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Arctic Circle Student Briefing

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Are conflicts "allowed" at the Arctic Circle?

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After being canceled in 2020 due to the outbreak of COVID-19, the Arctic Circle conference was back on track this year; bringing together 1.500 participants from academia, businesses, governmental bodies, indigenous nations, and civil society. When entering the grandiose halls of Harpa during the first morning one could sense an aura of excitement. Business leaders and politicians have lined up to discuss the opportunities that an increasingly ice-free Arctic will entail, such as new shipping routes, increased tourism, and the potential to exploit untapped resources. It seems that the Arctic is having a „moment“ and while this may excite and attract new players to the field, there are also those who have cherished these frozen badlands for generations. Many of the sessions include panelists that represent the indigenous nations of the high north. They highlight their right to self-determination and voice their concerns for the disastrous effects that mining and other developments can have on their lives and livelihoods.

By the end of day two, it had struck me how many realities seem to co-exist during an event like this. Is the future of the Arctic about conserving biodiversity and culture, or making the most of untapped resources? Should we apply the precautionary principle when it comes to climate change and strive towards de-growth or will novel technologies and the potential to produce clean energy even out the score later this century? What would, in my view, be more interesting and productive would be to allow these different visions to be in dialogue with each other; something which the organization of the Arctic Circle seems to somewhat avoid. Moments of conflict were indeed rare. During one plenary session a politician from Alaska, a fossil fuel extracting state, exclaimed „are you planning on shutting us down?“ when another panelist addressed the need to rapidly decarbonize. This brief burst of outrage revealed an underlying issue that is simmering beneath the surface but is perhaps not considered appropriate to hash out. However, there is a body of research that recognizes the importance of conflict and contestation as drivers of democratic processes and change (Mouffe, 2005). If platforms such as the Arctic Circle thus treat conflict as problematic and destructive, they will inevitably downplay fundamental issues, create a false sense of agreement and run the risk of ignoring existing power imbalances and marginalizing certain voices (Raitio, 2016).

What I gather from my experience is that the primary goal of the Arctic Circle is not the pursuit of collaboration and democratic dialogue on the issues of

natural resource management and climate change in the High North. From the looks of it, I would rather say that the primus motor is to foster and advance business relations between Nordic countries and the global players that are increasingly excited about the promise of the Arctic.

As I crammed down a complementary egg muffin before heading to the first session of day three, a young man in a suit and tie approached me and stuck conversation. He was a polite Princeton graduate who was now representing a mining company. He had been sent to Reykjavík to set up potential contracts. I was intrigued to ask him whether the conference was living up to his expectations. Above and beyond was his answer.

References:

Mouffe, C. (2005). *The return of the political*. Verso.

Raitio, K. (2016). Seized and missed opportunities in responding to conflicts. Constructivity and destructivity in forest conflict management in Finland and British Columbia, Canada. In Peterson, T. R., Bergerå, H. L., Feldpausch-Parker, A. M. & Raitio, K. (Eds) *Environmental Communication and Community* (pp. 229-248). Routledge.