

Introduction: The Problems of Polar History

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Almost 100 years ago, the American Geographical Society (AGS) published an edited volume titled *Problems of Polar Research*, which started with the assumption that much remained to be learned about the Arctic and Antarctica. Edited by the geographer W. L. G. Joerg, an employee of the AGS, the volume contained chapters by many of the leading polar authorities of the day, most of whom were active participants in exploration and science.¹ ‘Problems’ had a double meaning: the authors referred to inadequacies and gaps in the contemporary state of knowledge, but also to the excitement of the potential for advancing understanding in difficult conditions. The volume sought to inspire its readers to think further and address the challenges. We approached this present volume with a similar view. To examine the history of the polar regions within a single volume is to take on a difficult task that not only brings together different histories and geographies, but also different conceptions of history and geography.

It is easy to take the existence of polar history for granted. To borrow the famous quote attributed to George Mallory about climbing Mount Everest, it often seems like we study polar history simply ‘because it’s there’.² To physical geographers, the north and south geographic poles exist as exceptional geographic entities characterized by extreme seasonal variation in daylight hours. Several countries have polar research institutes, there are polar-themed academic journals, and educational programmes exist in polar studies. In popular consciousness,

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¹ Joerg, *Problems of Polar Research*.

² The quote appears in *New York Times*, “Climbing Mount Everest Is Work for Supermen”, 151.

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the ‘polar regions’ frequently connote visions of ice, cold, penguins, and polar bears. These visions are created and reinforced by representations of the Arctic and Antarctic in popular media. If there are polar regions, then surely there is polar history, its contents defined by their connection to specific geographic areas?

Problems start to emerge when we begin to ask questions about whether the polar regions should be regarded as quite the self-evident entities they might first appear. What exactly is the Arctic? What is Antarctica? How are these two regions connected? Adding a historical dimension further complicates our understanding. Who has defined the polar regions? Who benefits when we take the existence of polar history for granted? An important ‘insider–outsider’ theme permeates the history of the polar regions, especially in relation to the ways in which the Indigenous peoples of the Arctic understand their histories. But while being an insider or an outsider is often starkly binary, there are also times when it seems more of a continuum, especially in Antarctica where nobody is a permanent resident. In the spirit of *Problems of Polar Research*, this volume seeks both to challenge and to enthuse. But where *Problems of Polar Research* served to stabilize a field of inquiry with the weight of scientific gravitas, we hope to prompt critical reflection on whether writing polar history reifies as much as it edifies.

Geographical Definitions

Mallory’s quip has become legendary because it affirms that geographical exceptionality creates its own reason. But although Everest gained its exceptional height above sea level from the collision of tectonic plates, it was just as much constructed as exceptional by a cultural context in which value was attributed to conquering high peaks.³ Similarly, the polar regions as a concept have been constructed as exceptional in popular and scientific consciousness. In recent times it has become more common to hear mention of the ‘third pole’, a term that asserts the commonality of polar and alpine extremes, especially the Himalayas.⁴ There is a pleasing veneer of certainty to the most northerly, the most southerly, and the highest point on the Earth’s surface. But certain by what measure? A compass will point to magnetic north and not ‘true’ north – itself a linguistic distinction that betrays a preference for the permanently rooted over the transitory. The problem is only accentuated by

3 Indeed, even within the Himalayas, local residents attached greater reverence to another mountain – Nanda Devi – while K2 in the Karakoram is widely acknowledged as a sterner test of mountaineering skill.

4 See, for example, Synnott, *Third Pole*.

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the difficulty of finding appropriate boundaries for each polar region – let alone boundaries that are symmetrical between north and south.

The provocative title of a book by the geographer Mark Monmonier – *How to Lie with Maps* – captures a deeper truth that a map is an active creation rather than a passive transcription.⁵ Consider the polar circles, the areas of the Earth in which there is at least one day a year when the Sun does not rise and one day a year when the Sun does not set, thereby defining the Arctic and Antarctic by their intense seasonality. A cartographically based gaze that demarcates each polar region as half of a logical pair derives its power from a global perspective that minimizes local difference to maximize global descriptive power.

The circles certainly have the benefit of being easy to represent – for cartographers, at least. But using this seasonal boundary in the north can lead to the inclusion of regions that may not fit other common definitions of the polar. Aklavik in the Northwest Territories of Canada, well above the Arctic Circle, has a record summer temperature of 33.9 degrees Celsius, higher than the record for St John's, Newfoundland, over 20 degrees of latitude further south.⁶ The Arctic isotherm – a line above which average temperatures in July are below 10 degrees Celsius – produces a rather different and less uniform line from the neat polar circle (Figure 1.1). But is the isotherm any more accurate or authoritative? Certainly it is different, but the choice of the round number ten should prompt reflection on how natural it is. Another frequently used definition for the Arctic is based on the northern treeline. Aklavik is nestled within boreal forest, which, like the great *taiga* forests that cover much of Siberia, are in stark contrast with the treeless landscapes of Tasiilaq, eastern Greenland – which lies *below* the Arctic Circle, despite featuring both a climate and a suite of fauna that most would regard as stereotypically Arctic.

While a boundary based on average temperature could be applied to the Antarctic, the treeline is an almost entirely useless definition in treeless Antarctica. In contrast to the Arctic, Antarctica's continentality has often informed definitions. But this is complicated by the fact that significant portions of the continent are situated to the north of the Antarctic Circle. Thinking of Antarctica as a continent raises questions about the status of the surrounding islands and constitutes a key reason for the Antarctic Treaty zone being defined as the lands below 60 degrees south rather than simply the continent itself. One of the most interesting recent definitions of Antarctica is the ecosystem

5 Monmonier, *How to Lie with Maps*. See also the work of J. Brian Harley, especially Harley ed. Laxton, *New Nature of Maps*.

6 Temperature records obtained from Almanac Averages and Extremes at <https://climate.weather.gc.ca>.

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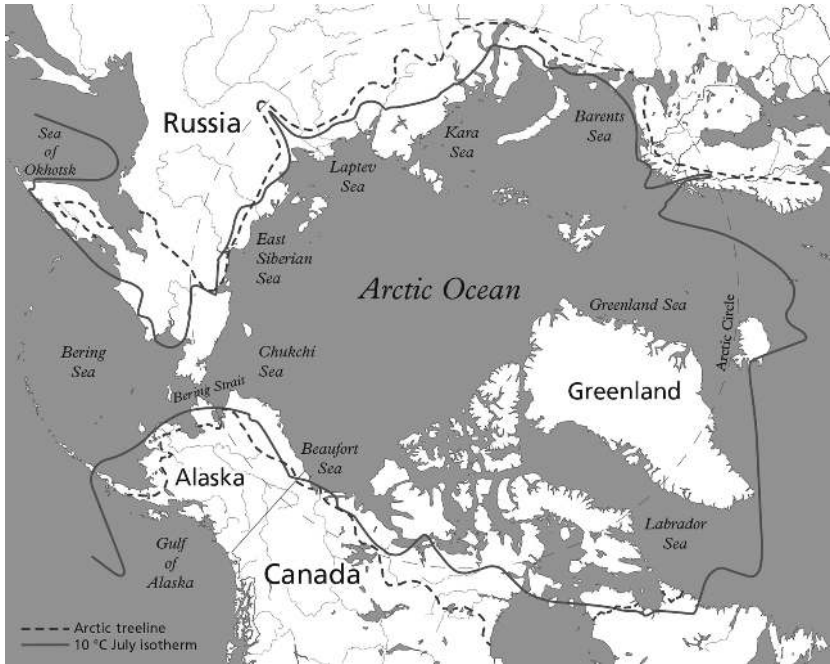


Figure 1.1 The circumpolar north including the Arctic treeline and the 10 degrees Celsius isotherm for July.

definition of the Antarctic Convergence used by the Convention for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources (CCAMLR), which encompasses the whole of the Southern Ocean. But there remains a distinction between the continent and the surrounding islands. When Argentina, Britain, and Chile were actively contesting the sovereignty of the Antarctic Peninsula region in the mid-twentieth century, a ‘continental’ base was often deemed of more political value than an island base; today’s tourists demand a continental landing to ‘bag’ the continent.⁷ By raising questions about where the land ends and the ocean begins, ice shelves, icebergs, and sea ice further complicate a definition of Antarctica based on continentality.⁸

At a time of rapid climate heating in large parts of both the Arctic and Antarctica, definitions of the polar regions based on any kind of physical

⁷ The geopolitics of Antarctic station building is discussed extensively in Howkins, *Frozen Empires*. For a discussion of the importance of continental landings in Antarctic tourism, see for example Zlotnicki, “For the Purists!”.

⁸ On the history of ice as territory to be owned or conquered in Antarctica, see for instance Dodds, *Ice: Nature and Culture*, especially 114–119.

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geographical parameters are undermined by shifting boundaries. While the prospect of trees growing in Antarctica is still (probably) a long way off, climate-driven ecosystem change is allowing plants and other forms of vegetation to grow in places they previously did not.⁹ There is something quite poignant in the idea of the polar regions themselves ‘shrinking’ as a result of climate heating: not only is there less ice or more vegetation, but in a sense less Arctic and less Antarctica as well, in the eyes of both scientists and (in the Arctic) Indigenous communities for whom detailed environmental knowledge may not translate reliably into the future.

It is humans that make the polar. The Canadian geographer Louis-Edmond Hamelin (1923–2020) recognized that in order to hold meaning, the Arctic must be viewed as a human creation. His great contribution was the concept of ‘nordicity’ (Figure 1.2), an index that combined physical and

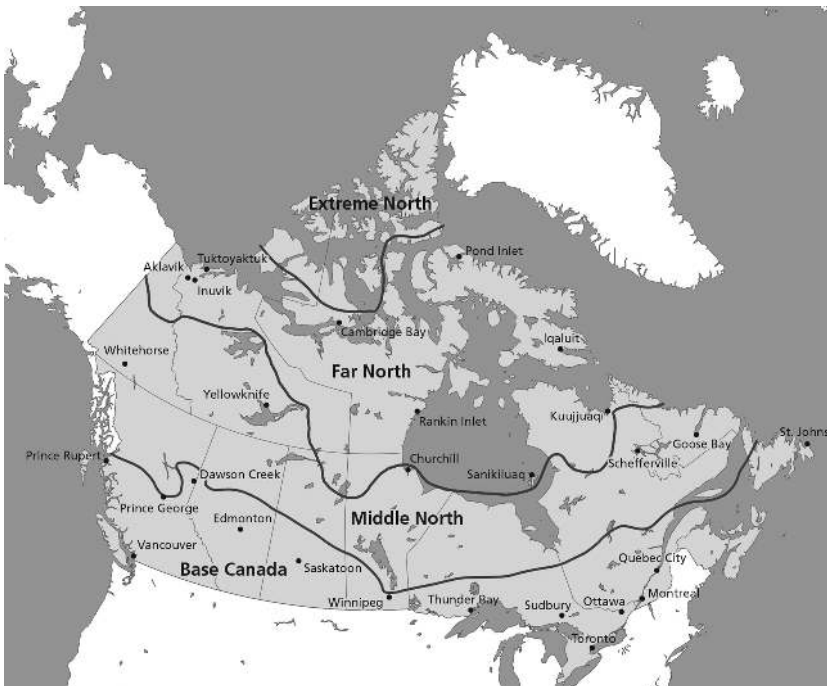


Figure 1.2 Louis-Edmond Hamelin’s gradations of nordicity in Canada. (Adapted from Hamelin, “Espaces touristiques”.)

⁹ McGeoch et al., “Monitoring Biological Invasion”.

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human geographical indices, '*valeurs polaires* (VAPO)' to express the 'state or level of being polar in the northern hemisphere'.¹⁰ Climate played a central role in this scheme, as did distance. Hamelin's 'extreme north' dipped south into Manitoba and Saskatchewan, while his more hospitable 'middle north' encompassed Dawson City in Yukon.¹¹ But communications infrastructure was more important than distance as the crow flies. And temperature was only one factor along with others such as population size, population density, and economic development. 'No development, none foreseen' earned 100 VAPO; being an 'interregional centre with multiple services' and 'heavy investment' earned zero.¹² Hamelin's scheme lacked the simplicity of demarcations derived from a single cartographically derived variable. But nordicity captured something more important. Instead of boundaries between Arctic and non-Arctic, he saw gradations of more or less Arctic.

While integrating a welcome human dimension into the definition of the Arctic, Hamelin's nordicity is a highly Eurocentric concept. The label of 'no development, none foreseen' presumes the centrality of a set of activities associated with lifeways from further south. It takes little account of whether the sea ice in a particular region might be good for sledging, or whether a region might have a reputation for good hunting at a particular time of the year. Precise definitions of 'the Arctic' can actually be dangerous, implying a misleading uniformity that overlooks the specific factors important to particular communities, and flattening the deep pockets of Indigenous knowledge and attachment to place.

Unsurprisingly, no equivalent concept of australicity has emerged for Antarctica. Practically the entire landmass would be assigned a score of 100 on Hamelin's index, the scattered islands of human presence sustained entirely through resupply from the north. Without Indigenous communities or permanent settlements, the island continent of Antarctica appears a stable artefact in terms of human geography. Yet even here there are questions. Many Antarctic stations are located on islands off the continent's coast. Some, such as Marambio, are adjacent. Others, such as Signy and Orcadas, are halfway to South Georgia – which is not part of the Antarctic Treaty area, but which surely has some degree of australicity based on both physical and human geographies. Moreover, the state or level of being polar in the southern hemisphere is hardly uniform even on the continent itself. Transport and communication infrastructures vary greatly from base to base. And having overwintered on the continent remains a badge of honour that veterans point

¹⁰ Hamelin, *Canadian Nordicity*, xi. ¹¹ Map X.1, above.

¹² Hamelin, *Canadian Nordicity*, 21.

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to proudly as a fundamental distinction between themselves and those who have merely spent a summer on the continent, or not been there at all.¹³

Political gradations are even clearer in the north. The eight full member states of the Arctic Council – Canada, Denmark (Greenland), Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Russia, and the United States – share a common privilege of sovereignty over territory north of the Arctic Circle. But in other contexts the term ‘Arctic Five’ is used, based on having coastlines on the Arctic Ocean, thereby excluding Finland and Sweden, and, perhaps more controversially, Iceland.¹⁴ Squabbles over who deserves observer status on the Council have echoes of Hamelin’s arguments. China has declared itself a ‘near-Arctic’ state based not on cartographic proximity but on the fact that its political and economic interests make it a stakeholder in the region.¹⁵ Other states with economies substantially involving maritime commerce, such as Singapore and South Korea, have similarly argued that their interests warrant observer status. Today, thirteen non-Arctic states are recognized as observers. One might ask whether we are headed for a future where every state in the world is Arctic to some degree.

Is this situation replicated in the Antarctic? To a point: notably, Brazil has claimed a kind of Antarctic status by dint of its southern coastline having an uninterrupted oceanic connection to Antarctica, following the ‘frontage theory’ developed by the political geographer Therezinha de Castro.¹⁶ Membership of the Antarctic Treaty System (ATS) hinges on a state declaring itself willing to abide by the rules of the system. But there is an important element here, namely that the upper tier of ATS decision-making membership (status as a consultative party) depends upon active participation in Antarctic science. To have a voice at the Antarctic table means being active in Antarctica, wherever that state may be located. Being Antarctic is thus a right that is earned rather than inherited – even if the founding twelve consultative parties earned that status (and the right to define the values of the system) through differing degrees of activity.¹⁷

¹³ Howkins, “Have You Been There?”.

¹⁴ The most striking example is perhaps the 2008 Ilulissat Declaration, in which the Arctic Five asserted that existing legal mechanisms (including the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea) were sufficient to administer the Arctic. The full text is available at www.regjeringen.no/globalassets/upload/ud/080525_arctic_ocean_conference-_outcome.pdf.

¹⁵ See for instance Dams et al., *Presence Before Power*.

¹⁶ Cardone, *Antarctic Politics of Brazil*.

¹⁷ See for instance Hemmings, “Considerable Values in Antarctica”. On the implications of this for the legitimacy of the Antarctic Treaty see Yermakova, “Governing Antarctica”.

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The Power of Practice

Following an argument advanced by Michael Bravo in *North Pole: Nature and Culture*, we wish to make a claim that may strike some readers as bold: that elements of tradition, of lived practice, created the polar more powerfully than a line on a map. Polar history, like the concept of the polar regions, emerged from the desire of individual practitioners to stabilize and legitimize traditions, to give them life and meaning. ‘The very idea of seeking the North Pole’, writes Bravo, ‘so beguiled these explorers that they felt compelled to search for a deeper history of the poles in which their own polar endeavours would make sense.’¹⁸ Those who practised and endorsed ‘polar exploration’, ‘polar geography’, and ‘polar science’ created ‘polar history’ as the label for their achievements.

Conceptions of Arctic and Antarctic research as linked enterprises date back to at least the nineteenth century. The Earth’s two magnetic poles functioned as the focal point for the ‘Magnetic Crusade’ of the 1830s and 1840s, a quest to construct a magnetic map of the Earth as a whole that was widely associated with the British Empire.¹⁹ Several individuals were involved in both the Arctic and Antarctic during this period, most famously James Clark Ross, who participated in expeditions to both magnetic poles. Later in the century, the first International Polar Year of 1882–83 helped further establish the polar regions as a paired legitimate subject of scientific study, even if its activities were focused almost exclusively on the Arctic.²⁰ When exploration of the Antarctic continent began in earnest from the last years of the nineteenth century, both individuals and techniques travelled from north to south – from the Sámi men who accompanied the *Southern Cross* expedition in 1899–1901 to the many explorers for whom the poles constituted fungible, if not wholly identical fields of operation. The most well-known example is, of course, Roald Amundsen. Having been on the very first party to overwinter beneath the Antarctic Circle in 1898 in the ship *Belgica*, he subsequently completed the first traverse of the Northwest Passage and set his sights on being the first to the North Pole, only to be forestalled by the rival claims of the US explorers Robert E. Peary and Frederick A. Cook (the latter having also been one of Amundsen’s shipmates on the *Belgica*). Famously, Amundsen announced his intention to proceed

¹⁸ Bravo, *North Pole*, 7.

¹⁹ Cawood, “Magnetic Crusade”; Enebakk, “Hansteen’s Magnetometer”.

²⁰ On the first International Polar Year see Barr and Lüdecke, eds., *History of International Polar Years*.

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instead to the South Pole while at sea, setting up a race with the Briton Robert Falcon Scott – himself a protégé of Sir Clements Markham, an old Arctic hand.²¹

In the wake of the explorers and the scientists came institutions and professional structures. After Scott's death en route back from the Pole, the public collection in memory of this tragedy was so successful that it established the Scott Polar Research Institute (SPRI) in 1920.²² From the start, SPRI had a mandate to cover both the Arctic and the Antarctic, reflecting Britain's self-image as a global empire capable of ordering and categorizing the rest of the world. In the United States, the AGS programme in geography of the polar regions that emerged later in the 1920s aimed to solidify the scientific foundations of a field – polar exploration – that AGS supremo Isaiah Bowman saw as dominated still by sensationalism.²³ The American Antarctic Society was founded in the United States in 1934 in the wake of Richard Byrd's expeditions, changing its name to the American Polar Society (APS) a year later to expand its pool of potential members among US expeditions in both polar regions.²⁴ With increasing numbers working in both polar regions, logistical skills and technical competence proved just as susceptible to being classified as 'polar' as expertise in specific scientific disciplines. Even when it became clear from the late 1930s that much of the world had entered a warmer period, and glacial recession in both the Arctic and the Antarctic became linked in the minds of physical geographers, the key ties between north and south were human as much as intellectual.²⁵

Definitions of the 'polar regions' as a coherent category have almost always been developed by outsiders to these regions. The polar regions are only 'natural' categories within a worldview that privileges commonalities in climate, geomorphology, or the presence of marine mammals over the specific connections to place denoted by an Indigenous homeland. Consequently, polar institutions have always had a geopolitical function, in

21 On Amundsen see most notably Bomann-Larsen, *Roald Amundsen*; Huntford, *Scott and Amundsen*.

22 On the early history of SPRI see Roberts, *European Antarctic*, 78–81.

23 Joerg spearheaded this initiative despite his knowledge of the Arctic and Antarctic coming entirely from the maps and accounts of others. Wright, "Obituary: W. L. G. Joerg", 486.

24 <https://americanpolar.org/about/our-history/>. Byrd himself premised Operation *High Jump* – a massive 1947–48 US military exercise in Antarctica – as a means of building capacity in cold-weather warfare, despite the potential theatre being Arctic rather than Antarctic.

25 Roberts, *European Antarctic*, 105–110; Sörlin, "Narratives and Counter-narratives".

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the sense of inscribing nationally inflected meanings upon and attachments to particular spaces. The hard power of projecting logistical capacity was one dimension, but so too was the softer-power mission of the APS and SPRI – to validate a connection with distant spaces, a mission that SPRI founder Frank Debenham regarded as essential for establishing polar exploration as a living tradition.²⁶

A contrast here might be instructive. There is no *Cambridge History of the Tropical Regions*, despite the tropics being similarly capable of demarcation by climatic parameters and cartographic lines. And indeed, the mere thought feels uncomfortable. We suspect that for many readers it conjures up uncomfortable images of European imperialism and geographies defined by deviations from a temperate norm. And anyway, why would proximity to the Equator be the thing that binds together Rwanda, the Galapagos Islands, and East Timor? An answer lies in Denis Cosgrove's argument for the existence of 'ontological tropics', the (European) intellectual frames through which tropical regions were represented and understood, and which held greatest purchase when the tropics were marked by exotic difference.²⁷ Is it not the same for European visions of the polar regions, spaces constructed as distant in space and culture?²⁸ We suggest that there are similar 'ontological poles' marked by exteriority and otherness, constructed by a gaze that must be distant in order to mark differentiation.

Our claim is that polar history aggregates and indeed magnifies inherent problems with Arctic history or Antarctic history by per definition privileging explorers and scientists – the categories of practitioner for whom the polar regions have meaningful commonalities. The need to identify that which both polar regions have in common necessarily marginalizes that which is particular or unique. Such an approach can erase Indigenous cultures and undermine local ways of knowing. It also tends to overlook histories of work, especially domestic labour. Even the history of logistical operations in the polar regions is substantially skewed toward the heroic – expedition ships, feats of engineering, and epic traverses – rather than the infrastructures that annually support sealifts to northern communities or field operations in Antarctica, routine acts of maintenance rather than spectacles of conquest.²⁹ The fact that the 'polar

26 See Frank Debenham, "The Scott Polar Research Institute", undated draft (1922). SPRI uncatalogued letters (1919–1922), MS Folder 3 'Rough Notes for S.P.R.I. by Frank Debenham (1922).'

27 Cosgrove, "Tropic and Tropicality", 198. 28 See also Pálsson, "Arcticity".

29 We draw inspiration here from the manifesto of The Maintainers, who advocate for a greater focus on the often unseen and unappreciated agents who 'keep our world from falling apart.' See <https://themaintainers.org/about-us>.