**Commons in Contestation: Iceland’s Natural Resources Between Two Crises**

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Abstract:

Contemporary resource politics in Iceland operate in the interstices of two crises and traverses two temporalities. The first of these is the *acute* economic and democratic crisis connected to the rapid expansion and collapse of the Icelandic financial sector between 2000-2008. The second crisis is the *chronic* environmental, social and political economic instability produced by climate change and economic development strategies in Iceland. This paper examines the convergence of Iceland’s two crises through political contention over the role of natural resources in economic and political recovery strategies. I seek to disentangle the competing and overlapping patterns of authority, use, and ownership of Iceland’s natural resources, including its fisheries, geothermal and hydroelectric energy sources, oceans and land. While project participants frequently claim natural resources as commons, economic development strategies demand their privatization, financialization and subjection to opaque forms of authority, distorting not only the balance of economic sectors but also collective sensibilities about the relationship between the Icelandic society and environment. I suggest that ideas about natural resources imagined as forms of heritage, their role in ongoing development, and visions of possible futures often contradict the imperatives of crisis recovery strategies. This contradiction between concept and strategy vis-à-vis familiar and closely held natural resources produces estrangements that contribute to the (re)production of crisis while simultaneously foreclosing meaningful negotiation of acute and chronic societal tensions.

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Dear Sir or Madam,

Please accept this letter as an application for one of the travel stipends for the 2015 Global Conference on Economic Geography at Oxford.

*Motivation:*

I am currently completing the fourth year of the doctoral program in political science at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Since January 2014, I have been conducting field research on the political economy of the global economic crisis that began in 2007. My dissertation project examines how the financial and economic crises of recent years have generated critiques of democratic systems, the collective strategies that affected societies have taken up to respond to both the consequences of economic and political crisis and patterns of conflict and contestation over economic decision making. The project is especially concerned with the deepening of social dislocation through austerity policies, the durability of economic discourses and practices implicated in the crisis itself and loss of confidence in democratic institutions. My inquiries into these profound political economic problems have led me to pursue long-term field research in Iceland and short-term field research in Scotland.

In my work as a political scientist I am committed to interdisciplinary research, which I interpret as constituting meaningful dialogue, interaction, and most importantly collaboration both across and beyond academic disciplines. To this end, I have worked extensively with my home institution’s anthropology department, where I participate in the ethnographic methods training program Culture and Heritage in European Societies and Spaces. Under the auspices of CHESS, I completed a semester of exploratory fieldwork in Iceland in spring 2014. After the CHESS program, I became and currently serve as a graduate mentor to the current cohort of first-time graduate fieldworkers. During my fieldwork in Iceland, I began an ongoing collaborative project with economic geographer Janelle Knox-Hayes (associate professor, Georgia Institute of Technology). As my field research begins to return results, I have found that geography’s analytical techniques lends themselves particularly well to the complex, overlapping arrangements of territory and authority and the consequences of both environmental and financial crises that can both embed themselves in or defy the conventional boundaries of national states. I believe that the Global Conference on Economic Geography would be an exceptionally productive venue for my work, and I hope that my research will help to promote the interdisciplinary spirit of the conference by contributing a perspective from political science.

*Intended contribution:*

My intended contribution, entitled “Between Two Crises: Iceland’s Natural Resources in Contestation” draws upon the fifteen months field research I have carried out for my dissertation project in Iceland. The paper I will present is developed as both a dissertation chapter and a stand-alone journal article. Broadly speaking, my research addresses three distinct but interacting problematics related to the global Great Recession of recent years: authority, debt, and resources. I believe that these problems are well suited to the analytical tools of economic geography, particularly because they demand consideration of the spatial and scalar organization of economic growth and development, crisis, recovery and political responses. My contribution to the conference will focus on the third problematic area, natural resources, while attending to the interaction of resource politics with authority and debt. The paper takes as its point of departure the conflicts over the development of Iceland’s natural resources both leading up to and in the wake of the financial collapse.

The findings presented in the paper should be of broad interest to conference attendees because the convergence of both financial and environmental crises on Iceland speaks to two geopolitical regions: the European Union/European Economic Area and the emerging Arctic. Furthermore, the historical conditions of and contemporary trends in resource politics in Iceland invite comparison with late-developing economies of the Global South. While I have submitted this paper to the Environmental Economies section, I am also keenly interested in attendance to panels organized by other sections of the conference including Financial Economies, Political Economies and Financialisation of Everyday Life.

I believe that my interdisciplinary research orientation and the specific research outcomes I will present will contribute fruitfully to the advancement of the goals of the 2015 Global Conference on Economic Geography. Thank you for your consideration and I look forward to your response.

Kind regards,

Alyssa S. Maraj Grahame