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Mass Tourism and the Arctic: The Impacts of Globalization on Peripheral Communities

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Introduction

In the last 20 years, the number of tourists venturing into remote parts of the Arctic has increased dramatically. This rapid growth has shifted the region from a niche expedition destination reserved for hardy explorers to a popular bucket list item luring tourists with the promise of an exotic adventure to be experienced *en masse*. Although the phenomenon of mass tourism in the Arctic is relatively new, it fits into broader themes of globalization in which today far more people are aware of distant places, interested in global travel, and are able to afford both the means and time to travel for pleasure. Revolutions in affordable transportation in the modern era have made travel more affordable and accessible for people than ever before while the proliferation of social media around the globe has romanticized images of far-flung places. As such, “low-priced transportation and organized tours have played a huge role in the increase in global tourism” even to the world’s most remote and unlikely places (Ritzer & Dean, 2015, p. 289).

The Arctic encompasses the territories of eight sovereign states and a wide range of cultures including many indigenous communities. Due to its uniquely harsh conditions, tourism in the Arctic is generally characterized by short seasons and difficult to access locations within fragile environments. Previously these challenges had imposed great risk and prohibitive

costs which isolated the region from the 20th century rise of the mass tourism industry. Today however, these circumstances have changed dramatically as a direct result of climate change.

The Arctic is the most rapidly warming region on earth and rising global temperatures have led to longer summer seasons and increased regional accessibility due to significant reductions in sea ice.

Because of its unique geography, tourism in the Arctic is a uniquely maritime endeavor with the majority of tourists visiting the region's most remote locations on cruise ships. The rapid loss of sea ice combined with a rise in affordable cruise

Year	Arrivals	Number of cruise ships	Average number of arrivals/ship	Average passenger capacity/ship
2003	164	14	13	490
2004	195	24	8	468
2005	115	25	5	714
2006	157	28	6	546
2007	222	35	6	671
2008	375*	39*	10*	641*
* = Estimates for 2008 (full data not available at time of printing)				

travel, has led to a new era of Arctic mass tourism.

Figure 1 Cruise Ship Arrivals in Greenland (AMSA 2009)

Total numbers of Arctic cruise tourists are difficult to calculate as there is no central reporting for such statistics. The 2009 Arctic Marine Shipping Assessment provides the best available data and reports that in 2004, 1.2 million passengers went on an Arctic cruise. That number more than doubled by 2007 and was forecast to continue exponential growth (AMSA 2009, 79). In 2008, the number of cruise tourists who arrived in Greenland alone was more than half of Greenland's total population. Even with these dated statistics it's clear that Arctic cruise tourism is big business and getting bigger, and these figures don't even consider the number of people who visit the Arctic through other means of transportation.

To meet this booming demand a remarkable 32 ice-class cruise ships are currently under construction and scheduled to take sail between 2019-2021 (Wright 2018). These ships

will add to an already active fleet of over 80 Arctic cruise vessels (Nilsen 2018). Given the reduction in ice due to climate change, however, non-ice hardened cruise ships are already venturing into the Arctic making it increasingly difficult to track the growth of this industry (AMSA 2009). These ships bring large numbers of tourists (between 200 and 1,500 each) into dangerous waters and fragile landscapes, and their arrival is often pitched as a pathway to development for underdeveloped indigenous communities. However, in many cases mass tourism has failed to deliver on its promises, instead placing a significant strain on these peripheral communities and deepening them into cycles of dependency. The reasons for this failure are complex and often defy traditional neoliberal political economy logics. To resolve this disconnect between the promise of mass tourism and its often less than straightforward reality, this paper introduces a critical political economy approach to explain why tourism in the Arctic has frequently been problematic for its peripheral indigenous communities.

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Tourism, Development and Peripheral Communities

Tourism has long been associated with development particularly for peripheral communities who are now increasingly including it as an important part of their development strategies. However, the term ‘development’ is a highly ambiguous, multidimensional concept which defies simple definition. Development is usually associated with embracing economic growth, but it also includes aspects of justice and freedom for all individuals in society (Sharpley, 2015). Historically, tourism has been viewed as a way to increase revenue in struggling economies and to diversify economies which are overly reliant on single or limited extraction commodities.

International tourism is often viewed as a means of achieving economic and social development and redistribution of wealth and power. Broadly speaking, this positive connection between tourism and development is generally tacitly accepted despite evidence that the actual relationship is not so simple. Though understanding of this relationship has become more nuanced over time with the introduction of concepts like sustainability, tourism is still generally considered to have positive outcomes and, in today's age of global flows of capital and people, tourism can be a highly lucrative enterprise. The real impacts of large-scale tourism, however, are complex as is especially evident in peripheral communities like those in the Arctic.

A peripheral community is characterized by both its remoteness from the primary networks of goods, services, and transportation and its underdevelopment. They “operate on the fringes of the world economy” and are built on few or single commodities (generally an extractive resource) making them vulnerable to changes in price and demand which are controlled by more developed economies (Britton 1996). This dependent relationship is often connected in some way to a colonial past.¹ In the Arctic, the majority of indigenous communities can be considered peripheral economies and are historically reliant on the extraction of a small number of resources such as fur, fish, and in more recent times oil and gas. Furthermore, most of these communities are historically constructed by the state through colonial or paternalistic policies which removed the indigenous peoples from their historic homelands and nomadic lifestyles to permanent settlements both for ease of state management and to encourage more efficient extraction of the resource.

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Tourism and Political Economy

Contemporary political economy is a largely transactional and neoliberal understanding of global interactions which studies the socio-economic forces generated in the production of commodities for the market. Tourism, as the commodification of cultures, places and experiences, is an important part of the global political economy. The tourism industry's position at the nexus of some of the fastest growing industries in the world – construction, finance, property, transport, hospitality, media, and communications – makes it a hyper-globalizing activity that epitomizes the neoliberal economic order where freedom of travel meets freedom of trade. A “constant expansion of the realm of consumption via the relentless expansion of new tourist products and destinations epitomizes the logics of capitalist development and indeed globalization” (Bianchi, 2009, p. 495). As such, tourism features similar transnational structures of ownership and flows of capital that characterize other aspects of global trade.

This transactional approach to tourism takes a decidedly neoliberal political economy approach which is focused on predictions of tourist flow, revenue generation, and market development within a narrowly defined cost-benefit analysis. For peripheral communities like those in the Arctic, this approach generally focuses on the expected benefits tourism could bring in terms of social development and economic diversification as demonstrated by this excerpt from the 2009 Arctic Marine Shipping Assessment commissioned by the Arctic Council:

“The economic benefits of the Arctic tourism industry were immediately evident to both

private companies and Arctic governments. Tourism provided jobs, personal income, revenues and financial capital for infrastructure. It also represented a new way to use the Arctic's natural resources. It was a departure from the resource extraction and depletion industries such as hydraulic mining, rampant timber harvesting, and the exploitative commercial fishing and whaling practices of the 19th and early 20th centuries” (AMSA 2009, 46).

But this neoliberal political economy approach to tourism was not without its critics. Over the past 30 years, critical political economy has emerged as an important school of thought intersecting critical theory and political economy. Critical political economy rejects the dominant neoliberal understanding for placing too much focus on transactional and economic aspects at the expense of interrogating asymmetries of power, exploitation and cultural differences. To correct for the explanatory shortcomings of the neoliberal model, critical political economy focuses on the study of “structures and relations of power associated with globalization and neoliberal capitalism” (Bianchi, 2009, p. 487). This includes paying close attention to developmental forms and distributional outcomes of production.

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A Critical Political Economy Approach to Tourism

Applied to tourism, critical political economy attempts to resolve the divide between an embrace of the global liberal market with its promises of development and prosperity and the reality of mass tourism's frequent failure to deliver. Critiques of neoliberal interpretations of political economy specifically applied to the tourism sector began with Stephen Britton (1991) when he called for scholars to recognize tourism as an “important avenue of capital accumulation” and argued for the need to critically evaluate its capitalistic and often

exploitative nature (p. 451). As pioneers in the application of critical political economy to tourism studies, Britton (1991, 1996) and Bianchi (2009, 2015, 2018) engage specifically with issues of power, dependency, distribution and development.

Britton and others challenge the neoliberal understanding of tourism and development and interrogate why it is that tourism, “while bringing undoubted benefits to many poor countries, frequently also perpetuates already existing inequalities, economic problems and social tensions” (1996, p. 155). According to critical political economists, the root of the explanatory shortcomings of the traditional notion of political economy is its transactional approach. Britton argues that the neoliberal political economy approach often finds itself unable to explain the negative impacts of tourism because it is “typically divorced from the historical and political reality of the processes that have led to the condition of underdevelopment” in peripheral communities in the first place (1996, p. 155). Central to Britton’s arguments are notions of power, dominance and ownership all of which determine who, ultimately, benefits from tourism enterprises particularly in peripheral communities.

Generally, when peripheral communities participate in international tourism, they must accept the commercial practices and standards established by the developed economies from where the demand originates. Since tourism, by its very nature, is designed to meet the needs of the affluent middle classes of developed states, the industry itself is largely owned, operated and controlled by the corporations and capital of those states. Britton outlines a number of propositions about the structure of tourism in peripheral communities to explain why any peripheral community which wishes to use tourism as a means to generate revenue,

economic independence and employment is “likely to find the attainment of such goals impeded by the organization of the tourist industry” (1996, 156).

Bianchi, who draws heavily from the works of Britton, expands these arguments specifically to indigenous communities finding that neoliberal globalization in the tourism sector often comes at the expense of indigenous welfare through the appropriation and privatization of land, displacement of communities, resource degradation, and intensification and commodification of low-wage jobs and exploitative working practices (2009, p. 495). Of course, tourism also has the potential to offer powerful benefits in the form of employment, revenue, infrastructure creation and cultural revitalization if it is sustainably managed. Yet, far too often these economic, social, cultural and political benefits fail to materialize or are distributed highly unevenly (Bennett, Lemelin, Koster, & Budke, 2012, p. 752).

Tourism is often promoted to peripheral communities as a form of development; however, the distributive benefits of tourism, an important concept at the heart of development, frequently never appear. Britton contends that, because tourism features a “predominance of foreign ownership, [it] imposes on peripheral destinations a development mode which reinforces the characteristics of structural dependency on, and vulnerability to, developed countries” (1996, p. 170). Beyond vulnerability to boom and bust cycles of the global market which severely impact the tourism industry, the revenue generated by mass tourism in peripheral communities is often kept by foreign, and sometimes local, elites while the majority of locals can only participate through low-wage labor or small enterprise with limited income generation potential. Because the neoliberal political economy theory of tourism focuses on transactional aspects of the industry rather than power relationships and distributional effects, it often misses these negative aspects of tourism. This oversight by the traditional political economy model is why Britton and other

critical political economists advocate for a critical approach to uncover why the promises of tourism often fail to materialize

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A Critical View of Arctic Tourism

In the case of the Arctic, a critical political economy approach shows that structure and power play an important role in the impact of mass tourism in peripheral indigenous communities. In particular, the critical view highlights ways in which mass tourism is controlled by powerful external entities and has actually increased community dependency in a variety of surprising ways.

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Externally Driven Demand

Tourism is a demand-driven enterprise and in the Arctic this is especially evident. In particular, demand for tourist experiences is externally driven by a combination of factors all related to the ways in which the world has changed in the most recent wave of globalization. First, the popularization and fetishization of “authentic” and “off the beaten path” adventures through social media and other forms of mass communication has led to significant growth in the number of tourists seeking unique experiences. Social media has emerged as a form of social

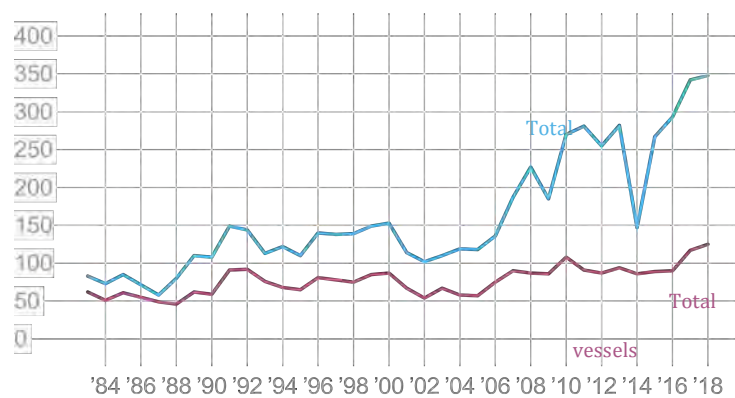


Figure 2 Passenger voyages in Canadian Arctic

currency, and the search for experiences which can be publicly displayed as authentic and original has increased tourism to remote regions like the Arctic in the ironic pursuit of a “non-touristy” tourist experience. In this new trend of adventure tourism, the ultimate bucket list item is often a trip to the poles which offers the promise of an inherently rare and unique kind of experience. With climate change opening new passages in the frozen north, the demand for Arctic cruises has skyrocketed.

Second, the macabre phenomenon of “last chance” tourism has promoted an increased demand for destinations which are perceived as fragile or vanishing. Last chance tourism is a phenomenon put forth by Harvey Lemelin (2010) to describe the growing trend of tourists intentionally seeking out experiences in the world’s most endangered or fragile locations before they vanish or are transformed through processes of globalization like climate change or human development. The rise in last chance tourism is connected to social media and other forms of mass communication which are responsible for alerting the public to last chance opportunities and popularizing them. An example of this is the popularization of bucket list feature stories such as Newsweek’s “100 Places to Visit Before They Disappear” which are often even printed as books and travel guides for those intrepid travelers seeking a unique experience.

At its root, last chance tourism is a macabre phenomenon of globalization which promises the “opportunity to witness the demise of ecosystems, to behold the extinction of an entire species from its natural habitat. Tourism of this nature is for all intents and purposes a chance to observe ecocide first-hand” (Lemelin, Stewart, & Dawson, 2012, p. 3). In essence, it is the global commoditization of the very casualties of globalization itself. The deep irony lies in the fact that, simply by engaging in this form of tourism, tourists are in all likelihood hastening the demise of the very thing that drew them there to begin with. This ultimately means that last

chance tourism is based on short-sighted marketing goals “designed to profit from and exploit destinations at risk of demise” (p. 3). Specifically, in the Arctic last chance tourism is actively promoted in connection with disappearing cultures, fragile landscapes such as glaciers and icebergs, and endangered iconic wildlife like polar bears. For tourists, the Arctic represents a chance to see the frontlines of climate change with the knowledge “that this may be their only chance to see this striking landscape before it melts away” (Frost, 2019). The desire for “off the beaten path” and unique adventures coupled with the phenomenon of last chance tourism means that there is increased foreign demand to be both one of the first and one of the last to experience the Arctic.

Third, as is the case of all peripheral tourism destinations, the economy of the destination is beholden to the economies of other developed states. While tourism in general is an elite activity, travel to far-flung destinations like the Arctic are generally only undertaken by the privileged few typically from western countries. An Arctic cruise often costs upwards of \$10,000 and flights to the region can be exorbitant (AECO, 2019). Since the majority of Arctic tourists are the elites of western nations, when developed economies slump there is a related decrease in the demand of tourism activities which disproportionately effects extremely expensive destinations like the Arctic (Sisneros-Kidd, Monz, Hausner, Schmidt, & Clark, 2019).

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Dependency, Boom and Bust

Neoliberal arguments in favor of promoting tourism in peripheral communities frequently cite it as a way to reduce economic dependency on the extraction of single commodities. It is becoming increasingly evident, however, that tourism is not a panacea for

development. In reality, for peripheral communities the introduction of tourism often means simply trading one form of dependency for another. Since demand for tourism is externally driven, overdependence can actually lead to adverse impacts such as the boom and bust cycles which are characteristic of the incredibly volatile tourism sector (Sisneros-Kidd, Monz, Hausner, Schmidt, & Clark, 2019). The Arctic is especially vulnerable to these cycles. First, as mentioned above, the exorbitant cost of traveling to the Arctic makes it particularly susceptible to fluctuations in the global market.

Second, the tourism season is extremely short making it impossible in most cases for peripheral Arctic communities to rely on it year-round and making recovery from slow seasons and bust cycles especially difficult. Extreme seasonality also leads to cycles of unemployment and enormous fluctuations in population due to migrant workers which strain infrastructure and community resources. The challenge is seasonality is one of the “core issues in the development of tourism in the Arctic” (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2019, p. 18). This leads to volatile boom and bust cycles both in response to the seasonal cycle and the global economic cycle.

Third, reliance on last chance tourism also creates problems with dependency through the creation of an unsustainable boom before the bust. Since last chance tourism is predicated on the fleeting nature of the attraction, as this inevitably occurs and the *raison d'être* disappears, there will be little left for these communities to fall back on. “If the resource attracting tourism (e.g. polar bears or glaciers) is subject to degradation or displacement as the result of climate change, sole dependence on nature-based tourism may result in an economic ‘bust’ similar to communities dependent on extraction of a single natural resource” (Sisneros-Kidd, Monz, Hausner, Schmidt, & Clark, 2019, p. 1261). For example, Churchill, Manitoba,

the self-proclaimed polar bear capitol of the world, primarily draws crowds with the promise of viewing wild polar bears. The concentration of polar bears in Churchill is due to a lack of sea ice which they rely on for hunting. This lack of ice leaves the bears stranded on shore starving during the warmer months until the ice returns. With ice returning one day later each year, in the decades to come the polar bears will either starve to death or be forced to migrate elsewhere ultimately leaving the village of Churchill with a bust (Stewart, Tivy, Howell, Dawson, & Draper, 2010).

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Outsiders and Local Input

Britton hypothesized that in peripheral communities tourism services are likely to be owned and operated by foreign companies who control the necessary resources and provide the bulk of tours, transportation and accommodation. This external and frequently monopolistic control of the tourism sector often leads to an influx of non-indigenous entrepreneurs. In a study of indigenous Alaskan communities, Hillmer-Pegram demonstrated that tensions often existed between the indigenous community and non-indigenous tour companies. Indigenous frustration centered on the perceived exploitation of community resources by outsiders with little input from native stakeholders (Hillmer-Pegram, 2016, p. 1204).

Because tourism in peripheral communities tends to be controlled and operated by non-native companies, for locals, tourism often generates predominately service sector employment with seasonal positions, low wages and low likelihood of advancement or benefits. At the same time, tourism tends to increase housing costs and create housing shortages during the tourism season to accommodate the transient seasonal workforce. These factors can displace

the local population and forces them to compete for increasingly scarce public resources (Sisneros-Kidd, Monz, Hausner, Schmidt, & Clark, 2019, p. 1265). Thus, large-scale tourism in Arctic peripheral communities produces highly uneven distributional effects frequently leaving many of the locals out in the cold. Furthermore, the influx of seasonal outsiders can pose a real threat to the “cohesion, culture, and identity of a community” (p. 1267).

In my own observations gathered in Greenland in 2018 and 2019, it was clear that the vast majority of tourism-oriented businesses in Ilulissat were primarily operated by Danish companies. Nearly all front desk and managerial staff in the larger hotels were Danish, the vast majority of residential guides were Danish, many of the whale watching boat operators were Danish as were the pilots for glacier flights. Most of these workers were in Greenland on a seasonal basis and would depart at the end of the summer. The native Inuit who worked in the tourism sector were most frequently employed in low-wage or manual labor jobs as housekeepers, kitchen staff or construction workers. One could not help but get a sense of the immense power disparity, notice the uneven distribution of benefits, or recognize echoes of a colonial past.

Related to the monopolization of the tourism sector by foreign companies, capital, and workers is a general lack of local input or control. Decisions about tourism and its regulation and management is often made outside of the peripheral community by non-Arctic actors (Sisneros-Kidd, Monz, Hausner, Schmidt, & Clark, 2019, p. 1263). Arctic tourist experiences often come in the form of cruises, but the Arctic cruise industry features surprisingly little input from or coordination with indigenous communities. The recently adopted Polar Code (2017) created by the International Maritime Organization has been difficult to apply to the cruise ship industry and its development did not include any input from Arctic indigenous groups.

As a complex region comprised of eight states all with their own regulations and jurisdictions as well as international spaces labeled as “institutional voids,” the absence of comprehensive regulation means it has been difficult to regulate or manage the proliferation of cruise ships operating in the Arctic (Cajaiba-Santana, Faury, & Ramadan, 2020). Because shore visits are a key component of cruises, the result is that there are no central guidelines or best practices limiting the size, number or frequency of visits or establishing proper coordination, engagement with, or employment of local communities. This is exacerbated by the fact that although Arctic cruises are booked well in advance, the itineraries are somewhat opportunistic with the precise route and the ports and communities visited depending on the ice conditions and the difficulty and risk of access (AMSA 2009, 79). This means communities often receive little or no notice of visits and are frequently ill-prepared for the enormous rush of tourists that flood small villages which often only have between 50 and 500 residents.

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Changing Arctic Identities

An important shortcoming of the neoliberal political economy model of tourism is its failure to consider the deep incompatibility of indigenous cultural collective values like those in the Arctic and the individualistic neoliberal capitalist model which drives the tourism industry. Capitalism is founded on the creation and extraction of profit through the exploitation of human labor and natural resources. This exploitative relationship is “generally understood as contradictory to indigenous worldviews which tend to emphasize community well-being and environmental reciprocity over maximizing private accumulation” (Hillmer-Pegram, 2016, p. 1194). The challenge of reconciling these two worldviews “can lead to undesirable impacts and

outcomes if processes of development are dominated by outside forces and subjected to the global economic imperative for profit maximization through social-ecological commoditization” (Hillmer-Pegram, 2016, p. 1195).

An emerging trend which demonstrates conflict between worldviews is the large-scale migration of Arctic indigenous people in response to tourism as they move from small, remote settlements to larger tourism hubs seeking the opportunities of seasonal employment. While the traditional political economy model would view this migration as evidence of the economic opportunities provided by tourism, this transactional view obscures the longer-term costs. As indigenous people in the Arctic abandon their close-knit small villages and ancestral homelands, this has significant long-term impacts which reshape what it means to be an Arctic community.

Because tourism is fundamentally a market-based, commodity-driven endeavor, it will always be “subject to the exploitative imperatives of capitalism” which sits at odds with the subsistence hunting activities that are the cornerstone of Arctic indigenous culture (Hillmer-Pegram, 2016, p. 1204). The choice to migrate to tourism centers represents a choice to forego traditional hunting and gathering activities during the peak season of summer which has serious hidden implications for indigenous community viability. Indigenous employment in the Arctic tourism sector is highly seasonal work often in low-wage, zero benefit positions with limited opportunities for career progression. While these jobs often pay more than subsistence hunting (at least nominally), there is an associated opportunity cost. Particularly in the most remote settlements where many of the migrants come from, nearly all of a family’s food is extracted themselves from the environment through hunting, fishing and gathering. Much of this is done in the summer months to provide the community with food for the long and harsh winter.

Although tourism sector employment pays better than subsistence hunting in the immediate term, it creates a cycle of dependency in which families must now purchase much of their food as imports to survive the winter.

In Greenland, for example, small villages like Oqaatsut and Ilimanaq effectively become ghost towns during the summer and are primarily only occupied by the elderly and infirm who are unable to migrate to Ilulissat for the short tourism season (Stone 2018, 2019). Having foregone hunting and fishing during the summer, goods must now be purchased to survive the winter. However, in an era of climate change this is no easy task. Traditionally during the winter sled dog routes are used to traverse frozen fjords and connect small settlements to larger hubs of commerce where they can purchase food staples. Now, however, these sled routes are often no longer viable for long stretches of time. The sea ice is forming later and later each year and is often so thin along traditional routes that it is unsafe to cross (Drivsholm, 2017). In such harsh conditions, the delayed consequences of seasonal migration to work in the tourism sectors can be truly life threatening.

Through migration, a cycle of dependency is created in which traditional practices are foregone in favor of short-term profits leaving many peripheral communities dependent on imports. However, migration is not the sole cause of disruption to the traditional subsistence lifestyles of the Arctic. In several interviews across multiple communities visited by cruise ships, locals repeatedly complained about the noise and presence of large ships scaring away the wildlife. The fleeing of whales, seals and schools of fish from large cruise ships makes it difficult for indigenous peoples to maintain the traditional lifestyles that help them survive the harsh winters (AMSA 2009, 127).

Furthermore, mass tourism can lead to increased attention to local practices which may not conform with the values and expectations of non-Arctic societies (AMSA 2009). For example, the traditional way in which sled dogs are maintained, sits at odds with western conceptions of dogs as pets. Sled dogs, when not being used, are chained outdoors to the ground on leads as short as 3ft often with no shelter from the elements. As they are not viewed as pets, they are not cleaned or socialized. The visual impact of this can be jarring for tourists. In observations collected in Ilulissat, Greenland over two summers, pressure from tourists had a significant impact on the traditional maintenance of sled dogs, but not in the way one might expect (Stone 2018, 2019). As a result of intense criticism and complaints from tourists arriving on cruise ships, many of the most visible clusters of sled dogs were simply relocated to more remote areas away from the public eye arguably making conditions more challenging for both the dogs and their owners.

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Cui Bono? A Distributional Problem

A common complaint surrounding the introduction of mass tourism associated with cruise ships is that hundreds of tourists are brought ashore that, “use the community’s resources, and then leave quickly without benefits flowing to native stakeholders” (Hillmer-Pegram, 2016, p. 1204). This sentiment is echoed in accounts across many Arctic communities from Alaska to Canada to Greenland. Cruise ships, in particular, are not a good source of job or revenue creation since passengers eat and sleep on board, are encouraged to purchase their souvenirs onboard, book their excursions through the cruise agency and even utilize their own guides. “Villagers might be able to sell a little bit of local art, but that is not sufficient to balance the harm they are doing” (Elks, 2019).

“Indigenous communities are being overwhelmed by ships that drop up to 1,000 passengers in small villages but offer no employment opportunities” (Elks, 2019). In a broad survey of multiple Arctic communities



Photo By: Costa Deliziosa A massive cruise ship in the harbor of a small village of under 300 residents, Greenland 2011 (Wright 2018)

who were visited by cruise ships, Nilsson found that locals were often disappointed by the lack of spending by cruise tourists and were upset by the insensitive and unregulated intrusions into their private lives (2008, p. 105). Echoing these observations, an advisor to the Inuit Circumpolar Council stated, “some of the small Inuit villages are literally flooded with passengers who only look and give little back to the local people. It’s usually only the visitors who benefit – not the residents” (Elks, 2019).

Observations in villages of western Greenland showed that communities would have to periodically close or restrict access to grocery stores to prevent an exhaustion of local food supplies by large groups of tourists that inundated the towns from cruise ships (Stone, 2018-2019). In far-flung communities at the remote end of global food chains, a very real risk exists of mass tourism exhausting the limited supply of food staples like bread and milk. With limited local infrastructure or capital to develop a robust souvenir industry or other commercial establishments to capture revenue from mass tourism, this gap often ends up being filled by foreign capital which can afford to invest in and operate a seasonal business with a temporary

workforce. In particular, revenue generated from cruise ship tourism often remains with the large conglomerates that operate the cruises and it sails away with them when they depart. Between the transnationally owned cruise ships, foreign seasonal workers and investments from foreign capital, much of the revenue generated from the Arctic tourism industry ends up simply leaving the peripheral communities in which it was generated resulting in little local benefit (Sisneros-Kidd et al. 2019, 1263).

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Conclusion

It is perhaps useful to conclude with observations gathered in the summer of 2019. While camping in the hills above Ilulissat, a picturesque village on the western coast of Greenland, I was surprised one morning to look out over the harbor and see three enormous cruise ships anchored offshore. During my previous summer there, I had never seen any ships this large and certainly not three at once. Curious, I hiked into town to find that daily life in the village had been transformed dramatically.

Local Inuit fishermen with shell-shocked expressions struggled to make their way to work as they dodged clusters of tourists donning matching red expedition-style parkas complete with fur-ruffed hoods. Seemingly unaware of the intrusiveness of their actions, throngs of tourists in their dozens ambled through yards of private homes taking pictures of the locals through their windows and remarking how “primitive” the village was. Tourists complained about the way the sled dogs were maintained and demanded something be done about it. Clusters of tourists were led by the white faces of seasonal tour guides who provided them with information of questionable accuracy. Hundreds of foreign feet stomped across formerly pristine

Arctic tundra where just yesterday I had chatted with Inuit women as they collected tiny herbs used to brew a traditional tea.

Overnight, the arrival of these ships doubled the population of the village, and over the following month large cruise ships continued to come and go several times per week. The strain placed on the local community by such sudden influxes of tourists was intense, and it was clear the tourism boom was not simply delivering the promises of prosperity initially hoped for. In interviews with locals, public opinion was torn. While some industries like construction and services seemed to benefit, many locals lamented the disruption to their way of life and complained that the tourists spent little money during their time ashore while they overburdened the plumbing infrastructure, cleared grocery shelves, and invaded their privacy (Stone, 2019).

This experience in Ilulissat is like that of many Arctic communities which are seeing rapid growth in their tourism industry. Certainly it is the case that not all tourism is bad, and it is not the intention of this paper to argue against tourism, globalization, modernization or capitalism per se. Instead, the purpose here has been to utilize a critical political economy approach to uncover problem areas which the traditional neoliberal political economy model misses.

By moving beyond a transactional view of the tourism industry and applying a critical political economy approach to the current boom in Arctic tourism, light is shed which helps to explain why the promises of development and economic prosperity frequently associated with mass tourism often fail to materialize. In contrast to the traditional view of tourism development which presupposes communities are actively vying to become tourism destinations and that mass tourism offers a positive pathway to development, evidence in the Arctic suggests

that mass tourism in peripheral communities can actually exacerbate dependency and bring highly uneven distribution of benefits. This new dependency is founded on externally driven demand, industry control by foreign corporations and capital, a lack of local input, a high degree of seasonality, and disruption of important traditional practices.

Clearly tourism is not simply a panacea for development, but there are ways in which it can be done in more sustainable ways. As the critical approach highlights, Arctic peripheral communities suffer from a lack of indigenous participation and control made worse by the use of cruise ships as the primary form of regional tourism. Cruise ships in particular are loosely regulated, frequently fail to coordinate or consult with villages, inundate towns with large numbers of passengers, create few jobs in the local economy, and take their profits with them when they depart. It is no surprise mass tourism in this fashion delivers mixed results. By returning control to Arctic communities, however, a more positive connection between tourism and development is likely to emerge. First, a peripheral community's capacity for tourism should be assessed with local input to determine what volume and forms of tourism are appropriate and manageable for the culture, infrastructure and natural environment. Then, steps should be taken to increase local revenue and retain profits through the implementation of landing fees and requiring the use of local guides and services. By taking these steps, mass tourism in Arctic peripheral communities can be a sustainable activity as long as it is supported by and enmeshed within the community's traditional values and it features a high degree of indigenous control.

Notes

1. The concept of peripheral economies is commonly associated with dependency theory. The intention here is not to rely too heavily on dependency theory which can often paint an overly simplistic picture of the relationship between ‘core’ and ‘peripheral’ economies and ignore peripheral agency. However, the use of the term ‘peripheral community’ is useful in characterizing the descriptive traits of Arctic indigenous communities collectively as being remote, underdeveloped, having limited economic diversity, and featuring a history of colonial practices.

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