Economics, environments, and emotions: rewriting the history of Nordic exploration in the early twentieth century

The aim of this panel is to bring the historiography of science and exploration in the Nordic countries – particularly Sweden – into conversation with wider cultural and economic contexts. Our point of departure is the claim made by the geographer Johan Gunnar Andersson in 1930 that Sweden had contributed to a golden age of exploration and geographical achievement around the turn of the twentieth century, marked by feats of travel and cartographic conquest, which had since come to an inconspicuous end. Staffan Bergwik considers the colorful and controversial Swedish explorer Sven Hedin, who made his name through expeditions to Central Asia during Andersson’s golden age, but continued to work in western China well after the First World War – in considerably changed circumstances. Bergwik argues that Hedin was able to make his audiences (popular, and to some extent also scholarly) sense the exotic spaces he traversed by constructing an emotional as well as an empirical world. Dag Avango uses another site for Swedish exploration, the Spitsbergen archipelago at the turn of the twentieth century, as a window into the links between science and resource colonialism. Sweden did not have a large overseas empire, or a tradition of employing geography as the handmaiden of colonial expansion, but in this case the description and charting of a particular portion of the earth was closely linked to an imperial project. Janina Priebe considers another fin-de-siecle example of Nordic colonial resource development in the Arctic, namely debates over the rights to commercial development in Greenland. Similar to the case Avango describes in Spitsbergen, scientists played a dual role in these discussions, both describing the physical geography of Greenland and making claims about its optimal economic geography. Peder Roberts concludes the panel by reconsidering Andersson’s lament, arguing that the perception of decline that Andersson represented was apparent only to those for whom exploration continued to stand as a proxy for the health of geography as a discipline. Roberts compares the circumstances of Andersson’s claim, and indeed the wider circumstances of geography in Sweden, with a very similar debate at the same time in Britain concerning the place of exploration in academic geography.

Explorations and the sense of the global: Sven Hedin and the emotions of overview

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This paper concerns how geographical explorations circulated a sense of seeing global patterns in overview. The empirical focal point is the Swedish explorer Sven Hedin who undertook four expeditions to Asia between 1893 and 1935. He became influential in international geography as well as a European celebrity, and his books, articles and lectures, for example “My Life as an Explorer” (1925), were best sellers. I ask how his exploratory practices invited the audience to sense a global space, for instance vertigo about the distances that Hedin’s travel narratives were claimed to engender. How were emotions linked to the sensing of distant places and the individual position in such large patterns? The paper aims at showing how emotions of experiencing global space were produced, suppressed and cultivated collectively. It explores the circulation of knowledge making emotions in the
twentieth century. My methodological claim is that publications and popular presentations were among the arenas where emotions of exploration were circulated and emotional communities shaped. There has been a close link between knowledge of global contexts and public emotions in Western modernity. A history of that link is pivotal for our understanding of how global space and shifts are perceived and sensed collectively.

The dual role of science in constructing knowledge and economy: Arguments for the industrialization of North Atlantic fisheries in the early 1900s
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The aim of this paper is to illuminate how scientific knowledge about the marine environment translated into economic directives in a Nordic colonial context. This paper analyzes the comprehensive plan of a private stakeholder group, submitted to the Danish Home Office in October 1905. It was one of several private initiatives that argued to end the state’s strict monopoly on resource use and trade in Greenland by accusing the colonial administration of mismanagement. Scientific statements formed a key component of this application that framed industrialized fisheries as premise for economic prosperity. Christian Fredrik Drechsel (1854-1927), at that time the Danish government’s consultant on fisheries and representative at the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES), contributed a report on Arctic char in Greenland’s coastal waters to this application. Drechsel stated that knowledge about its commercial potential was still fragmentary, yet, that it was inevitable to expand fishing activities. Rational management was constructed as being the colonial power’s moral responsibility, especially since the industrialization of North Atlantic fisheries. Drechsel’s statement illustrates how the (in terms of oceanographic and geographical knowledge) uncharted marine environment served as a backdrop for visions of prosperity and how science produced principles for rational management of resources in the early 20th century. By setting Drechsel’s report in the wider context of marine sciences, I conclude that it was the fragmentary status of knowledge about the marine environment that created space for transferring scientific assumptions directly into economic directives.

“Spitsbergen is what Swedes made it to be:” the use of history of science and industry in the Swedish colonization of Spitsbergen
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Western resource colonialism expanded rapidly during the period 1870-1930, as Europe and North America industrialized and acquired access to natural resources and export markets on a global scale. This presentation grows from a wider project concerning the role of Swedish actors in this global process, focusing on three regions where Swedish actors were involved in colonial science, industry and politics – Africa, Central Asia and the Arctic. The objective is to analyze how Swedish scientists and industrialists promoted their colonial interests and ambitions at the Arctic archipelago of Spitsbergen in the late 19th and early 20th century, and why. During this period, a large number of Swedish scientists conducted research at
Spitsbergen and beyond in the European Arctic. In their footsteps came industrial companies who established mining colonies, supported by state actors who wanted to increase the political influence of Sweden in the region. In the paper I will show that Swedish scientists and industrialists promoted their interests by cooperating in three different ways: firstly by co-producing narratives intended to construct environmental phenomena as natural resources, secondly by co-producing the knowledge necessary to exploit those resources and thirdly by co-producing narratives about the relation between science and industry, intended to support the foreign policy interests of the Swedish government. Their strategies, I will argue, are an instructive example of the role of Swedish actors within the larger context of global resource colonialism in the period.

“The eyes of the fool are on the ends of the earth:” Geography and exploration in interwar Sweden and Britain

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The aim of this paper is to explore (pun intended) why feats of travel and cartographic exploration ceased to be emblematic of the professional discipline of geography during the interwar years, through a comparative study of Sweden and Britain. When Johan Gunnar Andersson complained in 1930 that a golden age had passed in Swedish geography, he had great voyages such as the 1880 Vega expedition in mind (and Antarctic expeditions, in which he himself had participated). The health of geography as a discipline could be diagnosed by reference to the number and quality of expeditions that probed the frontiers of the earth’s surface. But for many academic geographers, especially of the younger generation, the equation of understanding the earth and its residents with heroic acts of discovery was both antiquated and insulting. The situation was even worse in Britain, where institutions such as the Royal Geographical Society continued to privilege feats of travel, to the point where a rival Institute of British Geographers was established in 1933 to bypass the RGS’s hegemony. The quote in the title – from the geographer Sidney Wooldridge – was symbolic of a wider frustration with the prominence accorded to exploration. I conclude by contrasting the responses to this crisis: the split in British geography (and persistence of an exploration-focused tradition) was not replicated in Sweden, where physical and human geography were reconciled more easily. Part of the answer lay in culture, particularly the expectation that academic geographers in Sweden should have a broad professional competence.