“Spitsbergen is what Swedes made it to be”: the use of history of science and industry in the Swedish colonization of Spitsbergen

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. In the research project Sweden and the origins of global resource colonialism, we explore the role of Swedish actors in this context by focusing on three regions where Swedish actors were involved in colonial science, industry and politics – Africa, Central Asia and the Arctic. The objective of this paper 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, is an instructive example on the role of Swedish actors within the larger context of global resource colonialism in the period.