

Invigorating the far north: foreign images, cultural turns and alternative knowledge production

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Abstract. This article is concerned with the possibility of a political and cultural revitalization of the far north. It is argued that such a revitalization requires alternative knowledge production. First, the two academic disciplines discussed in the article, Human Geography and International Studies, have to critically investigate their own methodological approaches. Secondly, academic isolation from one another has to be replaced by cross-fertilization in order to capture the social totality of the north. Thirdly, the cultural turn in both disciplines seems to offer a promising starting-point for a negotiation of prevailing forms of domination and marginalization in the north. Yet, both disciplines have not yet taken advantage of all the possibilities that the cultural turn has to offer. The article tentatively suggests alternative academic approaches to the far north including the re-contextualization of hegemonic discussions and the composition of alternative theories from starting points radically different from those of the centres of knowledge production.

Introduction

This article discusses the potential for a political and cultural revitalization of the far north. It is argued that the current political construction of the north of Europe in the framework of, for example, the Northern Dimension for the European Union appropriates the north terminologically without being substantially interested in it. The far north, effectively pushed to the margins of the emerging European political system of co-ordinates, seems to fall into oblivion completely. The far north – a cultural and political meeting place, a historical area unnaturally divided by national boundaries (see Kivimäki 1998) – is dispossessed of its own subjectivity and agency once again: one set of foreign images is replaced by another.

A revitalization of the far north requires alternative knowledge production and cross-border co-operation between different academic branches. Yet if Human Geography and International Studies (the two academic disciplines discussed in the article) are to say anything relevant about the far north, they do not only have to listen to and learn from one another, but they have to rethink their own methodological approaches to the north. In particular, they have to remember their initial strengths, critically investigate their current weaknesses and escape from fashionable metropolitan influences.

Furthermore, we argue that an understanding of change and continuity of culture is necessary if one wishes to grasp the social interactions and power relations in the north. In particular when it comes to con-



firming existing modes of domination and marginalization, culture – referring to artistic and intellectual products and systems of shared beliefs – is indispensable: it helps maintain and justify prevailing social orders, but it may also contribute to re-negotiate current modes of domination. Here, the cultural turn in both Human Geography and International Studies seems to offer a promising starting-point.

Culture and politics

Academic knowledge production is characterized by increasing differentiation and competition between and within the different academic branches. Academic disciplines usually accumulate specialized knowledge; they generate “detailed understandings of particular processes. However, they fail to understand the place and the role of the processes that have been isolated in the social totality” (Wyn Jones 1999: 22). The resulting knowledge “ignores the whole in favour of a fetishization of the parts” (Wyn Jones 1999: 22). The strict academic departmentalization also ignores that “you cannot do serious work in the humanities without drawing on the methods of various disciplines” (Couldry 2000: 8). In this article it is therefore suggested to link Human Geography with International Studies in order to make self-imposed and thought-paralyzing academic boundaries permeable and to replace mutual neglect with open-mindedness and cognitive curiosity.

We do not claim that the cross-fertilization between International Studies and Human Geography is capable of capturing “the social totality” (Wyn Jones 1999: 22) of the far north. Yet it helps to analyze the prevailing social order in the north by investigating the complex relationship be-

tween the cultural, the political and the geographical. Culture and politics are neither identical nor completely separated from one another. For example, culture as identity is politics rather than culture, but politics is more than culture as identity. Culture, in turn, has little to say about many important political and economic contentions, but what it has to say is an expression of specific spatial and temporal conditions. Thus the article goes beyond the conventional representational mode of distinguishing between “an isolated cultural sphere” on one hand and on the other “a debased political sphere” (Said 1994: 66) without wanting to indicate, as has been argued in the context of empire, that culture and politics are “ultimately the same” (Said 1994: 67). Accordingly, it is not implied that culture is necessarily the most appropriate place to stage political contentions. Culture becomes political “only under specific historical conditions, usually of an unpleasant kind” (Eagleton 2000: 122-123). In other words, culture becomes political by its incorporation in struggles for domination and resistance. The implicit assumption underlying this approach thus is that the far north is indeed involved in such a struggle. One of its most obvious expressions is the rhetorical appropriation of “the north” by outsiders. Under these circumstances, culture as identity transcends its narrow meaning and enters the stage of political contentions.

Foreign images and grand narratives

“The definition of spatial units as administrative, legal or accounting entities defines fields of social action which have wide-ranging impacts on the organization of social life. Indeed, the

very act of naming geographical entities implies a power over them, most particularly over the way in which places, their inhabitants and their social functions get represented. [...] the identity of variegated peoples can be collapsed, shaped, and manipulated through the connotations and associations imposed upon a name by outsiders” (Harvey 1997: 257).

This assessment by David Harvey serves well as a starting-point for an investigation into foreign images and grand narratives of northern Europe. For example, Norden, the Barents co-operation, the Northern Dimension of the European Union and the United States Northern Europe Initiative carry, in one way or another, “the north” in their title and thus influence, shape and perhaps even manipulate the identities of the people and peoples of the far north. Yet, grand projects celebrated by the international political establishment – decision-makers and academics alike – in terms of cross-border co-operation, increasing permeability of borders, region-building and intensity of diplomatic activity may, from a local point of view, be perceived as abstract and ignorant of the quotidian world. High-flown strategic objectives may be considered irrelevant and incomprehensible to the locals. For example, Barents co-operation, celebrated internationally and in foreign ministries, has not been appreciated wholeheartedly by some political representatives of the Sámi population (see Helander 1996). The European Union’s Northern Dimension unfolds in the condition of tension between EU interests, northern interests and those of the far north, neither of which is accessible to simple and unambiguous definitions. West European interests in Russian energy resources may collide with increasing Russian reluctance to

be perceived mainly as a resource supplier while otherwise being otherized.

The social sciences are without doubt fascinated by these grand projects and narratives. They spend a lot of ink on explaining their theoretical and practical merits, often in a larger European context. They frequently find it somewhat inconvenient to bother about the quotidian interests of the peoples living in the far north and directly affected. Yet, it would be rash to take for granted that the interests of the people in the far north are well represented by the grand projects just because they are carrying the north in their title: the condition between the north – enlarged and southernized in parts of the academic debate on and the political process of the Northern Dimension – and the far north may in fact be one of tension. For example, the designation of the European Union as “northern” (Bonvicini et al. 2000) takes from the people of the far north the exclusive power of disposition and control of the term “the north”. Rhetorically taking possession of a particular spatial unit is a political, not a cultural act: naming is politics rather than culture.

International studies and the far north

The current lack of genuine interest in the far north is perhaps not surprising in the case of International Studies. In fact, the discipline has never really been interested in the far north as such. Rather, it reflected the superpowers’ penchant for looking not *at* the north but rather *past* the north at each other. International Studies still seems to suffer to some extent from both its basic assumption, challenged only recently, that the “sovereign nation-state is [...] the subject



within (or objective reality of) international relations” (Krause & Williams 1997: 39) and the neorealism-inspired notion that the international system can be adequately explained and understood in terms of the relations between “major states” (Waltz 1979: 94). The application, during the Cold War, of these basic assumptions to the far north led to systematic misrepresentations of the region.

Given the basic lines of thinking about security at the time (including state-centrism and nuclear deterrence), addressing the far north in terms of security almost inevitably resulted in its militarization in both a material sense – as a steady growth in the military potential concentrated in the area – and in a cognitive sense: state-centric “national security” became the prevalent way the far north was dealt with, analyzed and, in part, constructed by academic and political security experts. By naturalizing the nation-state, International Studies helped prepare the ground for biased representations of the far north and security policies which ignored the needs of the local folk. Owing to its intimate relationship with the political security establishment, these academic representations were never just academic representations but part and parcel of factual security policies, the consequences of which, in turn, were not limited to the sphere of security. Addressing the north in political speech acts and practices strictly in terms of national security exerted “hegemonic effects” (Klein 1988: 311) on the overall representation of the north, rendered difficult more resilient academic approaches and effectively prevented those scholars from getting heard who did pursue alternative paths to knowledge production.

This approach had consequences beyond

the narrow margins of the security establishment. The people in the far north became pawns on the chessboard of super-power strategists and their academic aides. They were denied own subjectivity and systematically left in the dark about, and excluded from, decision-making processes and resulting military policies, the consequences of which they nevertheless had to bear. Their interests, security and otherwise, as individuals or groups of people mattered little. Thus, the construction during the Cold War of a militarized far north may be seen as a condition of impossibility for both the emancipation of the northern people and an adequate approach to the northern land and lives by the social sciences. The end of the Cold War may thus be seen as a condition of possibility for the overcoming of these cognitive closures and their consequences. Yet, as we have alluded to above, equally possible is the replacement of one bias by another.

Human geography and the far north

The alienation from the land and lives of the northern people and peoples is perhaps more surprising in the case of Human Geography with its long tradition of field-work and its important original research on the north. The Skolt Sámi geographies of Väinö Tanner and Karl Nickul – two of the foremost Finnish geographers of the first half of the 20th century – show that there is a strong heritage of northern geography rich both in scope of themes and deepness of analysis (see Susiluoto 2003). Tanner and Nickul challenged naturalized, institutionalized ways of depicting the Sámi communities, but they were largely ignored at the time by both the general public and

academic geography. By building upon Tanner and Nickul's methodological approaches, which included an interpretative and local-geohistorical perspective as well as extensive fieldwork and respect for their study objects, the rich heritage of early Finnish geography in dealing with northern lands and peoples can be capitalized on. Yet, the potential of these studies has remained largely unnoticed: they seem to be too far away from today's British or American mainstream discourses.

Held hostage by, for example, British influences (or surrendering to these very influences of its own initiative), Human Geography often accepts without much reflection the questions and approaches developed in and appropriate to the metropolitan contexts and fails to interrogate these approaches' usefulness in other contexts. The influence of British cultural studies on recent Human Geography seems to be an indicator of the disciplines' estrangement from the "real world" and the "real people". The result frequently is the exclusion of marginal geographies from the dominant research canon, the application of research agendas developed in the centre to marginal regions and the denial of own subjectivity. Yet, questions and approaches developed in the centre are not necessarily relevant to the margins; questions relevant to the margins are not necessarily asked in the centre. What the margins may learn from the centre is asked more often than what the centre may learn from the margins. Human Geography has developed an ever increasing sophistication as to methods and approaches which is then proudly displayed in journals and monographs. Unfortunately, these approaches increasingly seem to be lacking intelligibility to non-experts like the people on which they aspire to reflect.

Sometimes it is difficult to say how geographical research relates to the land and lives of the people in the far north which is currently displaying a rather oppressive picture.

The incorporation of the far north into global economic structures is to some extent equated with unemployment, poor living conditions or social networks shifting away from those based on family and work towards those influenced by drugs, alcohol and prostitution. Not just human beings feel deprived of a decent way of life: the northern nature is confronted with threats emanating from collapsing industrial complexes, nuclear plants and submarines. In the northern context, the academic debate of the centres on sustainable development becomes an irony: many of the industrial communities of the north were not even built for a permanent use in the first place, but only to help capitalism, at a particular moment of its history, turn the rich natural resources to profit. Many of the social problems are due to different and conflicting ways to frame the northern realities.

Multiple north-views

Terry Eagleton says that cultural studies today "fails to see not only that not all political issues are cultural, but that not all cultural differences are political" (Eagleton 2000: 43). Thus, *some* are political. In particular if incorporated in struggles for domination and resistance, culture becomes political. Then, a rigid separation of the cultural sphere from the political sphere is in fact untenable.

There is a huge variety of different cultures and meanings attached to (the concept of) culture (not only) in the context of the north which cannot be rehearsed here (see



Möller & Pehkonen 2003). Suffice to say that culture can refer to skilled human activities through which non-human nature is transformed (as the word culture initially does), but also to geographically and historically varied ways of understanding the relationship between humanity and nature on the basis of the daily life (such as the patterns of land use in Lapland). It can refer to both the material and the immaterial, to artistic products and conventions attached to them, to a way of life and a system of (presupposed) shared values. It can refer to processes where culture makes culture but also where all these meanings are hierarchically ordered. In any case, different understandings and definitions are useful in the light of specific research interests and declared theoretical missions.

One of the relevant interests in the present context is: does the cultural turn in the social sciences bear any relevance for the debate on the far north? As stated above, addressing the far north strictly in terms of national security rendered difficult more flexible and hybrid academic approaches, including cultural ones. With the end of the Cold War, this seems to have changed. A new research agenda is emerging in International Studies which can be seen as a healthy liberation from self-imposed closures (see, e.g., Lapid & Kratochwil 1996; Wendt 1999; Wyn Jones 1999). For example, the discipline is increasingly freeing itself from Realism's dominance and state-centrism. The return of culture in International Studies does not only help to dematerialize the academic discourse on, and emphasize the political character of, security. It also showed that security is "an inherently cultural practice" with implications far beyond "the deployment of weapon systems" (Klein 1997: 362). It helps, too, to

reveal the constructedness and thus arbitrariness of that which traditional international relations theory usually takes for granted, including basic assumptions about the nation-state and about "some ontologically privileged anarchy" (Barnett & Adler 1998: 436).

Yet, although the cultural turn offers new opportunities for alternative approaches to international relations in the far north, International Studies has not yet taken advantage of all the possibilities that the cultural turn has to offer. The evaporation of the far north as a potential theatre of nuclear war, the redefinition of the military potential as an environmental, rather than a military, threat and the flourishing of inter-state co-operation in the north made security and international relations experts become interested in the far north only to the extent to which the region could be addressed in terms of either the concept of environmental security (see, e.g. Sawhill 2000) or the grand projects and narratives referred to above. Academic interest in the prospects for sustainable development and local co-operation was soon side-tracked by the political process of the Northern Dimension which, despite its initial consideration of the far north, expanded in a manner otherwise than that initially envisioned by academics (Heininen et al. 1995). While military security has been removed from the political agenda of the far north, it has not been replaced by an equal interest in broad security, or non-security, issues. Given the recent focus on norms and identity, identity issues would be a possible candidate but interest in *local* identities – in themselves or as a component of complex identity structures – is almost non-existent. Given the complexity of the term "culture", International Studies' frequent equation of culture



with identity and its neglect of, for example, culture in an artistic sense results in new cognitive closures.

In the context of Nordic Geography, Inger Birkeland (1998: 229–230) argues that “the cultural turn has been met with a remarkable silence”. The themes introduced by New Cultural Geography do not seem to have fully entered the northern research agenda. But is this so and if so, is it automatically a case worth worrying about? That the cultural turn has been met with relative silence can also be interpreted as a strength of geographers and geographies from marginal regions (meaning remoteness in distance, language and academic culture). Researchers dealing with the north, by sticking to their “traditionality” rather than flirting with everything “new”, have managed to avoid the trap of losing the culture-nature relationship in favour of a society-space relationship (see Setten 1999). They have succeeded in resisting the sophisticated theories written in the economic centres of the globe which do not necessarily bear relevance to the everyday lives of the northerners. Despite scholarly emphasis placed on the problems of representation, certain representations will do better than others when making theories and presenting ideas to be read at academic departments all over the world. It remains for geographers on the margins to find alternative sources for knowledge production either by re-contextualizing hegemonic discussions or by composing alternative theories from starting points radically different from those internationally recognized.

Kenneth Olwig’s (1996) work on landscape can be mentioned as an example of the first alternative. In his writings he has criticized some of the basic assumptions made in the newly formulated British land-

scape studies of the 1990s. In these studies the origins of the concept of landscape were exclusively linked with certain types of representation and contents such as, for example, the continental landscape paintings of the 16th century with the natural scenery as their primary subject matter. Olwig, however, redirects emphasis to alternative representations and contents of landscapes – something which he labels “substantive landscapes” – as a way of pointing out the relevance of the social and material contexts in which the politics of representation take place.

The second alternative, the composition of alternative theories from starting points usually ignored in Geography, is inherent in Ari Lehtinen’s (2003) approach to the far north. Grasping the multilayered coexistence of a northern geography requires keeping the door open for ideas both within and outside academic circles. Lehtinen therefore is searching for the multilayered geographies of the north in the non-academic cultural journal *N66. Culture in the Barents Region*. He finds an agenda with a multi-cultural profile that can be read as an invitation to a lively debate in which geographers have so far not been deeply involved. The topics presented on the pages of *N66*, while carefully listening to local voices, also mirror a broader cultural re-orientation which bears the potential for “unlearning the (post)colonial manoeuvres” (Lehtinen 2003: 52) of academic research practice. Being conscious of coexisting temporal scales, for example, the approach suggested by Lehtinen calls into question the hopelessly closing chronological periodizations so typical of scientific inquiry. Paul Connerton (1989: 19–20) reminds us that the interviewer’s expectations of a linear trajectory of the narrative, reflecting a so-



cialization in dominant institutions of knowledge production, clash frequently with the cyclical perception and representation of time on the part of those interviewees representing subordinated groups. Lehtinen encourages geographers and scholars from related disciplines to think beyond the pressures of “submissive adjustment” (Lehtinen 2003: 55) emanating from the southern centres of knowledge and thus to make sense of the marginal narrations which would otherwise, *i.e.* when seen from a universalizing point of view, remain invisible.

Rather than placing emphasis on the marginal regions only as far as they are constitutive for the centres, the construction of centre and periphery may be seen as a dialectical process: it is through representations of the northern periphery that the southern centre constructs itself and *vice versa*. How the northern peripheries and the southern centres are dialectically constructed in literature and photography is a relevant subject here. As Edward Said (1994: 5) has argued in the context of empire, “the art [must be set] in the global, earthly context. Territory and possessions are at stake, geography and power.” A political iconography focussing on northern photography (Möller 2003) could take into consideration both photography’s history as a legitimacy provider for state policies and its potential for resistance and indigenous self-representation. Photography can play a role in both promoting purposeful oppositional interventions in the public sphere and altering socio-cultural formations. Photography’s inter-subjective character (requiring an audience that is capable of responding) and communicative nature (obtaining meaning only through the dialogue, including conflicts over meaning, between photographer

and audience) makes it an apt vehicle for breaking with institutionalized orders of knowledge and envisioning an alternative reading of past, present and future.

Likewise, literature is too important to be left to the literary critics. Juha Ridanpää, discussing selected writings of the Finnish novelist Rosa Liksom, emphasizes the clear distinction in Liksom’s short stories between the north and the south of Finland: “places and spaces of the north and the south are constructed differently, through different discursive practices” (Ridanpää 2003: 114). Yet, although life in the north is often depicted in terms of human misery, living conditions in the south do not necessarily have to be better. Ridanpää interprets Liksom’s stories as an implicit critique of some over-simplifications in post-colonialist theory. In particular Liksom’s use of irony, rather than being directed only at the social inequalities between the north and the south, challenges, according to Ridanpää, the whole theoretical composition of post-colonialist theory. Addressing Liksom’s writings from a socially critical, literary geographical perspective, Ridanpää reveals the extent to which the marginalities of the periphery and the centre are interrelated and contingent on each other.

However, it is all too often that the periphery is studied only because it is needed in order to say something about the centre. Would we not have grounds to insist on looking at the construction of the north and still emphasize those aspects which are relevant for the north?

Those who criticize the cultural turn of having detached its practitioners from the realities of everyday life (see Valentine 2001) bring us back to the rather oppressive picture of the current situation of the people in the north. Much of the current criticism

toward the cultural turn could be overcome by returning to an original strength of Geography, its tradition of fieldwork (see Smith 2000). From the point of view of the north this is a welcome invitation, but only so far as fieldwork-based research manages to critically investigate the very concepts it employs (see Sparke 1996) and to diverge itself from the hereticized accounts and fieldwork practices associated with classic northern explorations and their literary representations. Some of the central late 19th and early 20th century Nordic literature on northern exploration was indeed characterized by a close connection to the then prevailing modes of academic geographical thinking (Ikonen & Pehkonen 2003). These modes were thoroughly dichotomizing and the opposite pairs of home/abroad, safety/danger and nature/culture have arguably formed the basis of both popular and scientific ways of knowledge production. To be able to introduce a different kind of geographical imagination, it may be suggested to go beyond the senses of sight and hearing (traditionally regarded as masculine senses) towards the senses of smell and taste (conventionally regarded as feminine senses). Today, in many parts of the north, (southern) researchers with their scientifically formulated questions have become part of the everyday life of the north without really entering the north. In other words, researchers

may be 'there' making insights into northern cultures, but they are not inside culture; they have not entered the social, cultural and economical problems of the people studied and are thus in danger "to ignore the fact that ultimately representations must be based on something material" (Setten 1999: 67).

Conclusions

We have tentatively pointed to various ways to approach the north in a non-standardized manner, challenging institutionalized ways of constructing and representing social reality and producing naturalized orders. From the international and International Studies point of view, the reinvented social interaction across borders is certainly opening up new opportunities to tackle the problems in terms of economy, culture, social organization and self-determination the people of the north are facing. From the local perspective, however, these changes may not be the ones most eagerly awaited. We are, once again, confronted with the question of who defines the problems? Are the new opportunities something people of the north *should* take advantage of? And if so, is it because of pity or apology that the south is allowing and promoting co-operation in the north? Or are there other interests and motives hidden behind the recent political re-invention of the north?

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