

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

JØRGEN OLE BÆRENHOLDT, *Coping With Distances: Producing Nordic Atlantic Societies*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2007, xv + 286 p., index.

Nordic societies often figure prominently in sociological discussions about the welfare state and gender equality in the workplace and private sphere. Researchers also uphold Nordic societies for their consistently high rankings in measures of overall life satisfaction and work-life balance. Most often, however, Continental Scandinavian societies are the focus in social science literature and the isolated, peripheral regions that Jørgen Bærenholdt calls the Nordic Atlantic – namely, Northern (coastal) Norway, Iceland, the Faroe Islands (or Faroes) and Greenland – are overlooked or subsumed into a generic idea of “Nordic nations.” And, while Nordic Atlantic societies deserve the same attention and praise as their Continental Scandinavian counterparts for their progressive social formations and policies, their arrangements have developed under much more challenging conditions: extreme social, physical, economic, cultural and political isolation.

Focusing on the isolated yet successful societies of the Nordic Atlantic, Bærenholdt questions how they have developed. He argues that Nordic Atlantic societies have emerged through everyday practices of coping with distances, whereby people learn to make do in situations that are both inescapable and beyond their control. By exploring social, cultural and economic dimensions of coping, Bærenholdt explains that Nordic Atlantic societies use a combination of networking, innovation and identity formation to deal with distances across time and space. Predictably, he underscores the fragility of societies that are produced through such coping strategies; he stresses that they are fragile in tangible ways, given the vulnerability of their transportation and communication networks to extreme weather conditions and technical problems, and on intangible levels, for reasons including a shared history of Danish colonialism and more recent migration that has raised questions of inclusion and exclusion in Nordic Atlantic societies.

Bærenholdt is careful to acknowledge that, as a Dane who spends most of his time in Denmark, his perspective on coping in Denmark’s former (in the case of Northern Norway and Iceland) and current (in the case of Greenland and the Faroes) “colonial” peripheries could be seen as insufficiently critical of the power dynamics bound up in coping strategies. That said, he does a commendable job of foregrounding issues of power, national identity and colonial relations throughout the book. And, although a major contribution of Bærenholdt’s work lies in the detailed synthesis he provides of others’ Nordic Atlantic scholarship, he also discusses findings from his own considerable field work in Nordic Atlantic communities. His data, collected on numerous research

trips to these remote areas, including a period as visiting professor at Northern Norway's University of Tromsø, lend credibility to his perspective and offer him a virtual insider-outsider vantage point.

The book is structured so that it can be read in parts or as a coherent whole; Bærenholdt explains that readers can choose to focus on chapters of particular interest without losing sight of the study's broader questions and theoretical contributions. This is certainly true, but selective reading results in a lopsided understanding of how coping practices play out across the Nordic Atlantic, given that particular regions are highlighted in some chapters but not others. Granted, this approach enables him to present detailed case studies, but sometimes at the expense of broader comparative analyses. Although Bærenholdt presents rich data on transport, communication, fisheries and tourism in the Nordic Atlantic, his theoretical commentaries on coping, power and Nordic Atlantic identity are the backbone of the book. *Coping With Distances* is as theoretically focused as it is empirical; two lengthy introductory chapters review and thoroughly critique theories of coping and society making, and even the empirically focused chapters have strong theoretical emphases. The book's final chapters also explore Nordicity and identity from a chiefly theoretical perspective. While this makes Bærenholdt's work a valuable resource for understanding the development of thought about territory, identity and society making, some of the detail is tangential. Much of the space devoted to theoretical critique could have been reserved for a deeper engagement with the identity-based questions that he raises – but never fully unpacks – in the book's later chapters. But, although Bærenholdt's attention to prior theoretical work is at times excessive, the same cannot be said about his historical overview of life in the Nordic Atlantic; he offers just enough detail for the reader to understand the development of Nordic Atlantic societies without prior historical knowledge, and clearly highlights their commonalities while emphasizing their heterogeneity. He is particularly intent on debunking the myth of the monolithic "Scandinavian welfare state," something that political sociologists are often guilty of assuming.

In many ways, Bærenholdt's work constitutes a departure from traditional approaches to thinking about territory and society making. It challenges the two dominant, traditional views of societies, namely theoretical perspectives on societies as contained within given territories and shaped largely by external forces. Also, whereas related studies in economic geography have typically focused on individuals' coping in proximity to others, Bærenholdt switches the focus to coping across distances. Along with his interest in distances, he shifts his attention from the usual concern with coping in fixed places to coping while moving around in highly mobile, technologically sophisticated societies. Bærenholdt constantly emphasizes the mobile nature of coping and society making; he uses the construction of undersea tunnels on the Faroes to demonstrate how understandings of "place" are given new meaning through mobility, not in contradiction to it. Finally, his ability to argue for these shifts in theoretical foci by using data from some of the remotest communities in the West demonstrates how the study of rural peripheries can contribute to important theory building in the social sciences. Large urban centers have always interested researchers, but must not monopolize their research agendas to the exclusion of peripheries.

Sociologists and anthropologists interested in urban/rural and environmental studies, in particular those who focus on the political dimensions of these research areas, would find Bærenholdt's work relevant to the core issues they tackle. The applicability of his research, however, is much broader than this. Researchers interested in culture (namely, questions surrounding identity) and social networks would also benefit from his empirical and theoretical contributions. And, of course, *Coping with Distances* will appeal to any Canadian social scientist who has questioned – whether in the context of formal research or informally – how Canadian society, like Nordic Atlantic societies, has developed in the face of the challenges posed by great distances and, oftentimes, extreme isolation.

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