



**Infra  
North** | Building  
Arctic  
Futures

Workshop

# Ethnography Beyond the Case Study

Possibilities and Limitations of Comparison

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Nordregio

InfraNorth Workshop, September 10, 2024, 09:30 – 18:00 CEST  
Nordregio. Holmamiralens Väg 10, Skeppsholmen, 111 49 Stockholm  
Online via Zoom (with prior registration)

[More information](#)

# Ethnography Beyond the Case Study

## Possibilities and Limitations of Comparison

Comparison stands as a cornerstone within empirical social sciences and humanities research, presenting a versatile array of methodologies. Sociocultural anthropology, on the other hand, typically insists on the priority of ethnographic fieldwork and engages with questions about the uniqueness of a particular case study. Thus, the question arises what can be gained by engaging in comparative endeavors? Or, to put it more provocatively, isn't the level of generalization needed for comparison the foe of ethnography?

We encourage broad discussions from a variety of social science perspectives about successful comparative projects across different regional and topical areas. At the same time, the workshop organizers are engaged in a pan-Arctic project addressing transport infrastructures. Thus, the comparability of human engagements with transport infrastructures across regional contexts will be a recurring topic of conversation.

Keywords: comparison, research tool, temporal, spatial, ethnographic fieldwork, case study, scale.

# Agenda: Tuesday 10 September

Nordregio. Holmamiralens Väg 10, Skeppsholmen, 111 49 Stockholm. 2nd floor, Hörsalen.

**09:30 – 10:45**

**Session 1**

**Moderation: Peter Schweitzer**

- **Opening: Welcome and Introduction to the Workshop**  
[Timothy Heleniak](#) (Nordregio) and [Peter Schweitzer](#) (University of Vienna)
- **Memories of Comparative Anthropology**  
[Ulf Hannerz](#) (Stockholm University)

**10:45 – 11:15**

**Coffee Break**

**11:15 – 12:45**

**Session 2**

**Moderation: Philipp Budka**

- **What is Arctic Adaptive Governance in the Context of Climate Change and Permafrost Thaw?**  
[Leneisja Jungsberg](#) (Nordregio)
- **JUSTNORTH: Reflections on the Viability of Sustainable Development**  
[Corine Wood-Donnelly](#) (Nord University)
- **Ethnographic Comparison in the Arctic: Collective and Individual Transport Infrastructure**  
[Florian Stammer](#) (University of Lapland)

**12:45 – 14:30**

**Lunch Break**

**14:30 – 16:00**

**Session 3**

**Moderation: Elena Davydova**

- **From Case Study to Pan-Arctic Ambition: The InfraNorth Project and the Challenge of Comparison**  
[Peter Schweitzer](#), et al. (University of Vienna)
- **Infrastructuring Arctic Coastal Communities: A Comparative Anthropology of Seaport Projects in Alaska, Norway and Russia**  
[Olga Povoroznyuk](#) (University of Vienna)
- **Accessing the “Inaccessible”: The Role of Airports for Arctic Local Communities**  
[Alexandra Meyer](#), [Ria-Maria Adams](#), and [Sophie Elixhauser](#) (University of Vienna)

**16:00 – 16:15**

**Health and/or Coffee Break**

**16:15 – 17:45**

**Session 4**

**Moderation: Katrin Schmid**

- **Infrastructures of Circulation: Migrant Preparatory Training in Southeast Asia and East Africa**  
[Johan Lindquist](#) (Stockholm University)
- **Small and Large Infrastructures: A Comparison**  
[Chakad Ojani](#) (Stockholm University)

# Presentations (chronological order)

## **Memories of Comparative Anthropology**

By Ulf Hannerz (Stockholm University)

This is a brief personal chronicle of encounters with comparative anthropology over my scholarly life. I point to the early importance of George Peter Murdock in mid-20th century anthropology, reminisce about my own encounter with Murdock at an American university in the early 1970s, point to the rejection of Murdock-style comparative anthropology in a volume resulting from a conference in Vienna some twenty years ago, and sketch my own involvement in comparative studies in a project with Andre Gingrich, on “small countries”, resulting in an edited book in 2017. This book, with 16 contributing anthropologists, dealt with countries of less than 10 million inhabitants, finding various more or less recurrent characteristics.

## **What is Arctic Adaptive Governance in the Context of Climate Change and Permafrost Thaw?**

By Leneisja Jungsberg (Nordregio)

This research focuses on the adaptive governance of Arctic permafrost ecosystems (APEs) and the identification of socio-ecological resilience enablers. The study examines governance structures and processes, emphasizing accountability, transparency, and responsiveness among local and regional authorities in Arctic regions. Through a comprehensive desk review and participatory mapping, the research explores the ecosystem services provided by permafrost environments, including cultural, provisioning, and regulating services. The study also investigates the role of nature-based solutions (NbS) in mitigating permafrost thaw, highlighting both formal and informal ecosystem management techniques. Indigenous knowledge and practices are integral to the research, particularly in understanding the socio-cultural dimensions of resilience. Stakeholder mapping and semi-structured interviews provide insights into the responsibilities and capacities of various actors involved in permafrost governance, from governmental bodies to local communities. The findings will contribute to capacity building among stakeholders and inform the development of governance strategies that foster resilience in Arctic ecosystems. The outcomes will be documented in as part of the ILLUQ project, deliverable report D8.4, and are expected to guide future policies and practices aimed at enhancing the sustainability and resilience of APEs in the face of climate change.

## **JUSTNORTH: Reflections on the Viability of Sustainable Development in the Arctic**

By Corine Wood-Donnelly (Nord University)

The viability of development is often premised on a positive economic outlook and technical feasibility within a stable regulatory environment. However, the outcomes of JUSTNORTH reveal that many core challenges to sustainable development in the Arctic are rooted systemic issues with origins far beyond the region. These challenges include the blurriness of responsibility emerging from the concept of sovereignty, fractured governance that fosters competition between political interests and conflicts over land uses driven by competing economic and cultural interests. Addressing these issues requires acknowledging the hierarchies of inequality and clarifying responsibility to facilitate a pivot on subject of justice. In this, we emphasize that a rebalancing in the distributional, procedural and recognitional aspects of justice is essential for nurturing the foundations for sustainability in the Arctic region.

## **Ethnographic Comparison in the Arctic: Collective and Individual Transport Infrastructure**

By Florian Stammler (Arctic Centre, University of Lapland)

Transport infrastructure plays a decisive role in determining the remoteness of locations and settlements in all Arctic countries. In this talk I shall go a step further and suggest that it likewise has an influence on notions of individuality and collectivity Arctic societies. I shall use ethnographic comparison from the Russian, Fennoscandian and Greenlandic Arctic to explore ways of analyzing the link between transport infrastructure and individualism / collectivism in our field sites. Even though transport infrastructure has never been the primary research interest during such comparative fieldwork, the lived experience of collectively or individually being on the way to and within field sites has generated evidence on the influence of infrastructure on patterns of mobility. I shall experiment with affordance theory to determine the significance of transport infrastructure for individuals and collectives. This is useful as a base for reflecting how infrastructure investments by collective bodies such as authorities, companies, cooperatives influence the way in which people experience mobility and consequently the social texture of their communities as well as their connection to the outside world. Such ethnographic comparison may lead to new understandings not only of Arctic infrastructural realities, but also of Arctic social and cultural diversity.

### **From Case Study to Pan-Arctic Ambition:**

#### **The InfraNorth Project and the Challenge of Comparison**

Peter Schweitzer and the InfraNorth Team (University of Vienna)

The ERC Advanced Grant project InfraNorth grew out of an ethnographic case study of a railroad line in eastern Siberia. As a first step of implementing InfraNorth, the project developed or expanded upon 10+ case studies of existing and/or planned Arctic transport infrastructure constellations in three northern study regions (Arctic Europe, Arctic North America, Arctic Russia) within its first three years. As anthropologists and geographers, our focus is not on infrastructure as such but on its significance for community well-being or lack thereof. Now, in year 4 of the 5-year ERC project, the question arises how to arrive at meaningful comparative perspectives without flattening the rich, but often idiosyncratic, ethnographies at hand.

InfraNorth assumes that transport infrastructure projects in the Arctic have certain distinctive qualities that set them apart from similar projects elsewhere. Thus, the comparative ambition is pan-Arctic and not necessarily global. Within this framework, several comparative dimensions deserve to be explored: differences and similarities within study regions, between different types of transport infrastructures (roads, railroads, seaports, airports, etc.), and within different political and temporal contexts. While we do not assume that there is a transport infrastructure constellation that applies equally throughout the Arctic, we intend to highlight factors that lead to similarities and differences within the overall region. In the end, this should also lead to preliminary “lessons learned” regarding the positive and negative impacts of transport infrastructure projects for community well-being in Arctic contexts.

## **Infrastructuring Arctic Coastal Communities: A Comparative Ethnography of Seaport Projects in Alaska, Norway, and Russia**

Olga Povoroznyuk (University of Vienna)

Since the fall of the Ice Curtain, the Arctic was constructed as a global region facing a number of common issues such as climate change, resource extraction, and Indigenous movements. Arctic globalization associated with expanding extractive industries, new technologies and forms of mobility, including cargo and cruise shipping, resulted in a few transnational infrastructure projects. However, since the beginning of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the region has been turning into an arena of securitization and military exercises, of struggles over access to maritime routes and resources, and of reconfigured connectivity, which might be driving infrastructural development along the Arctic coast in the future.

This presentation draws on case studies of seaport expansion projects, and examines the social, economic and cultural implications of infrastructural development in the newly divided Arctic. *What are the current promises and threats of Arctic maritime infrastructure projects for local communities? What are the main discourses and imaginaries surrounding seaport expansion and modernization projects? And what implications do the new Arctic geopolitical configurations have for the implementation of seaport projects and for community well-being?* I follow imagined, emergent, and reconfigured Arctic (dis-)connections to explore local attitudes, narratives and affordances of seaport infrastructure in Nome (USA), Kirkenes (Norway) and Tiksi (Russia). Drawing on my ethnographic field data from different periods, archival materials, media reports and policy documents, I explore the possibilities and limitations of comparison of similar infrastructure projects in different national contexts.

## **Accessing the “Inaccessible”: The Role of Airports for Arctic Local Communities**

Alexandra Meyer, Ria-Maria Adams, and Sophie Elixhauser (University of Vienna)

Often imagined as remote and isolated, the Arctic is becoming more accessible and connected. In this presentation, we explore the local effects, promises, and fears related to the increased accessibility that existing and planned Arctic airports provide communities. We do so by comparing three unique Arctic towns: Longyearbyen, extremely remote yet well-connected through its airport; Rovaniemi, a central Arctic hub with an international airport and other transport infrastructures; and Tasiilaq, a region that currently does not (yet) have a good transport infrastructure. While the two former towns are well-established Arctic tourism destinations, the latter aspires to increase accessibility and tourist numbers by building an airport. By comparing these different case studies, we seek to answer the question: What is the role of existing and planned airports for local Arctic communities? We draw on three individual ethnographic studies and perform what we call a “collaborative secondary analysis,” building on “soft comparison,” as formulated by Mathews and Izquierdo (2009). This allows us to compare the role airports play / are anticipated to play in everyday life and community development, as well as the hopes and fears connected to increased accessibility of remote Arctic communities.

## **Infrastructures of Circulation: Migrant Preparatory Training in Southeast Asia and East Africa**

By Johan Lindquist (Stockholm University)

This paper is concerned with an ongoing project centered on 'migrant preparatory training,' vocational education in the deployment of low-skilled documented international labor migrants from sending to receiving countries. Empirically, we focus on how this type of training and associated forms of migration policy have come to circulate across the Global South from Asia to Africa. Based on ethnographic research in Ethiopia and Indonesia, we consider training centers, particularly for female domestic workers, as sites that both lend themselves to a concern with comparison as well as an infrastructure of transnational circulation, ultimately raising questions about the relationship between the two perspectives in anthropology.

## **Small and Large Infrastructures: A Comparison**

By Chakad Ojani (Stockholm University)

The anthropology of infrastructures is replete with scalar imaginaries. As an analytic, infrastructure has the capacity to address social processes at scale, and it also enables ethnographic scale jumping; for example, between the small and the large or the local and the global. However, the infrastructural, as a quality, is also itself an outcome of scalarity and comparison. It relies on vertical orders of above and below, figure and ground, or epiphenomenon and condition of possibility. Using scale as a basis for comparison, in this talk, I juxtapose two ethnographic projects on what could be deemed small and large infrastructures, respectively. The first project deals with fog catchers in Lima, Peru. In the absence of water infrastructure in the city's informal neighborhoods, residents try to set up these micro-infrastructures to capture not only fog but also land titles and state infrastructure.

The second project is set in Sweden and explores large-scale infrastructures, including a rocket launch site, ground stations, and satellite constellations in orbit, which together impact and gain particular kinds of meaning in situated socio-political settings. Whereas the first project investigates how small, improvised infrastructures instigate or redirect larger processes, the second project is primarily concerned with the way small social settings sometimes adapt or modulate large infrastructures. What can this difference in focus tell us about the anthropology of infrastructures more broadly considered?

## Speakers (alphabetical order)



### **Ria-Maria Adams** | University of Vienna

Ria-Maria Adams is a postdoctoral researcher at the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology at the University of Vienna and a visiting researcher at the Arctic Centre, Rovaniemi. Her research interests focus on Arctic youth wellbeing, transport and tourism infrastructures, shrinking northern towns and sustainable communities. She is currently conducting research spanning from Finnish Lapland to communities along the 'Iron Ore Line' in northern Sweden, extending to the ice-free port of Narvik in Norway.



### **Sophie Elixhauser** | University of Vienna

Sophie Elixhauser is a senior researcher in social anthropology at the University of Vienna. Her research interests include climate and environmental change, interpersonal communication, the senses and perception, infrastructure, and research ethics. She has conducted long-term fieldwork in Greenland and is currently part of the interdisciplinary citizen science project Snow2School.



### **Ulf Hannerz** | Stockholm University

Ulf Hannerz is Professor Emeritus of Social Anthropology, Stockholm University, and a former Chair of the European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA). He has done field research in the United States, the Cayman Islands and Nigeria, and multi-locally among foreign correspondents of the news media. He has written, edited or co-edited some twenty books, from *Soulside* (1969) to *Afropolitan Horizons* (2022).



### **Timothy Heleniak** | Nordregio

Timothy Heleniak is a Senior Research Fellow at Nordregio, where he does policy focused research on population change, migration, and regional development in the Nordic countries, the EU, and the Arctic. He has a long list of publications, book chapters, and policy briefs on Arctic population issues. He currently has a grant from the National Science Foundation, Office of Polar Programs, titled *Polar Peoples: Past, Present, and Future*, which examines various aspects of population change in the Arctic. He is the Series Editor of the Routledge Research in Polar Regions. He was the Editor of the journal *Polar Geography* from 2011 to 2015. He previously worked at the U.S. Bureau of the Census, the World Bank, UNICEF, and George Washington University. He holds a PhD in Geography and an MBA in Finance from the University of Maryland (USA).





**Leneisja Jungsberg** | Nordregio

Leneisja Jungsberg, Ph.D., is Senior Research Fellow at Nordregio. She specializes in applied research, focusing on Arctic regional development, green transition policies, and community resilience. With extensive experience in the Northern Periphery and Arctic program, she collaborates with stakeholders to advance local economies and democratic participation through strategic planning and socio-economic assessments.



**Johan Lindquist** | Stockholm University

Johan Lindquist is Professor of Social Anthropology at Stockholm University. His research has focused on migration, primarily labor recruitment and brokerage, as well as the market for social media engagements such as Instagram followers. Most of his field research has been conducted in Indonesia and more recently in Ethiopia.



**Alexandra Meyer** | University of Vienna

Alexandra Meyer is a postdoctoral researcher at the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology at the University of Vienna. Her research on changing Arctic communities, in particular Longyearbyen, Svalbard, focuses on climate change, socio-economic restructuring and community transitions, permafrost and infrastructure. She is part of the InfraNorth team and works in the Horizon Europe project ILLUQ.



**Chakad Ojani** | Stockholm University

Chakad Ojani is a Pro Futura Scientia Fellow at the Department of Social Anthropology, Stockholm University. He holds a PhD from the University of Manchester and has worked as a postdoctoral researcher at Uppsala University and Jagiellonian University. His research interests lie at the intersection of the anthropology of infrastructure, environmental anthropology, and science and technology studies.



**Olga Povoroznyuk** | University of Vienna

Olga Povoroznyuk is a postdoctoral researcher and lecturer at the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology, University of Vienna, a member of the Social and Human Working Group of the International Arctic Science Committee and a researcher at the Austrian Polar Research Institute. As a research coordinator to InfraNorth, she is responsible for co-organization of the project's key events and activities and collaboration with associate researchers and partners.



**Peter Schweitzer** | University of Vienna

Peter Schweitzer is Professor at the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology at the University of Vienna and Professor Emeritus at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. He is past president of the International Arctic Social Sciences Association (IASSA) and served as director of the Austrian Polar Research Institute (APRI) from 2016 to 2020.



**Florian Stammer** | Arctic Centre, University of Lapland

Florian Stammer is Research Professor at the University of Lapland's Arctic Centre (Finland), where he established and coordinates its anthropology research team. He has led Finnish and international research projects and consortia and published on Arctic human social/cultural diversity and similarity across national borders. Key topics in this research have been human-environment relations in the Arctic, urban sustainability, well-being, Arctic Extractive Industries, senses of belonging and perception of the state in the Arctic's remotest areas. Most of his field experience stems from the Russian Arctic, where he has lived for years, but more recently also includes sites in Finnish Lapland and Greenland. Through cooperation with international TV he has also helped popularising Arctic Science, such as on the BBC, ("Arctic with Bruce Parry," "Frozen Planet") Discovery ("Tribe"), ZDF/Arte ("Terra X"), and others.



**Corine Wood-Donnelly** | Nord University

Corine Wood-Donnelly is an Associate Professor of International Relations and the High North at Nord University. She has regional expertise in the Arctic with substantive knowledge of governance frameworks, maritime law, and state practices. Her research interests include normative evolutions in Arctic sovereignty and governance, maritime search and rescue, maritime territory and resource sovereignty, performative geopolitics, values in sustainability and Arctic justice. As a scholar of the Arctic, Corine conducts interdisciplinary work within International Relations and political geography, also drawing from public international law, history and theories of justice. She was the Scientific Coordinator for JUSTNORTH (GA 869327) and is the Coordinator for the Arctic Research Initiative at Nord University.