

Envisioning the North Atlantic: Current Narratives and Official Discourses

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1.0 What's in a name

Through the ages, the North Atlantic countries have not had a strong tradition for [sic] close communication, neither culturally nor politically, and there are many areas in which the countries can rediscover each other – and rebuild their cultural ties.¹

Some years ago, these were the words that met visitors on the homepage of the North Atlantic House in Copenhagen (*Nordatlantens Brygge*): a center for Greenlandic, Icelandic and Faroese culture, furnished in an old warehouse, which once was the center of trade and transport to and from the North Atlantic countries. In addition to the cultural center, the warehouse is the seat of the Icelandic Embassy and the Greenlandic and Faroese representations. The words came as a surprise – usually when introducing oneself as a unit, commonality would be stressed, not the opposite. Furthermore, the text is strangely contradictory – how can one *rediscover* and *rebuild* something that never existed in the first place?

However, the text obviously takes the existence of the North Atlantic region as a unit for granted. Being part of the North Atlantic seems to be what defines each of the three countries, and it therefore seems reasonable to assume that they must have a lot in common. What prevents this lack of commonality is the lack of communication. One important purpose of the North Atlantic House therefore is to help facilitate communication, in order to strengthen the ties between the North Atlantic countries.²

A certain commonality between the countries is indicated in the fact that they all seem to be included in the term ‘the North Atlantic’; no further explanation is needed. Outside the Nordic countries, or outside Scandinavia – or even outside the *western* part of Scandinavia – this term means something completely different.³ A quick search on the internet will reveal that the term ‘North Atlantic’ is generally used as a designation for the entire Atlantic Ocean north of the equator.



Nordatlantens Brygge in Copenhagen, a center for Greenlandic, Icelandic and Faroese culture and the seat of the Icelandic Embassy and the Greenlandic and Faroese representations. It was inaugurated in 2003.

Photo: Johannes Jansson/norden.org.

In Sweden and Finland, not even the helpful extension of ‘Scandinavian North Atlantic’ or ‘Nordic North Atlantic’ seems to have the specific significance discussed here.

The term ‘North Atlantic’ is particularly used within the Danish Realm (*Rigsfællesskabet*, that is, Denmark, Greenland and the Faroe Islands)⁴ as a common denominator for Greenland and the Faroe Islands. The Faroe Islands and Greenland have home rule/self-government, but they are still part of the Danish Kingdom. Before becoming a republic in 1944 Iceland also belonged within this constellation of islands, which once were part of Norway and the Danish-Norwegian empire. At the Treaty of Kiel in 1814, which ended the hostilities of the Napoleonic Wars, Denmark agreed to cede Norway to Sweden – but kept Greenland, Iceland and the Faroe Islands. Therefore Iceland, and in some cases even Norway, are still included in the ‘North Atlantic,’ as for instance in NAMMCO, The North Atlantic Marine Mammal Commission, and NORA, the Nordic Atlantic Cooperation. NAMMCO is an agreement between the member governments, Greenland, Iceland, the Faroe Islands and Norway.⁵ NORA is an intergovernmental organization under the Nordic Council of Ministers, supporting businesses and research and development organizations in the region, which is defined as the Faroe Islands, Greenland, Iceland and Coastal Norway (the 9 coastal counties of Norway, from Finnmark in the North to Rogaland in the South).⁶ NORA is also working to develop cooperation with the so-called “western neighbors”, defined on its homepage as “especially Canada and Scotland”⁷ Other co-operations like NATA, the North Atlantic Tourism Organization, does not include Norway. NATA defines the region as the “Three Astonishing Countries: The Faroe Islands, Iceland and Greenland”⁸

Currently ‘West Nordic’ is used synonymously with ‘North Atlantic’ in the discourse of the countries in question. ‘West Nordic’ was mainly used in Norway as a common denominator for the languages spoken in Iceland, the Faroe Islands and Norway (as opposed to Danish and Swedish).⁹ In politics, the term was consolidated with the establishment of The West Nordic Council (originally The West Nordic Parliamentary Council of Cooperation) in Nuuk in 1985. The members are Iceland, Greenland and the Faroe Islands, and the council was created following political discussions of the three countries during the early 1980s, after home rule was introduced in Greenland in 1979.¹⁰ The rationale was “to cooperate on common problems and to conduct positive and constructive cooperation regarding West Nordic, or North Atlantic, issues with the Nordic Council as well as other organisations”.¹¹ The text oscillates between the two terms ‘West Nordic’ and ‘North Atlantic’, as does the present homepage of the council. The homepage lists the following as its main objectives:

- Promote the common interests of the West Nordics.
- Preserve the natural resources and culture of the North Atlantic in collaboration with the West Nordic governments.
- Strengthen cooperation between the West Nordic governments.
- Promote West Nordic interests within Nordic cooperation.
- Strengthen cooperation with and between other West Nordic organizations.
- Strengthen cooperation with other parliamentary organizations, including the Conference of Parliamentarians of the Arctic Region and the European Parliament.¹²

These countries obviously felt that they needed a forum to focus on particular issues relevant to the North Atlantic. For Greenland and the Faroe Islands, the West Nordic Council has the advantage that in it they get to represent themselves, free of their usual subordination to Denmark.¹³

Recently, ‘West Nordic’ has been used in a brand new combination with ‘Arctic’, as when the Faroe Islands defined themselves as “an island nation in the West Nordic region of the Arctic”.¹⁴ This notion turns the perspective 180 degrees. Usually, the North Atlantic countries are seen from a southern perspective, reducing them to a periphery. By establishing the Arctic as the point from which the viewing angle is determined, and by defining themselves as Arctic, the Faroe Islands become the center. Likewise, in defining themselves as part of the Arctic, the North Atlantic countries are strategically inscribing themselves within another region, which in recent decades has gained an immense momentum. So, while the ice is moving further and further north due to global warming, the ‘Arctic’ as a politically defined concept is moving further and further south.

Before, the Scandinavian countries did not identify with the widespread image of the frozen, barren and inhospitable Arctic. Throughout history, a divide has been established between the white ‘Polar Regions’, denominating the areas

closest to the poles or frozen to a degree where sledges became the most obvious means of transportation, and the blue 'North Atlantic', which was a Scandinavian term for the body of waters that enabled traffic by ship between Norway, Denmark, the Faroe Islands, Iceland, the Shetlands and Scotland and the West Coast of Greenland. In Norway the term 'Polar' usually refers to the Svalbard archipelago, the island of Jan Mayen and the two poles – remote areas where only polar heroes and scientific researchers go.¹⁵ Presumably, an important reason for the Faroe Islands, Iceland and Norway suddenly identifying with the term 'Arctic', is that the concept is currently undergoing a process of 'oceanization' or 'blueification', due to global warming. The Arctic that these nations identify with is not the white, but the blue Arctic, as is formulated in Norway's 2017 Arctic strategy: "Here [in the Norwegian Arctic], people are not divided by the ice, but rather joined by the ocean."¹⁶ While the white Arctic is seen as vulnerable, the blue Arctic carries other connotations of industry, technology, utilization and innovation.¹⁷ However, both versions of the Arctic are at play and are being negotiated within the North Atlantic countries' individual strategies and within the international efforts to create a new, strong and dynamic region.

We have decided to use the term 'North Atlantic' in this book because it recalls the countries' past as part of the Danish-Norwegian empire (*Nordatlanten* is still widely used). As the analyses within this book will demonstrate, this is a past that is in many ways still present, and of which it is helpful to be aware – especially in a time when relations in the area are being redefined. This applies not only to the relations between the former imperial center and its periphery, but more significantly to those between the North Atlantic countries in a time when they are taking part in the establishment of new geopolitical centers.

1.1 Between 'the Nordic' and 'the Arctic'

Just like a nation, a region does not simply awaken to an understanding of its identity or its destiny. A region needs to be built. Like a nation, a region must build a strong narrative to support its existence. This involves a process of selecting features that are specific to it. Certain historical events, geographical features, special products and so on are given preference in this process. A web of meaning is created, as these elements are put in relation to one another, and further embedded into a causal *emplotment*, with one incident leading neatly to the other. This creates a meaningful and coherent line of events that gives the present meaning and perspective, and, not least, offers a vision of the future. Temporality, relationality, selective appropriation and causal emplotment: these are the constitutive features of narrativity, according to Somers and Gibson.¹⁸ Their theory of narrative as an ontological condition of social life is widely used within the social sciences. In sociology 'narrative' is used interchangeably with 'story' – as opposed to literary studies, for example, where narrative is a genre and thus an optional

mode amongst other modes. Hence, “narratives are the stories we tell ourselves and others about the world(s) in which we live, and it is our belief in these stories that guides our actions in the real world”¹⁹

People construct identities (personal and collective) in order to locate themselves in time and space, and, again, narratives do the work. Thus, imagined communities like the nation (according to Benedict Anderson’s definition)²⁰ and the region are dependent on peoples’ willingness to share, expand and perform the stories that tie them together. In this book, we will look at the North Atlantic as a discursive field and explore the multiplicity of stories available within and about this field. We aim to analyze which of these stories are being selected in contemporary narratives, and which are being omitted and concealed. As is evident from the quotation from the North Atlantic House’s homepage above, the peoples of the North Atlantic do not yet constitute any strong narrative as a community. But, as is also evident, efforts are being made to change this.

Once, the North Atlantic islands were part of an empire. At some point that empire even included Orkney and the Shetland Islands. Today, the empires of the past may not be fully dissolved, but they are radically changed, not least due to independence processes and decentralization. This is a global trend, in social sciences named *devolution*. Everywhere empires are splintering, and provinces and cities seek autonomy in their financial and diplomatic affairs.²¹ However, this mechanism is countered by another trend: *aggregation*. The smaller the political units get, the more they must fuse into larger commonwealths in order to survive.²² Since what matters in the new global order seems to be *connectivity* – being connected – it is strategically desirable to be active on as many platforms as possible. Therefore, it is logical that the countries in the North Atlantic want to form their own region, in which they are the center, *and* also still be part of the Nordic Cooperation, *and* uphold close connections with other co-operations, like the EU, *and* keep options open for new co-operations, for instance with their western ‘neighbors’.

It is also understandable why the Arctic, as a new and powerful regional construction, must seem an important new focal point, seen from a North Atlantic or West Nordic perspective. The idea of the Arctic as a region is of a fairly recent date, according to professor of political science Carina Keskitalo.²³ In the days of heroic exploration, the Arctic gained a reputation as an inhospitable wilderness, sublime but desolate, and only possible to reach with the greatest expenditure of effort.²⁴ From a southern perspective, the Arctic was a frontier, rich in both renewable and non-renewable resources, but not fit for human occupation.²⁵ After World War II the Arctic’s new position as a strategic frontier did not change the perception of the area. However, during the late 1970s and early 1980s environmental and indigenous movements expanded the areas traditionally considered ‘Arctic’ and put an emphasis on human action. This sparked a process of region-building where in particular the Arctic Council, established in 1996, has been active, trying to turn the Arctic from an area of conflict into a region for cooperation.²⁶ Since, accord-

ing to Keskitalo, the Arctic does not yet exist, but is still under construction as a region, Keskitalo consistently puts the concept in inverted commas.²⁷

Thus, the Arctic is now being politically, rather than geographically defined. The Arctic Council originally consisted of the so-called 'Arctic Five': the 'Arctic Rim' states with borders on the Arctic Ocean – Russia, the USA (with Alaska), Canada, Denmark (because of Greenland) and Norway. Due to the successful branding of the Nordic countries as a unity, Iceland, Sweden and Finland were later included. Environmental protection (discussions on an agreement for the protection of polar bears) was the issue that first brought about the idea of an Arctic Council, and it has remained a dominant focus.²⁸ However, the ICC (Inuit Circumpolar Council) has also played a central role in the Canadian engagement in the Arctic Council. Canada was the initiator of the council and has been a driving force ever since. First and foremost, the ICC has been keen on encouraging the Arctic Council to focus on the human dimension (instead of the Arctic as a wasteland), in particular the indigenous populations, and on sustainability instead of conservation.²⁹

It was the Brundtland report, published 1987, which sparked the discourse on sustainability, arguing that environmental protection and development were not opposites, but interdependent terms: "Development cannot subsist on a deteriorating environmental base, the environment cannot be protected when growth leaves out of account the costs of environmental protection."³⁰ However, tradition (in the sense of traditional hunting, or traditional knowledge) has always been significant in the argument for an 'Arctic' arena.³¹ This, of course, has to do with indigenous peoples and the general understanding of these peoples – as in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples from 2007.³² It may also have to do with the Canadian influence in the Arctic Council and the role 'tradition' and 'elders' play within the voice of the Canadian Inuit. From early on, discussion papers formulated by Canada emphasized the vulnerability of the Arctic, not only as environment was concerned, but also regarding the social situation (loss of cultural traditions, unemployment, alcohol and drug abuse, self-destructive behavior, suicide). The Arctic soon became associated with the word *crises*.³³ Obviously, such a negative brand could create stereotyping and problems for new states, who want to be taken seriously as equal members of the world community – like for example Greenland, an active member in the ICC.³⁴

Earlier definitions of the Arctic were primarily formulated by the natural sciences. However, this does not mean that it has ever been possible to find an exact definition of what the 'Arctic' means, or where its boundaries lie. The definitions seem to stem from the old desire to define the Arctic as different: barren, cold and dominated by snow and ice.³⁵ The most common definitions are: The *tree line* definition (the Arctic is where trees cannot grow); different *temperature* definitions (one of them claiming that the mean temperature for all months of the year must be below 10 degrees, and at least one month must have a mean temperature below freezing); the *permafrost* definition (soil which is permanently frozen year-

round); and a number of different *latitude* definitions, one of them the Arctic Circle at 66°33'46.3" north, above which line the sun is not visible for at least one day at midwinter, and the sun does not totally disappear below the horizon for at least one night during midsummer. The problem is that many factors in combination determine climate. Places at the same latitude will have a different climate depending on whether they are inland or coastal, and a place where the Gulf Stream passes, like Norway or South Greenland, will have quite a different climate from some other place at the same latitude where it does not pass, such as Canada or Russia. The domestic Canadian definition places the limit of the Arctic at 60° northern latitude, mirroring the Antarctic delineation of 60° southern latitude. In Scandinavia, this would include not only Iceland and the Faroe Islands, but Norway just north of Oslo, Sweden north of Stockholm and all of Finland. Many programs therefore use the 60° for America and the Arctic Circle definition for Europe.

According to the Arctic Circle definition, the Faroe Islands do not qualify, and neither does Iceland, except Grimsey, a very small island belonging to Iceland. The strategic assessment report *The Faroe Islands – a Nation in the Arctic: Opportunities and Challenges*³⁶ therefore advocates the political definition:

The Arctic can be defined in a number of different ways. In strictly scientific terms, the definition has often been limited to the area north of the Arctic Circle, or from the border line that marks the beginning of permafrost, or the area in which the average daily temperature in the summer does not exceed 10°C. In the context of international politics, however, the most commonly accepted definition of the Arctic is that characterised by political cooperation between the states and nations whose people live in the Circumpolar North, and this definition includes the Faroe Islands.³⁷

The term the ‘Circumpolar North’ has previously been introduced in Arctic discourse as a convenient abbreviation for the Arctic and sub-Arctic,³⁸ and here it serves to build a bridge between the two in order to support the view that the Faroe Islands have “a key position” in the Arctic region.³⁹ The report further argues that the Faroe Islands share key socio-economic features with the recognized “High-Northern” territories, and it claims that “The Faroe Islands have the knowledge and experience necessary for the further development of fisheries, shipping and research, as well as the conservation and management of natural resources.”⁴⁰

Being closer to the Arctic Circle, Iceland prefers to claim its rights as an Arctic nation with reference also to the geographical arguments. As of the adoption of the Arctic resolution, *A Parliamentary Resolution on Iceland’s Arctic Policy*,⁴¹ the parliament of Iceland entrusts the government to carry out a policy:



From the front cover of *The Faroe Islands – a Nation in the Arctic* (2013).

[s]ecuring Iceland's position as a coastal State within the Arctic region as regards influencing its development as well as international decisions on regional issues on the basis of legal, economic, ecological and geographical arguments. This will among other things be based on the fact that since the northern part of the Icelandic Exclusive Economic Zone falls within the Arctic and extends to the Greenland Sea adjoining the Arctic Ocean, Iceland has both territory and rights to sea areas north of the Arctic Circle.⁴²

Still, the intent is to be inclusive and also promote:

[u]nderstanding of the fact that the Arctic region extends both to the North Pole area proper and the part of the North Atlantic Ocean which is closely connected to it. The Arctic should not be limited to a narrow geographical definition but rather be viewed as an extensive area when it comes to ecological, economic, political and security matters.⁴³

However, the connotations, which stick to the white Arctic are still active, and seem to result in a certain discomfort with the term. In Norway the city of Tromsø, which is situated far above the Arctic Circle at almost 70°, is commonly referred to as the 'Gateway to the Arctic' – an expression which is also used by both Iceland and the Faroe Islands, indicating that these places are not actually part of the Arctic, but positioned on the border, where the Arctic begins. Something similar was suggested by the Icelandic budget airline WOW air in an online article, where the company tried to answer the frequently asked question: "Is Iceland in the Arctic or not?"

The locals too will talk freely about the harsh north, surviving in the Arctic and suchlike to tourists, because it sells! But really most people think of their country as being more like Scotland, central Norway and Canada than as being like Greenland, Lapland or Svalbard. There really is no comparison. Despite its high north location, Iceland benefits from the Gulf Stream, which means that while nature goes Arctic-quiet in the long winter and even the grass turns brown, the snow is not a permanent feature of city streets. The currents also mean that when the spring arrives, plants and animals can make full use of the constant daylight and gardeners and farmers are able to grow all sorts of unexpected things, like sunflowers, wheat, peas and oak trees. That doesn't sound at all Arctic, does it? (...).

On the other hand (...) thanks to our glaciers, Arctic lovers can find snow all year round. So once again, the land of contrasts, the land of fire and ice, the land where nothing is quite as it seems, lives up to expectations. Iceland is both a fertile, temperate, European country like any other...and it is also a barren, frozen Arctic wasteland...all at the same time. Awesome!⁴⁴

Upholding the dichotomy between the Arctic and Europe, as well as the hegemonic discourse about the Arctic as barren and frozen, the text tries to position



Front cover of *Nordatlantens Ansigter* (North Atlantic Faces), NORA 2008.

Iceland as a kind of borderland between the two – cf. the text’s own argument that it sells. This is one example of a far more undecided position than that of the official statement of the Government of Iceland, defining Iceland as “a coastal State within the Arctic region”.⁴⁵

Thus, in the process of region building, old and new narratives are being tried out, and no final, unified story of the new Arctic – and the North Atlantic countries’ position in relation to it – has yet found its form.

1.1.1 North Atlantic Faces

With the intention of paving the way for a sense of shared identity between the North Atlantic countries, which is considered necessary for the strengthening of a North Atlantic region, the various coordinating institutions have launched a number of initiatives: project support, networking initiatives, conferences, festivals, book prizes and so on. An initiative that is worth paying attention to is the book *Nordatlantens Ansigter* (North Atlantic Faces).⁴⁶ At the time of its publication in 2008, this was very different from the usual initiatives to describe the

