

Re-framing the relevance and presentations of northern geographies

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Abstract: Given the growing geo-political significance of northern geographies, let alone their role as benchmarks of global environmental change, it is no surprise that northern high latitudes are receiving more attention than ever before. As Hall and Saarinen (2008) noted in an editorial in *Fennia* for a special issue on tourism and change in northern geographies, ‘Once portrayed as locations of natural curiosities and as a source of Nordic identity through contact with harsh nature there have been substantial changes in representation of the north in recent years’ (Hall and Saarinen 2008: 1). Of course such a statement raises the question of what are the various representations of northern geographies and what is their contemporary relevance?

The extent of northern geographies

The first point to be made, at an empirical level, is that there are actually surprisingly few academic publications that specifically mention ‘northern geographies’. That great friend of students and researchers alike, Google Scholar, for example only identifies 40 publications that use the term, as opposed to over 200 on ‘northern geography’ and almost 700 on ‘nordicity’ (search conducted 30 November 2013). Scopus identifies only two papers that refers to northern geographies in either title or abstract, one the previously mentioned Hall and Saarinen (2008) work and the other being another Finnish publication (Robbins and Heikkinen 2006), while Web of Science does not identify any. Such a situation does not necessarily negate the significance of

either the north or geography but it does suggest that a more thorough interrogation of the concept may be required than what first appears at the surface.

The notion of the North undoubtedly provides a rich symbolic and mental landscape that is deeply embedded in the image and self-understanding of northern high-latitude regions and countries (Hamelin 1979; Shields 1991; Powell 2005). These have been well explicated by Medvedev (2001: 91), ‘Lacking in rationality, the north is rich in mythos and implied meanings’. In many traditional mythologies the north is singled out among other parts of the world as essentially being the outer fringe.’ The north is left as ‘the last Frontier, the only part of the world that holds the fascination of emptiness, a white space in our mental maps’ with the implications of this being substantial for tourism (Hall 2008) because

of the symbolic value of northernness. 'Europe's southernmost and easternmost points are hardly known to the public at all... The north turns out to be marketable precisely because of its remoteness, relative obscurity and anonymity' (Medvedev 2001: 91).

Medvedev's (2001) comments suggest that the north occupies a similar spatial identity as that of the frontier West in American and Chinese history. The American and Chinese frontiers have often been represented as empty spaces waiting to be civilised and incorporated into the common national good (Block 1980; Malone 1989; Faragher 1993; Smith 2000; Perdue 2005). In both cases, this often occurred while ignoring the status of existing peoples. In contrast, while the notion of the North as a frontier has some shared characteristics, especially with respect to notions of an empty wilderness, it is nevertheless different in terms of the role of indigenous peoples as well as the extent to which it can be regarded as being able to be "tamed" (Powell 2005).

The frontier

Despite growing awareness of transnationalism and the fluidity of frontiers (Brickell & Datta 2011), their study remains closely associated with the American frontier of the Turnerian tradition in which the wilderness and/or the savages beyond the border is portrayed as being tamed by civilised man (Klein 1996). However, although this image still retains a role within popular culture

(Smith 2000) and is also potentially being conveyed in contemporary portrayals of the technological frontiers that some regions, including the Arctic, provide with respect to the exploitation and extraction of minerals. Nevertheless, within academic research on the notion of frontier it is now more commonly understood as a 'shifting zone of innovation and recombination, through which cultural materials from many sources have been unpredictably channeled and transformed' (Rodeseth & Parker 2005: 4). Yet, a number of recurring themes remain. First, the emergence of a peripheral and sparsely populated frontier in relation to a core area marked by concentrated power and wealth in a densely populated location (Parker 2002). Second, a set of mutually reinforcing relations that serve to structure the relationship between core and peripheral frontier. Third, the development of new relationships via either exchange or conflict between the populations that are located either side of a frontier. The latter emphasis on conflict arguably having more in common with European notions of frontiers as zones of contested political control than Turnerian notions of rugged frontier individualism (Rodeseth & Parker 2005), a situation that again resonates with contemporary competition for Arctic resources, despite the establishment of multilateral bodies such as the Arctic Council.

Nevertheless, it must be emphasised that some of the different notions of northern frontier and northern identity exist *simultaneously* as part of the multiple geographies that exist of the north (Nuttall 2009). For example, the idea of Canada is

based on geography including being the self-declared ‘True North, strong and free’ (Saul 1999; Hulan 2002; Powell 2005). Yet the northern geographies of Canada are also increasingly marked by isolated and rural First Nations communities that have substantial food security, health, housing and social problems (Christensen 2011; Fergurson 2011; DeMiglio *et al.* 2012), and which have become even more complex as a result of jurisdictional, language and cultural barriers, as well as rapid environmental change (Ford *et al.* 2010).

Representing the north

The idealised and often romanticised portrayal of the north to be found on *Animal Planet* and the *Discovery, History* and *National Geographic* channels is therefore one that is increasingly at odds with the realities of many indigenous northern communities. Indeed, it also fits uneasily with the geopolitical realities of the competition for Arctic resources. Or, perhaps not. The use of media, and natural history documentaries, in particular to both further depopulate the north in the popular imagination as well as cloak the impacts of climate change (unless you are a polar bear) can also act as forms of soft domestic and international diplomacy via the relatively unproblematic framing of the north (Martello 2008). Presenting the north in public discourse as wilderness in which settlements and human use are virtually absent provides opportunities to present land claims or claims over continental shelf as being relatively unproblematic.

Yet such engineering of representations of the northern frontier are not new (Alia 2011). Images of the north have always been manipulated in the media of metropolitan cores according to particular public and private agendas and interests. Moreover, the globalisation of media has also served to reinforce the multiple, entangled scales, in which northern geographies are produced and embedded (Farish 2006) leading to a multitude of northern imagined communities (Anderson 1991).

Geographers also play a part in northern mythmaking and imaginaries. Whether it be in their teaching, publications and extension activities, geographers are implicit in the production of northern imaginaries and its different geographies. Discussions of northern geographies have also created intellectual frontiers as disciplines focus on their own literatures, discourses and ways of framing northern ‘problems’. Rodseth and Parker (2005: 8) note that ‘interdisciplinary conversations are often difficult to sustain because they tend to engender considerable conceptual and methodological problems’. To this observation we can also add that in most disciplines, such difficult conversations also exist internally given issues of problem definition and approach, while the significance of indigenous geographical knowledge should also be noted (Duerden & Kuhn 1998). Hence, the notion of northern geographies arises as much from the different frames used to analyse space and place as it does from the intrinsic nature of northern places and spaces and how they are represented to a wider audience (Hall 2013).

Conclusion

There is no “view from nowhere” knowledge is always “local, situated and embedded” (Shapin 1998: 6). The phenomenological relationship between the geographical contexts of being somewhere and knowledge acquisition reflects a concern not just with where things matter but also how they matter. ‘A frontier is a vaguely defined boundary—a region rather than a line’ (Rodseth & Parker 2005: 10). A frontier is therefore simultaneously a zone of transition. In the case of northern frontiers and geographies we are seeing not only a change with respect to the extent to which the north, and the Arctic Ocean in particular, has become more central to global geopolitics as a result of improvements in transport access and the commercial attractiveness of resources as a result of climate change, but also an accompanying shift in the way the north is considered. Although different popular and political perceptions and understandings of the north will continue, it becomes increasingly incumbent on geographers with their potentially catholic and interdisciplinary world-view of the interplay between the physical and social worlds (Agnew & Livingstone 2011) to make sense of the complex northern environment and convey its significance to public and policy-makers alike.

As a result of environmental, economic, social and political change the understanding of the north in the popular imagination is gradually changing. Human induced environmental change in particular may generate new images of the north not in terms of an untrammelled wilderness

but an area that is being dramatically affected by alterations in climate (Hall *et al.* 2009). Finland’s northern identity and representation via media, place promotion and tourism will also be affected by such environmental change (Tervo-Kankare *et al.* 2013). The warming trend for the Baltic has been slightly higher than the global average since the middle of the 19th century although the future for the Finnish landscape may be far more dramatic. As Hall and Saarinen (2008: 1) suggested ‘Such changes clearly require a significant research effort as a new set of northern geographies begin to emerge’. Geographical analysis should be at the forefront of the challenges and opportunities that will present themselves. Yet, in order to do this, geographers will have to continue to strive to bridge the categorisations that are often imposed from within and external to the discipline. The former from changes in academic fashion and contestation over resources. The latter from the disciplining by university administrators, politicians and academies, often under the guide of “priorities” and “assessment of research quality”. As Cloke and Johnston (2005: 5) recognised, if the binary or slightly more nuanced categorisations, e.g. physical and human; ‘or qualitative and quantitative, or economic and cultural,... ..were brought together the cross-fertilisation would bring massive benefits’. As the pace of environmental change quickens over the next few years and new geographies of the north come into being that will overlie earlier ones so it becomes essential that geographers are at the forefront of understanding what has happened and providing the capacity for integrated

responses to adapt to and even mitigate such change (Hall & Saarinen 2010). For a long time the north has been represented as a distant and almost unchanging region (Greenberg 2009). Now, as change becomes rapid, it becomes vital that geographers are part of the responses not only to assist in the sustainability of the communities of the north but also to help conserve landscape and biodiversity and limit the environmental changes that will be felt not just in the north but throughout the entire global system.

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