

The Arctic and the Configuration of the Stars

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PREFACE: THE ARCTIC AND THE CONFIGURATION OF THE STARS

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> *"There is nothing that is so hidden that it does not need to be made manifest. In this, the heavenly firmament is like the sea and the earth. It is necessary that all things become manifest, but it is up to man to uncover all things."* Paracelsus (1494-1541)

The Grenoble Canadian Studies Centre organized an International Conference in Lyon in November 2010 which brought together about thirty specialists from diverse fields and countries to discuss together the geopolitical significance of the Arctic in the twenty-first century. This book is not presented as the 'proceedings' of the Conference and it does not pretend to be the summation of all the valuable contributions made during the two days of extensive scientific exposition and discussion. Rather is it an attempt to distil some of the essence, to conceptualize and offer further reflection on the subject's importance, taking as its common thread the rather existential question: "What Holds the Arctic Together?". The emphasis here is on convergence, rather than divergence, the Arctic's centrality not its eccentricity. The book is resolutely interdisciplinary and international, and, acting like a veritable astral conjunction in the awe-inspiring arctic sky, it brings into alignment three major elements of transformation.

The first transformation is ecological: the melting of the ice is a phenomenon which touches and perturbs the environmental balance of the whole world. And this is not just a 'surface' phenomenon, however astonishingly vast (and changing) that liquid and solid arctic surface is revealed to be. Below the terrestrial surface is an unstable and disappearing permafrost, and below the expanding liquid surface there are shelves and ridges, containing ores, oils and minerals which, as ever, are coveted by man's insatiable appetite for wealth creation. And then, thirdly, above the surface of both sea and land, there is the atmosphere, both the troposphere and the stratosphere, where the 'whiteness' (literally 'albedo') effect in the form of reflected radiation becomes a major factor in climate change, with its effects stretching well beyond the Arctic Region.

The second transformation is political: and here again, the analytical vision is three-fold; for the whole world is involved (the globalized and the universal); and yet much political emphasis is inevitably 'regional' (involving the surrounding 'powers' – states which are only partly arctic – 'coastal states' with interest in 'off-shore' control, claiming 'borders' or 'frontiers' and interested in questions of 'sovereignty'; and then, last but not least, there is the truly 'local', the literally 'indigenous' (less discredited a word than it is in French) or aboriginal, or (if we want to delve back to the Greek) 'autochthonous'. For all these three interwoven levels (world, regional and local), the Arctic constitutes a 'theatre' in which all the actors (leaders, politicians, diplomats, scientific experts and commentators) play roles. But in this enumeration of the actors, I have left out the main actors: those who live there.

Which brings me to the third transformation, which is anthropological. And this concerns the cultural dimension of these main actors whose civilizations often go back thousands of years. It concerns their communities, their languages, their modes of thought and of action. To use the fine expression of Jean-Christophe Victor, they are "parent peoples" who have been caught up in the maelstrom and contradictory logics of so-called 'development' (with its colonization, industrialization, urbanization, overconsumption…). Each fragment of territory is the vehicle of their own singular history with its traumatisms but also its contentment, demonstrating their vulnerability but also their resilience and capacity for new social concord.

This book deals with all three of these transformations and each chapter touches on the links between them. In an introductory chapter, a member of our Grenoble Canadian Studies Centre (and our in-house Arctic specialist and the instigator of the Conference), Cécile Pelaudeix, sets forth the overall alignment of our constellation of twelve essays on the Arctic. As a conclusion to the book, another member of the Centre, Robert Griffiths, puts the Arctic into a wider, if sub-stellar, context by reflecting on the importance of the subject in aesthetic as well as civilizational terms, by alluding to aspects of its geographic, historical, literary and linguistic significance in recent centuries.

If I appear in this brief preface to be drawn to etymology and the meaning of words, it is only natural that I should conclude it by noting that the word 'arctic' is generally thought to come from an Indo-European word coming into Greek as *arctos* which (in spite of its no doubt plausible association with a 'polar bear'!) means *she-bear* (*ourse* in French) in Greek legend and refers to stories about the constellations that we now call *Ursa Major* and *Ursa Minor,* or the *Great Bear* and the *Lesser Bear* (or waggon, plough, dipper, chariot, or (Hindi) Rishi, - take your pick). Both constellations only appear in the Northern Hemisphere. The bright seven-star *Lesser Bear* points to Polaris which marks roughly the position of the north celestial pole and which we therefore call the pole star, or the North Star. The pole star is circling slowly among the northern constellations because of the earth's precessional motion. Now situated less than one degree from Polaris, it is worth

noting in your diaries that the celestial North Pole will pass closest to this pole star at under half the present distance about the year 2100. In the meantime, readers of this book will have plenty else to think about.