

Sustaining the Arctic Nation-State:

The Case of Norway, Iceland, and Canada

It was a blustery October's day in Reykjavik – “typically Icelandic”, I was told. I was there to interview a member of the Icelandic Parliament, the *Althing*, about her sense of an Icelandic ‘Arctic identity’. We met at a hotel that promised “fresh ocean air all around”, ostensibly striving “to stay in touch with nature”. The irony of the hotel's location, practically right next to Reykjavik Airport, was left unmentioned.

The parliamentarian enthusiastically answered my questions about her ‘Arctic identity’. She explained the Icelanders' pride in being ‘green’ and clean, powering the nation by sustainable, geothermal energy. We ordered coffee, and soon she was explaining how they were now – equally proudly – considering oil exploration. Once more, the irony was left unmentioned. Such exploration would be conducted in cooperation with the ‘experienced’ Norwegians (cf. Kristoffersen and Steinberg's chapter in this volume), making sure that – in her words – Iceland is “part of the making of the future of the Arctic”. While the question of oil remains controversial in Iceland, both sides of the debate are arguing along lines of ‘who we are’; political practice may be disputed, but the actor, the ‘nation-state’, never is.

Continuing, the parliamentarian referred to a shared circumpolar identity: different landscapes, but the same atmosphere and mentality. As an Icelander, she felt strongly that she had an Arctic identity, connected to their closeness to nature – “we are always talking about the weather!” – to natural forces, to the ocean, to glaciers. In her words, “ice, the glaciers, you know, it's also a part of us. Arctic, glaciers – it's somehow the same. You connect with it somehow”. In the north, we have a “connection”.

According to her, it is due to this connectedness to nature and what she referred to as a “special energy” only shared by northerners that Icelanders care so much about the environment. She explained that this connects them to their history all the way back to the settlement of the volcanic island in the Atlantic; they are *part* of nature themselves. As such,

sustainability politics is indeed about nature, but a nature that is also seemingly intrinsic to the Icelandic people and identity. Sustaining the Arctic is also about sustaining themselves.

Introduction

As the above anecdote illustrates, politics of sustainability co-constitute ideas of Arctic statehood and identity, past, present, and future. However, while the aim of Arctic sustainability seems to be undisputed and undisputable, it often remains undefined in terms of sustainability of what, where, how, and by whom. For the Arctic states, their privileged position as such spells not only particular rights, but also particular responsibilities – among these, the promotion of this Arctic sustainability. With ever more actors and stakeholders making their presence felt, the performance of these responsibilities becomes demonstrative of authority, credibility, and sovereignty: an active performance of what it means to *be* an Arctic state.

This chapter explores how politics of sustainability become tied to those of identity among policy-makers in three Arctic states; and how enacting sustainability thereby comes to reproduce and reify the idea of the Arctic ‘nation-state’ itself. That is, as state representatives articulate ‘sustainable’ practices as demonstrative of a seemingly inherent characteristic of the national community, they also indirectly ‘sustain’ the very ideal from which the practice purportedly flows, namely the ‘Arctic nation-state’s’ identity.

The specific focus here is three of the eight Arctic states: Norway, Iceland, and Canada. These are all states whose political leadership share explicit concern with Arctic identity and sustainability, yet whose relationships to the region differ in practice. The chapter draws on interviews with state personnel about their sense of Arctic identities and relations more generally; hence, ‘sustainability’ entered conversations as reflective of their conceptualisations of what it means to be, perform, and represent an Arctic state. While their articulations of sustainability demonstrate the concept’s elasticity, potentially seeking to sustain objects ranging from environments to economies, the subject, i.e. the Arctic nation-state, always remains constant. In this manner, Arctic politics is discursively reified as the domain and responsibility of states – that which has ‘always’ been and ‘always’ will be.

In what follows, the chapter proceeds in three steps: Firstly, brief conceptualisations of sustainability and statehood are offered, placing the chapter within the wider context of the book. This is followed by, secondly, a brief introduction of the three Arctic states in question – Norway, Iceland, and Canada – and their respective relationships to the region. Thirdly, articulations of Arctic identity and sustainability by the study’s interviewees are presented for each of the three states. Notably, the point here is not that state actors are deliberately attempting to ‘sustain’ (or even construct) an identity for political gains, but rather that this is an effect of their statements, rhetoric, practices. Here, the state-level deployment of the concept of ‘sustainability’ effectively re-produces the very idea of ‘the national’ itself, which is fundamental to both political support and professional purpose. Thus, in the process of performing politics of sustainability, the Arctic state is in effect invested with authority – the bearer of Arctic rights and Arctic responsibilities.

Sustainability and Statehood

As demonstrated throughout the book, the concept of sustainability seems only to have increased in currency, use, and meaning in recent years. Particularly since the UN’s *Our Common Future* (1987), or so-called ‘Brundtland Report’¹, popularised ‘sustainable development’, the concept has become widely employed as a political virtue worth global effort (cf. Benson et al., 2016). While numerous definitions exist, the etymology of sustainability traces back to the *ability to sustain* something, applied to (ecological) systems’ indefinite regenerative ability. In the Arctic context too, sustainability has become a near-ubiquitous objective – at least rhetorically and symbolically (Kristoffersen and Langhelle, 2017; see also Swyngedouw, 2007). However, as soon becomes clear, what this much-lauded aim means in practice is far from straightforward. What is to be made ‘sustainable’, by whom, where, when, and *how* are all questions open to debate. Highlighted by the aforementioned Icelandic parliamentarian, sustainability may simultaneously be about protecting nature and about protecting an economy through petroleum extraction. Instead of seeing these as irreconcilable, both instances point to the maintenance of a present ‘good’ for the future: a way of life in and of the Arctic. And indeed, it is the acknowledgement of the concept’s political purchase coupled with its inherent ambiguity that guides and unites the wide-ranging enquiries throughout this book.

¹ Worth noting here, Gro Harlem Brundtland was also Prime Minister of Norway in 1981, 1986–89, and 1990–96.

Here, the interest lies in the conceptual premise of sustainability, or the ‘act of sustaining something’, and what political role it may play in the Arctic. In other words, the focus is less on what sustainability is said to mean in practical terms and more on what it means as a political *concept* to begin with. Evoking the concept of sustainability is an act in and of itself; state actors speaking of Arctic ‘sustainability’ is a narrative positioning of the Arctic ‘nation-state’ and the environment in a relation of interdependence, which is (to be) maintained over time (see Gad et al.’s introductory chapter to this volume). On the surface, claims of sustainable action/politics imply that the Arctic environment is that which ostensibly needs to be safeguarded through policy (although, as seen above, these may include practices and nouns seemingly far from, even in opposition to, environmentalism *per se*). However, more fundamentally, political statements and practices of Arctic sustainability have the unintended consequence of ‘sustaining’, or reifying, its ‘sustainer’ – in this case, the nation-state and its purported identity. And, conversely, the ‘sustained’, i.e. the Arctic, is rendered passive and static, objectified, in need of safeguarding (cf. Swyngedouw, 2007). As such, what is of particular interest is how this normative concept percolates through political discourses more broadly, and how it comes to take on added meaning in the question of ‘who we are’ – indeed, co-constituting Arctic identities.

Of course, state actors are far from the only engaged in Arctic politics or ‘sustainability’ (however defined); the region’s governance arrangements having been described more akin to a ‘mosaic’ (Young, 2005) or ‘bazaar’ (Depledge and Dodds, 2017). However, they do hold a certain status and standing as the voting members of the Arctic Council. For the eight states with territory north of the Arctic Circle, their formal geographically defined title also encompasses notions of homelands and communities, histories and futures. Paying attention to scale, it is in this context striking how the ‘national’ (or ‘state’/‘federal’) seems only to be strengthened in the face of increasing globalisation and multilateral engagements (see e.g. Dittmer et al., 2011; Gerhardt et al., 2010). In what is frequently framed as the ever-more global, ‘new’ Arctic, the eight states’ particular, privileged position is reiterated and reified (see e.g. Graczyk et al., 2017; Wilson, 2016).

Even so though, defining who or where or what the Arctic state really *is* in practice not straightforward. Rather than seeing the state as an ‘actor’, it is understood as abstract ideal that ‘materialises’ as an effect of practice (see Abrams, 1988; Mitchell, 2006; Painter, 2006);

the ‘Arctic state’ comes into being through the numerous practices and performances enacted under its banner (see Butler, 2011). Hence, it is enacted into being by a range of *people* (Jones, 2007; Kuus, 2008), including those interviewed below. Statements of/about sustainability are among the enunciations through which the state emerges; and moreover, are reflective of how these practitioners understand their own roles as representatives of Arctic states. These statements are simultaneously products and *productive* of political discourse (Foucault, 1972), which means that e.g. the above cited Icelandic parliamentarian’s articulations of what it means to ‘be’ an Arctic state also *make* it such (Butler, 1999, see 2011). Conversely, articulating sustainability otherwise holds the potential to disrupt and challenge much more than specific policies – namely deeper-set convictions, questioning not only ‘how’ we should act sustainably, but also ‘who’ should do so and ‘why’. That is not to say that state representatives are deliberately seeking to sustain a notion of (Arctic) nation-statehood; rather, the concept of ‘sustainability’ itself is premised on an idea of a future that leads on from a certain interpretation of the present, a continuation and maintenance of a discursive status quo and specific worldview.

Also worth noting, the hyphenated ‘nation-state’ represents an ideological, discursive coupling of a people/society (the nation) with a political-territorial organisation (the sovereign state), assuming their congruence (Gellner, 1983; Sparke, 2005; but see Medby, 2014). As will become clear below, Arctic sustainability practices are in these states frequently framed as demonstrative of such an identity – a seemingly homogenous national community, sharing an identity across time and space (Anderson, 1983; Guibernau, 2013). Not only does this render it difficult to challenge politics, but also potentially homogenises how and who may indeed legitimately enunciate and enact them. Thus, in short, claiming that the production of Arctic policy is ‘based’ on a national identity becomes a practice through which its practitioners indirectly also re-produce, ‘sustain’, the ideal of a nation-state and its identity; one which they themselves ‘represent’ as well as rely on for their professional purpose. *How* these idea(l)s are discursively wedded – i.e. the convergence of identity, nation-statehood, and sustainability – in Arctic states is that which will be further explored below.

A Case of Three Arctic States

In order to start approaching how the above unfolds in practice, articulations of ‘Arctic identity’ by Arctic state personnel here offer insights on the state and identity’s relation to ‘sustainability’ (see Medby, 2017). Three of the eight Arctic states – Norway, Iceland, and Canada – provide the focus due to their shared state-level rhetoric of Arctic identities; yet, identities, and relationships with the Arctic more generally, that are also of contrasting character (see e.g. Arnold, 2010; Baldwin et al., 2012; Dodds and Ingimundarson, 2012; Grant, 2001; Jensen, 2013; Johnstone, 2016). On the one hand, these states are all relatively small, historically ‘peripheral’ states on the international scene; on the other, they have vastly different geographies, histories, and peoples – not least in the Arctic. Nevertheless, in their particular emphases on sustainability as *state* practice, they may all be contrasted with e.g. current US rhetoric, seemingly having jettisoned both Arctic and sustainability (or environment, see Hermann's chapter in this volume) from the immediate policy agenda, or indeed the aspiring-to-be-state Greenland, denouncing responsibility of other state’s unsustainable practices (see Bjørst's chapter in this volume).

It is worth noting that the semi-structured interviews, most of which were conducted in 2014, centred on Arctic identity and statehood², asking state personnel of their sense of such and potential implications for political practice. Thus, when ‘sustainability’ entered conversations, this tended to be through respondents’ own associations. While not all used the term ‘sustainability’ per se, they *all* spoke about their sense of a particular duty to protect and steward the region and its environments. The respondents were 49 state personnel in a variety of positions across the state/federal level: some elected politicians, others appointed bureaucrats, ranging from ministers to advisors, Indigenous and not. Importantly, many of these did not work on specifically Arctic-labelled issues; rather, what was of interest was how the Arctic region is identified with (or not) by decision-makers potentially far removed from it, but nevertheless representing a state formally titled as Arctic. Hence, instead of focusing on one specific sustainability strategy, what is here at stake is how such strategies enter political discourses, worldviews, and ‘common-sense’ practices; and how this in turn may reconfigure relations in and with the region.

² More about the study, its methodology and results can be found in Medby (2017).

As it is the conceptual premise of ‘sustainability’ that is of main concern, the analysis goes beyond the onomasiology of ‘sustainability’ per se, to consider also related words and expressions (see Gad et al., this volume). In their deployment, terms such as stewardship, environmental protection, safeguarding for future generations, etc. perform similar (often mutually reinforcing) functions in political parlance. Hence, for the purpose of this chapter they are included, not as syntactically different but as semantically related – forming part of a discourse of political consequence (see Foucault, 1972).

In what follows, each of the three states are presented separately, highlighting both their similarities and differences. As soon becomes clear, ‘sustainability’ remains vaguely defined across them, and among individual personnel, but it is precisely this ambiguity – and yet unquestioned normativity – that leads to the concept’s ubiquity. When sustainability becomes a *value*, the question is not only ‘what is to be sustainable?’, but indeed ‘who defines its currency; and what does it *do*?’.

Articulations of Sustainability and Identity

Before turning to different manifestations of identity discourses in each state, it is worth noting their shared discursive frame: State personnel in all three described their ‘Arctic identity’ as simultaneously embedded within a pre-existing national identity – the stable core of ‘who we are’ – and a new phenomenon, the result of change, that allowed a re-assessment of ‘who we *will* be’. In this manner, the geographically based title of Arctic statehood – and with it, sustainability politics – becomes part of the national narrative: a present that is a consequence of the past as well as a promise for the future. However, the ways in which this takes place, i.e. the ways in which politics of Arctic sustainability become embedded in national identity, are reflective of the perceptions each has of their own nation-state: enshrined in different imaginations of different national pasts and different national futures – though all, importantly, national.

Norway

In interviews with Norwegian representatives, the topic of sustainability was often brought up as both an example of and justification for not only Norwegian political involvement but *leadership* in the Arctic region. Environmental protection here ties into a wider narrative of

‘good’ nationhood, even moral exceptionalism, which feeds into a quest for international status and influence that arguably runs through Norwegian foreign policy more generally (de Carvalho and Neumann, 2015; Lahn and Wilson Rowe, 2015). One Norwegian politician explained this, as well as the undeniable paradox posed by it:

Not that I am personally in favour of it, but if there is *one* nation on this Earth that could, perhaps, limit oil extraction based on a climate-reasoning, so to speak, and have the economy to miss that income etc., then that is Norway, right. And also, to show the importance of taking care of the climate and environment – among others, because of the Arctic.

As his quote suggests, there is a tension between Norway’s emphasis on environmental protection and their active extraction and export of fossil fuels. However, even here the ‘responsible’ image is maintained through what Jensen (2012) has termed ‘discourse co-optation’: claiming that Norway *should* extract hydrocarbons due to their ‘cleaner’, more ‘sustainable’ extractive industries in order to avoid the purported inevitable alternative, namely that Russia would do so instead, but in a ‘dirtier’ way. In short, Norway is “drilling for the environment” (Jensen, 2006; see also Kristoffersen, 2015)... In this manner, the image of Norway as a sustainable, responsible, moral actor is sustained in the Arctic, and political practices are not only justified but seemingly necessitated in the process. And indeed, many interviewees linked this leadership to a proud history of Polar exploration (see e.g. Drivenes and Jølle, 2004; Wærp, 2010); a pioneering spirit that today ‘transfers’ to environmental protection. Thus, Norwegian politics of sustainability in the Arctic not only sustain a particular self-perception, but also link to patriotism and pride, embedded in ‘the’ national narrative.

Several interviewees described Norwegian environmental care as not just historically rooted but as environmentally determined: describing how shared experiences of cold and harsh coastal conditions have somehow *shaped* them as somehow “closer to nature”, similar to the opening’s Icelandic parliamentarian. Reflecting on national identity’s influence on Arctic political practice, one interviewee explained:

When you meet others, from other countries, who do not have that, sort of, hard nature, right; then you notice that it affects our character, yes, our identity, how we look at things. And I think this closeness to nature means that we have more *respect* for nature...

Here, nature is ostensibly what ‘makes’ Norwegians, ‘makes’ political behaviour, and ‘makes’ it a leader of sustainability, as above. A self-perception of being a small, struggling nation-state of fishermen and farmers is re-narrated in the ‘new’ north (see Stuhl, 2013); in the words of one politician:

Today, the Norwegian identity [is tied to] us being the nation that exploits natural resources but in a *sustainable* way.

Once more, notions of sustainability – here, sustainable development in the arguably unsustainable extraction of fossil fuels – become subsumed in a deeper sense of Norwegian self. Regardless of whether nature has influenced the Norwegian ‘character’, as long as state personnel *believe* it to be true, it undoubtedly influences *their* behaviour, *their* representation and enactment of the Arctic ‘nation-state’.

Iceland

Arctic nature, environments, and their protection were also frequent themes in the Icelandic interviews. However, instead of resulting in leadership, the Icelandic environment was more often described as that which sets the country *apart*, that which defines them as stubbornly independent. In a similarly environmentally determined manner as in Norway, climatic conditions were articulated as providing the Icelanders with a unique character and spirit, and therefore their claim to political independence – to nationhood and sovereignty. In the words of an Icelandic politician, closeness to nature – Icelandic identity – clearly influences political behaviour:

[...] we are a people who need a lot of freedom. I think that comes from being brought up in an environment where you are totally free. [...] And that also makes a country that is brought up like that.

In other words, the Icelandic nature is what supposedly makes Icelanders, and thus, sustaining nature becomes a question of sustaining much more: the very ‘essence’ of the nation.

For Icelandic state representatives, Arctic statehood is a title that is explicitly future-oriented – arguably *more* so here than in the other seven states, despite most Arctic engagement being marked by anticipation (Depledge, 2016; Dodds, 2013; Steinberg et al., 2014). Due to Iceland’s geographical position mainly south of the Arctic Circle – and until recently, political efforts reaching mainly south, east, and west – the adoption of an ‘Arctic’ brand is still fresh in Icelandic memory. Of course, Icelanders also look to the past, connecting their Arctic

statehood to histories of e.g. Vikings and fishermen (at least rhetorically), but the interviewees were all clear that for Iceland, the Arctic primarily represents economic opportunities:

Attention to the Arctic and the economic interests are not very close to us now, but of course *we* [political leaders] have to look to the farther future.

In the process of recovering from a severe economic crisis, also the current Icelandic economy is highly dependent on the successful promotion of their ‘pristine’ nature. In the words of another parliamentarian:

It is, of course, very important for Iceland to be a clean country – without any smoke, without any nuclear waste, without any other kind of waste. Clean. That is really a huge issue for Iceland.

Nature is not just something that gives Icelanders a sense of a stable national self, but also attracts interest from external ‘others’: tourists and investors. And so, the sustainable co-existence in and with nature is something to *display*; for example, presenting geothermal energy-use as an item on itineraries of neatly packaged trips and convenient flight layovers. And moreover, sustainable practices are not just laudable achievements, but necessary for sustaining the Icelandic national economy.

While tourism is a relatively recent addition of scale, fishery is deeply imbedded in the national, historical narrative as a ‘foundation’ for an Icelandic identity; and today, autonomy over fishing zones and quotas has come to symbolise the aforementioned struggle for freedom and independence of the Icelandic nation (Bergmann, 2014; Robert, 2014). As one parliamentarian noted in relation to fishery and control over own (sustainable) quotas:

[I]t’s very much at the core of Icelandic foreign policy, identity. And more so than just the economic activity; it’s of course an extremely important economic activity, but it’s a little bit *more* than that.

When Iceland was excluded from Arctic Ocean negotiations (Dodds and Ingimundarson, 2012), it therefore soon became a question of Icelandic national pride. The demonstration of Icelandic sustainability – from the ways in which they extract energy and transport tourists to how they regulate their fishery – thus also soon comes to be seen as a demonstration of the inherently Icelandic. As such, aiming to sustain the environment matters for much more than ‘just’ the environment; it matters also to the sense of national self, and indeed, sustains the belief in such.

Canada

In the Canadian case, the concept of sustainability tended to come up under a different banner: that of ‘stewardship’. While historically referring to colonised peoples and lands, stewardship is today transferred to the safeguarding of the environment and nature. Indeed, on what it means for Canada to be an Arctic state, one official simply summarised: “stewardship and sovereignty”. Or, in the words of former Prime Minister Stephen Harper:

This magnificent and unspoiled region is one for which we will demonstrate stewardship on behalf of our country, and indeed, all of humanity (2008, cited in C.FATDC, 2010, p. 16).

Harper’s views on environmental protection or (the lack of) climate change would seem to contradict calls for sustainability (in the environmental sense); and yet, even under his government, it was a topic, however differently framed, differently performed, differently identified with. Perhaps connected to the historical (colonial) connotations of ‘stewarding’, also ‘sustainability’ frequently took on a more human/social (even economic) meaning in the Canadians’ articulations. Reflecting on Canadian citizens’ views of the North, one official explained that, in his view, these were romanticised and:

mostly environmentally focused, mostly hyper-sensitive of the peoples of the North and their challenges [...] What’s not part of that conversation, and what’s not part of people’s thinking, perceptions when they think of the North, is business. You know, how – who is keeping the towns running? Where is the economy coming from? What *sustains* it?.

More so than in the other states, the adjective ‘sustainable’ was applied to communities, economies, and the financial viability of industries. Hence, it is a question of ‘sustaining’ the nation – indeed, paternally protecting the national community (Dodds, 2012) – where the Arctic environment provides the backdrop for the post-colonial state’s formation of self.

The environmental determinism seen in the other two states is of a different character in Canada. On the topic of a Canadian Arctic identity, personnel tended to speak of Arctic environments and nature as still foreign, distant, exotic, but something with which Canadians could *connect* through a nature-based identity – that of the south, yet cold, ‘winter-y’, and *relatively* northern.

I think it might blur; like, ‘Arctic’ might blur into Canadian vastness and wilderness. A lot of Canadians [are] very proud of the wilderness and the uniquely Canadian – the vastness as well.

While the romanticised Arctic does indeed link to national identity here too, it does so in a far more *symbolic* manner than in Norway and Iceland (where, arguably, the opposite is taking place as national Arctic identities are becoming normalised and domesticated). While most Canadians, including most state personnel, have never physically experienced the Arctic, it is nevertheless a space that *matters* symbolically and politically, not least in separating themselves from, first Great Britain, and second, the USA. As one federal official explained, ‘the changing Arctic’ may not affect everyday life in the south, but it does affect, even *define*, how Canadians see themselves:

[...] as a sort of outdoors people, who are close to nature as well. And... you know, who have inherited this part of the planet and also want to make sure that it’s carefully protected and that we are, basically, stewards of that region [...].

Although Canadian politics of sustainability are articulated differently than in Norway and Iceland, they nevertheless perform a similar function. What may at first glance seem a unidirectional relation between the Canadian North and South – the latter ‘sustaining’ the former – upon closer observance proves to be one mutual dependency, where the former sustains the southern ‘stewards’ sense of self. Ultimately, identity is always relational and performative – through the practice of ‘sustaining’ the Arctic, the very notion of the Canadian nation-state is too.

Conclusion

Considering state personnel’s articulations of Arctic identity and its ties to sustainability, there are many similarities across the three states in question: For all three, sustainability is unquestionably positively laden and constitutes a political aim to strive for in the Arctic and elsewhere. Speaking of Arctic sustainability is uncontroversial (some might even say, near-mandatory), and, linking it to identity, a laudable value. Further, in all cases, it is about sustaining a present object, the Arctic, for the future (or indeed, aspects of it, such as Arctic environments, cultures, economies etc.); hence, it is a concept of temporal consequence, of governing the future in the present. As the opening’s Icelandic parliamentarian phrased it, political engagement in the region is about “*making*” the Arctic future; importantly, a future based on one interpretation of the present, thereby singularising the plurality of potential futures. Tied to identity, it is therefore not *only* about who ‘we’, the so-called national community, supposedly *are*, but also about who we *want* to be – past, present, and future generations in and of the Arctic – seen from the level of the state.

While Arctic sustainability intersects with narratives of national identity in all three cases, it nevertheless does so in different ways across the different contexts. Thus, what we may also observe above is the elasticity of the concept; and moreover, how it comes to take on added meaning when coupled with fundamental myths of ‘who we are’ – justifying certain political practice, and indeed, ‘sustaining’ the very idea of the cohesive nation-state and its identity. For Norwegian state personnel, their politics of sustainability may be seen as demonstrative of their leadership in the Arctic; for Icelandic state personnel, it connects to their sense of unique independence and ties to nature, a making of the Arctic future; and, for Canadian state personnel, it is about stewardship and responsibilities that are inextricably bound up with colonial histories. In short, politics of sustainability come to co-constitute an ‘Arctic identity’ for these state personnel, albeit weighing past, present, and future differently. In this manner, it is the very ambiguity of the concept that gives it its political power, a universal ‘good’ under the banner of the Arctic nation-state (see Guibernau, 2013), investing diverse practices and practitioners with authority.

Returning to the book’s guiding questions (as introduced by Gad et al.), this chapter has sought to highlight how the introduction of sustainability as a political value supposedly derived from an identity discursively reifies political practices and actors. Through notions of morality and the collective national ‘self’, state action in the Arctic becomes state action as Arctic – and thereby also becomes naturalised and normalised, uncontested and incontestable. Hence, what is clear from the above is that wedding politics of Arctic sustainability to identity has implications extending beyond the region – to fundamental political beliefs and worldviews. In short, the political implications of the above may constitute a discursive narrowing of what it means to ‘be’ Arctic and how to be so, and a privileging of the state as the key ‘steward’ of the region. Applied ever more widely, as indeed the other chapters also demonstrate, sustainability becomes less of a concrete practice and more of a discursive legitimisation of authority and rights, in this case those of the state. That is not to say that the term is completely ‘emptied’ of meaning, that it does not also come with a range of important policy initiatives; Arctic environments and natures, lives and cultures, are indeed articulated as something to be maintained through time. However, importantly, ‘to be maintained’ implies an Arctic that is passive, static, necessitating the active intervention of a ‘stewarding’ state. In other words, well-meaning as they may be, these articulations cite a certain worldview and discourse, a certain ordering of relations, through which the idea of the state

and state power reified. In the end, state practitioners' articulations of Arctic sustainability and identity do more than 'sustain' the Arctic per se: they sustain the very idea upon which statements are made, discourses of Arctic 'nation-statehood'.

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