

Ingo Heidbrink

Icebergs and Ice-Stones: Industrial Development in Greenland in the 19th and 20th Centuries: Risk Acceptance in an Arctic Environment

Although today's discussions on global change often focus on Greenland's melting icecaps, an environmental history of the globe's largest island has yet to be written. Most scholarly research on Greenland has up to now been limited to ethnological and/or anthropographical studies of the traditional Inuit society, or else historical research on the Danish colonial period, the interaction with the Danish society, and, in particular, the movement towards complete sovereignty. A study of the strong influence of the US on Greenland, and in particular the relevance of the US for the industrial development of Greenland from the nineteenth century onwards, is one of the major desiderata in Greenlandic history.

My research project at the Rachel Carson Center will not only try to provide a historical overview of the industrial activities of US companies in Greenland and the relevance of US activities (industrial and military) for the development of today's Greenlandic society, but also an analysis of risk acceptance in traditional Inuit society. I believe that this will offer a possible key to understanding current debates about large industrial developments in Greenland (e.g., the proposed aluminum smelter project by ALCOA).

The proposed establishment of an aluminum smelter in Greenland carries extreme risks for the future economic development of the country, as well as the possibility of very high financial gains, which might be able to finance complete sovereignty after separation from Denmark. Nevertheless, from the point of view of traditional western-style economic analysis, the risk would be considered so great that the proposed industrial development project would be unlikely to be realized.

But, in stark contrast to western industrialized nations, traditional Greenlandic Inuit society has been always exposed to extreme risks in the context of economic activities, due to the nature of the extreme Arctic environment. (A hunter in the Arctic has always dealt with much greater risks than a farmer in a moderate climate.)

During my fellowship at the Center, I'll try to analyze whether this extreme exposure to a dangerous environment has caused a higher level of risk acceptance in Greenlandic Inuit society than can be found in most European societies. I will also examine whether such historical risk acceptance might be used as an explanatory model for the very high level of societal risk acceptance in the context of today's industrial development policy, in particular in connection with the proposed project of an aluminum smelter. In brief, I will attempt to answer the question of whether the historic societal experience of exposure to an extreme Arctic environment and related high levels of societal and individual risk acceptance might have led to a societal climate that is willing to accept higher levels of economic risk in the context of current industrial developments.