional centre/periphery perspective.

The move from a temporal to a spatialised view of modernity has caused a rethinking of the meaning of the term itself. In her influential provisional definition of modernity Susan Stanford Friedman rejects “nominal” (noun-based) definitions of modernity which connect it to a particular historical moment in Western history and argues instead in favour of a strategic “relational” (adjectivally-based) definition (Friedman 2001). In this view the term “modernity”, like its siblings “modern”, “modernisation” and “modernism”, acquires its meaning through negation, as a rebellion – often figured as a “new”, emancipated and secularised, woman – against a presumed past (Felski 1995; Friedman 2001; Friedman 2006). Hence, modernity is conceived as a global, shifting and unstable category that can only be understood within a geographically specific comparative “modern”/“traditional” binary (Subrahmanyam 1998). Across the circumpolar Arctic, too, there are many “alternative modernities” (Gaonkar 1999) that each requires a different contextualisation.

Some theorists, most notably Bruno Latour, have argued against definitions of modernity that rely on the assumption that there is a rupture between modernity and tradition (Latour 1993). Modernity in Latour’s definition depends on the work of “purification”, i.e. the creation of two distinct ontological zones, that of humans/culture on the one hand, nonhumans/nature on the other. However, he also argues that the practices of purification are always concomitant with practices of “translation” and “hybridisation”. The proliferation of hybrids between nonhuman and human – global warming is a good example of this; another is the militarisation of the Arctic, where the pristine-looking ice cap conceals an arsenal of far-reaching nuclear submarines – creates mixed categories, while modernity is dependent on keeping the two sets apart. Latour’s attempt to find a position beyond the either/or of modernity via an emphasis on the nonseparability of the common productions of societies and natures holds great promise for the study of Arctic modernities.

2.2. Approaches, hypotheses and choice of methods

Although the main emphasis of the project is on the Arctic as a Polar Region (cf. *Norsk polarforskning. Forskningsrådets policy for 2010–2013*), from a humanities and social science perspective a more generous definition of the Arctic is necessary. On the basis of the 2004 *Arctic Human Development Report*, the geographer Laurence Smith therefore proposes a wider definition that includes a larger area than the Arctic proper, that is, the area north of the Arctic Circle (at 66° 33’N), the approximate limit of the midnight sun and the polar night (Smith 2012). Socially and

politically the Arctic region encompasses the northern territories of the eight Arctic states, including (in Fenno-Scandinavia) Lapland/Sápmi, although by natural science definitions much of this territory is considered subarctic. As is obvious in writings about the Arctic, however, the exact demarcations of the area are less important than the cultural notions surrounding it as representing a generalised North. Hence the question, from a humanities perspective, is not so much where the Arctic actually begins as where we imagine that it begins.

Put differently, the Arctic is *also* a discursive formation. As defined by Michel Foucault, discourse is the system of representation formed by a network of statements, or using Foucault's term, enunciative functions (Foucault 1972). It is the series of signs that combine into a meaning-bearing sign system with rules that regulate how a topic can be talked about. Edward Said goes even further and argues that authoritative texts actually create both the knowledge and the reality the texts seem to describe (Said 1978). In this view language constitutes knowledge and is not simply the means of expressing a pre-existing knowledge or truth. Discourse joins knowledge with power and may function as a tool for oppression and control, but any discursive system is also inherently unstable since it constantly needs to incorporate new units or enunciations. As a result, discursive formations are necessarily incomplete and always contain what they do not articulate or actively seem to negate. While discourse is an instrument of power, it also engenders opposition, and it is always important to ask what and whose interests are served by a particular discursive formation and what may be invested in its continued circulation in culture (Grace 2001, Hulan 2002).

One of the most persistent discourses about the Arctic in the last two hundred years has been the image of it as a cold, empty, dangerous region imbued with notions of heroic masculinity and frontier rhetoric. This has to a great extent persisted in spite of historical developments over the past century, when the circumpolar Arctic has been incorporated in modernity in an array of locally specific ways. This project will examine to what extent these processes of modernisation have changed the discursive signification of the Arctic, and to what extent the traditions of heroic Arctic images – whether these traditions are affirmed, contested or repudiated – have shaped, influenced and informed modern discourses of the Arctic. Theoretically the project will be grounded in the three approaches to modernity outlined above – i.e. modernity as a multifarious phenomenon that has brought forward different transnational variants that have strong local roots and geographical specificity, modernity as a rupture between present and past, and modernity as practices of purification that deny the proliferation of hybrids between human/culture and nonhuman/nature. However, the focus will be less on theory than on case studies of particularised discourses of Arctic modernity. Some will be general in scope, others will be targeted studies of texts. All will be close readings informed by the historical and cultural knowledge necessary to produce what Clifford Geertz calls “thick description” (Geertz 1983).

In terms of “a new geography of modernity” the project will investigate some *specificities* of Arctic modernity. In general, however, the modern Arctic seems to have a double discursive signification. On the one hand it signifies something accessible, everyday and mundane; on the other it is a never-never land of romance and adventure. While the exploration narratives of Nansen and his contemporaries may be viewed as quests for sanctuary from modernity (Wærp 2010), much recent writing on the Arctic has made it synonymous with modernity itself. Hence in Soviet writing of the 1930s, for example, the Arctic is promoted as an exemplary region in which technological innovations, social warmth and imagination would irradicate the hardships of remoteness and a cold climate (Frank 2010). Related utopian images are also found in representations of the Nordic North as exemplary of progressive gender politics in women's travel writings from around 1900 (Ryall 2009; Hansson 2011). As a utopian space the Arctic points to a different future – manifested, for example, in Ralph Erskine's Arctic architecture and in Mars mission tests on Devon Island and Svalbard. At the same time it often seems to have become an expression of the continued survival – within modernity – of the past as nostalgia, longing, dream and myth. In the words of Sherrill Grace, “unlike the permafrost and ice, myths are less amenable to climate change” (Grace 2010).

Hence the Arctic often appears as a countermodernity, embodying mythic or romantic dimension existing beyond the modern everyday world while remaining thoroughly imbricated in modernity.

One hypothesis linking many of the contributions to the project is that the Arctic may be seen as a stark embodiment of the paradoxes of modernity. This is one reason we believe that a study of the discursive significations of the modern Arctic may throw light on general processes of modernisation. We want to investigate both how discourses of the Arctic have been inflected by various kinds of modernisation and how traditions of heroic Arctic images – whether these traditions are affirmed, contested or repudiated – have shaped, influenced and informed modern discourses of the Arctic. Our focus is primarily literary/textual, encompassing a wide spectrum of textual genres, from media debates, documentation, travel writing, guidebooks and memoirs on the one hand, to fiction and poetry on the other. The geographical span of the material is equally wide. In addition to representations of specific geographical locations across the transnational circumpolar area, the project covers the generalised North of travel writing and fantasy (as in utopian fictions of the North Pole). The perspectives on the Arctic in the selected material are both external/touristic, as exemplified by fantasy literature, travel writing, expedition narratives and sociological reports, and internal/indigenous and based on intimate local knowledges.

Preliminary investigations suggest that three interlinked nodal points are central to discourses of Arctic modernity: 1) gender, 2) indigeneity, and 3) ecology. The incorporation of the circumpolar Arctic into modernity via tourism, technology and resource exploitation, is complexly related to changes in the practices and conceptions of gender. We therefore consider gender as key to our understanding of modernisation processes in the Arctic, as well as to the persistent images of the Arctic as countermodernity. Indigeneity and ecology, while often connected to questions of gender, are inextricably linked in discourses of Arctic modernity that respond to the complexities and risks of Arctic developments – locally as well as globally. All three nodal points provide the possibility of critique and a necessary focus on the grey zones ignored in much present-day decision making about the Arctic.

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