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## Cultural Commentary: Climate Change and Culture - Some Thoughts on the Precarious Idea of *North*

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# Cultural Commentary

## Climate Change and Culture: Some Thoughts on the Precarious Idea of *North*

Andrew Holman

On August 3, 2007, Russia shocked the international community when it announced that one of its submarines had planted a rust-proof titanium Russian flag on the sea bed beneath the North Pole, claiming an underwater ridge (the Lomonosov Ridge) as an extension of its continental shelf and, therefore, Russian territory. The act was provocative and consequential. Until then, the Arctic had been seen by politicians and policymakers as nothing but an ice-laden sea with no solid land to claim. It had prospective underwater oil and gas fields but they were impossibly inaccessible. One spokesman for Russia's Arctic and Antarctic Institute claimed "It's like putting a flag on the moon." The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation called it "drawing a line in the water."

Russia's actions drew immediate alarm, especially from its other Arctic neighbors (Denmark, the United States, Canada and Norway) whose own dormant territorial claims and resource interests in the high north were suddenly and abruptly awakened. Almost immediately, Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper visited his country's Arctic region and announced the construction of two new military bases in the far north to protect its exclusive claim to the Northwest Passage. One week later, Denmark sent its own scientific expedition by ice breaker, seeking to claim ownership of its part of the polar region, a ridge that extends northward from Greenland.

The trigger for this flourish of activity was nothing less than global warming and the concerns that scientists have as the polar ice cap melts. For the past twenty years, scientists have observed a shrinking of Arctic sea ice at an alarming rate, a phenomenon popularized by Albert Gore's documentary film, *An Inconvenient Truth*, and legitimized by the Nobel Peace Prize committee, which granted Gore and the scientists on the International Governmental Panel on Climate Change its prestigious award for 2007. Recent climatic developments threaten to alter the planet's ecology by reducing polar ice and raising sea levels, posing massive coastal erosion and habitat destruction. What some see as ominous climatically, others see as economic opportunity and a trigger, perhaps, for a new "scramble" for the

Arctic. Beyond this, there is a symbolic aspect to this transition that promises to be interesting to observe. Global warming and increased Arctic exploitation threaten to alter the cultural meanings that modern societies have attached to and imposed upon the North. As the Arctic is threatened with real, physical change, it draws us to think about what North—an idea as much as a real place—has come to mean to us.

### MEANINGS OF "NORTH"

Place is a powerful identifier. The sorts of physical attributes that surround us have often been used to describe and refine feelings of community, region and nation. In short, to some degree, we are where we live. For northern nations in the two centuries since the rise of modern, secular nation-building, the idea of North, or "nordicity," has had a central place in identity formation. Since at least the time of Peter the Great, Russians have called their country "Empire of the North" because of its vast expanse of northern territory and because its people have long prided themselves on their ability to live and work in extreme climatic conditions beyond the endurance of others. In Scandinavian countries, a similar idea has been captured and broadened in the concept of *norden*, a cultural posture that was seen to bind the peoples of Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Finland and Iceland. Until recently, *norden* was code-speak for the societies at "the top of Europe" who imagined their climate a cause of their cultural distinctiveness and reputation for diplomatic wisdom, rational economic behavior, and moral decency, among other traits.

Americans and Canadians have also come to see something of themselves in the idea of North. For Americans in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Arctic constituted the next frontier beyond the mythic West after it had closed or been filled up. The Arctic North was mirror for the rugged individualism and penchant for the risk-taking in American character—in Jack London's stories, for example. The Arctic North was seen by Gilded Age and Progressive Era Americans as a proving ground, a testing field for heroes. Historian Michael Robinson's recent book on



Arctic exploration and American culture, *The Coldest Crucible* (2006), focuses less on the details of the Arctic voyages of American explorers Elisha Kent Kane, Isaac Hayes, Adolphus Greely, Walter Wellman and polar rivals Frederick Cook and Robert Peary than he does on what the explorations meant to American newspaper readers at home. For them, the North was a perfect foil for American genius, a risky challenge in which the essentially American characteristics of ingenuity, industry and mastery of science would eventually win out.

Canada has long imagined itself a northern nation, even though the vast majority of its population has always lived within 100 miles of its southern border. The idea of the “Great White North” as a discursive touchstone for identity has had great purchase: in the words of the country’s National Anthem (“The True North Strong and Free”), in its love of winter sport (especially hockey), in the wintry impressionist depictions of its most famous painters (The Group of Seven), in a Glenn Gould soundscape (*The Idea of North*) and in a dominant theme in its literature and poetry, exemplified best, perhaps, in the French-Canadian poet Gilles Vigneault’s well-known piece, “Mon Pays”:

*Mon pays ce n'est pas un pays c'est l'hiver  
 Mon jardin ce n'est pas un jardin c'est la plaine  
 Mon chemin ce n'est pas un chemin c'est la neige  
 Mon pays ce n'est pas un pays c'est l'hiver.*

(My country it’s not a country, it’s winter  
 My garden it’s not a garden, it’s the plain  
 My path it’s not a path, it’s the snow  
 My country it’s not a country, it’s winter).

“I see a new Canada,” Prime Minister John Diefenbaker proclaimed in his successful electoral campaign of 1958, “a Canada of the North.” And most Canadians seemed to know what he meant, even as they watched him comfortably on recently purchased televisions in their furnace-heated southern living rooms. “North is the point we look for on a map to orient ourselves,” University of Aberdeen cultural scholar Peter Davidson writes in his 2005 book, *The Idea of North*. We have made it a pole of culturally timeless comfort and certainty. We could count on snow, ice, frigid winds, and northern peoples always being there, somehow, *for us*.

#### WHITHER NORTH?

All of this brings into relief an interesting prospect. How will northern nations describe themselves if or when—as scientists predict—the North begins to look and feel increasingly less *northern*? What is North physically if it is not snow and ice? What is North metaphorically if it is not cold solitude; if it does not demand fortitude, ingenuity and morality for survival? Whither North?

Whatever it is and whatever it comes to mean, there must always be a North, and we will always impregnate it with meaning. As Davidson carefully argues, North is a comparative, not absolute, ideal. North of what?, he asks, quoting the Englishman Alexander Pope’s *Essay on Man* (1732):

*Ask where’s the North? At York ’tis on the Tweed  
 On Tweed ’tis at the Orcades, and there  
 At Greenland, Zembla or the Lord knows where...*

Perhaps North has never been a reliably static pole—physically or culturally. As an ideal, Magnetic North is more apt. “I am fascinated by the fact that Magnetic North cannot be located with absolute precision,” Sherrill Grace writes in her 2002 book, *Canada and the Idea of North*, because it is attractive to us, always moving and changing, and “...because it is only one of several northern poles.” Global warming threatens to expose the multiple meanings of North and, more broadly, the frailty of the cultural equations that modern nations draw between people and place.

—Andrew Holman is Professor of History and Associate Editor of the *Bridgewater Review*. He lives in southeastern Massachusetts, but imagines himself a hardy northerner.