

BOOK REVIEW: SUSTAINING RUSSIA'S ARCTIC CITIES

Orttung, Robert W., ed. 2016. *Sustaining Russia's Arctic Cities: Resource Politics, Migration, and Climate Change*. New York: Berghahn Books. 254 pages.

This edited volume is the first approach towards addressing urban sustainability in the region that is most affected by the socio-economic crisis of the post-Soviet period, with increasingly intensified exhaustible-resource extraction, ghost settlements due to out-migration – and where climate change is expected to have dramatic (in some cases, catastrophic) consequences on urban and industrial infrastructure. This is the Russian Arctic and its cities.

Readers of the book learn that of all circumpolar countries, Russia's Arctic is urbanised the most (60% of its population live in urban areas), and that this is the only Arctic region that has cities of more than 100,000 people (the largest cities in Alaska, Canada and Greenland, for example, have roughly 10,000 people). Since the Soviet period, Russia's Arctic has also undergone the most intensive industrialisation. This is the place "of the most intense interactions between man and nature on the planet", as Robert Orttung (p. xii) says when starting the book. Russian Arctic urban areas, however, have almost never been the focus of scholarly attention. This book aims to fill the gap. It opens a novel foundation for the discussion of urban sustainability in the North, though many questions remain after reading this volume.

Sustaining Russia's Arctic Cities has 11 chapters written by 16 authors. The chapters are grouped into three parts according to the three key aspects that the authors consider the main drivers of Russia's Arctic urban development: policy making, migration related to resource development, and climate change.

The volume opens with an introductory chapter by Colin Reisser in which he gives a historical outline of Russia's Arctic development and urbanisation from the late-imperial construction of the Trans-Siberian Railroad; the Stalinist-era industrialisation, when the Gulag became the main supplier of labour in the Arctic; to the mushrooming of new cities in Siberia with the discovery of new supergiant oil and gas fields in the late Soviet period; eventually to post-Soviet deindustrialisation, political strife, and rapid demographic decline. Reisser rightly points out the diversity and heterogeneity of the Arctic urban landscape, providing a typology of Russian Arctic cities. He proceeds with an overview of the main drivers of change in the Russian Arctic, which correlates with the book's main structure: politics, energy development, and climate change.

Because Russia's economy increasingly depends on the extraction of northern resources, state control in the development of the Arctic plays a dominant role. Acknowledging this, Chapters Two and Three stress the limits of centralisation, the multiple foci of Russia's Arctic policy making, and different ways its implementation even within the centralised system. The analysis of current policy documents, by Elana Wilson Rowe, demonstrates the struggle between the centralisation and regionalisation of power in the Arctic, between the securitisation of the region, increasing military spending and internationalisation of its economy, environmental issues and economic profits.

Something only mentioned in the book, but not developed into a point of argument, is the vast variety of informal relations and para-constitutional political practices on the path from centralised formal policy decisions to their practical implementation in Russia's regions. I believe the volume would greatly benefit from an engagement with earlier discussions on the affinity of the early post-Soviet transition with feudalism (Humphrey 1991; Clarke 1992; Verdery 1996). As Katherine Verdery, Caroline Humphrey, and Simon Clarke argued, the transition of the 1990s produced "great uncertainty about where government and law actually resided" (Verdery 1996: 205), especially as regional companies and organisations were run by local managers almost as "suzerainties" (Humphrey 1991: 8). The transformation of this "neo-feudal" model into Putin's re-centralisation of power is crucial for the understanding of Arctic development.

This approach would probably help to better understand why the two twinned monocities, Gubkinsky and Muravlenko, which are the focus of Chapter three, have such contrasting development pathways. Located 140 km from each other and founded in the same period, one city developed a "colonial model of authority", being a provincial appendix to the administrative centre. The further distance from the administrative centre and a more complex transportation situation allowed the other city to develop a "socially embedded model of authority". Nadezhda Zamyatina and Alexander Pelyasov argue that the independent model of development stimulates the *creativity* of the local society. The latter notion seems quite problematic itself, and furthermore is applied to a region characterised by a lack of strong civil society, high regional corruption and heavy bureaucracy. This "level of creativity" is defined according to a number of small businesses in the city, as well as the number of visitors to a local museum. The latter, museums, are

given closer attention. The authors regard museum attendance as the index of integration of a local society and its potential in creativity. They do not take into consideration, however, the role of the museum in the creation of political and social legitimacy, as a site for the exercise of political power. The political role of the museum in Gubkinsky naturally suggests itself, given only the coloniality of its name, the Museum of Mastering the North.

The second part of the book addresses social sustainability, specifically migration as one of its crucial indicators. Timothy Heleniak gives an account of dramatic post-Soviet population decline in the Arctic, changing by recent stabilisation and slowdown of out-migration. Marlene Laruelle gives an extensive description of profound changes in population and mobility patterns, focusing on the increasing labour migration (long-distance commuting, LDC) from CIS countries and southern parts of Russia to the Russian Arctic. The current Arctic policy gives a prominent place to a shift-work approach as an attempt to decouple economic exploitation of the Arctic from demographic growth in the region. Gertrude Saxinger, Elena Nuykina, and Elisabeth Öfner take a neoliberal approach in their assessment of the social sustainability of LDC labour. They argue that LDC contributes to the social and economic integration of the North and central/southern regions, and that the employment of mobile workers confers benefits on disadvantaged central and southern regions of Russia. But the argument about whether it is beneficial for the receiving society is not convincing. Despite pointing out the economic and social advantages of the LDC system, the outcomes for the Arctic seem quite ambiguous. The authors give a brief description of how the influx of transient population damages the social fabric of northern cities (drunken and disorderly behaviour, an increase in prostitution, social exclusion, the deterioration of working conditions),

but do not, however, consider it a fundamental issue for urban sustainability. Furthermore they argue that shift workers are socially and culturally integrated, while, at the same time most of their ethnographic examples demonstrate that shift-workers live physically, socially, and culturally isolated diasporic lives in the North. Another aspect of the shift-work system that also seems underestimated is the pure economic rationale behind this sustainable development strategy. The shift-work system devalues the cost of labour and increases the precarity of work and unemployment among local population. It is industrial enterprises who get major advantages from this neoliberal policy. With a cheaper labour force they do not need to invest in the development of local urban infrastructure, workplace security, or healthcare. The questions of how this policy can be assessed as sustainable and what kinds of norms of sustainability are applied remain unanswered.

The final section of the book (four chapters, written by Oleg Anisimov, Vasily Kokorev, Scott Stephenson, Dmitry Streltskiy, Nikolay Shiklomanov, and Jessica Graybill) provides an extensive analysis of the effect of climate change on urban and industrial infrastructure in Russia's Arctic: new opportunities for transportation with the decline of the sea ice in the Arctic Ocean, and potentially catastrophic consequences on the infrastructure, build upon thawing permafrost. This section is also concerned with the public neglect of climate change issues and lack of engagement with climate change in policy making. The volume ends with the commentary conclusion written by Orttung.

In general, the book has a lack of coherent theoretical analysis of the notion of *sustainable development* itself. In his Preface, Orttung refers to the Brundtland Commission's definition of socioeconomic sustainability, while every author in the book 'stretches' the concept in a different way. Meanwhile, the concept is applied to the most compli-

cated region, with many seemingly "impassable" challenges to sustainability. The book, however, does not challenge the rhetorical vagueness of the term, nor does it disclose the multivalence of sustainable development discourses and practices, and the forms of power and knowledge it produces in the Russian Arctic. Of course, it is not an easy task to assess the urban sustainability of resourced-based Russia's Arctic urban landscape. But I assume, simple reference to the Brundtland's 'slogan' is not sufficient to untie the knot. The increasing urbanisation of indigenous peoples and their contribution to urban sustainability is another issue overlooked in the book.

The value of *Sustaining Russia's Arctic Cities* is in setting up a novel field for interdisciplinary discussion of urban sustainability in the Arctic region. It is highly recommended for postgraduate students and researchers from different disciplinary fields interested in urban sustainability and the multiple challenges to it.

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