

*Canada and Russia in the North Pole:  
Cooperation, Conflict, and Canadian Identity in the  
Interpretation of the Arctic Region*

### INTRODUCTION

The Arctic debate touches on a number of important international issues: national security, energy exploration and policy, environmental concerns, and maritime commerce are but a few (Heininen 2004: 218-22). The North Pole, the Arctic more generally, is becoming increasingly important to a number of international actors as climate change causes ice to melt and the Arctic's waters become increasingly navigable (Carnaghan 2006: 1). The pressure to lay claim to the Canadian North<sup>1</sup> is intense, as countries clamor for the right to firmly plant their flags and lay the foundations for their military bases and research facilities.

Canadians must confront threats to sovereignty that they have not experienced in some years. The Arctic debate is much more than a geopolitical discussion to Canada, however. Indeed, Canada's biggest mistake has been to largely ignore the Arctic region (Huebert 2003: 1).

This benign neglect has been a major detriment to Canada's national identity.

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<sup>1</sup> The literature often describes the Arctic as the "North," especially when written from a Canadian perspective.

Although it could be argued that Canada must exercise control over the Arctic in order to increase national security or to prevent ecological collapse, the more compelling reason is to enhance and preserve notions of “Canada” and “Canadian.” Issues of identity, on the national and individual level, underlie all other concerns and Canada must address these issues as they relate to the Arctic before addressing other national issues, in order to fully comprehend its own position in the world.

#### STRATEGIC CONCERNS

The military, commercial, and environmental interests are certainly important reasons supporting Canadian engagement in the Arctic. It would be difficult to divorce strategic politics from identity politics. One avenue of inquiry that warrants particular attention, perhaps because it underlines and/or intersects other interests is the issue of national identity politics. Canada has much to gain from this strategic region. The Arctic has vast oil reserves and presents strategic sea routes for maritime commerce. (Perry 1997: 660). Oil reserves are, of course, a non-renewable resource and in a world where oil prices are rising, and will likely continue to rise for the foreseeable future, and Western countries are importing the majority of their oil, the Arctic becomes a strategic region for energy exploration and development. Along with concerns over energy and oil comes the importance of efficient transportation routes, which move goods on less fuel to and from ports. The Northwest Passage is one such strategic shipping route that runs through the Canadian North and as the world battles against high oil prices and grapples with rising concerns about

the effects of emissions, efficient transportation solutions are of the utmost importance (Huebert 2003: 3). Transportation often takes a back seat to other policy concerns, certainly in domestic policy priorities, but also in international politics. Canada has much to gain from control of the Arctic as it relates to the Northwest Passage's potential for sustained growth of maritime economic prosperity, although there are other strategic issues at play.

The current debate, brought about by evidence of global warming, is the increased navigability of the Northwest Passage, which Canada claims are its internal country waters. The classification of waters as internal verses external carries great legal weight and import. It affects not only how Canadians view Canada, but how the country's actual land mass is recognized, which underlies ontological and epistemological concerns discussed later in this article. The Northwest Passage cuts through portions of the Nunavut Territory in the Arctic Circle, an area with rough waters and shifting land masses. Will Canada exercise complete dominion over the region to the point where the Northwest Passage is determined to be internal Canadian waters or will Canada be a mere steward of external waters, a host and caretaker by convenience? The strategic position of the Arctic, close to Russia, Europe, and North America, reinforces the region's importance. The United States conducts military exercises to simulate attacks on Russia and Russia positions many of its nuclear-powered submarines throughout the region. Russia recently planted its flag in Arctic waters and could be making a move for control of the region, which presents troubling possibilities for North America (Baev 2007: 4),

even in a post-Cold War environment where tensions have theoretically diminished.

It may seem curious that Russia has pursued the Arctic given the multitude of precarious situations very close to its borders: Afghanistan, Korea, a preoccupation with Georgia, and even the Middle East. But can Russia be blamed for seizing an opportunity Canada has failed to appreciate? Russian history is, of course, replete with instances of desiring more land. This latest episode is nothing new.

One might suggest that Russia was or is after the oil and natural gas reserves that lie under the Arctic ice masses. The existence of these reserves is subject to some debate because the region has not been completely studied and Russia does not have the technology to exploit the region's energy resources (*Ibi*: 6). To some extent the pursuit of energy reserves would undercut the importance of the region for purposes of national identity. That is to say, if Russia, a country very much concerned with national identity, took to this unexplored region open to dominion and development, but chose not to assert dominion for national identity purposes, that would cause observers to cast a suspicious eye on the argument that Canada needs the Arctic for national identity reasons. But, Russia is not interested in the Arctic for energy alone (*Ibi*: 7). As discussed above, strategic and identity politics often mesh. Perhaps because other arguments for interest in the Arctic simply do not seem persuasive or all encompassing enough, the claim that the Arctic debate is in fact about national identity resonates.

Russia's posturing not only puts Canada at risk, but provides an important opportunity for Canada to flex its military muscle not to mention serve as a key ally to the United States with respect to force projection. Although tensions between the United States and Russia are low now, there is no reason to assume that the Arctic region will become irrelevant in strategic military planning. Relations could likewise worsen between Canada and Russia. This positions Canada in an awkward position as a member of Arctic regional consortiums and as a strong United States ally, metaphorically and actually.

The likelihood of another Cold War seems low (*Ibi*: 9), but historical contingent realities cannot be ignored.

Russia's flag-planting exemplifies the power of the Arctic to reinforce national identity. If the Arctic did not matter with respect to national identity politics, then Russia would have looked elsewhere. The case for Russian national identity through pursuit of the Arctic region presents parallels for the argument that Canada's involvement in the Arctic promises expanded or improved national identity. Parallels between Putin's policies and Stalin's policies have been made and certainly deserve some consideration as they help shape the debate over the Arctic and national identity (*Ibi*: 9-11). Russia's recent military mobilization in Georgia has helped coalesce the notion that Russia is attempting to regain the boundaries of the old Soviet Union. Georgia represents a difficult target, however, and if in fact Russia permanently backs down then who's to say the Arctic will not be next. Russia desires the opportunity for increased petromoney.

Controlling land is an integral part of being a state, indeed a state in the strictest sense cannot exist absent land. The Russian question of identity presents an interesting array of issues that, while relevant to the Canadian question and very instructive, when fleshed out would be a voluminous distraction from discussions of Canadian identity.

The Arctic presents opportunities without nearly the same risk of backlash as Georgia or other former Soviet regions. The death tolls would be much lower, civilian casualties minuscule, and the military threat from other nation's initially low. As Russia's Georgia policy is exposed, Russia may save face by asserting military authority in the Arctic. Then what will Canada do?

#### CANADIAN IDENTITY

The Arctic region is a space where scholars can develop ideas of Canadian identity. What exactly does it mean to be Canadian and what do we learn from the divergent interests countries have taken in the Arctic? How can Canadians define themselves and further develop their marvelous history? Why does or should Canada look at what is its least populous region for a sense of national identity? These are important philosophical and policy questions that this paper explores and with which Canadian policymakers ought to concern themselves. The vast expanse of the Arctic region presents real place and rhetorical space to develop and pursue Canadian identity.

The Arctic as undiscovered and wild represents a space upon which countries can execute virtually unfettered dominion, an increasingly difficult task as power in the world multiples and more countries take on prominent

roles in the international community (Perry 1997: 657-8). “Dominion” is a word that has deep meaning for Canadians because “dominion” was the word used to describe the former British colonies. Dominion Day (now known as Canada Day) marks the day that Canada became the Dominion of Canada after separating from British North America on July 1, 1867. The pride that comes with dominion cannot be understated—it was what motivated manifest destiny in the United States, what motivated Hitler to large extent, and what encouraged the British to reach out across the globe to secure a colonial empire. Indeed, the British took pride in their dominion which spawned Canada and spanned continents; control over geopolitical space has long been a hallmark of a nation’s might and stature. Why would the world expect Canada to act differently than other countries? Furthermore, why would the world expect Canada to reject dominion after being borne from it? Is not the ability to turn the oppressive tools of the oppressor back on the oppressor or against the oppressor’s ideals the very essence of freedom and rebellion? Canada has long been defined, especially by the United States, as a northern neighbor—borne out of its proximity to the world’s greatest super power. Canada has not accepted this role easily. Since Dominion Day, Canada has sought to distance itself from the British Empire, developing its own identity that is distinctly North American and decidedly not of the United States. The Québécois question, of course, provides another nuance to notions of Canada. Desmond Morton (2006: 98) notes: “Before Confederation, and long after, sensible Canadians have understood that peace, order, and good government in their country depended on the reasonable long-run harmony of French and

English.” At its beginning Canada sought harmony, a stance that very well might have permanently disadvantaged it. Canada’s peaceful and harmonious policies have made it a secondary actor in most situations. It is not a powerful country in the world, not a force with which to be reckoned. It is not even the most powerful country in the Arctic region—Russia occupies that position. Canada occupies an awkward space on the world stage—long known as a peaceful, ethnically diverse, accepting country; Canada is positioned on the top of the debate for the top of the world. But what would it mean to increase military presence in the region? What would it mean to peaceful Canada? How much would Canada’s assertion of dominion over the Arctic be a response to its historic actual subjugation by Great Britain and/or the subjugation inherent in the rhetorical positioning perpetuated by the United States? To be sure, the oppressed often desire to lash out against the oppressor in one form or another. It is not enough to condemn the oppressor, to celebrate nationhood and attempt hollow acts of distancing (Freire 1970: 44). Paolo Freire (*Ibi*: 56) argues that the violence of the oppressed in response to the oppressor is the love needed to restore the humynity<sup>2</sup> of the oppressor, by breaking the oppressor of their power to suppress. Is not Canada playing the role of oppressed, the same role that it has played for some time? Would not a Northern Policy that was more offensive, designed to secure and protect

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<sup>2</sup> I spell “humyn” this way to dispossess the patriarchal root “man.” International relations theory has not often been accepting of such feminist positions and as I have utilized this spelling convention in the past, I feel it important to bring into my writing away from legal issues. It is important that scholars attempt to investigate the languages choices made and it is my small attempt to disrupt rhetorical practices that have long subordinated womyn.

geopolitical integrity, be an attempt to break the bonds of dominance and assert a rhetorical, if not actual, violence against the world that has regarded Canada as an afterthought? Loosely construed, Freire's ideas about reactions to oppression can provide a useful paradigm for understanding Canada's desire for dominion. It weighs tremendously on the psyche of a people, a person, or a country to be second class, and Canada may and perhaps should shake off the dominion it has known in order to reassert itself.

The answers to the questions throughout this paper hint at why identity politics is vastly more important than other concerns when discussing the Arctic. The political, environmental, and military questions are secondary to developing the answers of identity, not only of Canadian individuals, but of Canada itself. Identity politics underlies other politics. The ideas accepted about identity help to construct the geopolitical realities with which individuals and countries deal. If Canadians accepted the Arctic as necessary to the country's identity, then they would logically pursue policies that protected the region, perhaps through military force. The pursuit of answers about identity opens up a number of questions, too many to answer in one article. This is why this article makes arguments, not at the exclusion of other ideas or positions, but instead with the hope that the arguments here will enlighten the discussion and bring about a more critical investigation of Arctic policy and Canadian identity.

Canadians have long drawn strength from the vast expanse of land they call home. To be Canadian is to be of the rugged, cold environment that exists above the 49th parallel (Morton 2006: 389). Perhaps it is this association with

the ruggedness of the land from which Canadians draw a strong affinity to the Arctic. It is not as if Canadians are strangers to living off the Earth or that they have not experienced harsh winters, scarce food, and the difficult life of sea-based economies (particularly in the Atlantic provinces). Association with land, a kinship with one's surroundings, has helped to define numerous groups of people: cowboys, the Basques, beach bums, sodbusters, Florida's crackers, and more. Furthermore, the plains of Canada and the Canadian Rockies have long defined what it means to be Canadian. Donald R. Rothwell (2003: 331) notes: "The Arctic Archipelago and the fabled Northwest Passage are... a significant part of the Canadian national psyche. As such, any threat to Canada's sovereignty over this region is considered just as significant a threat to the Canadian national interest as would be a claim to the Canadian Rockies." The Arctic functions similarly to the beach or the mountains, the lake or any other geographical feature to which people have assigned importance.

It is integrally a part of how Canadians have come to understand who they are. Knowing the Arctic is to know being Canadian. There are several connections that may be developed from the association between the Arctic and Canada, but four seem most prominent: epistemological, political, *poiesis*, and ontological connections.

#### PHILOSOPHICAL CONNECTIONS

The first connection between Canada and the Arctic is epistemological. It is a convergence of identity and geography, where both explain each other. The circularity of that argument is evident, but does not doom the connection to

the philosophical rubbish bin. Such is the foundation of Canadian critical geopolitics. The Arctic debate addresses the fundamental question of knowledge: How do we know “Canada” and “Canadian?” There are multiple ways to define both concepts but which do we choose and how do we populate the definitional spaces? This article does not preference one method over another, but suggests that the Arctic plays a critical role in the process.

What do we know about the Arctic and Canadian identity? And, what exactly is “knowing?” Canada lies in the Arctic Circle and it shares close relationships with other Arctic Circle countries. Canada is a member of several regional organizations defined geographically. Canada also has an historical relationship with the Arctic region. But what does all of this mean and more importantly why do we assign meaning to it? Canada must address the Arctic question with full dedication in order to develop a conception of knowledge – knowledge of national identity, sovereignty, and geopolitics. Knowledge of national identity is anchored, in fact, in geopolitical understanding.

The position of Canadians is one that bridges the new with the old and attempts to understand a complex identity that has been molded slowly over hundreds of years just as a jagged rock is rounded in a slow moving stream. “Torn between old heritages and regional identities, Canadians have always wondered who they are.” (Morton 2006: 388). This constant wondering is a cultural force that necessitates the satiating aura of dominion. The only space to which Canadians may turn, or at least with the least chance of conflict, is the Arctic. Quite simply, the long representation of United States military power renders looking South fruitless.

The second connection between Canada and the Arctic is political. In an attempt to formulate identity in a practical sense, an identity that can be measured not through ephemeral musings and lazy anecdotes, but through metes and bounds; Canada has sought the North as a place to measure and grow identity. Leon Baradat (2006: 46) notes that territory is one of the precursors to statehood. Canada's covetous look to the Arctic is truly about preserving one of the building blocks of statehood. The Arctic represents political growth and legitimacy, a place where the power of statehood can expand. Political expansion will enrich and expand Canadian national identity.

The third connection is that of *poiesis*. The Arctic represents a blossoming of possibilities, a reason why Canada is and a theory for what Canada could be. The Arctic brings forth images of freedom and control. It conjures up images of energy production and environmental harmony, the powerful and the pristine. The Arctic brings forth discussions of environmental responsibility, maritime law, scientific research and natural resource management. There is a tremendous amount of possibility across policymaking paradigms and political ideologies. For the same reason countries pursue space travel and research, Canada can and must pursue the Arctic. Possibility has played a great role in the geopolitics of many countries. United States history revels in stories of the Louisiana Purchase, Lewis and Clark's expedition, and gold mining exploits in the Wild West. Possibility was important during the Age of Exploration and the Age of Piracy. There has not been a time in humyn<sup>3</sup> history where the unknown has not inspired and

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<sup>3</sup> I practice this spelling convention as a matter of feminist politics. It is not generally accepted

captivated individuals, cultures, and countries to look outside of their comfort zones and pursue the great something beyond the boundaries of current knowledge. The Arctic presents, in many respects, a return to the Age of Exploration. The unknown of new commercial possibilities, new biological discoveries, and new notations of national boundaries read very much like the reasons for early exploration.

The forth connection is ontological. The Arctic provides substance for ideas of being. International relations scholars, Canadians, and other actors might try to measure what it is to be Canadian, but to fully understand that one must not simply address the questions of epistemology because the knowledge of the Arctic and Canada is but a short segment of the journey. We must address the more basic question of ontology: what does “Canada” or “Canadian” mean? How are these words deployed and to what advantages and detriments? These are the fundamental questions of what the nation-state is and how a nation-state develops and relates to the space around it. The Arctic provides an answer to questions about being in or of Canada and being Canadian. From knowledge of being comes the ability to consider knowledge of space – the knowledge of epistemology. It is linked through history, culture, and politics, as well as *poiesis* and epistemology. Being takes on many meanings, but resolving the Arctic question through the assertion of Canadian sovereignty may help address these concerns. Being and the Arctic are intimately connected for Canadians.

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amongst scholars of English or even amongst feminist scholars, but it represents an important break in the patriarchal dominance of language. It is important as an act of rebellion and as a moment of questioning.

Philosophical considerations underlie policy considerations in the hierarchy of argument. Canadian identity underlies Canadian policy actions and that is why Canada should act out in order to support a strong identity.

Canada must assert dominion over the Arctic because doing so would reassert Canadian identity as well as help define that very identity. Understanding issues of identity informs policy decisions. Canada's dominion over the Arctic would encourage developments in energy, military, and trade policy. It would show Canada to be a strong and growing nation. Without pursuit of an active presence in the North, Canada risks a continued subjugation, being relegated to nothing more than an adjunct to the United States. A strong Arctic policy will improve Canada's perceptions about itself and develop a stronger sense of the "Canadian".

#### URGENCY AND ACTION

The time is now. Canada's lackadaisical attitude has not helped in any respect and as Russia pushes for dominion over the Arctic, Canada must begin to exercise its sovereignty. Other countries are poised to exploit the Arctic's resources as well. There is no other time in history where the Arctic has been so important on a multitude of levels and Canada's need to enact a Northern Policy that enhances Canadian identity and protects Canadian interests is crucial to the perpetuation of Canada (Lalonde 2004: 123-4). Energy policy, fuel efficiency, climate policy, Russia's flag-planting, as well as more general advances in scientific discovery and the increasing closeness of nations due to technological advances makes now the time for Canada to act before another

country does. If Canada does not act, it may miss out, and do irreparable damage to its identity. There are real threats from Russia and other countries to the region and Russia may engage in a more aggressive Arctic policy in the coming years.

Enacting a stronger Northern Policy would greatly change the dynamics of the Arctic region. It would position Canada against Russia, and perhaps against the Scandinavian countries as well. The United States has a strong interest in the Arctic as well and although Canada and the U.S. are prone to cooperation, one should not underestimate the desire of the United States to remain dominant in all things worldwide. Dominion would entail a military presence and posture impressive in recent history. Canada would become the controller of tremendous natural resources and would greatly grow the land mass that is Canada. Canada might become a player in international energy policy, posing a threat to OPEC nations, and potentially providing the United States with an opportunity to pursue lower oil prices, an important political play for whoever happens to be in power. The politics of Canadian dominion would certainly change perceptions of national identity.

#### CONCLUSION

The debate about Canada's claim to the North exemplifies the strong connection people have to land. It is important to remember that the Arctic region of Canada has a population density much lower than Canada's already

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<sup>4</sup> Poutine is a tasty Canadian treat that consists of French fries, dark gravy, and cheese, usually mozzarella. It is available in various forms at a host of restaurants from the classy to the not often cleaned.

low population density. The pursuit of a Northern Policy is a quest for land because land, physical place, is integral to understanding the nation-state. Unlike many international relations issues this is not a debate about warring peoples or even ethnic groups in conflict, although there is certainly room for those discussions. This is a discussion of how a nation understands itself. The Arctic region represents the substance of what it is to be Canadian—not the Maple Leaf, poutine<sup>4</sup>, hockey, or Canadian (Molson Canadian for those who have not imbibed in Canada), but the ecology of being Canadian. The pursuit and preservation of land for the people of Canada is an exercise in preservation and definition. It is a pursuit deeply rooted in ecological principles, but not in a way that subordinates people. Instead Canada's Northern Policy promises the ability to preserve the subjective Canadian, defining who and what is Canadian for years to come.

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<sup>4</sup> Poutine is a tasty Canadian snack that consists of French fries, dark gravy, and cheese, usually mozzarella. It is available in various forms at a host of restaurants from the classy to the not often cleaned.

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