13

Postscript

Extractivism after the "New Arctic"

SVERKER SÖRLIN

There is nowadays no shortage of books on the Arctic – and this is the last chapter of yet another one. What is different at the end of the read? To answer that question, let me start with a reflection on the understanding we had when we embarked upon writing this book. Despite the rich diversity of publications on the topic, it is possible to discern a few major lines of analysis in the growing body of literature on contemporary Arctic change. One such approach consists of attempts to map and take stock of state-of-the-art knowledge on multiple dimensions of environment, climate, and social conditions in the region. In this category we find the rising genre of "assessments," many issued by the Arctic Council, of for example: biodiversity, pollution, human health, snow and ice, climate adaptation, impacts of climate change, and a range of other topics. The *Arctic Human Development Reports* (Einarsson et al., 2004; Fondahl & Larsen, 2014) also belong here, typically broad, multi-authored, anchored in new research, and accessible for wider policy and professional audiences. An attempt to synthesize this broad strand of knowledge was the *Arctic Resilience Report* (Carson & Peterson, 2016). It compiled an impressive amount of data from many knowledge areas and established better understanding of complex relationships but had less to say about how to interpret this new knowledge and how to use it to address the challenges.

Another line of research in the last two decades has been on the "new Arctic" in the post-Cold War era. It is represented by several books and reports on the melting of sea ice, opening of sea routes, globalizing tourism, and more generally a release of economic opportunities, including a boom in mineral and energy resources. This literature – itself an old tradition of resource myth and lore in Arctic affairs – saw a peak in the early 2010s with titles such as Charles Emmerson's, *The Future History of the Arctic* (2010) and Lawrence C. Smith's, *The New North: Our World in 2050* (2011). For a period, this perspective of a Glasnost plus end of Cold War 1989 "rupture" was predominant, and the "new" kept creeping into the very language of Arctic reporting, conferencing, and books,

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009110044.020 Published online by Cambridge University Press

such as *The New Arctic* (Evengård, Larsen, & Paasche, 2015), or *Brave New Arctic* (Serreze, 2018). The titles themselves could be quite different, and not all books shared in the hype. The language and the framings were often common, however, and the political significance of this, for some time almost paradigmatic, understanding of the Arctic future cannot be overestimated.

Well into the Agenda 2030 decade, and after dramatic swings of both mineral and oil and gas markets, this already seems a long time ago. Much of what the speculations were based on, such as massive extraction of fossil fuel resources, is now surrounded by deep uncertainty related to the decarbonizing agenda that followed the 2015 Paris agreement and the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) from the same year, the former reinforced by the Glasgow COP meeting in 2021. Nor do the previous chapters of this book really offer much cause to support the rosier futures that were in circulation. It seems that the expansionist, resource hype version of the twenty-first century Arctic is losing some of its relevance as world and regional developments have taken new turns.

Path Dependency: The Extractivist Curse?

What has come instead? It is hard to say. Plans to continue and grow resource extraction remain for sure, but the hype is no longer there. The Arctic is certainly heating, but it is no longer as "hot." The scholarly and policy-related literature in recent years reflects a mood of concern and critical reflection. We could go back to Oran Young's foundational book on *Arctic Politics* (1992). He predicted, as it turned out quite correctly, that the Arctic after the Cold War would gravitate into a more significant role in world affairs and occupy a position as a region with its own brand and agenda. The reasons he gave were several, including interesting experimentation in multi-level governance and the testing of international cooperation regimes. Another important reason was the extraction of natural resources:

> [T]he Far North, which is undoubtedly a storehouse of raw materials of great value to advanced industrial societies, has become a critical arena, not only for those desiring to reexamine the efficacy of traditional resource regimes but also for those wishing to dig deeper in an effort to rethink the bases on which we organize human/environment relations (Young, 1992: x).

While innovative, this way of looking at the region had an in-built ambivalence. The Arctic was an emerging policy *subject*, thawing out after the long Cold War freeze, with a voice of its own and seeking new ways forward. At the same time, it remained an *object* of security and resource politics from southern states, for which an endogenous development of the Far North was, literally, a peripheral issue,

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009110044.020 Published online by Cambridge University Press

especially for the emerging Arctic wannabes, such as India, China, South Korea, and Japan. As an effect of this dual outlook, the energy and vibrancy in the Arctic literature was directed both on the commercial growth of resource extraction and on policy innovation in international relations, markedly the Arctic Council, which started in 1996 as a genuinely new post-Cold War institution for governance in the north (Burke, 2020).

At first, this growing literature endorsed the post-1989 development, but with time, it also marked the shifting conjunctures for the Arctic in the international arena. Carina Keskitalo's analysis of the post-Cold War regionalization, *Negotiating the Arctic: The Construction of an International Region* (2004) is a case in point, and can be juxtaposed with her own edited collection, *The Politics of Arctic Resources* (2019) less than two decades later. While the first presented the birth of a modern transnational Arctic as subject, the latter volume took a distinctly different view, looking at continuities and patterns over the long term and articulating a more complex, diverse, and ambiguous set of Arctic relations.

Other synthetic approaches in recent years have presented similar perceptions of an Arctic region where less has changed than anticipated, either in the real-life conditions of communities or in the stature of the Arctic in the wider scheme of world affairs. On most public health, educational, and other social and welfare indicators, the Arctic region lags behind compared to the southern parts of Arctic states. To this pattern, the Nordic countries are an exception, linked to the integrative policies of these countries going all the way back to Christian mission and national policies in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries on the principle of equality within the national territory (Sörlin, 2019).

Entering the Agenda 2030 decade, the deep Cold War past still casts long shadows on the Arctic (Bocking & Heidt, 2019). Whatever innovative policy solutions may come up, the Arctic seems set on a resource-oriented path dependency where "history matters" (Tilly, 1988). The Eurasian Arctic remains closely tied to Russian security and economic interests (Josephson, 2014). In Sweden, the far north is embarking on a massive "new industrialization," taking a "lead position in the new industrial revolution, shifting to technologies aimed to slow climate change" (Nilsen, 2021). The shift is propelled by the availability in the region of many forms of minerals, "green" electric energy, and the potential to produce fossil-free steel in just a few years, repeating the natural resource hype of ca. 1900, when the north was the "Land of the Future" (Sörlin, 1989). Norway has abandoned coal in Svalbard, but on the other hand moves prospecting for oil and gas further north into the Barents Sea, actually not far from the Svalbard coast. It also takes a forward-leaning position in the UNCLOS process, arguing that all islands in the Svalbard archipelago be surrounded by the 200 nautical mile boundary, wanting to secure vast areas of the Arctic Ocean for domestic offshore extraction.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009110044.020 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Sustainabilities: A Plural?

The much-desired state of sustainability has also been the topic of lively discussions, which does not seem to diminish its phantom-like characteristic, hard to grasp and even harder to realize (Fondahl & Wilson, 2017). Nor do the geopolitical framings of the Arctic seem to establish any convergence, and the Arctic Council, however innovative and functional, remains an exclusive club-like vessel for a rather limited set of issues (Dodds & Powell, 2014; Burke, 2020). The fate of individual communities is unpredictable and diverse, as many of the cases in this volume suggest. Forced migrations are sadly a common phenomenon around the circumpolar Arctic (Bronen, 2014; Labba, 2020). Qaanaaq in North Western Greenland is one example. Its 650 inhabitants are the descendants of villagers who were moved a hundred kilometers north in the 1950s to enable the expansion of the United States Thule Air Base. Today they adapt as best they can to disintegrating ice and shorter hunting seasons due to climate change, demonstrating resilience and a capacity for survival but not necessarily enjoying a state of sustainability (Hastrup, 2017, 2020).

In many studies, the innate political character of sustainability has become both articulated and critiqued. It is oriented toward the future, but the normative function that this word signals remains weak, which also makes assessing the past and the present hard, and Arctic scientists often shy away from drawing the gloomier conclusions for fear of having overstated their case (Wormbs, 2015). Even a broad circumpolar review of sustainable development gives little reason for genuine satisfaction about the progress of sustainability "on the ground" (Gad & Strandsbjerg, 2018), although the rich diversity of resources in a multiplicity of Arctics could also give rise to an idea of "sustainabilities" in the plural and therefore some optimism (Tennberg, Lempinen, & Pirnes, 2020). In the last decade the mood has shifted from a unidirectional trajectory toward a rising Arctic to an understanding that futures are also in the plural, hence some brighter and others far less so. What these futures will become is undetermined and ultimately the responsibility of people and the outcome of different, opposing politics, as suggested in a volume with precisely that title, *Competing Arctic Futures* (Wormbs, 2018).

Impressive as much of this literature is, with a sizable growth in research output from the social sciences and humanities during and after the Fourth International Polar Year 2007–2008, some of its policy-oriented contributions remained for a long time predicated on unfounded expectations of future economic growth and resource-based societal transformation. More recent work, such as the literature cited previously, has already started to reflect on new and more diverse approaches. This literature suggests that there is little uniformity. In that, Oran Young's assumptions were somewhat overstated. Clearly, there has been a regional formation, and the Arctic has gained a higher profile as a region in world

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009110044.020 Published online by Cambridge University Press

affairs. However, the interests within the region are less coherently presented than could be expected, and much of the decision making takes place with interests outside of the region in mind. The Arctic may have grown as a political object, but as a subject not as much.

A possible conclusion is this: While the past couple of decades saw a proliferation of approaches united by the notion that the post-1989 Arctic was a very special and forward-looking place, in the 2020s this view is changing dramatically. The trajectories of change are less distinct and paradigmatic than previous understanding suggested. The challenges are perhaps even more profound, but not so uplifting, rather disturbing, potentially devastating. The glorious future envisioned is, in reality, much more uncertain, with some of the visions even more unlikely than they were pre-1989. Back then, détente and sustainable development were held out as an opportunity, but most of the promises came to little. The future Arctic of the 2020s is no longer as "new," and certainly not as merry as that which was hyped for decades but not delivered.

Entering the Extractivist Paradigm

Part of this adjustment to realities has come from experiences of resource extraction. It is a crucial part of the path dependency in the Arctic. We have argued throughout this book that it is always there and that it changes only in form and intensity. We also argue that resource extraction has expanded its reach and has already been turning into resource extractivism, which is more than the extraction itself. It is a social formation and an outlook on the world. We asked: Could resource extraction co-exist in harmony with Indigenous and settler communities? Could even the Arctic become a vanguard of responsible mining and extraction? Ultimately of sustainability.

We have found some progress, explored ways of transitioning from extraction to post-mining futures and wiser forms of collaboration and consultation, and seen alliances between multiple actors find new ways forward for sustainable development. Some initiatives are very recent and can spur progress in years to come. New Arctic strategies, focusing on people and local development, were adopted by the pan-Nordic Sámi (2019) and the European Union (2021). The updated EU Arctic strategy has been welcomed by the Sámi community for its respect for Indigenous communities and its demand that fossil fuels should stay in the ground but has also been met with concern for its focus on the Arctic's potential as a region of renewable energy production.[1]

However, we have also seen political inertia and additional "multiple pressures" on local, especially Indigenous, communities. Resources, landscapes, cultures, and livelihoods are severely affected by the expanding extraction operations. In

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009110044.020 Published online by Cambridge University Press

addition to these accumulated changes, the last few decades have seen the start of what most envision, and hope, will become a period of transformational change to meet the UN SDGs, and say a last goodbye to the fossil fuel regime that the modern world is increasingly suffering from. Such a farewell to the fossil fuel age would mean a great deal for Arctic futures. Without it, the Arctic as we know it would be in serious trouble for the rest of this century.

The crux, though, is that the new resources that the Arctic can offer to the world as it transitions – mines for copper, nickel, iron ore, and rare earth minerals, as well as energy from hydro and wind – at present risk making things worse. Arctic extraction does not seem to foster more sustainable and thriving local communities in any straightforward fashion. It seems, on the contrary, to cement the Arctic's position as a predominant raw materials region with communities that are depopulating, albeit with occasional centers of growth. It is a genuine dilemma, since extraction also means advantages for some in the short term.

At present, we do see a phasing out of some mining, especially coal in the European Arctic. There is growth in alternative sources of income such as tourism, and investments in science with huge observation stations and networks collecting data about climate and environment. The flipside of that coin is that the data typically are used elsewhere. Monitoring the planet doesn't necessarily build community in any single site. Tourism has its extractive properties, wearing and tearing on environments and cultures, and in some areas of the Arctic its sustainability is already seriously questioned (Runge, Daigle, & Hausner, 2020). Extraction and harvesting come in different shapes and sizes. It is not just extraction per se, it is also institutions, policies, knowledge, and a state of mind that tend to reinvent themselves and expand into new domains.

We have called all of this this *the new extractivist paradigm*. It is a concept for an expanding, contemporary extractivism that encompasses ever more sectors of society and the economy. It may not be what we had wanted to find, but even undesired results are results. The pathways the Arctic is currently on will not build the sort of sustainability that aligns itself with the demands of the UN SDGs.

Radically different development models for the Arctic are urgently required. It probably means new trade-offs, if the transition to a fossil-free world is going to be a "just transition" for the Arctic. This fairly small and vulnerable part of the world, with a mere four million of the world's soon eight billion inhabitants, cannot carry the burden of supplying large parts of the world's needs for energy and minerals. Nor can prohibitions and restrictions be imposed on communities that have been highly dependent on such extractive activities for employment, investment, and training. As many Indigenous communities in the Arctic have complained, a heavy-handed "green colonialism" is making itself felt with new demands for mining to cease in order that the Arctic be "saved" from further privation.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009110044.020 Published online by Cambridge University Press

This is a serious thing. After several post-1989 decades of Arctic resource hype and frenzy, it is time to face the realities of the green transition, as the fossil fuel regime will remain up and running for some time yet. A bountiful Arctic functioning as a resource frontier may seem beneficial for the world as a whole – just as outsiders often wish to ensure that the Arctic continues to be imagined and framed as a "wilderness" rather than an extractive-industrial hinterland with settler and Indigenous communities living and working within it.

This is the Arctic paradox. The Arctic already serves as the bellwether of global climate change, with melting ice, thawing permafrost, and receding snow covers. It is right now sliding ever deeper into the role of a global resource hinterland whose own future is subservient to saving smooth transitions elsewhere. Nor is it easy for Arctic communities and citizens to take their own decisions and choose when to use a resource and when not to. They are trapped in the strategies of their nation states, and in copious external resource demand.

Local populations are sometimes divided. Indigenous corporations in Alaska want oil extraction to continue, and some Inuit communities in Greenland stand behind the, now abandoned, prospect of excavating uranium. They are Arctic outliers of strong international interests, commercial and geopolitical, from around the world, who want nothing else than for extraction to continue, however problematic it may be. Others try to argue that new pathways, not yet seriously discussed, must be carved out and compromises struck. There are pan-Arctic business voices arguing for investment in infrastructure, mineral, renewable energies, and for clean, green, and sustainable use of fish and other marine life.[2]

Sustainable resource development will have to transcend and surpass the extractivist path dependency. The chapters of this book have shown that the time-perspective of extraction must be very long and allow for post-extractive futures that are viable and attractive to local residents and Indigenous communities. These chapters have also shown the importance of affect and of participatory deliberation that is not just symbolic. The book has demonstrated clearly that existing forms of extraction remain insensitive to values that are essential for communities. To overcome this, critical and careful navigation is necessary. It will require ingenuity, skill, endurance, and collaboration. Geopolitically, it is a massive challenge given the determination of Arctic states to assert their permanent sovereign rights over Arctic territories.

This book is about the Arctic, but the way the Arctic is changing reflects, more than ever, change going on in other parts of the world. The external forces acting on the region are strong, and the stakes are high. The Arctic has, quite recently, been presented as an opportunity, a bonanza, a future for the world. In this book's rendering, it comes across as a moral and political test case. Not just for Arctic states but for the world.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009110044.020 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Notes

1 www.saamicouncil.net, visited January 27, 2022.

2 An example is the Arctic Economic Council. See: www.nib.int/cases/invest-in-arctic-solutions-for-global-green-transformation, visited January 27, 2022.

References

Bocking, S. and Heidt, D., eds. (2019). *Cold Science: Environmental Knowledge in the North American Arctic during the Cold War*. London: Routledge.

Bronen, R. (2014). Choice and necessity: Relocations in the Arctic and South Pacific. *Forced Migration Review*, 45, 17–21.

Burke, D. C. (2020). *Diplomacy and the Arctic Council*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press.

Carson, M. and Peterson, G., eds. (2016). Arctic Resilience Report. Stockholm: Arctic Council, Stockholm Environment Institute and Stockholm Resilience Centre. www.arctic-council.org/arr.

Dodds, K. and Powell, R. C., eds. (2014). *Polar Geopolitics: Knowledges, Resources and Legal Regimes*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.

Einarsson, N., Larsen, J. N., Nilsson, A., and Young, O. R. (2004). *Arctic Human Development Report*. Akureyri: Stefansson Arctic Institute, under the auspices of the Icelandic Chairmanship of the Arctic Council 2002–2004.

Emmerson, C. (2010). *The Future History of the Arctic: How Climate, Resources and Geopolitics Are Reshaping the North, and Why It Matters to the World*. London: Vintage Books.

Evengård, B., Larsen, J. N., and Paasche, Ø. (2015). *The New Arctic*. Cham, Heidelberg, and New York: Springer.

Fondahl, G. and Larsen, J. N., eds. (2014). *Arctic Human Development Report: Regional Processes and Global Linkages. TemaNord 2014:567*. Copenhagen: Nordic Council of Ministers.

Fondahl, G. and Wilson, G. N., eds. (2017). *Northern Sustainabilities: Understanding and Addressing Change in the Circumpolar World*. Cham: Springer.

Gad, U. P. and Strandsbjerg, J., eds. (2018). *The Politics of Sustainability in the Arctic: Reconfiguring Identity, Space, and Time*. Abingdon and New York: Routledge.

Hastrup, K. (2017). The viability of a high Arctic hunting community: A Historical perspective. In M. Brightman and J. Lewis, eds., *The Anthropology of Sustainability: Beyond Development and Progress*. New York: Palgrave, pp. 145–164.

Hastrup, K. (2020). Thule as frontier: Commons, contested resources, and contact zones in the high Arctic. *Anthropological Journal of European Cultures*, 29(1), 1–19. https://doi.org/10.3167/ajec.2020.290102

Josephson, P. (2014). *The Conquest of the Russian Arctic*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Keskitalo, E. C. H. (2004). *Negotiating the Arctic: The Construction of an International Region*. New York: Routledge.

Keskitalo, E. C. H., ed. (2019). *The Politics of Arctic Resources: Change and Continuity in the "Old North" of Northern Europe*. Abingdon and New York: Routledge.

Labba, E. A. (2020). *Herrarna satte oss hit*. Stockholm: Norstedts.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009110044.020 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Nilsen, T. (2021). North Swedish battery gigafactory expands before production start. *The Barents Observer* article. https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/industry-and-energy/2021/06/north-swedish-battery-gigafactory-expands-production-start

Runge, C. A., Daigle R. M., and Hausner, V. H. (2020). Quantifying tourism booms and the increasing footprint in the Arctic with social media data. *PLoS ONE* 15(1): e0227189. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0227189

Serreze, M. C. (2018). *Brave New Arctic: The Untold Story of the Melting North*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Smith, L. C. (2011). *The New North: Our World in 2050*. London: Profile Books.

Sörlin, S. (1989). *Land of the Future: Norrland and the North in Sweden and European Consciousness*. Umeå: Center for Arctic Cultural Research, Umeå University.

Sörlin, S. (2019). State and resources in the North: From territorial assertion to the "*smorgasbord* state." In E. C. H. Keskitalo. ed., *The Politics of Arctic Resources: Change and Continuity in the "Old North" of Northern Europe*. Abingdon and New York: Routledge, pp. 38–61.

Tennberg, M., Lempinen, H., and Pirnes, S., eds. (2020). *Resources, Social and Cultural Sustainabilities in the Arctic*. London: Routledge.

Tilly, C. (1988). Future history. *Theory and Society*, 17(6), 703–712. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00162616

Wormbs, N. (2015). The assessed Arctic: How monitoring can be silently normative. In B. Evengård, J. N. Larsen, and Ø. Paasche, eds., *The New Arctic*. Cham: Springer, pp. 291–301.

Wormbs, N., ed. (2018). *Competing Arctic Futures: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Young, O. R. (1992). *Arctic Politics: Conflict and Cooperation in the Circumpolar North*. Hannover, NH and London: University Press of New England.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009110044.020 Published online by Cambridge University Press