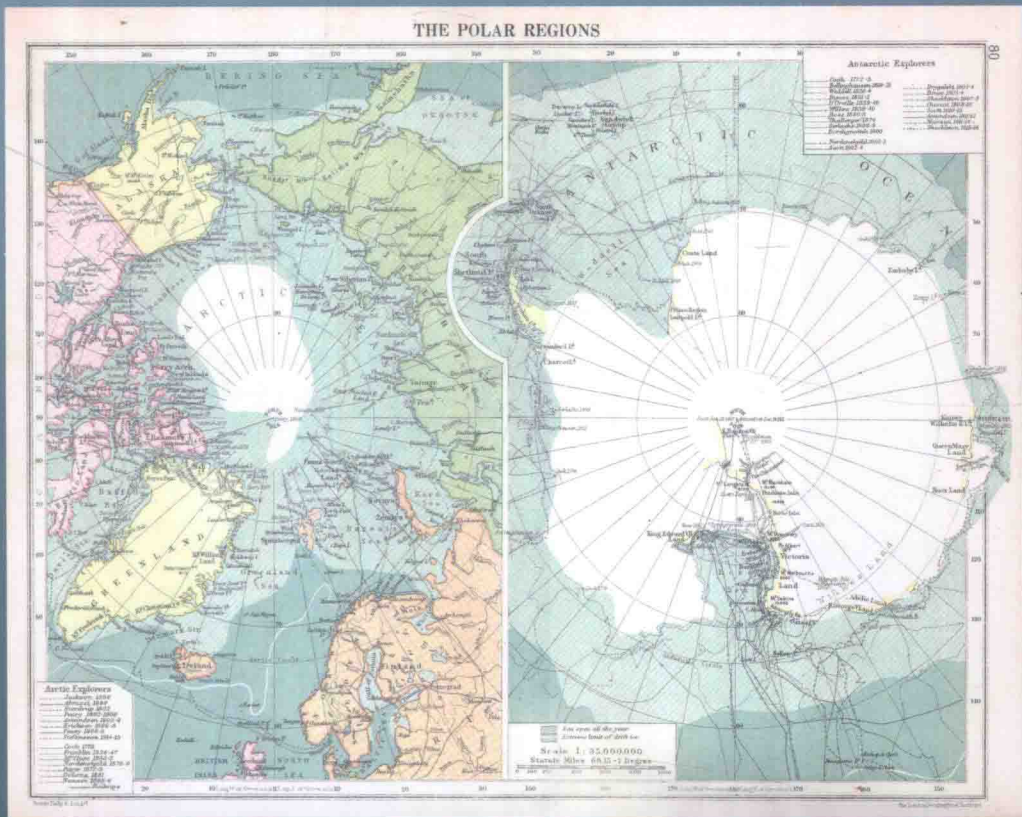


EDITED BY
Richard C. Powell
 and **Klaus Dodds**

POLAR GEOPOLITICS?

Knowledges, Resources and Legal Regimes



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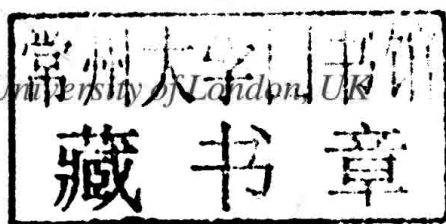
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Polar Geopolitics?

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Preface

Richard C. Powell and Klaus Dodds

This collection emerges from a successful ESRC Seminar Series grant, *Knowledges, Resources and Legal Regimes: The New Geopolitics of the Polar Regions* (January 2010–October 2011; RES-451-26-0661-A), awarded to the editors and accredited to the RCUK Global Uncertainties programme. Through the grant, two seminars were held at the Foresight Centre, Liverpool, two at the British Library, London, and a further postgraduate workshop at Mansfield College, Oxford. These seminars and workshops have developed an interdisciplinary and international network of academics, policy-makers and other experts, including a new generation of early career researchers, engaged with the broad field of *polar geopolitics*.

Thank you to all of those who attended the five events, from distinguished colleagues to graduate students, who participated in fascinating discussions from which we learnt so much. At the British Library, we thank Dr. Jude England and Dr. Phil Hatfield, and at the Polar Regions Department, Jane Rumble, for their support during the series. Sandra Mather provided important assistance for the Liverpool seminars.

We wish to thank all the contributors to this volume, for supplying excellent essays and engaging in the editorial process with good humour. Alex Pettifer and all the staff at Edward Elgar have been a pleasure to work with.

Finally, we would like to dedicate the volume to the late Professor Kaiyan Kaikobad, who gave an excellent paper on the Antarctic Treaty at our first seminar in Liverpool and passed away soon afterwards. We wish to record our shock and sadness at the passing of a great scholar and colleague.

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PART I

Global and regional frameworks

1. Polar geopolitics

Richard C. Powell and Klaus Dodds

1. INTRODUCTION

On 18th October 2007, the British newspaper, *The Daily Mail*, informed its readers that there was a ‘Scramble for Antarctica: Argentina hits back after Britain makes land grab’ (cited in Dodds 2010). The genesis for the story lay with a widely reported decision by the British government to submit geological and geophysical materials to a UN body called the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS), pertaining to the outer continental shelves of various South Atlantic islands including the disputed Falkland Islands/Islas Malvinas.

The UK government, as a party to the United Nations Law of the Sea Convention (UNCLOS), was not behaving in an unlawful manner, as such a headline might imply. As part of that legal process, parties to UNCLOS were obligated to deposit their submissions within ten years of ratification, and in the case of the UK, this meant that there was in effect a deadline of May 2009. If there was a scramble of sorts, it was more to do with a deadline imposed by UNCLOS ratification than one fomented by inter-state rivalries per se in the Antarctic and Southern Ocean. The notion of Britain engaging in a ‘land grab’, while useful for seizing the interest of the readers of the *Daily Mail*, tells us more about how remote regions such as the Antarctic and, as this book will make clear, the Arctic are represented in the first place. So while it may be tempting to dismiss such headlines as simply sensationalistic, it makes more sense to think further about why places like the Arctic Ocean and the polar continent and Southern Ocean frequently attract such headlines.

For social scientists, however, this news story coinciding as it did with renewed Argentine-UK tension over the Falklands/Malvinas, offers an insight into how the Polar Regions are routinely framed as exceptional spaces, which appear to demand and/or encourage extraordinary actions by states and their sanctioned agents including scientists, military personnel and local administrators. The notion of a ‘scramble’, let alone some kind of latter day ‘land grab’, is a reminder not only of past colonial

encounters (most notably the 'Scramble for Africa' in the nineteenth century) but also of its continuation. In other words, countries such as the UK stand accused of coveting the polar seabed. But this kind of mapping exercise also brings to the fore the importance of geographical knowledge (or what we term here knowledges, in order to draw attention to multiple manifestations and complex political economies surrounding the production and circulation of knowledge) in shaping expressions of sovereign power (Powell 2010). States such as the United Kingdom have had a long tradition of collecting, analyzing and utilizing geographical information for the purpose of spatial planning and the development of national strategies in the Antarctic (Figure 1.1).¹

The mapping and delimiting of continental shelves in the South Atlantic is a starting point for a detailed evaluation of how the Polar Regions more generally have garnered renewed attention in academic, media and policy-related forums around the world. The delimitation of the continental shelf has also been headline news in the Arctic Ocean as well. The much publicized reporting of a Russian flag on the bottom of the central Arctic basin in the summer of 2007 unleashed a new round of febrile commentary (Craciun 2009). A legal regime, the Law of the Sea, designed to help manage and regulate ocean governance, appeared to be fuelling speculation about spatial expansionism, resource grabbing and domination of a region, which was thought to be increasingly accessible to other parties because of the thinning of sea ice cover in the Arctic Ocean. Once again, headlines such as 'Scramble for the Arctic' and 'Exploiting the last frontier' became prevalent.

In the space of a year (2007–08), this interaction of bodies of knowledge, resources and legal regimes was keenly felt in the Polar Regions and beyond. At the same time, scientists and social scientists were engaged in a wide variety of projects attached to the International Polar Year (2007–09), and the US Geological Survey released a report estimating that there might be 90 billion barrels of undiscovered but potentially recoverable oil north of the Arctic Circle. In turn, this resurrected an old idea of the Arctic being a resource frontier (Powell 2008), a mosaic of places inviting flows of people, equipment and investment in search of what Richard Slotkin once termed the 'bonanza frontier' model of development – the possibility of immediate and impressive economic benefit on the basis of low capital outlay (Slotkin 1992, p. 18). While such a characterization frequently underestimates the profound technical-scientific challenges of operating in northerly latitudes, this idea of bountiful resources awaiting exploitation remains compelling – capable of generating both hopeful and indeed fearful futures of and for the Arctic (Figure 1.2).

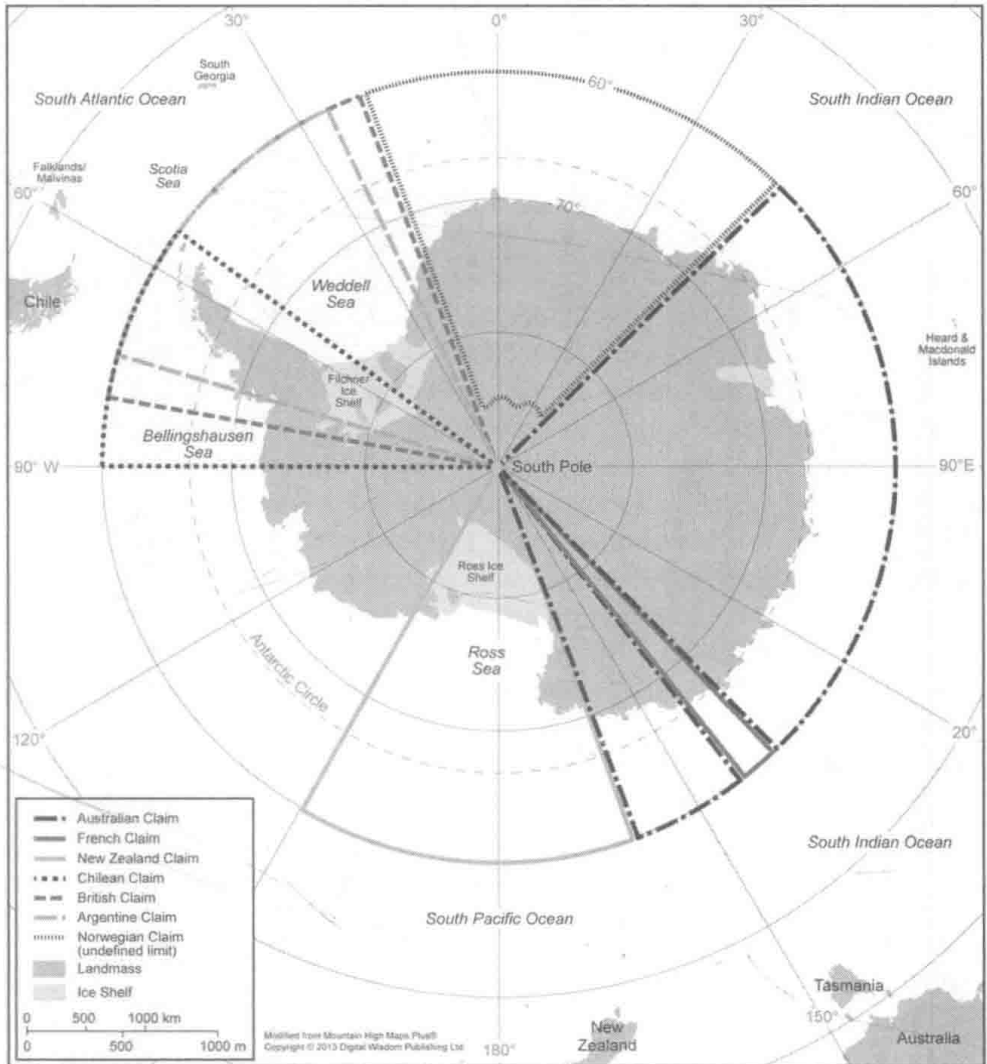


Figure 1.1 Locational map of the Antarctic.

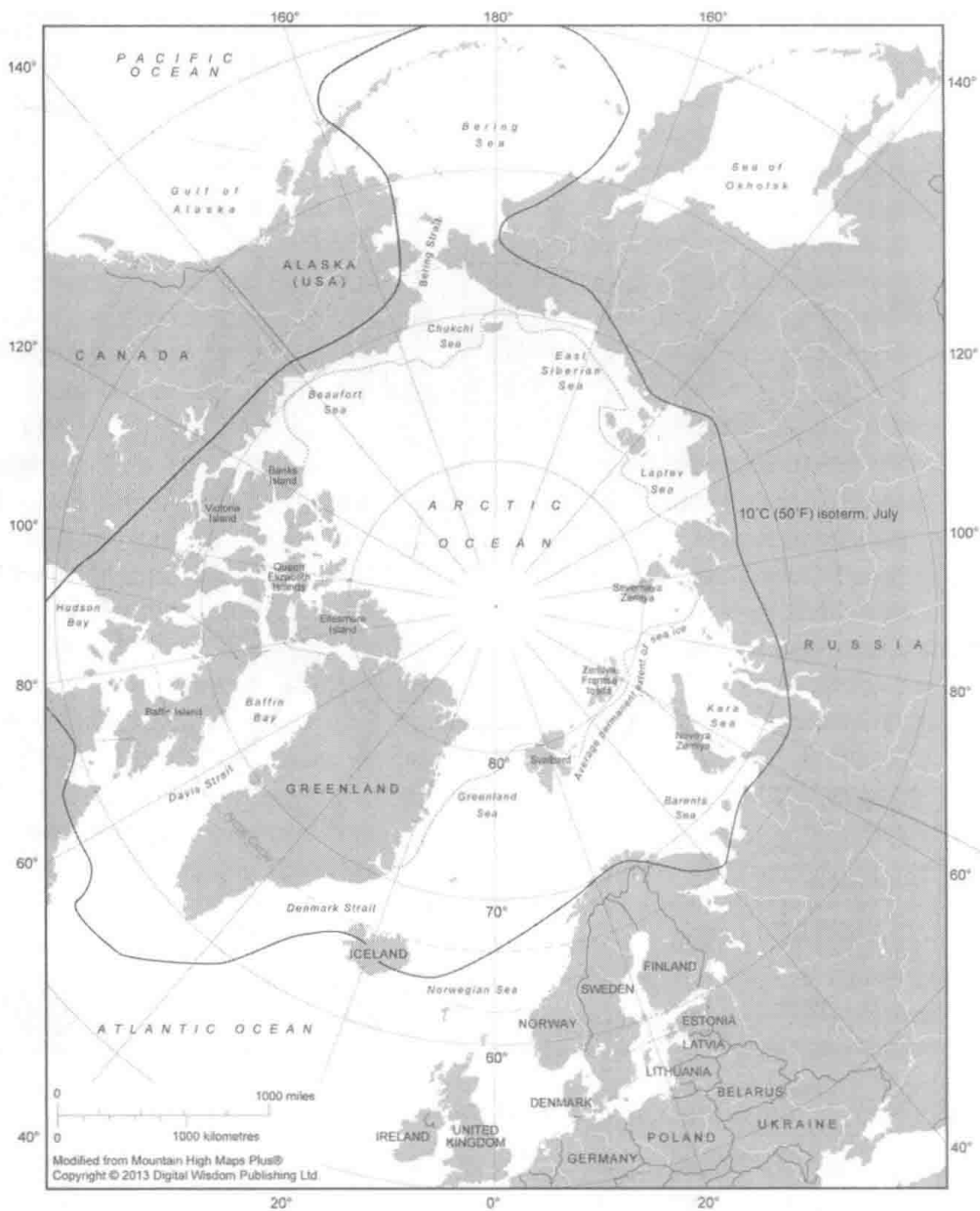


Figure 1.2 Locational map of the Arctic.

Notwithstanding operational complexities, the Arctic and even the Antarctic are being reconfigured by a series of developments and processes, which are altering human and physical geographies. Most dramatically, much reported incidents of sea ice thinning in the summer season are enhancing the notion that the Arctic is better conceived of as a 'polar Mediterranean' rather than a 'frozen desert'. The Canadian-American anthropologist Vilhjalmur Stefansson in his two books *The Friendly Arctic* (1921) and *The Northward Course of Empire* (1922) was an early advocate of such a claim, while at the same time noting changing transportation capabilities and possible population shifts. The descriptor 'Mediterranean', of course, is profoundly geographically suggestive of a maritime space betwixt continental spaces (Steinberg 2001). It imagines a place where there would be fewer impediments to mobility. While sea ice thinning disrupts traditional subsistence lifestyles in parts of the inhabited Arctic, it appears to encourage ever more commercial shipping with the promise of improved access via the fabled Northwest Passage and Northern Sea Route. The end-result is an Arctic imagined as a zone of transition, where either peaceful co-existence and/or disruptive conflict might flourish. For Arctic Ocean coastal states, such as Canada and Russia, this notion of the Arctic as a northerly Mediterranean arguably provoked ever-greater interest in encouraging and, indeed, bolstering investment in polar infrastructure including military capabilities, in the name of national security, sovereignty and stewardship.

2. STRUCTURING A POLAR GEOPOLITICS

The study of the Polar Regions has, historically, been characterized by national traditions. As British scholars, we are more than aware of the peculiar conceit of studying these places comparatively. Indeed, such an approach might be characterized as particularly British, reflecting the continuing bi-polar legacy in that national imagination. However, we believe that in many recent theorizations of the Arctic and Antarctic, these comparative themes have been both deployed and, just as often, resisted for rhetorical purposes. In the ESRC Seminar Series, from which this book derives, this issue was much commented and debated upon. For us, it signifies the *ambivalent geographies* of the Polar Regions.

While there are national traditions with respect to Polar Regions, scholars of the two regions tend to have a different position towards the given *scale* of exceptionality (Powell 2010). For the Antarctic, exceptionality is most potently manifested at the continental scale – the uninhabited land, designated solely for science and peace under the terms of the 1959 Antarctic Treaty and associated legal instruments. For the Arctic,