



Afterword

Risk Constellations and the Politics of Polarity

Michael Bravo

Ask almost anyone who lives in the Arctic, young and old, and they will tell you it is a tricky business to navigate life's risks, whether that's looking after one's mental health or caring for cherished places on the land, camps where generations of families lived and subsisted. Nothing stands still. Even where there is continuity in the named features of the land, perhaps an inuksuk (stone monument, or cairn) marking a famous battle between shamans, the floe edge that disappears and reappears in the same place each year, the scent of the air, the taste of melted glacial water, a place whose memory is marred by misfortune, there is movement and change. Everything is in motion, like a dance linking the earthly and celestial realms.

Surveying the sky and the horizon for clues is an important way of knowing in northern societies, a form of gestural knowledge, taking stock, and identifying familiar landmarks. More than that, it is also a way of positioning oneself within what Inuit term *sila*, which is difficult to translate, but approximates to 'the living realm of the air, atmosphere, and sky'. A deeper understanding of *sila* is that it is a cosmological life-force that animates the world. Karla Williamson, Kallalliit scholar, envisages *sila* as a 'force that gives all the living beings air to breathe, and intelligence. With every breath people and animals take, air becomes transformed into energy to be used for intelligence, because as much as there is no life without air, without it there is no intelligence either' (Jessen Williamson 1992: 24).

With climate change, the onset of winter ice comes later in the year and its departure in the spring is earlier; this leaves less time for firm shore ice to form, which complicates the lives of humans

and sea mammals alike in the spring – and contributes to coastal erosion during several autumnal storms. Well-formed ice provides health and security to feeding seal pups as well as safety for spring whaling. This interplay between *silá*, *nuna* (the land), *siku* (the ice) and the sea, each of them in flux, the balance altered by a changing climate, can be disorienting as though ‘the earth is spinning faster’ (Krupnik and Jolly 2002). It is as though the constellations that give order to the universe are shifting. Revising seasonal knowledge and making adjustments to the timing of human-environmental activities like hunting on the ice is therefore not only essential, but sometimes a matter of life and death.

The ecosystems of the Arctic are experiencing unprecedented upheavals, many of these disturbing changes observed in everyday life, some like the tundra and taiga fires of northeast Siberia dramatically so. The chapters in this volume attest to the very tangible experience of living environmental change as it is playing out in different ecosystems of the global cryosphere, notably Arctic Alaska, Canada and Russian Far North, as well as the Alps and Himalayas. Painting an accurate regional picture for the Arctic is deceptively difficult, especially as the beaches, permafrost, ice edges and salinity profiles of the ocean are eroding, dissolving, shifting or giving way. This blurring of boundaries is accentuated by the ebb and flow of geopolitical interests, particularly the competing interests of the three most powerful states in the world, the United States, Russia and China.

The historical incursions of Victorian whaling fleets and naval expeditions into the Arctic archipelagos, reading their twists and turns, dodging icebergs, or devising encounter strategies to avoid provoking violent encounters with northern inhabitants, these all illustrate the constant calculus of risk taking and avoidance inherent in navigation. Managing risk was integral to the construction and description of the Arctic as a geographical imaginary for navigators and their distant readers in ways that still matter today. Commerce, navigation and military power were intertwined in such a way that the language of risk was a way of conceiving and identifying imperial opportunities, to the extent that risk often acquired the status of an organizing principle of these imperial and nationalist ideologies. How best to locate and traverse the Arctic’s ‘ocean highways’, to borrow a phrase from imperial geography, was debated by armchair admirals and hydrographers in Greenwich, Paris and New York. As a mode of analysis integral to the expansion of capital, risk was never just about describing the Arctic. Far more ambitiously, it contained within it organizational logics that imposed an extractivist account of

the living Arctic, reforming the contours of the region in ways that colonized and transformed those familiar to its inhabitants.

Newcomers and outsiders generally understood that the best way to control risk in navigating these potentially dangerous archipelagos was to mine the deep knowledge reservoirs of the peoples who had studied its intricacies for hundreds of years. Navigators with experience recognized in the cosmologies of First Nations peoples fine-grained relationships to describe the motives, actions and responses of the living world of humans and non-humans. A spirited landscape offers far more sights, names, stories and other kinds of hooks for orienting oneself. Let's give the name 'constellation' to the shifting patterns governing these relationships observed over countless days, seasons and lifetimes. When a person gathers knowledge of these constellations, instilled through a great deal of practice and repetition, and it becomes second nature, one might describe this navigation as dead reckoning. A newcomer may attribute this knowledge to an inexplicable intuition or mere habit, rather than to skilled attunement to complex patterns of movement. Stillness, particularly in the Arctic, to those with experience and patience, is often seen as an active state, a kind of movement held in suspension, that can announce itself or conceal its presence.

Grasping how the Arctic has acquired its exceptional geopolitical symbolic power is made easier by understanding that 'polar talk', the vocabulary of poles and polarity, is rooted in a very different kind of cosmology, one whose concealments lay elsewhere in the Ptolemaic model of the world which places the polar axis of the earth at the centre of the universe. The imperial desire to rule over the earth's dominions viewing the globe from above, looking down over the North Pole, has close associations with the power of emperors, from Alexander the Great through the Holy Roman Emperors. In this vision of the Arctic, the people or spirits on the edge of the world play a significant role as witnesses paying homage to imperial rulers, a theme replayed over and over in European narratives of exploration (Romm 1992). Early modern cosmography identified the polar Arctic as a crucial site as a source of universal power because it was a unique point on the globe from which worldly time and space (longitude) emanated. This framework of symbolic power, reworked in the creation of northern nation states, is what gave the search for northern sea passages their mythological allure. Indigenous cosmologies must come to grips with the burden of being the liminal linchpins of this imperial legacy, simultaneously being irredeemably 'other' and thereby validating imperial power. Herein lies the key to

understanding the competing philosophies of risk, namely that the polar vocabulary of terror, discovery, victory and triumph (popular names for naval ships) invokes a mastery that is only fulfilled by being validated from the periphery.

International relations scholars have for some time speculated that the world order of the twenty-first century is returning towards a multipolar world and carrying with that the risks of global instability, following a long period of relative bipolar stability during the Cold War. Note here how in this political language of risk calculation, the idea of stability is indebted to the advent of systems theory that also emerged alongside military planning during the Second World War and the decades that followed. Something important is being lost when geographical imaginaries privilege scalar visions that situate political power as though it were operating like a magnetic field between two poles of attraction and repulsion. Magnetic fields can be subject to aberrations and distortions, but the language of polarity in international relations constantly struggles to keep up with, or do justice to, the complexity and sheer diversity of the living world.

Generations of international relations students have been taught about the politics of ‘poles and polarity’. The realist school in particular, and through no accident, embraced the language of poles in articulating questions about the balance of power and global stability. Famously, Kenneth Waltz, champion of neo-realism, asserted that polarity of the world system was central to determining its stability. ‘Almost everyone agrees that at some time since the [First World] [W]ar, the world was bipolar’, he wrote, such that ‘the emergence of the Russian and American superpowers created a situation that permitted wider-ranging and more effective cooperation amongst the states of Western Europe’ (1979: 70). One can recognize in Waltz’s bipolar account the role of the Arctic Region during the Cold War as a critical borderland in the American–Russian *détente*. It is true that his diagnosis of a unipolar world after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1989 may be less useful than constructivist approaches in explaining the framework of international cooperation that enabled the creation of the intergovernmental Arctic Council. However, Waltz left us with an enduring question that matters to anyone who wants to understand how power and risk work in the Arctic, when he asked, ‘how should we count poles, and how can we measure power’ (*ibid.*: 129)? The more urgent question today, I would contend, is what we mean by ‘pole’ and ‘polarity’, and if they are not up to the job of aligning political and environmental stability, then we need a different framework.

It is against this backdrop of neorealism's Arctic roots, that these chapters offer an alternative relational framework for understanding risk ecologies, and a much better place to begin an analysis of the climate emergency. The cosmic harmony of life is defined by humans and animals recognizing their reciprocal obligations to care for one another (rather than Waltz's account that has its roots in theories of universal political power that emerged in sixteenth-century cosmography). These relational ethics extend beyond animals to the whole living world of plant life that bursts forth each summer, the air from which all living mammals draw breath, and the land whose forms subtly shift with the sunlight across durations near and far. The peoples of the North have for centuries acquired highly detailed knowledge (so much so as often to be baffling to outsiders), very specific linguistic tools, and narrative traditions at their disposal to navigate these relationships with the living world, knowing that they can be prone to sudden and profound change, often with little warning.

When asked today how the Arctic matters to the wider world, northern peoples will often reply that the fundamental importance of the Arctic, and specific places, routes and trails within, is that they are 'home', a place of belonging (Watt-Cloutier 2015). The practical traditional knowledge of receiving clothes, shelter and tools from animals is of course part of the interiority of social life. The decision on a given day to examine the sky to decide whether it is safe or too risky to hunt whales is a means of successfully managing uncertainty. When on a winter's night in March, a hunter may navigate using the three stars high above the horizon to the south called *Ullaktut* (Orion's belt), this constellation is described as sledge runners, but also as hunters who had each become stars because of a transgression of a taboo. This encodes movement and transformation from the profane world of the terrestrial to the celestial realms. Thus, Orion's belt is quite literally a risk constellation in that its stars explain fundamental cosmographical relationships between the affairs of living beings on earth and the celestial or planetary realm. However, I chose the term 'risk constellation' to characterize the work of this volume because the movement of this patterned group of stars across the sky through the night is a source of both moral and spatial navigation, a system of orientation that encompasses knowing one's place in the world.

What then of geopolitics? Where in the geopolitical space that Waltz defined in terms of 'counting poles' is there space for the risk constellations and cosmographical visions of northern peoples? It is a striking fact that in Inuit star lore, the pole star, *Nuutuittuq*, is of comparatively little interest and still of less use because of its

stillness. Crucially Inuit do not make the mistake of confusing stillness with stability. Fixed poles of the kind that Waltz envisaged as giving the world stability are less preferred than dynamic relationships between living beings (which includes stars). This is also the case further afield in other cultures such as Bedouin society, where the pole star forms part of the constellation Benetnash, a funeral procession. For Bedouin, the pole star's stillness was traditionally regarded as being suspicious, as though the truth behind it was being concealed or restrained. Thus, readers may choose to be pole counters, which I understand to mean subscribing to a vision of the world based on a fixed or static frame of reference, in which polar claims to authority insist on validation by smaller polities over which power and dominion are exerted. Or they may choose the more ecological, contingent and culturally rich traditions of navigating the world's precariousness through relational strategies. This points to a theory of political power predicated on reciprocity of mutual recognition between centres of power and peripheries. Pole counting on the other hand has the appeal of a clarity born of simplicity and assigns the sovereign power over political ontology to those who hold the reins of power and value their own agency above all others. Risk constellations offer those in power no such satisfaction, reminding them that their well-being is perpetually in the hands of others and subject to complex ethical mediations.

A resolution to the century's defining challenges of the climate emergency and the likelihood of the onset of a sixth major species extinction will very likely require making space for competing kinds of cosmography. The neo-realists show no sign of retreating any time soon while the relational ontologies so beautifully explored in this volume, though lacking political and military power, appear to be ethically indispensable to navigating the twenty-first century. A signal achievement of this collection of chapters is to give readers a very authoritative and reliable picture of the Arctic zodiac, a set of risk constellations that speak to the world's need to find a way forward that comes to terms with the transition that experts agree is now required to keep the earth on any kind of a sustainable trajectory.

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