

# Social Sciences and Beyond in the Arctic

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Above: New houses under construction at Gruvedalen, Longyearbyen. Some residential areas are now deemed unsafe due to avalanche or permafrost melt risks and there are housing shortages.

Left: Longyearbyen from nearby hills. Photo: Jakub Žárský



The vision of the Far North as a pristine empty wilderness has prevailed in many parts of Europe and North America since the era of exploration and is used extensively today in tourism promotion. Far from pristine, the Arctic is an inhabited place, home to over seven million people in more than 1,500 settlements, from big cities to remote indigenous villages. Climate change has profound effects in this region. These changes are highly localized, impacting Arctic communities in different ways and inspiring global media rhetoric of new resource scrambles and geopolitical conflicts. As the International Arctic Social Sciences Association celebrates its 30th birthday, our sub-collective of researchers who work in Svalbard reflects on the role of social science in this context and demonstrates the strengths and importance of an interdisciplinary approach.

Social sciences, humanities and arts can help us understand better the interconnectedness and mutual dependency of global processes and phenomena such as climate change, globalization, migration, cultural diversity, inequality, and now, the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. The approaches, theories and methods of the disciplines are manifold but

complementary; combining social anthropology, sociology, history, human geography, cultural studies, literature, visual arts, and international politics means studying the changing polar regions from various angles. In this article, we provide samples of these different viewpoints and a taste for exciting research upcoming and already underway.

Svalbard, at first a 'no man's land' before becoming a part of the Kingdom of Norway in 1925, has been a base for extractive industries since the 16th century. Officially discovered in 1596 by the Dutchman Willem Barents, the news of a plentiful marine bounty (whale blubber that could be rendered into oil for lighting) in the European Arctic soon spread. After several waves of intensive seasonal hunting - whales, walrus, polar bears were particularly sought after - mineral extraction, exploration, and tourism also developed, giving way to more permanent, year-round settlements in the early 20th century. Without an indigenous population, Svalbard has been a site of competing claims for a national presence, facilitated by coal mining. Norway and Russia are the two players left standing within a unique legal status provided by the 1920 Svalbard Treaty.

Svalbard is part of a sovereign state, yet one with a special territorial status that legally grants extensive access and usage rights to the citizens of other countries based on an international treaty. Hence, issues of international politics are both intriguing and critical here. In addition to more 'classical' issues like fishing rights in adjacent waters, many local political processes make little sense without considering the effects of this unique international political/legal regime. It also poses the question of whether, and how, Svalbard could serve as a role model for peaceful international governance elsewhere in the world.

This political backdrop is also fascinating when considering how this Arctic territory is made a 'home': what makes this space a meaningful place? Through the interdisciplinary lens of Cultural Studies, a place can be considered through multiple perspectives such as ethnographic, geopolitical, material, artistic. Therefore, the many intertwined perceptions of what Svalbard is and has been can be untangled and given a voice. This offers a broad scope for understanding the multi-layered dynamics of the local communities and their place within the context of a rapidly changing, sometimes contested, circumpolar north.

For 100 years, coal mining has been the basis of Svalbard's societies. In the 21st century, however, the picture is one of transition, economically and environmentally. As mining operations are closed against the background of altering ecologies, new questions are being raised about the nature of human settlements in Svalbard. The Northernmost settlement of Ny-Ålesund was an early indicator, transforming itself from a coal-mining town to a scientific base in the 1960s that now hosts 16 research outposts from 10 different nations. The main Norwegian settlement of Longyearbyen (population approx. 2,400), following closures of the largest coal mines, is now centered on tourism with significant research and education facilities. Similarly, the Russian town of Barentsburg (population approx. 460) is increasing its tourism activities and the now-abandoned Soviet-era mining town of Pyramiden is primarily a tourist attraction.



*Mining remains in Barentsburg. Both Barentsburg and Longyearbyen have an active coal mine in operation, but there are also many remains of past exploits. Photo: Sam Saville*

One way to explore processes of change in Svalbard from a social anthropological perspective is through examinations of the different ways in which 'transition' is imagined and performed by various actors, how ideas about labor, memory and nature become actualized and negotiated. Ethnographic explorations reveal the intricate politics of managing the remains of mining communities in Svalbard; how post-mining alternatives are creatively envisioned, improvised and contested; and how Norwegian and Russian 'presence' is being enacted in these ongoing processes of change.

Another way to interpret the dynamic changes observed in Longyearbyen is through the metaphor of 'overheating' (coined by anthropologist Thomas Hylland Eriksen). Overheating is a process of speeding up without being willing and/or able to slow down again that can have multiple effects and often unforeseen consequences. The average temperature is rising, glacier-melt is speeding up, there are more planes flying, more ships sailing, more tourists, more non-Norwegians settling down, inequalities are deepening and the

feeling that things are 'getting out of hand' is getting stronger. The COVID-19 pandemic forced a halt to easy mobility and intense tourism, serving to inadvertently 'cool' the place down and ask questions about what really matters in this context. Our human geographer takes the approach of starting from this very question – what matters, or what is valued? How are values in Svalbard practiced at the local, national, and global levels? Norway aims to make Svalbard one of the best protected wilderness areas in the world. Questions about what matters here lead to intense debates about the policies designed to achieve this goal and how they are decided upon. Another avenue leads to growing concerns about 'overtourism'.

Tourism is a complex cultural force. The Arctic Nature Guides that train in Svalbard are key to how the Arctic is represented to visitors. Practice-based critical visual arts can challenge the continued portrayal of Arctic terrains as wild, natural spaces outside society. This research practice allows questions to emerge about trained perceptions, gendered positions, structured environments and infrastructure. It reveals how



The town limits and warning signs are popular photo-stops for visitors to Longyearbyen.  
Photo: Sam Saville



The old central transport hub for coal and coal-fired power station.  
Photo: Dina Brode-Roger.

guides and tourists shape impressions of Arctic landscapes.

Cultural heritage is increasingly realized as an important tourist attraction. Four centuries of human activity have left substantial traces of human contact in the Svalbard landscape, which are now considered international and local heritage assets. Cultural heritage is a non-renewable resource, irreplaceable once gone, and the Arctic's rich cultural heritage faces increasing environmental and anthropogenic threats. Social research is vital to inform heritage planning in the Arctic, paving the way to better integrate cultural heritage into environmental, tourism, development and other relevant policies.

Climate change is but one of various dynamics currently transforming Arctic communities, and in many cases, not considered the most important locally. The study of localized impacts, perceptions of, and responses to these multi-faceted processes are crucial for understanding the changing Arctic and mandatory for a holistic approach to the sustainable development of Arctic environments and communities. While the effects of climate change are widely

acknowledged in this area, the notion of disasters in the Arctic often evokes surprise and appears at odds with an Arctic perceived as pristine, sparsely populated landscapes. However, disaster risks and disasters in the Arctic, both related and non-related to climate change, are abundant. Arctic communities have always faced earthquakes, tsunamis, wildfires, landslides, avalanches, permafrost melt, floods, epidemics, and extreme weather events. With tourism and resource exploration on the rise, disaster risks and vulnerabilities are increasing. Svalbard's environment, special status, and collaborative disaster risk reduction and response efforts among its residents, including across nationalities and sovereign powers, offer lessons on the power of informal disaster governance and the potential for disaster diplomacy.

Adaptation to climate change and safety management have become regular parts of everyday life in Longyearbyen. Natural science data and reports are important to provide knowledge about potential disasters, but it is challenging to provide accessible, understandable information needed

for sustainable planning locally. Social science can help bridge the gap in discussions of adaptation strategies. Current work in community monitoring programs and collaborations within our network involves gathering multiple perspectives and stakeholders to co-create and share knowledge at workshops and seminars, mapping projects and dialogue-conferences.

We share a passion for helping to create positive futures in the Arctic, especially for those living there. If the knowledge we create about the polar regions is limited to the natural and physical disciplines, the policies and management strategies that follow will also be limited. It is a little cliché to say we are 'better together' or 'more than the sum of our parts'. But, as a newly founded association, we constantly experience the benefits of combining different approaches, methods, skills and perspectives to research problems and are hopeful for the continued spread of interdisciplinary approaches.

You can read about the work and members of the Svalbard Social Science Initiative on their website: [www.svalbard-socialscience.com](http://www.svalbard-socialscience.com)

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