

Extractions and Related Changes in Svalbard

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Zdenka Sokolíčková, *The Paradox of Svalbard. Climate Change and Globalisation in Arctic*. London: Pluto Press 2023, 202 pp., ISBN 978-0-7453-4740-0

The issue of global climate change resonates across the natural and social sciences and creates space for a range of new conceptualizations of social development. It has also inspired Thomas Hylland Eriksen and his collaborators to characterize the current era as “overheating”, which views social and climate change as a single phenomenon with various manifestations (Eriksen 2016). Since the concept was first articulated, several projects have emerged studying overheating in local conditions. The reviewed publication is one of them. Zdenka Sokolíčková, a lecturer in social anthropology at the University of Hradec Králové in Czechia, received a European grant through the Ministry of Education of the Czech Republic and co-funding from the parent university to implement the project in Svalbard, where human life may change significantly as a result of climate warming. Her main research site was in the town of Longyearbyen, and the publication is based on ethnographic data collected there.

In her book, Zdenka Sokolíčková sets goals that exceed the local community. She sees Longyearbyen as a laboratory, a microcosm, and a scaled-down image of how Norway manifests itself in a globalized world and how the globalized world affects Norway. This egocentric hyperbole helps the author to place the locality in a global context. Thomas Hylland Eriksen, the mentor of her research, points this out in the preface to the book, saying that Svalbard and Norway, as a whole, do not form an utterly identical picture. Zdenka Sokolíčková is aware of this and shows that an environment that has a specific international status, is excluded from Schengen, and has a specific visa or visa-free regime creates a communication environment that is difficult to compare with classical parts of

European states. Despite this, with her perspective, she manages to frame many phenomena by more general events.

The book opens with a classical introduction compiled from first impressions after coming to the field that would undoubtedly have intrigued Clifford Geertz – taking into account his famous piece *Works and Lives* (1988). A brief history of Svalbard follows it, contextualizing the author's field data. The next subsection presents academic sources of inspiration. First mentioned here is the research mentor, Thomas Hylland Eriksen, and his concept of overheating, elaborated in his book of the same name (2016). Other authors include Bruno Latour, Jason W. Moore, Donna Haraway, Lesley Head, and others who consider the topic of ecological change in the context of globalization, working with the concept of the Anthropocene or Capitalocene and other concepts linking human society and ecological change. Follow the positioning of the author and her family who accompanied her.

The results of the field research are summarized in three parts. The first part, entitled *Fluid Environments*, focuses on the issue of experiencing climate change. In this part, the author begins to introduce her ethnographic work and seeks to answer the question of how people respond to change. She starts with natural scientists, geologists, and climatologists. Although it is clear from the opening sentences of her work that she takes the subject of climate change very seriously and uses the vocabulary of engaged anthropology, the chapter titles *Fairy Tales of Change* and *Once Upon a Time* convince the reader that her aim is not to reinterpret the data of natural scientists. Instead, she works with information as narratives and provides the opportunity to follow the flow of information as a dialogue. The chapters show that geologists and climatologists who work with long-time data are cautious in their judgments and even refer to a period when forests covered Svalbard and the present archipelago was accessible by land. They could also imagine it without people. Sokolíčková contrasts gradual change with the theme of immediate change, in the book represented by the avalanche, and shows that people not only react to change differently according to their position in society, knowledge, and values, but their reaction is determined by the time span in which it takes place, how urgent it appears to society and how immediately it affects individuals. Chapter 3 of Part One, entitled *The Viscosity of Climate Change*, expands on this theme through the discourse about the temporary closure of the Seed Vault due to water intrusion¹ and some other topics related to the local government's responses to natural disasters.

The second part of the book, entitled *Extractive Economies*, works with the concept of extractivism to provide a deeper understanding of the processes of

¹ The Global Seed Vault located on the island is intended to be a global bank of biodiversity.

exploitation and subjectification. This concept provides an interpretive scheme for entrepreneurial activities on the island. In addition to the mining activities, it includes tourism, which has been particularly dominant in recent years and which Sokolíčková could especially experience during her stay here. However, she also uses the concept of extractivism for scientific activities, which also contribute to ecological change and are accompanied by the mobility of students and the movement of other people who provide an infrastructure for them. In comparing science and tourism, she draws not only on her own field data but also on data collected in Canada by Nicolas Graham (2020). The chapter shows that extractivism can refer to any activity and is related to the theme of sustainability. The latter is most likely to emerge, based on personal activities, especially where people project themselves with a long-term perspective.

The theme of temporality and the long-term perspective of people living in Longyearbyen is developed in the third part of the book entitled *Disempowered Communities*. I see the issue of social cohesion and the creation of a socially cooperative environment as the central topic of this part. It will attract attention because, among other reasons, paradoxically, the fears and doubts of people speaking spontaneously about issues of the space in which they live do not significantly link them to climate change, or at least this is not apparent from the text. Building a livable environment turns almost exclusively on the issue of relationships between people, not on the relationship between people associated with nature. The author names the initial social unit “extractivist settler community” (p. 116), which is specific in that it “combines the features of a rural small-scale society, where social networks are tightly knit, with the mesh of an urban society” (p. 117). In this section of the book, the various actors reveal what they see as the most significant obstacles complicating the prospects for a brighter future. Sokolíčková correctly identifies that community building is currently a largely managed process significantly influenced by state and local policies. She introduces them to the reader and shows how they emerge in the reflection of residents. She connects them to the process of “communitification”, whose theoretical anchoring she takes from Anne Mette Jørgensen (2019). Perhaps even more insight into the creation of the social environment and its embedment in material space would have allowed for providing more information about the actors themselves, their social background, and aspirations for the future. Of course, even if its current residents do not associate their futures with Longyearbyen, the issues of maintaining local cohesion are primarily in the hands of politicians. But perhaps this aspect of community building was difficult to unpack, especially for a foreign anthropologist who came alone to “extract” data on local life and intended to leave after two years when her project ended. If she writes

that local people are somewhere between the small-scale rural community and urban society, I do not see that interface here. The rural community is tied not only by social interconnections but also by the object of its activity – rural production. The object of the activity is tailored to the social ties of the community: marriage policy, multi-generational staying in one place coupled with planning to take advantage of the opportunities provided by the environment in which the group lives or within which it migrates. Kinship ties reinforce community ties. The corporate culture of single occupations that might substitute for this aspect of life in Longyearbyen is not discussed here, except for a few hints about old miners' meetings in the cafeteria. But even what is apparent in the text, in this new settlement society, social cohesion is created and manifested, especially in the occasional overcoming of common obstacles, such as the consequences of the avalanche described by the author.

In conclusion, the author returns to the social and climate change link. We can conclude that she has touched on many issues that go beyond the town of Longyearbyen and that perhaps emerge even more here than elsewhere in the world. She shows here that social mobility and globally interconnected economies, technologies, and social relations make it possible to enter and inhabit a wide variety of geographical spaces. At the same time, this high social mobility brings with it many uncertainties associated with the unmooredness of people in surrounding space and society. At least, this book suggests that the mechanisms for creating a sense of social cohesion in a globally mobile world are still in the making, and since it is a mobile world, this cohesion cannot be anchored in local belonging alone. In a heavily immigrant environment, people may respond to global changes (which people have probably always feared). However, given the weakly developed social memory, few will associate them with local changes.

Zdenka Sokolíčková's publication is an exemplary ethnography and an interesting contribution to understanding local and global challenges through the reflections of approximately two hundred informants with often very contradictory views. This multiplicity and contradictions are also alluded to by Hilde Henningsen in *Afterwords*, where she finds one of the added values of this text in this generality that Zdenka "has given voice to unheard voices in the community creating arenas of common ground – community dialogues."

The book has many dimensions. There are the reactions of local people to various events, the impact of laws and other regulations on different groups of people, reflections on life in Svalbard by non-European migrant groups, and other aspects that will open up the reader's understanding of life in a specific and unusual place. The book inspires students and is an example of well-crafted ethnographic research.

References

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