

Arctic State Identity, Geography, History and Geopolitical Relations, Ingrid A. Medby, (2025), Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press. 233 p. Hardback. ISBN 978 1 5261 5390 6

The increasing international attention for the Arctic in global geopolitics leads to a reflection on the identity of the eight states reunited in the Arctic Council by the Ottawa Declaration of 1996 and to wonder about the existence of such a thing as an “Arctic state identity.” **Arctic state identity, Geography, history and geopolitical relations**, by Ingrid A. Medby, fills this gap with a book that is a collection of voices “from the inside” which manages to offer a new perspective on the Arctic and its geopolitics through its human side.

With a complete overview of three of the eight Arctic states composing the Arctic Circle – Canada, Iceland and Norway – the research examines the views and perceptions on statehood and national identity toward the concept of Arctic state identity given by state workers, who were asked to reflect on their working and personal experience as personnel representing their own state. The methodological approach taken in this study is based on a hermeneutical method that, after analysing echoes, stories, records, interview material and documents, leads to explore the ways by which discourses of state identity are performed and shared by the states themselves and by their representatives and personnel, demonstrating that such Arctic identity is a complex and multi-layered product of spatial, historical and relational interactions. Consequently, Medby argues that to understand and forecast Arctic geopolitics, it is necessary to pay attention to the people whose job is to represent their state daily, and to analyse their adherence to formal discourses, as well as incongruity or manifestations of power imbalances.

The structure of the book follows a thematic logic. It opens with an introduction where a theoretical conceptualisation of what is meant by “state identities” is presented, with a brief review of the Arctic geopolitical literature and the definition of state identities as the product of performative discourse practices. The main issues underlined by the author invite to reflect not only on what an Arctic state identity may be, but also on how and why discourses can reinforce and shape it. Identifying “state personnel” as “those within the state institution (personnel at the federal level) who articulate discourses of their state’s identity” (p. 20), Medby sets then her research focus on the geographical, temporal and relational articulations that express how state representative and personnel see their countries’ belonging to Arctic statehood and identities.

Chapter 1 of the book, intended as a sort of introduction to the first part, presents the empirical background of the Arctic as a contested geopolitical region, offering an overview of Canada, Iceland and Norway and focusing on their shared as well as divergent geographical imaginaries of the North. The author argues that how and why we define the Arctic is something strictly dependent on the context and identifies the knowledge gap to fill as the necessity to explore Arctic state identities, starting with an understanding of how the state personnel of the three countries situate themselves, view and interact toward statehood and identity.

Part 1 identifies space and time as the structures through which we can read Arctic state identities. Starting with a traditional conceptualisation of borders, maps and lines defining sovereign territories. Chapter 2 moves on including environmental characteristics and elements, experiences of nature and place-related interactions to show that people are both influencing and influenced by space and that space – and language, as the ways we label it – matter for understanding state identities. One interesting reflection proposed by Medby refers to the etymological origin of the word “Arctic” itself, which originally came from Greek language “arktos,” a common reference used in the past for the Ursa Major and afterwards adopted to indicate the Northern countries, contributing to shape the imaginary of Polar bears as recognised icons of a Northern identity which was in fact originated from the South. Chapter 3 introduces the variable of time, highlighting the relevance of ancient narratives, historic and literary tales narrating the adventures of explorers, settlers, Indigenous peoples or Viking and

their role in defining the basis of the Arctic imaginary. The chapter ends with the author's reflection on the importance of considering present and future when dealing with Arctic state identities as potential agencies able to determine and direct day-to-day politics and on how for state personnel may be even more decisive to be able to be forward-looking.

Part 2 elaborates the relations and articulations of Arctic state identities in Canada, Iceland and Norway throughout a scale perspective, from international to national, to domestic, to personal. Chapter 4 deepens the international perception of Arctic state identity. Light is focused on references and expressions of the interviewed state personnel underlying their belonging to a state member of the Arctic Council or pointing at memberships, privileges and positioning among the other states. Chapter 5 delves into the national scale, concentrating on each national context and studying the ways state identities can be entangled with other national identitarian issues, such as stereotypes, inclusion or exclusion in everyday life, etc. Chapter 6 goes into the details of the inevitable heterogeneities that we can experience within a smaller scale at a domestic level, within a single project, where identities can interrelate, intersect or differ based on context and temporality. For what concerns Norway and Canada, the author focuses here on indigeneity and how it can influence the articulations of narratives toward state identity, while for Iceland – where no Indigenous people exist – the focus is on local and traditional issues (e.g. the notion of preserving language) and knowledge toward global challenges. To conclude, chapter 7 provides an overview of the results of the ethnographic research on state personnel, giving an outline on how state personnel see themselves on a personal level and their own Arctic identities (or lack of them) and lays emphasis on the role of the personal action and experiences in relation to all the previous scales.

In the final chapter, Medby offers a conclusion that aims both to summarise the conceptual foundations of state identity as performative discourses situated in space and time, as well as to call for the necessity to study them in a multi-scalar perspective.

A key aspect of the book is that despite the complexity of the topic and its multifaceted aspects, the author manages to present it in a clear, engaging and accessible way, providing all the definitions required for the understanding of the premises and the conceptual framework of her research. The interviewees' testimonies are

reported with special care, anonymity and ethical concern always being granted. The reader's engagement is granted by the novelty of the ethnographic first-hand field notes and the rich quotes, providing examples and clarifying the most complex theoretical parts.

Being acknowledged that the book's strengths outweigh its limitations, a few aspects could be improved for what concern the richness of contributions presented in the form of direct quotes, dialogues and first-hand stories that could benefit from some more methodological details. Considering that it may have been a choice for the sake of the accessibility of the book to a broad audience, it would however be interesting to learn on how the samples were collected and, even more on the techniques used to perform the content and discourse analysis.

Being the author an "Arctic state" researcher herself, her reflexive contribution at the end of the book is much appreciated and adds meaning to the whole work, achieving the aim of addressing to a broad, non-necessarily specialised audience and to disseminate the research also outside academia.

Arctic state identity, Geography, history and geopolitical relations is not an academic book itself but aims at disseminating the results of important academic research to a wide audience. Nonetheless, it is suitable for every kind of readers, from political geography experts to students and PhD students interested in the Arctic contemporary issues, as well as for a non-academic public. A clear language and an elegant style make the book accessible and enjoyable, without compromising its scientific accuracy.

All in all, the research gives important and valuable insights to the Arctic geopolitics studies, providing a critical overview of the dynamics that govern the understanding of Arctic state identities, as a multifaceted concept composed by a series of infinite narrations, stories, experiences and reflections provided by the interviewed state personnels without resulting paternalistic or rhetoric.

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