



# Articulating state identity: ‘Peopling’ the Arctic state



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## ABSTRACT

A space in rapid flux, environmentally as well as geopolitically, the Arctic region has not tended to be seen as part of the imagined national “homeland” of the eight states with Arctic territories. Yet, in a time of climate change and increasing international attention to the region, the Arctic is at present re-narrated as a space embedded in sovereign statehood and national identity. Recognising the powerful purchase of identity discourses, of emotional attachment, and feelings of belonging, this paper asks: What does it mean to “be” or represent an Arctic state; how do identity discourses permeate among those tasked with the state’s enactment on a daily basis, state personnel? This paper explores articulations of state identity by state practitioners in three of the eight Arctic states: Norway, Iceland, and Canada. In so doing, it develops an understanding of discourses of state identity as spatiotemporally regulated, articulated as geography and history; and yet, it shows how it always comes about through relations and encounters – across, beyond, and exceeding scales, from international relations to the intimately personal. Focusing on the performance of politics, the paper thereby highlights the constitutive role of the diverse *practitioners* behind the practice, the articulators, and performers. In short, it argues for “peopling” political geographical conceptualisations of the state, statecraft, and political practices. By seeing the state for its people, new avenues for interaction and dialogue may open up – new, radical ways of relating and participating in politics as, of, and by people.

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## 1. Introduction

You come from a certain place, and you are influenced when you grow up and when you live here. You are influenced by media of course, and by nature, and by just being here. [...] When you become a politician, you are a person with your experience and your education; of course you put it all together and you reflect what you are. You can’t be anything else. So I think that, yeah, your identity and who you are and what you are, it [influences] how you play the politics and your views on the world, of course (Icelandic politician, 2014).

The “certain place” the above politician was referring to is the Arctic state of Iceland, as she reflected on how her own sense of identity influences her everyday work. As she made clear, her identity is not only derived from what takes place between office walls, nine to five. It is about childhood, experiences, education, media, and nature, to mention but some factors. It is about the influence of “just being here”. Representing an Arctic state, all of

these influences play their part, big or small; in her words, “you can’t be anything else”. However, it is only recently that the Arctic region has been publicly re-articulated as anything but distant, exotic, and even threatening, far from the imagined “homeland” of the eight Arctic states. With Arctic climate change and international interest, narratives of identity are being told and re-told, interpreted in light of a new geopolitical context: it is not about owning the Arctic, but about *being* Arctic.

Despite today’s recognition of global interconnectedness, both in terms of socio-political globalisation and climate change, the idea(1) of “nation-states” and national identities seem as strong as ever. Political geographers have in recent years directed attention to some of these seemingly paradoxical developments: to the powerful persistence of national identities (e.g. Antonsich, 2009; Closs Stephens, 2013; Matejskova & Antonsich, 2015), and to the re-structuring and re-imagining of statehood (e.g. Brenner, 2004; Moisi & Paasi, 2013a, 2013b). Alongside this, a welcome contribution to geographical scholarship has been increasing interest in the influence of emotion, affect, and embodiment (e.g. Anderson, 2009; Closs Stephens, 2015; Harrison, 2000; Hyndman, 2004; Merriman & Jones, 2016). Indeed, it is increasingly recognised how politics is as much about the everyday (Benwell, 2014; Benwell

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& Dodds, 2011; Jones & Merriman, 2009); “the state” only ever comes about through the many and diverse practices that materialise it in the world (Abrams, 1988; Mitchell, 1991; Painter, 2006). And finally, with the recognition of the importance of practices and performances, more attention has been given to how concepts of political geography, such as the state and territory, cannot be understood without reference to the *people* performing and enacting them too (e.g. Antonsich, 2011; Jones, 2007, 2012; Kuus, 2008, 2014, 2015).

Despite these welcome contributions towards “peopling” political geography, what has so far received less attention is how ideas of identity and community permeate among those tasked with enacting the state on a daily basis. It is here the present paper seeks to make a contribution: bringing together literature on identity politics, nationalism, and emotion, on the one hand; and on the other, statehood, statecraft, and (geo)political practice. In short, the paper asks how discourses of state identity are articulated by its personnel: What does it mean to “be” or represent an Arctic state; and how do identity discourses permeate among those tasked with the state’s enactment on a daily basis? In so doing, it demonstrates how geographical and historical framings of identity are coupled with, understood through, and mediated by social and political relations. Hence, looking not at the *effect* of practices, but for the *practitioners*, it asks how they understand their own role and identity as Arctic state representatives. By focusing on state personnel, it allows us to explore how identity is understood as something not only to *be* but to *do*, not only to *have* but as something to *represent* – and a duty to do so well.

The specific focus here is on three of the eight formally titled Arctic states: Norway, Iceland, and Canada. The Arctic is an international region that is rapidly changing environmentally and geopolitically, and as noted, so too are narratives of identities connected thereto. Official statements in all three states have centred on the connections between their Arctic identities and statehood. However, Arctic state official or not, how do you articulate identity in relation to a space in flux, may never have been or go to, may only see on maps and TV screens? Here, what used to be global peripherality has now become centrality, and a re-interpretation of identities past, present, and future is taking place. What becomes clear from respondents’ articulations below, however, is that discourses of state identity are articulated not only within the frames of geography and history, but also across relations – through the international, national, sub-national, and even personal. Relations and attachments that are intimately intertwined, all aspects of a state identity come to depend on the others in the enactment of the state – as explained in the opening quote. Hence, this paper argues that to understand Arctic states and statecraft, there is a need to acknowledge their numerous personnel, and to acknowledge *their* sense of identity, self, and community too. Only by listening to their articulations of identity through Arctic geographies, histories, and perhaps most importantly, *relations*, may we approach the crucial question of “how you play the politics”.

In the remainder of the text, the above points are developed in three stages: Firstly, the concept of state identity discourses is situated in a wider body of scholarship on statehood and practices, national identity, and the impetus to “people” geopolitical conceptualisations. Secondly, a brief discussion of the Arctic and its current geopolitical context is offered. And thirdly, the conceptual framework is given empirical reality through the articulations of state personnel in the three Arctic states Norway, Iceland, and Canada. These demonstrate how, in brief, state identity discourses are shown to be spatially and temporally bounded, but nevertheless flowing in, through, and beyond relations at all scales of interaction. State identity – Arctic or otherwise – is ever becoming

anew in encounters; the way in which the state comes into being is not just political action but *inter*-action. With that, the paper closes with a call for more engagement, more active relating, and more attention to the highly diverse and heterogenous practitioners behind state practices.

## 2. A conceptual framework of state identity

Before turning to higher latitudes, however, critically interrogating the intersections of statehood and identity is as relevant as ever. In so doing, this section starts outlining the conceptual framework of state identity discourses. Firstly positioning the present paper in current political geographical scholarship, and secondly clarifying conceptual terminology, it presents a framework that subsequently orders empirical discussion.

### 2.1. The state: effects, practices, people

Although it might have seemed an anachronistic endeavour to study the state and national identity no more than a couple of decades ago (see e.g. Fukuyama, 1992; Ohmae, 1990), recent events have highlighted their powerful persistence to date. One need not look far for examples of how ideas of state sovereignty, nation(-alism), borders, and territories are anything but obsolete in the discursive ordering of political and social relations across the world: the so-called European migrant crisis, referenda on both EU- and UK-memberships, and promises of walls for “Great”-ness are all cases-in-point. In the Arctic region too, these events reverberate and, importantly, are met with state-level responses. A “globally embedded Arctic” or not (Keil & Knecht, 2017b), statehood still matters. Restructured, re-imagined, and re-invented perhaps (e.g. Brenner, 2004; Moisio & Paasi, 2013a, 2013b; Sassen, 1996, 2013), the state is nevertheless tied to powerful ideas of identity and belonging (see e.g. Closs Stephens, 2013; Matejskova & Antonsich, 2015). Hence, it is arguably paramount to (re)turn our analytical gaze towards the state, but with a much expanded understanding: one that forces us to consider its persistence as a locus for not only capitalised “Politics” but also belonging and safety (see Closs Stephens, 2013, 2015; Painter & Jeffrey, 2009).

Two broad developments in contemporary political geography are here of particular relevance, situating the present study. First, as critical geographers have shifted attention away from only the high echelons of government, they have shown how politics is about so much *more*: It is about the mundane, everyday, and prosaic (e.g. Benwell, 2014; Benwell & Dodds, 2011; Bratsis, 2007; Chatterjee, 2004; Edensor, 2002; Jones & Clark, 2015; Jones & Merriman, 2009; Kuus, 2016; Painter, 2006); and a matter of emotion, affect, and embodiment too (e.g. Closs Stephens, 2015; Merriman & Jones, 2016; Pain, 2009; Pykett, Jupp, & Smith, 2016; Sharp, 2009). Here, the influence of feminist geopolitics has been significant, as it “challenges the scales of geopolitics and refocuses on the mundane, everyday reproductions of geopolitical power” (Massaro & Williams, 2013, p. 567; see also Dixon & Marston, 2011; Dowler & Sharp, 2001; Hyndman, 2004; Mountz, 2004; Sharp, 2009).

And second, political geographers have taken up the challenge presented by e.g. Abrams (1988) and Mitchell (1991): to see the state not as an anthropomorphised entity with agency in its own right, but an anthropological *idea(l)*, which in turn takes on material reality as “the powerful, metaphysical effect of practices” (Mitchell, 1991, p. 94; see also; Painter, 2006). Building on Butler’s (2011) influential work, the state materialises as a result of its performance; citational, reiterative practices and statements, or here “articulations”, bring it into being and give it power. What then follows is a need to interrogate how, why, and by *whom* these “countless mundane social and material practices” (Painter, 2006,

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