

# Concluding commentary: Inter-disciplinary vistas – research on Svalbard in a local to global continuum

## Commentary

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**Author for correspondence:** Mathias Albert, Email: [mathias.albert@uni-bielefeld.de](mailto:mathias.albert@uni-bielefeld.de)

Mathias Albert 

Bielefeld University

Svalbard is unique regarding its natural, political, cultural, economic and legal settings. In many respects, this holds true not only when seen in a more limited Arctic context but also on a global scale. However, Svalbard is also firmly situated in the Arctic, and thus many of its characteristics and the challenges faced are similar to those faced by other regions and communities in the Arctic. Above all, however, Svalbard seems to constitute a showcase for how local, regional, and global processes and structures are inextricably linked: they are experienced and need to be permanently negotiated “on the ground,” so to speak. While practically this presents unique challenges for everyone living and interested in Svalbard, it also creates a unique opportunity for cross-disciplinary engagement. “Understanding Svalbard” requires bringing together perspectives on the changing global climate, on regional and local ecosystems, on the politics of sovereignty and the principles of international law, on social systems and the practices of remote local communities and their changing cultural and economic characteristics, as well as generally on imaginaries pertaining to all these issues, particularly if placed in the context of fast-evolving narratives about the Arctic (see Steinberg, Tasch, Gerhard, Keul, & Nyman, 2015).

The current collection of articles in *Polar Record* takes up the challenge of such a cross-disciplinary engagement. While, considering the wide range of disciplines and approaches that have something to contribute in this regard, it obviously can only contain a limited amount of perspectives, its individual contributions demonstrate that it is next to impossible to approach many issues pertaining to Svalbard in “pure” disciplinary terms. In Svalbard, even seemingly specialised ethnographic encounters with single communities will always have to consider the boundary conditions set by things as diverse as international law, geopolitical interests, climate change, and the flow of tourists. While this collection of articles represents a trend of an increasing number of social science contributions in “Svalbard Studies” (see Chekin & Rogatchevski, 2020), it fits into a broader social science Arctic research community in which such cross-disciplinary engagements seemingly become more common. It might appear that communicative barriers erected by disciplinary traditions and methods are regularly transgressed here, although they remain quite high, given the extant “disciplining” pull of disciplines on individual research contributions.

The present concluding commentary builds on the state of play of Svalbard research in the spirit of a cross-disciplinary, multi-perspectival view that guides this collection of articles as a whole. It deliberately weaves together levels, contexts and research in the spirit mentioned, rather than providing a structured stocktaking of Svalbard research from the points of view of different academic disciplines. The purpose of this exercise is to open vistas for the future of social science research on Svalbard, as well as an assessment of why and how this might matter both locally *in* and *beyond* Svalbard in a wider Arctic research community. In order to arrive at such an assessment, the following observations will look at Svalbard in terms of its characteristic *structures* – structures that range from decrepit and abandoned buildings to the Svalbard Treaty; in terms of its characteristic *flows* – flows that range from arriving and departing cruise ships to the specialty of a permanently shifting local population; and in terms of the *processes* that negotiate the rift zones created between structure and flows – processes that range from dealing and negotiating sovereignty claims to those dealing with the local environment. It is the processes that negotiate the constitutive tension between the unique structures and flows that characterise Svalbard. It is therefore no surprise that most contributions to this collection of articles focus on those. While of course there is a “social reality” behind it, it should be mentioned that in this contribution the distinction between structures, flows and processes is primarily seen as a heuristic that allows ordering the great diversity of subjects, approaches, and disciplines that characterise research on Svalbard both as presented in the present issue of *Polar Record* and beyond. In particular, this distinction is an attempt of ordering this diversity regarding what is not an idealised representation of an archipelago secluded from the rest of the world in the High North, but an assemblage of places full of layers, developments and frictions, as Zdenka Sokolíčková, Alexandra Meyer and Andrian Vlachov (Sokolíčková, Meyer, & Vlachov, 2022), point out in their introduction.

## Structures

Pyramiden exemplifies the intricacies of Svalbard. At 78° 39' North, it is a settlement with now only a handful of permanent residents that once was (temporary) home to about 1000 people, complete with apartment buildings, a gym, a harbour, mining infrastructure and a Lenin statue. Regularly inhabited until the late 1990s, Pyramiden was developed as a Soviet-style settlement in which mostly Soviet (or, in its final days: Russian) citizens worked and lived, and all this on Norwegian soil. Although most of Pyramiden's buildings and infrastructure are abandoned and run down, in recent years the town has been quite bustling with activity, particularly over the summer months. It has become a popular site for tourist visits, playing on the exotic nature of a Soviet ghost town in Norway, located remotely in the Arctic. While the constant and growing stream of tourists has led to a return of a couple of inhabitants mostly making a living out of tourism and a modest updating of infrastructure, it has however also already had its impact on the local environment, while still retaining some geopolitical value for Russia with the prospect of a possible "re-opening" of Pyramiden, as Jan Kavan and Barbora Halašková (2022) argue in their contribution.

Pyramiden is not simply an interesting artefact and an assemblage of physical infrastructure. It also exemplifies the unique politico-legal regime of Svalbard under the Svalbard Treaty. While most of the planet's land surface is carved up between states with full legal (if not always de facto political) exclusive sovereignty over their territory, exceptions to this model continue to exist, and globally Svalbard nowadays is probably one of the biggest of these exceptions (excepting Antarctica).

The "exception" in the case of Svalbard does not pertain to sovereignty in a narrow sense, however, but on how sovereign rights are exercised while being practically constrained through an international treaty. There is no doubt about Svalbard being under Norwegian sovereignty and part of the Kingdom of Norway (the latter is worth mentioning because it is possible to be part of Norway, but not part of the Kingdom, as is notably the case with Bouvet Island). Concluded in 1920, and currently ratified by almost 50 signatory states, the Svalbard Treaty combines recognition of Norwegian sovereignty with the obligation of Svalbard's peaceful utilisation, as well as the rights of non-discrimination between and equal access for citizens of all signatory states (see Ulfstein, 1995; also generally, Arlov, 1994). Non-discrimination and equal access explain the rather unique features of Svalbard and its settlements: the almost abandoned Soviet-style town being transformed into tourist site (Pyramiden), a town largely run by a loss-making Russian mining company being kept for the sake of being there (Barentsburg), a research village with temporary residents from many countries (Ny-Ålesund), and a main town (Longyearbyen) with a high diversity of the population in terms of citizenship that in many respects also shows remnant structures of a company town (although one could say that these structures have increasingly been absorbed and transformed the place into a "state town").

While the Svalbard Treaty does provide a stable legal framework, and while relations between communities on the archipelago are not characterised by a high level of tensions (in the current collection, see Olsen, Vlahov, & Wigger, 2022), the prescription of peaceful utilisation has not led to Svalbard remaining out of the troubled waters of geopolitical conflict. Even distinctly before the Ukraine invasion, Russia has grown more assertive in claiming its interests in Svalbard, complaining about being discriminated

against by Norway (see particularly the February 2020 letter by the Russian to the Norwegian Minister of Foreign Affairs; Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2020). Behind these tensions lie both economic and strategic interests. Economically, Russian complaints pertain to environmental regulations restricting economic activities on land, but particularly reflect disputes of fisheries rights in the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) around Svalbard (see Churchill & Ulfstein, 2010) – the problem with the latter being a dispute on whether, by virtue of its special status as laid down in the Svalbard Treaty, Norway can actually claim to have an EEZ beyond the territorial waters. Legally, this dispute stems from differing interpretations of the relation between the (much older) Svalbard Treaty and the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). The intricacies of this dispute are illustrated by the fact that legal battles are now being fought over such specific issues like the question of whether *chionoecetes opilio* (snow crab) is a sedentary species or not. But even beyond interests pertaining to fisheries, Russia deems Svalbard to be of high strategic value. Continuing a long tradition from the Soviet era (cf. Holtmark, 1994), this assessment of Svalbard's strategic importance can be seen to be a major reason behind subsidising Arktikugol (the company "running" Barentsburg) as an otherwise unprofitable company (see Avango, Hacquebord, Aalders, de Haas, Gustafsson, & Kruse, 2011 on the longer general history of the geopolitics behind economic activities in Svalbard; however, there are substantial difficulties obtaining reliable socio-economic data particularly on Barentsburg; see Middleton, 2022).

The tensions and rifts that are structurally built into Svalbard's unique situation will not disappear anytime soon. Quite to the contrary, they open up a wide field of ongoing contests over narratives about Svalbard: narratives on what it "is," how it defines its identity, how it relates to Norwegian sovereignty and to geopolitical constellations, etc. These narratives have slowly but significantly evolved during the past 15 years, emphasising sovereignty issues more than before. These are not, it should be emphasised, narratives about the North that might be embedded in contexts far beyond the North. Rather, while they are narratives *about* the North that might also be constructed globally, they are very much also enacted *in* the North, and in this case on the level of local government and news coverage. As long as geopolitical rivalries continue being expressed assertively, this "narrative battleground" supposedly will persist or even broaden, and for local communities avoiding a creeping politicisation or a securitisation of local issues might become one of the main challenges. In this respect, it seems fair to say that the geopolitical frame of the Svalbard Treaty is not a mere "background condition" for local affairs, but a structure that influences the perceptions in daily lives in Svalbard (see Brode-Roger, 2022).

## Flows

While rather fixed and static in terms of "structures" that range from buildings to international treaties, Svalbard is also characterised by a specific combination as well as by specific intensities of flows. While it is a truism that every place is also characterised – and even: "made" – by the flows that run through it, the combination of flows in Svalbard is rather unique in terms of the problems and challenges it presents.

The seasons, and the associated presence or absence of light and darkness, arguably constitute the most important "background flow" characteristic for Svalbard. Although not very remarkable

in and for themselves as result of the astrophysical “normal,” polar night and polar day constitute a specific marker for Svalbard. The combination of remoteness and easy access provide for the length of daylight (or absence thereof) itself being an important motive and theme for flows of tourists that have expanded constantly over the years (excepting the pandemic years 2020 and 2021). Indeed, daylight is visually “celebrated” at the entrance of some hotels in Longyearbyen, where displays tell the visitor when the sun is expected to (dis-)appear the next time. Although due to visits of cruise ships the number of tourists is much higher during the summer, one could argue that the season itself as a reason for visiting stands out more during the winter (Svalbard here forming a part of a “Nordic” remoteness/accessibility tourist cluster with its main hubs in Reykjavik, Tromsø, and Rovaniemi). Its diversification is an important aspect of this touristic expansion: The expansion is not only due to visits with cruise ships concentrated on Longyearbyen, creating logistic daytime overflow issues for the local population and infrastructure not unlike those experienced in other daytime tourist hubs – one could say that in this respect Longyearbyen bears a striking resemblance to Venice. The tourist flows increasingly also extend to places beyond Longyearbyen. The partial reconstruction of Pyramiden mentioned above is an indicator of this development. In her contribution, Eva Kotašková (2022) demonstrates how old mining infrastructure is also reframed as a cultural heritage. Blended with the unique environmental features of Svalbard, the result is the emergence of a “somewhat cultured” wilderness as a specific type of (tourist) destination (in contrast to “cultured” or “pure wilderness” destinations). The ostensibly steady increase in the number of organised tours and tour operators thus bears witness not only to the increase but also to the diversification of tourist flows (see the overview analysis in Saville, 2022; also in Andersen, 2022).

Next to tourism, the second most notable flow that characterises Svalbard pertains to the flow of researchers. In addition to expeditions and the turnover at individual research stations, these flows are channelled through two hubs: on the one hand, since the late 1960s, Ny-Ålesund has grown into a basically researchers-only settlement with a high seasonal flow of inhabitants; on the other hand, the University Centre in Svalbard (UNIS), located in Longyearbyen, has significantly grown since its founding in the early 1990s and its research community (staff and students) now make up a significant part of Longyearbyen’s population at any given time of the year.

The most important point in this respect, however, is that due to Svalbard’s special situation, the tourist and researcher flows are not “irregularities” set against the “normalcy” of a permanent population. Rather, flows are the “normal.” The overwhelming majority of Svalbard’s population lives there for limited amounts of time only. Very long, even lifelong, residencies remain the exception (although the numbers are rising). While this permanent fluctuation, combined with the highly diverse nationalities represented in it, would make Svalbard an almost ideal “cosmopolitan” place (see Viken, 2008), it arguably also leads to constructions of permanency in relation to flows. Thus, in what could be seen as an at least partial construction of some kind of “quasi-indigeneity” based on the length of living in Svalbard, both constructions of permanency and related constructions of authenticity work on a different time-scale than in other parts of the world: thus, while in Venice there still exists a significant amount of people who have lived there all their lives and in that capacity feel authorised to criticise the number of tourists, in Longyearbyen this authorisation can easily be bestowed by a temporal residency, that is by being part of a

cosmopolitan flow rather than by being of long-established local colour.

However, the more fleeting constructions of belonging particularly in Longyearbyen should not be taken as demonstrating a strong mentality of a cosmopolitan community (a Northern “jet-set,” so to speak). Rather, they come with the price of a high sense of difficulty, if not impossibility, to forge a local (sense of) “community” (see Sokolíčková, 2022). In addition, what is there in terms of a local community is certainly a far cry from any kind of egalitarianism implied by a cosmopolitan ideal. It would be going too far to call Longyearbyen a community that in a strong sociological sense would be stratified according to nationality (with Norwegian as the top stratum). However, there are clear power differentials at play that privilege Norwegian citizenship, and at least partly visible differentiations according to citizenship (e.g. access to particular kinds of jobs, the rather self-enclosed lifeworld of the Thai community, etc.). Recent policies that seek to couple local voting rights for non-Norwegian citizens in Svalbard to a previous minimum 3-year residence on the Norwegian mainland (rather than in Svalbard) can in this sense be read as a clear attempt to increase these power differentials and disrupt Svalbard as a space of flows through strategies of territorialisation.

### Processes

While it is worthwhile to study the specific structures and flows that not only characterise Svalbard, but in a certain sense also constitute it as a social entity in the first place, it is the processes that negotiate the tension between structures and flows on the sites where “things happen,” as it were. It is here where local and everyday practices intersect with other frames of reference, be they regional or global in kind. This is plainly visible when it comes to implementing the legal framework provided by the Svalbard Treaty in local practices of government and governance. As particularly complaints by Russia demonstrate, such an implementation always involves a high degree of interpreting and enacting such a legal framework through political practices *in situ*. Such practices are not mere technical applications, but they rely on and feed into interpretative frameworks, and they are reproduced in ever-changing narratives. Local communities differ to the degree in which they practically refer to such frameworks (see the contribution by Duda, Kelman, Glick, Sokolenko, Poussenkova, & Nikitina, 2022). Most importantly, however, many of the contributions to this collection of articles demonstrate how such frameworks need to be actively referred to and “managed” in what is an ongoing transition on a vast scale. This change from mining to tourism and research as the economic basis of Svalbard presents specific challenges to Svalbard a whole, as well as to its individual communities.

While of course transitions vary in speed and intensity over time, they never stop. The only certain result of a transition is that it blends into another one. It is at this point where the present collection of articles convincingly shows that the transition to tourism and research must not be seen as something that would at some time be “over.” Rather, there is a strong underlying current that constructs Svalbard as something that might be called a social-material configuration under the guiding aim of achieving sustainability (see the contribution by Hovelsrud, Veland, Kaltenborn, Olsen, & Dannevig, 2021; also, more generally, Pram Gad & Strandsbjerg, 2019), and that particularly constructs Svalbard not only as a political, legal, or economic configuration, but decidedly also as a cultural and aesthetic one (see la Cour, 2022;



Ødegaard, 2022). It is these configurations that need to be enacted and “negotiated,” be it through practices and underlying imaginaries of what Svalbard “is” (or should be), be it by guides in the tourist industry (see the contribution by Trine Andersen), be it by the local government and administration, or be it through the waking up of a “ghost town” (see Kavan & Halašková, 2022).

## Conclusion

The present contribution has proposed a distinction between structures, flows and processes not only in order to make sense of Svalbard as an archipelago that represents a complex criss-crossing of many and very different social and natural systems, thus creating a range of “cross-scale” challenges (see also Hovelsrud, Kaltenborn, & Olsen, 2020). By doing so, it has also proposed one possibility of ordering a vast variety of research, while respecting the diversity underlying such an order. In doing so, it needs to be mentioned, the distinction between structures, flows, and processes to quite a large degree serves no more than a heuristic purpose. Not every aspect describing (and, in a sense, constituting) Svalbard as a social space can be fit neatly into one of these “boxes.” As many of the contributions to this collection point out, it is the shifting climate and changing environment that both frame and influence all the structures, flows, and processes described above. While very variable and unpredictable in their effects on these structures, flows, and processes, it is the shifting climate and the changing environment that, for the time being, constitute the “brute” background fact for any kind of social change (see also Meyer, 2022).

This entire collection of articles grew out of the “Svalbard Social Science Initiative” (SSSI) that was founded with the idea of bringing together scholars working on Svalbard from different perspectives (it should be mentioned that “social sciences” in this case definitely also extends to the humanities and arts). It demonstrates the potential of research that is cross-disciplinary and varied in the scales and levels of analysis. In the latter respect, it certainly considers “big” frameworks, but it does not start “top-down” with issues of geopolitical interests and international law. Regarding the former aspect, there is no denying the fact that Arctic research remains dominated by the natural sciences, with only a relatively marginal role for the social sciences and the humanities. However, the contributions to this collection of articles demonstrate how successful cross-fertilisations between different disciplinary areas might proceed in a practical fashion. They can be read as examples for how to further cross-disciplinary research on the scholarly “ground”: rather than merely demanding to cross boundaries, they point to practical ways of how to do it.

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