

Coping with distances. Producing Nordic Atlantic Societies by J O Baerenholdt;

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Jørgen Ole Bæhrenholdt studies in his book how people make societies by coping with distances. He argues that the Nordic Atlantic communities, i.e. the coastal settlements of Norway, Iceland, the Faroe Islands and Greenland, meet the challenges of remoteness and long distances through networking, innovations and identity formation. This emphasis follows the inspiration of the ‘materialist relationalism’ of the actor-network approaches which, according to Bæhrenholdt, help to go beyond the abstract geographical notions of societies as territorial containers.

The author’s aim is to contribute to the geographical renewal in the field of mobility studies. He criticises the approaches that have identified societies in the form of spatial hierarchies of concentric circles and argues strongly for a relational view which underlines the mobile associational practices of bonding and bridging. Bonding for Bæhrenholdt is related to inclusions based on sameness, that is: shared values or identities, whereas bridging refers to links between the associations of sameness.

The oppositional treating of relational and concentric sociospatialities is central in Bæhrenholdt’s approach. This leads to nuanced analyses of translocal developments in transportation, tourism and the fishing industry but casts only minor, and often critical, views on local ‘folkish’ particularities and continuities. Empirical observations on unique villages, lay languages, neighbourhood ties and communities of care are treated as exceptions of the rule (of mobility) – or, expressions of ‘short

networks'. Bæhrenholdt also bravely questions those feminist views that criticise the land-sea divisions between commuting men and home-bound women by arguing for more mixed gender settings both among coastal fishermen and in factory trawlers.

Bæhrenholdt discusses carefully those findings that support his mobility thesis but at the same time tends to reduce local communities to passive playgrounds of travelling forces. The concentric articulations of community building, surfacing here and there in the book, can also be read as reminders of the existence of alternative and complementary perspectives, taking shape both in lay associations and among their researchers. Moreover, these 'exceptions of the rule' could be treated as methodological lessons pointing at the weaknesses of relational mobility approach. This is, in fact, the direction *Coping with distances* implicitly heads, especially in the chapters on fishing and municipal activities.

Communities of care in the Nordic Atlantic necessarily include the non-human domains, for example, emerging in concerns of changing weather conditions and their impacts on the northern flora and fauna. Local knowledge of seasonally varying weather, winds and ocean currents, lived changes in the spatio-temporal extensions of snow and ice covers, and the fluctuations of marine resources thoroughly condition the daily routines of remote seashore communities. It is therefore surprising that Bæhrenholdt does not examine the limits and affordances of the northern climate in the communities he studies. Coping with seasonal change is excluded from his view, as is the drama of global climate change.

Bæhrenholdt's exclusion radically deviates from the methodological recommendations of the actor-network approaches which favour symmetric treatment of human and non-human relations. The reason for ignoring ecological factors might be due to the strong emphasis on mobile practices, guiding the researcher to consider the extreme physical environment, and the sudden human-induced changes in it, as mere obstacles constraining human mobility. Bæhrenholdt states tellingly in one of his few comments on climate change that in Uummannaq, Northern Greenland, recent warm winters have resulted in less stable ice and therefore more isolation.

Bæhrenholdt's book is an edited version of his doctoral study (habilitation thesis) in the University of Roskilde, Denmark. The manuscript has thus been examined by an evaluation committee and it has gone through the review routines of the publisher. However, some solutions in organising the argument are still problematic. First, methodological reflection is carried out only on a very general level and the reader is therefore left unsure about the nature of fieldwork. Some interviews have apparently been conducted and some essays of school pupils gathered but this information needs to be collected from subordinate clauses here and there. No systematic presentation on how, where, when and by whom the data is gathered, nor how it is processed, is offered.

Second, the (post)colonial vocabulary by which Bæhrenholdt connects the Nordic Atlantic to the Danish past and present lacks theoretical specification. Accordingly, concepts such as arctic orientalism and orientalist imagination are used without any reflection of their validity in the study area, in fully occidental conditions. Third, the conclusion of the book is confusing. The last chapter, titled 'Transnationalism and

sustainable development', draws on specific research and a report from the 1990s, and is rather disconnected from the rest of the book. It deals with broad sustainability questions on a very general level, loosely grounded on Nordic cooperation. Only the last few pages of this final chapter build connections to the main content of the volume.

However, despite the weaknesses, the book is ambitious and full of rich argumentation, both theoretical and empirical. The reader learns a lot about the fluid spaces of the Nordic Atlantic and, for example, the history and collapse of 'wild capitalism' in Iceland become more understandable. Bæhrenholdt links his argumentation only thinly to the historical emergence of aggressive neoliberalisation in Iceland but, in general, the way of constructing the mobile North in *Coping with Distances* illustrates well the potentials and risks inherent in travelling geographies and geographers.

Ari Aukusti Lehtinen

Department of Geography, University of Joensuu, PO Box 111, 80101 Joensuu,
Finland