

Research Article

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The trouble with local community in Longyearbyen, Svalbard: How *big politics* and lack of *felleskap* hinder a not-yet-decided future

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Abstract

Based on long-term ethnographic fieldwork data, this article argues there is tension between how Longyearbyen's residents wish to perform as a community and hindrances the town inherited from its past and accepts as demarcation lines of Norway's Svalbard politics. The population of Longyearbyen has undergone considerable change since the 1990s, turning from a predominantly Norwegian mining community into a highly diversified group of people from all over the world. This article places Longyearbyen into the wider context of settlements with similar traces (in Scandinavia, the Arctic, multilingual and immigrant communities worldwide, or in the context of extractivism) and discusses the existing barriers of communitification. Encounters with four participants illuminate the tensions and contradictions when it comes to cultivating social cohesion and shaping Longyearbyen's "desired futures." Unless the process of increasing the community's agency is actively encouraged by people living there and those governing it from the outside, the future of the settlement risks being alienating for its inhabitants, weakening further the communitification potential.

Introduction: a settlement without a community?

We need something to gather around. When we light up the Christmas tree we walk around [it]. Everyone is part of that because everyone has a sort of a connection to Christmas. [...] The Christmas tree gives us all the good feeling we need to find. [...] We need something to hang on all these beautiful decorations that everyone can contribute to. Perhaps we should start making ornaments for the Christmas tree. All of us. But the ornaments could be things, tasks. Yeah. Engagement. I don't know.

(Interview with Sunniva, 18 March 2019)

Over a cup of coffee, about a month after I moved to Longyearbyen for two years to ethnographically study perception of accelerating change, Sunniva shared her metaphor of a missing joint-decorated Christmas tree that would enable the people in town perform as a community. There is a Norwegian tradition of dancing together around a newly lit Christmas tree observed in Longyearbyen, an "Arctic outpost" of Norway on the island of Spitsbergen. Sunniva was herself not convinced by the metaphor. It is not true everybody shows up at such gatherings. Living in Longyearbyen for over 20 years, Sunniva was looking for an image illustrating the growing need to strengthen social cohesion in the transient settlement.

This collection of articles, including this paper, focuses on change. Dynamic processes and developments in Svalbard on all scales (Hovelsrud, Kaltenborn & Olsen, 2020; Sokolíčková, Meyer & Vlahov, 2022) studied from the perspectives of manifold academic disciplines are in the spotlight of the contributing social scientists, humanities and arts scholars. The research project within which I created data presented in this article also focuses on change – namely how people describe, perceive and interpret it, and how it influences their lives.

Svalbard, where Longyearbyen is the largest settlement, is changing in many ways. One possible angle of study is environmental changes and impacts of a fast-changing climate (Meyer, 2022). Another is economic transformation since Longyearbyen has become more transient and cosmopolitan since the 1990s. That's due to unforeseen consequences of opting for the *per se* international arenas of tourism, research and education instead of coal mining, resulting in increasing accessibility and mobility of people lured to a globally attractive adventurous lifestyle (Hovelsrud, Veland, Kaltenborn, Olsen & Dannevig, 2021; Sokolíčková & Soukupová, 2021). There may be new industries emerging in the near future such as shipping (Olsen, Hovelsrud & Kaltenborn, 2020), or already developing green technologies and advanced satellite services.

The recent developments put Svalbard "at a serious crossroad", as Hovelsrud et al. (2020, p. 3) point out. Kaltenborn, Østreng and Hovelsrud (2020, p. 41) suggest reflection over societal drivers of change "would be a good place to start to equip for a future where the only constant is

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the need for substantial adaptation.” The societal aspect of change is also the angle of this article exploring the troublesome issue of “local community” and barriers for communitification (Jørgensen, 2021) in the town that has become, like other overheated places, “too full and too uneven” (Eriksen, 2016).

Longyearbyen is Norway’s bastion of national presence in Svalbard (Pedersen, 2017; Roberts & Paglia, 2016) and has been under Norwegian sovereignty since 1920 when the internationally recognised document now known as Svalbard Treaty was signed (and entered in force in 1925). The legal landscape carved by the Treaty makes Svalbard unusual, both in the Norwegian national context and globally. It is not part of the Schengen Area, the Norwegian Immigration Act is not valid there so no visa needed for settlers, and the National Insurance Scheme is available only for those employed by Norwegian employers or those already insured before moving to Svalbard. Longyearbyen, founded in 1906 as a mining company town, has never developed into a full-fledged cradle-to-grave community since that would not match the economic and political purposes of the settlement. The income tax is significantly lower (about 8%) compared to mainland Norway, one of the main incentives for Norwegians applying for jobs there, but it also attracts international workers. Low taxation is cited as a financial reason for not developing services beyond essential basics in social care, health care and education (Norwegian Ministry of Justice and Public Security, 2015–2016).

The reasoning for keeping the social profile of Longyearbyen as low as possible is of a geopolitical nature. “Norway must have presence in Svalbard,” as a high-ranking stakeholder representative said in an informal conversation. “It can be coal mining, it can be making jam. It doesn’t matter. Norway will pay. And the people there... they have no meaning.” The aim of sustaining Longyearbyen, a costly endeavour given the geographical and climatic conditions, is ensuring sovereignty over the strategically important territory through Norwegian activity (Pedersen, 2017). The local tension between the geopolitical view on meaning-less humans and the anthropological take on meaningful life stories translates into the theme of this article. While the geopolitical scope has remained intact for over 100 years, the settlement itself has been changing and the changes make the tension express itself in new ways.

Svalbard is a place with high geopolitical significance, but also high turnover. Neither of these are new, but during recent decades global developments have amplified both features. Interest in the Arctic is growing and the “scramble for the Arctic” including Svalbard is something more and more countries are engaging in (Dodds & Nuttall, 2016; Pedersen, 2021). Travelling and migrating to Svalbard has become easier and more attractive in the light of local economic developments during the past 40 years, catalysed by accelerated transportation and fast spreading global mobility patterns (Eriksen, 2016). A common perception by people in Longyearbyen about recent developments can be summarised as “a lot is happening and it’s all happening too fast.” I cannot count how often I encountered this framing and noted in my fieldwork diary, be it at political meetings, at manifestations, on social media, in informal conversations or during formal interviews. Many experience the overwhelming impacts of disempowering change, which Eriksen and Schober (2016) describe in their essay on what living in an overheated and globalised world is like: people feel they “did not initiate the changes themselves” and that “they were not even asked by anybody in power for their opinion” (Eriksen & Schober, 2016, p. 3).

The structure of the article unfolds as follows: After a brief account of the character of my ethnographic fieldwork, the case of Longyearbyen is examined in a wider context of circumpolar, Scandinavian, extractivist, multilingual and immigrant communities. Encounters with Wenche, Olaf, Simon and Susan illustrate the multiple aspects of the “trouble with local community.” In particular, those aspects are change, loss of knowledge and continuity, language barrier, growing inequalities and polarisation between Norwegian and non-Norwegian populations, and lack of unifying vision for the future. My participants’ narrations of changing social cohesion serve as the base for an analysis of how the wish of conjuring a “local community” in Longyearbyen, described by one of my participants as “an unreal place” because of its transience and artificiality, clashes with a political climate fostering segregation, exclusion and perceived discrimination. Attempting to create a “local community,” Longyearbyen residents emphasise values and attitudes that do not match the geopolitically motivated strategy of Norwegian central authorities. In the concluding part, I offer recommendations for revised policy in the form of on-the-ground actions to improve the potential of communitification.

Methodology: ethnographic fieldwork

My ethnographic fieldwork in Longyearbyen started in February 2019 and officially ended in February 2021. I lived there with my husband (a polar ecologist working occasionally as a nature guide) and our three sons. We stayed for five months past the official fieldwork end date. The fieldwork was designed as a two-year, open-ended inductive participant observation combined with auto-ethnography. Among the goals was conducting in-depth interviews with up to 10% of Longyearbyen’s population.

The reservoir of audio-registered face-to-face meetings (and a few meetings captured only in written form) consists of 114 Norwegian nationals (7.5% of the total Norwegian population) and 93 nationals of other countries (10% of the total non-Norwegian population).

Getting more immersed in life in Longyearbyen as the fieldwork proceeded, I actively tried to reach out to people across categories of age, gender, education, country of origin, job and length of stay. My sample is not fully randomised; in the beginning, it was easier to get in touch with internationals who spoke good English, worked as researchers and/or raised children in town, as those were niches I spontaneously found myself belonging to. After some time, it became easier to reach out to people whose worlds hardly ever interfered with my private universe in town. During the first year of my stay, most of my conversations were in English, with others occasionally in German, Italian and Czech. As my knowledge of Norwegian improved, most of the recorded meetings during the second year of my stay were in that language. When meeting a participant with whom I had no language in common, I asked a local translator for help. During a handful of meetings, we spoke Thai, Tagalog or Russian.

Because of the framing of my research, with interest in the question of how people live with rapid changes, it was particularly important for me to listen to people who have lived through the recent dynamic decades in Svalbard themselves. These Svalbard “veterans” are direct representatives of the social memory that enables people to “negotiate their identity in relation to the past, and a platform from which they can plan for a common future” (Lyons, 2010, p. 24). I met 31 out of 141 residents registered in

the population register for more than 20 years, which means 15% of my participants have a long personal history in Svalbard, compared to the ratio of 6% in the actual population. The longest personal history within a broader family connection to the transient Svalbard was the life story of a participant whose children are fifth generation living in Svalbard.

Having said that, I do not wish to claim that memories, bonds and experiences of people who have been living in Longyearbyen for less than two decades are less worthy. Some “parallel structures” in town consist almost exclusively of people with a shorter personal Svalbard history, but those are also very much part of today’s Longyearbyen. The current annual turnover of people that come and leave is 25%. In my dataset, the level reaches – quite accidentally – 24%, meaning 50 people I met between February 2019 and February 2021 already moved away (status pr June 2021).

According to Statistics Norway (2021), there are less than 100 full-time year-round workloads in the mining industry (*årsverk*, not quite equivalent to jobs), more than 510 in the tourism industry (decreasing to about 370 in 2021 due to the pandemic), and more than 230 in research and education. In my dataset, people working in these industries are represented respectively by approximately 10% per economic pillar: 9 for the mining company, 53 in the tourism and service industry, and 28 in research and education. Employment in Norway’s central government rose to 16.4% in 2021, the municipal government employs about 16.2% and more than 47% work in the private sector. The ratio of non-Norwegian residents – most from Nordic countries, elsewhere in Europe, and Northern America, but also Thailand, the Philippines and elsewhere – is 35% from 57 countries as of September 2021.

Despite the large amount of time spent in the field and the high number of conducted interviews, my research is of qualitative nature. Participant observation, tracking systematically my own lived experience, and formal and informal conversations with my interlocutors build up a “dataset” that cannot be translated into quantifiable results. Yet the tension between the need of Longyearbyen residents to become a collective agent in shaping their home’s present and future, and the barriers for communitification, is a phenomenon perceptible in the field and traceable through the different types of ethnographic data I present in my analysis. In this article, I revisit my encounters with four participants, put them in a conversation with each other and weave them in with observations, anecdotes and my other interlocutors’ notions of what is happening in Longyearbyen. Two of the four are from Norway, living in Svalbard for more than 40 and more than 30 years. I cannot claim their life stories “represent” long-term Norwegian residents, but I see them as instructive examples. One is currently a local authority employee (public sphere) and the other works in the management of a major company (private sphere). Two of the four are non-Norwegians who have been Longyearbyen residents for less than 10 years, one of them non-European and employed in research, the other European and working in tourism. Similarly to the selected Norwegian participants, neither of the non-Norwegians “represent” the grouping of international newcomers. But they bring in the lived experience of non-Norwegian migrants working in the dominant knowledge and experience industries – science and tourism – and their time perspective is shorter, capturing the most recent developments. I choose conversation partners whom I met repeatedly for the purpose of research and followed their paths throughout my stay to avoid misinterpretations of a one-time encounter. For the sake of anonymisation I changed not only all the names, but in some cases the participant’s gender.

Extractivist Longyearbyen in the context of Nordic, circumpolar, rural, multilingual and immigrant communities

Founded in 1906 by an American mining enterprise and sold 10 years later to a Norwegian company called Store Norske Spitsbergen Kulkompani (since 2020 only Store Norske), the settlement of Longyearbyen has been home to a transient and predominantly Norwegian population for most of its short history (Arlov, 2003). Longyearbyen bears traces that make it both typical and atypical in several areas of interest relevant for this article’s focus.

Longyearbyen stands out as a settlement lacking an Indigenous population, since it was created for the purpose of resource extraction and sustained for the purpose of exercising presence to claim continuous sovereignty. The former disqualifies Longyearbyen from comparison with places inhabited by people that for generations have developed a strong sense of belonging who also have legally acknowledged rights related to the territory. The notion of people’s temporary stay, expressed in exclamations such as “we are all tourists here in one way or another” or “this is such a limbo place” became a recurring theme in my ethnography. Instead of an Indigenous population, there is a “local” one. A feature that makes Longyearbyen unique among other extractivist settler communities is the comparatively low legal hurdles people face relocating there (no visa and no work permit needed), thanks to terms of the Svalbard Treaty.

Any comparison made between Longyearbyen and other communities is thus made with caution and with two aims: exploring meanings the town’s inhabitants ascribe to how communities work (or should work) and showing similarities while bearing in mind the place’s uniqueness. For the sake of the former, Scandinavian (or Nordic), and more specifically Norwegian sociality (Bruun, Jakobsen & Krøijer, 2011) is of particular relevance given the town’s history, frameworks of governance and the population’s majority. On a few occasions, my Norwegian interlocutors independently described Longyearbyen as un-Norwegian (*unorsk*). When prompted to elaborate, they would point to striking difference between how hierarchies are pronounced, growing and even fostered in Longyearbyen, and how egalitarianism, solidarity and commonality are idealised aspects of the Norwegian community life (Bruun et al., 2011).

Longyearbyen is one of many settlements founded on the premises of extractivism with a high turnover of newcomers attracted by globalised job opportunities. In the Latin American context, Stensrud (2016) writes about Majes as a place special by the “non-existence of a pre-existing population, and the diversity of its population coming as it has from all places and classes,” (p. 75). Social differentiations and hierarchies are emerging where scale-related tensions are palpable between lived experience of individuals, local issues, regional and national affairs. A regionally closer example is Kiruna in northern Sweden, a heterogeneous “masculine working class town with ethnic tensions” (Granås, 2012, p. 135) with industrial legacies and a normative ideal of outdoor life. When studying how the townspeople handle their relationship to the place, the future of which is largely shaped elsewhere, Granås criticises scholars victimising the inhabitants, representing them as disempowered and compromising their agency that might rather lie in pragmatism. Ambiguity and pragmatic attitude is explored in studies of communities based on extractivism beyond the circumpolar context; an example is Laastad’s (2021) study of how “processes and conditions that

include the local scale re-shape political geographies of extraction” (p. 100903). In her case in Peru, she documents the “uneasy coexistence” with bipolar local impacts and dependencies on decision-making processes that are co-shaped by national and economic interests in a global context.

In the circumpolar setting, Longyearbyen bears some similar traces as communities in Greenland, northern Canada or northern Fennoscandia struggling with the pains of boom and bust cycles. Shared elements include replacing or combining mining with tourism and research, experiencing the ambiguous impacts of both environmental destruction and protection, and other issues where rationality meets emotions (Sörlin, 2021). Threatened Indigenous livelihoods due to climate change impacts combined with globalised markets (often a problem documented in Arctic anthropology, shown e.g. in Hastrup, 2019) are not an issue in Longyearbyen as there is no traditional way of sustaining life locally without support from the mainland. All these places in the Arctic are redefining their futures in an overheated world (Eriksen, 2016) where a new extractivist paradigm can be traced (Sörlin, Dale, Keeling, & Nymand Larsen, *in press*).

Globalisation has become increasingly pronounced in Longyearbyen since the turn of the millennium, causing local side effects and triggering locally specific reactions. The Arctic is home to about 4 million people today and, apart from the Russian Arctic, the area is expected to grow in population (EEA, 2017). In the case of Longyearbyen, two trends during the past two decades counteract the Norwegian governmental strategy for Svalbard – namely that Longyearbyen is expected to be a) a Norwegian community (*samfunn*) and b) population growth is discouraged (Norwegian Ministry of Justice and Public Security, 2015–2016). Both the increased level of the population’s heterogeneity (currently about 2,400 residents from 58 countries) and steep population growth (doubling since the 1990s) are typical for boomtowns (Eriksen, 2018).

Only since the early 2000s, it is possible to situate Longyearbyen in the context of multilingual and international migrant communities. Mobility and community have become conceptual twins in the 21st century in Africa as well as the Arctic when “human mobility engenders socio-political interactions [...] that form and reshape the meaning and boundaries of community” (Landau & Bakewell, 2018, p. 3). In some aspects, Longyearbyen can be seen as a rural locale where people appreciate short distances and less stressful life, an “elastic” place constituted by mobility (not only the one associated with tourism), with numerous transnational migrants (Milbourne & Kitchen, 2014). In the referred study situated in rural Wales, the authors summarise the perception of changing mobility patterns as follows:

The movements of different groups in to, out of and through rural spaces and places have not only altered the *demographic profile of the study communities* but also impacted on their local *sociocultural and linguistic composition*. Indeed, some long-term residents discussed these migratory processes as destroying place, undermining *community cohesion* and damaging long established cultural norms. (Milbourne & Kitchen, 2014, p. 334, author’s emphasis)

In Longyearbyen, there is an obvious change in the demographic texture, sociocultural and linguistic outlook, and community cohesion. We can also draw a parallel with Nordic rural places shaped by migration from all around the world, with ambiguous implications:

Change caused by immigration can have both positive and negative impacts. Negative impacts may include increased municipal expenses,

tensions between the established population and the newcomers because of fear of competition for housing and/or jobs, or concerns that immigration may challenge the local culture. Positive impacts may be that immigration contributes to the local labour market, and helping stabilise or increase local population figures. (Søholt, Stenbacka & Nørgaard, 2018, p. 220)

Yet in this context, the studied locale is exceptional. A constant influx of workers (smoothed by the legal repercussions of the Svalbard Treaty keeping the area out of Schengen and visa-free) is necessary for the labour market, both in niches typically occupied by Norwegian and non-Norwegian employees. Yet in political and media discourse “local population figures” are presented in a normative matter, with the Norwegian ratio going proportionally up interpreted as a positive development, and vice versa. In their study of Nordic (Danish, Swedish and Norwegian) rural communities with high rates of foreign immigration, Søholt et al. (2018) explore the link between resilience and retention/receptiveness of “local elites” towards international migrants, be it “short- and long-term labour immigrants, circular and seasonal workers, as well as refugees, and family immigrants” (p. 221). Except for refugees given the specific territorial regime of Svalbard, all the listed groups are part of the Masseyian throwtogetherness of today’s Longyearbyen. Longyearbyen’s immigrant population is three times larger than an average Norwegian peripheral locale (35% vs. 11–12%). Many patterns are similar; foreign immigrants tend to live in smaller houses, they are often employed in booming industries such as construction or tourism and they accept jobs the majority would not take. Diversity is (in a pragmatic, economy-oriented way) seen as positive for the future of the local communities, and social inclusion, participation and welfare are identified as necessary for building resilience, together with the migrants’ own responsibility for integration. An important issue here is language competence. In their study of immigrants’ perception of learning Icelandic, Skaptadóttir and Innes (2017) discuss whether learning the language of the majority for an instrumental purpose (e.g. to have access to information or socialise more easily) also means a gate to inclusion. Their results instead show language is a tool of exclusion and a boundary marker. The case of Longyearbyen fits well in the picture, with the exception of the resilience-building measures, which are missing in Longyearbyen for political reasons. Søholt et al. (2018) conclude:

Immigrants’ inclusion in the labour market as such may contribute to local economic development, whereas ignorance and/or lack of social inclusion might simultaneously produce a segmented labour market and *parallel social communities*. Processes of exclusion/inclusion and retention/receptiveness that produce new, *undesirable inequalities* might imply less stability, and *deprive the community* of the potential of all residents participating in co-producing the common and *desirable future* of the rural place (p. 227, author’s emphasis).

Communitification: the concept’s meaning and application in the case of Longyearbyen

Sokolíčková, Meyer and Vlachov (2022) discuss the multifaceted changes Longyearbyen and Barentsburg (the biggest Russian settlement in Svalbard) have been undergoing in the recent past and present. Change of both the economic base and demographic outlook is striking. Olsen, Vlachov and Wigger (2022) explore the concept of community viability, comparing the economically more diversified and – in terms of population – less homogeneous ex-company town of Longyearbyen with Barentsburg, where the

doors to immigration and globalisation of capital have not been opened. In her comparative study of Qullissat in Greenland and the village of Sakajärvi in Sweden, Jørgensen (2021, p. 1) claims

Just as Arctic settlements have historically tended to be temporary due to their reliance on fluctuating resources, contemporary Arctic communities related to extractive industries continue this tradition. [...] Local communities came to face existential challenges, which led to conceptual insecurity, and they chose to respond to these challenges by means of strategies of communitification.

I apply the idea of communitification as a process, a dynamic strategy involving values and emotions. Jørgensen is aware of the illusionary imaginary of Arctic communities as isolated and “local,” while in reality they “encompass ethnically mixed, highly mobile, and composite identities,” (p. 2) which characterises Longyearbyen accurately. As I will show on my empirical material, “local community” (*lokalsamfunn*) in Longyearbyen appears almost as a “mysterious character,” something that everybody talks about, is mentioned in all governmental and strategic documents and in the media, but slips out of every effort to be captured in concrete words (Norwegian or English). The aspect of change in time is well pronounced here, with long-term residents witnessing a change in what the term would mean to them as they watch the highly transient town transform into a diverse and multi-ethnic place with illegible texture of the population. As Sverre, born in Longyearbyen and living here throughout his life, commented

When I go to a pub I kind of expect people to know who I am. But they don't anymore. [...] I guess this is part of the ownership towards this place. I grew up here, I have been living here for so many years... This is my home town. But it's not anymore...

Researcher: So when you hear the term *lokalsamfunn*, what do you imagine? That's difficult. Perhaps I go back to the time when I went to high school. I think of those people. But they are not here anymore. It's a difficult question. I don't know what to answer. We are in constant change. I don't know. [...] I mean, it is everybody but... is it?

(Interview with Sverre, 30 April 2019)

The normative term of (local) community as a poor fit to processes that entangle people and places in a mobile, volatile and overheated world bounces back in reflections such as Sverre's. Longyearbyen's social memory mourned by Sverre is something typical for communities; a collective past that “draws on both the memories and life histories of its individual members, as well as the social context that they experienced together” (Lyons, 2010, p. 25). It refers to emotions, mostly nostalgia for something known, legible and safe.

Anthropologically and sociologically intensely researched, community (together with culture or identity) belongs to terms many have investigated and argued. Its understanding has shifted together with changing patterns traceable in human (and eventually more-than-human) lifeworlds. The way Cohen (1985) or Anderson (2016 [1983]) approached community, as an imagined entity symbolically constructed, “a system of values, norms, and moral codes which provides a sense of identity within a bounded whole to its members” (Editor's foreword in Cohen, 1985, p. 9), was revised by the turn of the millennium by thinkers such as Bauman (2001) who still saw community as something positive, but also paid attention to the fluid and non-static process of boundary-making. Changing patterns in mobility and identity-making challenged earlier theories. The “trouble” with community – still sticking around as something desirable and homogenous – was recognised by authors such as Amit and Rapport (2002) or Creed (2006). The term of communitification applied by

Jørgensen (2021) allows for focus on processuality and relationality instead of a static definition (verb instead of noun). Given that Longyearbyen is squeezed into a unique legal and (geo)political picture, how do its inhabitants make sense of their desire to claim agency in shaping their home's present and future? Do they observe any developments in time in how the tension expresses itself against the backdrop of the unfolding changes? Is communitification happening in Longyearbyen? If yes, in which ways? If not, what hinders it?

I understand the verb *communitify* as the discursive act of pulling people together into a group, articulating boundaries around them, and attributing them certain emotions, behaviours, motives or traits. I observe the uses of the concept of community, its transformations in processes of *communitification*, and the agencies deriving from its being articulated either from the inside out, by the group itself, or from the outside in, by authorities, politicians or other actors in the surrounding society. (Jørgensen, 2021, p. 2)

In this context, we must tackle the question about the term *community* and ways it is locally invoked. What and in which setting does the term signify for whom? The Norwegian word *samfunn* can bear meanings that English (or German) translate in a more nuanced way; both *society* (*sensu* Gesellschaft, see Tönnies, 1955) and *community* (*sensu* Gemeinschaft, *ibid.*) can be intended. In addition, the political discourse of *lokalsamfunn* (*Meld. St. 32* (2015–2016); Longyearbyen Lokalstyre, 2013) can be mostly read in the sense of a *settlement* constantly being re-populated with citizens of Norway whom are provided with basic services necessary for a middle-term stay. Though in the updated version of *Lokalsamfunnsplan 2023–2033*, the word *settlement* (*bosetning*) is only used once, while the term *samfunn* (or *lokalsamfunn*) appears 112 times. This clearly directs the meaning of *samfunn* towards *community* – not a neutral settlement, but a place the meaning of which is created through shared values: “Longyearbyen is a safe and inclusive local community whose inhabitants feel sense of belonging and accept responsibility, regardless of cultural, social or economic conditions” (Longyearbyen Lokalstyre, 2022, p. 17).

My data documents a strong wish to conjure a sense of group identity allowing Longyearbyen residents gain a “claim on the future” (Jørgensen, 2021). Lack of such claim is stressful when facing insecurities such as climate change impacts, strict environmental and tourism regulations, politicised housing, and lack of services accommodating the needs of those not fitting the imagined identity of Longyearbyen as a Norwegian settlement consisting of healthy visitors (*besøkende*), as the governmental documents understand anybody living in Longyearbyen. Using Jørgensen's approach, I intend to show that unlike other Arctic communities at least partly succeeding in mobilising for the sake of communitification, allowing them to play a more active role in their home's future-making, a similar process is hindered in Longyearbyen.

Samfunn, fellesskap and the trouble with local community

While in much everyday language “community” appears as a descriptive term, in the present contexts, people use communitification as a strategic tool in the negotiation of rights and ownership and an instrument in their quests towards certain desired futures (Jørgensen, 2021, p. 1).

One of the overriding objectives of the Svalbard policy is maintaining *Norwegian communities* in the archipelago. This objective is achieved through the *family-oriented community* life in Longyearbyen. Longyearbyen is *not a cradle-to-grave community*, and there are clear *limits to the services* that should be made available for residents of the community.

This is reflected in the archipelago's low level of taxation and the fact that the Norwegian Immigration Act does not apply here. The government's aim is for Longyearbyen to remain a viable *local community* that is attractive to families and helps to achieve and sustain the *overriding objectives of the Svalbard policy*. (Norwegian Ministry of Justice and Public Security, 2015–2016, p. 39, author's emphasis)

“Desired futures” of Svalbard are being designed elsewhere; the very purpose of communitification – negotiation of rights and ownership – gets tricky where national interests override. Yet people who settle down in Longyearbyen dislike being seen as “puppets in a geopolitical theatre,” as one of my participants put it, and they also notice change over time.

Olaf has been living in Svalbard for more than 40 years and witnessed the evolution from a company town to what it is today; some call it “state town,” some “tourist town” (Saville, 2022), some “melting pot,” some “testination.” Given its size, the diversity of Longyearbyen's inhabitants is extreme and has been increasing fast since the last survey with a comparable focus (Moxnes, 2008).

I perceive the development in the community (*samfunn*) here as something positive, in contrast to some others. [...] From a Norwegian community (*samfunn*), we have become multicultural. It's an enrichment more than something negative. I think it's stupid that we focus on it so much. I think it's just individual political powers both locally and on the mainland that use it. [...] Unfortunately I see also here in Svalbard that people have become more selfish. Egoism rules in the whole world, the community (*felleskapet*) is on the way down. And I think that if you don't embrace the community (*hvis du ikke favner på fellesskapet*) in such a small community (*samfunn*) like this one then we all lose. [...] I don't even understand why some say this should be a Norwegian community (*samfunn*). It's correct that Norway has sovereignty, but that's where the line goes. I'd rather say we could be a pioneering place (*foregangssted*) to show that here we can manage.

(Interview with Olaf, 31 January 2020)

When we compare the formulations from the Norwegian government's White Paper with Olaf's reasoning, the angle of politics of translation might prove helpful. When Joks, Østmo and Law (2020) investigated (mis)translations of Sámi words weaving into Norwegian and English, they show how the colonial mindset is mirrored in the way we go about words. Despite the irrelevance of the Indigenous context, Svalbard politics demarcate the borders within which only what people call a “fake” or “synthetic community” is allowed to develop. *Samfunn* here means a *settlement* empty of locally shared values. For Olaf, a *samfunn* without *felleskap* is dysfunctional, and he claims the communitification potential (thus, filling up something empty with emotions and values) has deteriorated during his lifetime.

The multicultural aspect of Longyearbyen is something typical for the last two decades. It accompanies the diversified job market, yet not all sectors employ equally across nationalities. Local authorities (such as The Governor of Svalbard and Longyearbyen Municipality Council), Store Norske (a state-funded mining company currently refocusing on new business avenues such as renewable technologies and property management), SVALSAT (satellite station operated by Kongsberg Satellite Services, a joint venture between Kongsberg Defence & Aerospace and the Norwegian Space Centre), Avinor (a state-owned company that operates the airport), Lufttransport (a Norwegian helicopter and fixed-wing airline), LNS (a Norwegian family-owned entrepreneur in construction industry), Telenor (a Norwegian majority state-owned multinational telecommunications company) and others have a vast majority of Norwegian employees. Also almost exclusively Norwegian are

employees of other institutions such as the hospital, bank, post office and tax office, Statsbygg (the Norwegian Directorate of Public Construction and Property), or the local newspaper Svalbardposten. A recent phenomenon is moving offices of entities that have little or no relevance for Svalbard to Longyearbyen, such as the Norwegian Consumer Council (*Forbrukerrådet*, in 2021 transformed into a local branch of *Forsbrukertilsynet*, Norwegian Consumer Ombudsman) or Norwegian Health Net (*Norsk Helsenett*). The goal is establishing more jobs that will most likely attract Norwegian employees who will only stay for a few years and leave again (Forbrukerradet.No, 2017; Nhn.No, 2020). The Folk High School (*Folkehøgskole*) established in 2019 brings over 100 students to the island every year, the vast majority Norwegian, also with an explicit aim to increase the Norwegian ratio in the population.

These jobs are seen as “safe” in the sense of fair and legal working conditions, job-related benefits, adequate housing and health insurance, which also makes them attractive for non-Norwegian applicants. Succeeding is not easy. One of my non-Norwegian participants working in the public service sector recalled how surprised they were to be offered the job, expecting a Norwegian candidate to receive preference. Another non-Norwegian acquaintance shared it was unofficially communicated to them applying for state-funded jobs without a Norwegian passport is a waste of time. It is the other distinct sectors – most importantly tourism, service industry, research and freelancing – that are essentially international arenas.

People staying for several decades, such as Olaf or Wenche who are both part of multigenerational Svalbard-connected families, are aware of the inherently transient character of Longyearbyen. But they see something is happening to the community's cohesion and agency potential not only due to turnover but also because of growing language, cultural and socio-economic barriers:

What was perhaps a bit better earlier is cohesion (*samholdet*). People lived here longer and knew each other better. [...] Earlier everybody knew almost everybody. Today when people come we know they will probably just stay for a year or two. When you talk to them they are here just to experience Svalbard, a short period in their lives, to have it on their CV, often to get a better job later, and then you just don't have it in you to engage. To have good friends, that requires something from both parties. [...] Perhaps we who have lived here long, we don't bother to fight the big fights, we lie back. [...] It's very good there is a new generation but we also have to strive for *continuity*. [...] There isn't people with *knowledge* any longer. [...] We who have lived here long, we have a totally different attitude towards Svalbard than the new ones. Svalbard lies deep in our hearts (*ligger i hjerteroer våre*) and we have quite determined opinions about things. [...] We say what we mean. But at the same time we are too invisible in the societal debate (*samfunnsdebatten*).

(Interview with Olaf, 31 January 2020, author's emphasis)

More people in town means that even with a similar level of turnover more people come and leave. In the strategic documents of the Norwegian government, the key priority is given to supporting the Norwegian population ratio. But people living in Longyearbyen see as the biggest problems a lack of continuity and loss of knowledge caused by the turnover, as well as growing differences and striking political underrepresentation of certain groups. Olaf's feeling that continuity and engagement in shaping Longyearbyen's present and future are weakening is shared by all the Svalbard “veterans” I met during my fieldwork, but it also resembles the feeling of Susan, a European “newcomer” employed in tourism:

Even in three years you could see the the change. [...] Before it was a lot of people... well, a lot... it was 500, 1,000, anyway, but they were moving every year, second year, third year maximum. But then stay stayed, right? In the 1970s, 1980s, they started to stay. To make a *real community*. And then they stayed for a long time. *They got involved with the place, they loved it, cared about it*. But now it's going back again. For me, that's definitely because of tourism because that's something that works in seasons and then you have seasonal workers. Even the building [industry] is seasonal so you have a lot of seasonal workers in the winter to build. [...] And all these people, they don't care about this place.

(Interview with Susan, 1 November 2019, author's emphasis)

Care and engagement are identified with equal urgency by long-term and short-term residents as values that hold the "community" together. Since the turn of the millennium, local governance has shifted towards a place-specific form of local democracy, but the town has also become more diverse and cosmopolitan. Both changes bring challenges that – unless tackled – hinder communitification:

When I came here in [the 1980s] it was still quite usual that most of the state jobs, apart from Store Norske which actually wasn't a typical state employer, were tenure positions so there was a natural turnover. So already then there was a gap between those who worked for the state and turned in intervals of 4, 5, 6 years, and those worked for Store Norske and had stable jobs. [...] And then there was another group that was called "the others" (*andre*), who were basically the spouses or family. Because by then there was no private market or entrepreneurship. There was no local democracy like today, with political decisions, but there was Svalbard advisory board (*Svalbardrådet*) with representatives of all the groups. So it mirrored kind of the texture of the population, with the state, Store Norske, and "the others". [...] People were often very much defined by their jobs. [...] Longyearbyen has always been a very class divided society, defined by professional identity which impacted job-related benefits. [...] But I didn't see as if... yes, you were placed according to your job, but in the social, cultural life, in your free time, in the streets you could interact (*samhandle*) without any separation (*skille*) or limit (*grense*).

(Interview with Wenche, 8 January 2020)

Wenche's perception through the perspective of several decades in Svalbard is close to the interpretation of Susan. Interaction is complicated by the usual class divide, newly accompanied by the split among people with and without Norwegian citizenship (often combined with a gap in language competence), and the intensified transience:

I see three kinds of segregation. For me there is definitely something about where you come from because, of course, some communities are big enough to just stay together, and you have these groups by country or group of countries. [...] The second is definitely about work. People bond so much in their work. And even if they can be in clubs and other activities and cross, you still have people, for example, working in offices so having the same time [schedule] [...] then waiters and people working in kitchens are a lot together, the guides are also together because, of course, they have a crazy schedule and basically when they are off they just want to sleep and share their experience talking to other guides, you know. [...] And the third kind of segregation, that's your Svalbard age. There is not too much interaction between these groups and you can feel it.

(Interview with Susan, 1 November 2019)

The hundreds of people applying for jobs within the tourism and service industries are exposed to the impacts of the usual mechanisms of costs externalisation combined with the governance and legal legacies of the company town. Their employers are not legally bound to provide housing or language courses. There is no valid legal framework granting them a safety net when it comes to health care or unemployment aid. Only few job benefits accompany the often seasonal, short-term contracts. People

working in the sector are caught in the dead end of a contradictory element in the Norwegian strategy for Svalbard: honour the Svalbard Treaty, support tourism and keep the ratio of Norwegian inhabitants of Longyearbyen up (compare to Pedersen, 2017).

In an informal conversation with a non-Norwegian entrepreneur, they recalled a situation when they visited the office of Innovation Norway, a state-owned company and a national development bank at that time still had a branch in Longyearbyen. The entrepreneur was encouraged to apply for a grant and start up the business, but the Innovation Norway officer "kindly reminded [them] that it is desirable to employ Norwegians in the company, if it ever grows and [we] need more people." The encouragement is perceived as embarrassing, as another participant confirmed – a Norwegian who previously worked in the tourism sector and moved to a state job afterwards. They told me about a meeting the governor's office arranged for tourism managers about a decade ago, concluding the presentation about new possibilities opening up for tourism with a reminder that "now, it is up to you guys to employ Norwegians here." My participant reacted with astonishment: "But you know what, this is private business!" Another participant, a local businessperson in the sector of service industry, wanted to comply but did not succeed: "I have tried to employ Norwegians but they are unusable (*ubrukbar*)."

The term "unusable" has interesting connotations. First, it addresses the core premises of the business, which is profitable only if "human resources" are "used" efficiently. Efficiency does not only include work ethos, diligence and accuracy; it might also consist of willingness to accept suboptimal work conditions when it comes to working hours, physical and psychological fatigue, housing or salary (or all of that). The somewhat cynical observation of my participant also points to the fact Norwegian job applicants are more likely to speak up if they have a good reason to believe conditions are not acceptable, and they are able to organise and fight for their rights. Norwegian guides I have spoken to confirm this univocally and mastering the language of power – Norwegian – is not a factor to be underestimated here. The language barrier that delineates spaces of information accessibility, but also agency, most urgently but not exclusively among Thai and Filipinx migrants (Sokolíčková, 2022), is perceived as a political tool.

Longyearbyen is getting way more political. [It] is getting way more changed from the outside and it is getting far far more aggressive to non-Norwegians. For example, there was a language course up here when I first came. [...] I had an active Facebook battle with some of the people here in town because they closed down the language course. And then I was literally told by people that it's bloody foreigners who better take care of our language skills ourselves if we want to integrate with Norwegian society. And that's a bit of a weird statement because especially language, of course [...] should be accessible for people to integrate. And so that's, I think, a very good example. And the second example would be, I'm guessing, the housing crisis. [...] There is a solution, but people don't want to do the solution because it doesn't fit the political motivation. I'm guessing, but I don't exactly know the political motivation. So there's a lot of these small hints and things that give you those kind of views.

(Interview with Simon, 12 October 2020)

When Simon is trying to make sense of the "hints" he is getting from different directions, he does so against the backdrop of his previous life elsewhere (in different countries on different continents), where he also experienced racism and discrimination. While Svalbard might look like a utopia from the outside – an area in the far North where everybody is welcome – Simon realised over time the illusion is manifesting itself in an ever harsher way and

what he would expect to be obvious issues to tackle politically have become the norm. Some of my interlocutors confessed that when they left Svalbard, they felt relieved from this politically accepted pressure.

While the situation of people employed in science such as Simon and those employed in tourism and service industry differs in terms of housing (with researchers being granted housing through their employer, while employees in the latter group often must rely on the volatile and expensive private market), they share the difficulty in learning Norwegian. According to Susan, it hinders her involvement in shaping the town's future from within: "Perhaps I am not so much part of the community as I could be if I spoke the language. Because I am engaged. In transition and social responsibility, you know." When asked about what she associates with the term "local community" in case of Longyearbyen, Susan claimed:

The nature is harsh. And when the conditions around are already difficult, then people are usually more sticking together. I was expecting more bonds. Inside these groups, the bonds are very strong, but outside . . . And now even more because people don't stay so you don't have this mutual assistance and help. Caring. If it makes sense.

(Interview with Susan, 1 November 2019)

The issue of solidarity was recollected by numerous participants, especially in connection to the state of emergency caused by the avalanche in 2015 that works as a rupture in the collective memory of the place (Sokolíčková, Meyer & Vlachov, 2022). Yet once again, change is palpable in the short period of several years:

I think if shit really hits the fan, then that is when the *local community* steps up. So, for example, during this avalanche that hit the houses and killed two people. That was really when you said, wow, *this is how the community works*, but that was . . . five years ago. . . . But since then, there's actually been quite some big change in the town as well because there's a lot of coal miners that have left. So *the entire traditional sense of what the town was is no longer really the same*. And tourism is taking a far bigger part, and I'm not sure whether tourism here is sustainable. . . . I do think maybe having more industry back up here, like traditional industry, whether it's coal mining or extending KSAT or whatever, that might help in bringing some more. These people that stay here, hopefully for 5 or 10 years rather than leaving every year. And I do think that bringing people to work at, for example, Lokalstyre or Sysselmannen for just a limited time for three or four years is maybe not enough for a *long-term vision*. . . . You have a lot of people living here that actually want the best for the place, but they have people living here that actually just listen to Oslo. And if Oslo says "you do this" they will do that because in three or four years they'll be on a different duty station anyway. That is maybe not the most healthy for a small little settlement like Longyearbyen. But I think right now it's not really here for Longyearbyen people, I think Longyearbyen is a geopolitical pressure point for Oslo.

(Interview with Simon, 12 October 2020)

The perception of people like Susan and Simon, working in tourism and science, fighting the language barrier and practices that on the individual level are experienced as discriminating for higher political purposes, does not differ from the perception of long-term Norwegian residents who have lived through the turbulent era since the 1980s.

I am afraid . . . not sure if it's a political fear or a societal one . . . I'm afraid parallel societies (*parallele samfunn*) have been established in Longyearbyen. They are parallel – e.g. in the sense of language – if the language is the entrance ticket to the community then quite a big part of the population doesn't have that competence. . . . I think it's quite dangerous for Longyearbyen to have such parallel communities because sure, we can live next to each other in many different ways, but if there are too big contrasts (*motsetninger*) a conflict will come at one point. Take the housing.

Or salary and working conditions. Somebody is within (*innafor*) a system that is regulated, and somebody is outside the system (*utenfor*). . . . There are already well-developed parallel communities and a moment will come when you either must address it to do something about it, or it will keep developing and it will get more difficult to bring them together.

(Interview with Wenche, 31 January 2020)

While existence of layers in society is not remarkable, even in the supposedly egalitarian Scandinavian context (Bruun et al., 2011; Gullestad, 1984), both Susan in her reflection about the Svalbard environment as potentially inhospitable and encouraging solidarity and cooperation of its human inhabitants, and Wenche in her fear of parallel "bubbles" express something particular for Longyearbyen. The town is indeed exposed to a number of vulnerabilities (energy, health care, search and rescue, military tensions, climate change and beyond). In other words, there is enough to worry about anyway, and if barriers between people keep growing, the feeling of discontent with life in town follows the trend. Jørgensen's (2021) argument about communitification touches upon emotions that arise when a "community" is dealing with change and which shape the fight for desired futures. When Olaf, Wenche, Simon or Susan refer to an entity that is weak/weakening, it is *felleskap*. The political goal of sustaining the town is free of values such as care, engagement, knowledge or continuity, which Longyearbyen residents identify as important for people to thrive. The aspect of change is perceived as obvious and overwhelming; the town has become more diverse, the local governance has been transformed, knowledge and continuity are perceived as being lost, and the turnover is experienced as impacting more. These processes cause problems people see as negative for *felleskapet*: language barrier, uneven working and housing conditions, exploitation of non-Norwegian workforce, formation of "parallel communities" and push for Norwegianisation (*fornorsking*, term used by historian Thor Bjørn Arlov, e.g. in Arlov, 2020).

The language is extremely important. I criticise the community (*samfunnet*) for not taking care of this. It's a societal responsibility, not a responsibility of those few companies up here. And some do something about it, and some unfortunately don't. . . . People have been living here for 20 years and they don't speak Norwegian. . . . Using also this – as some do – as an excuse, that's bullshit. We have to do something about it all of us, we can't just push problems out of sight. . . . I think social dumping in Longyearbyen is much worse today than it was 5 years ago. There is much more exploitation of people. And I say this is only and exclusively the authorities' fault. Because they haven't put into force regulations that would prevent this. . . . You have let people be cynical. . . . Everybody agrees it's bad. But nobody does anything about it.

(Interview with Olaf, 31 January 2020)

In Olaf's blaming the authorities, he speaks both about central and local ones, acknowledging a bottom-up approach would not work on its own in Longyearbyen where communitification is hindered. The feeling that responsibility lies on the authorities is shared in town, which has to do with the company town legacy. These factors the lived experience of my participants frames as threatening *felleskapet* are caused by a combination of unforeseen consequences of Svalbard going global, and the political agenda designing Svalbard's "desired futures" from the outside.

In lack of vision

The boundaries as well as the values, meanings, and ideas of communities dynamically appear, change, and disintegrate, and . . . these transitional movements are dependent on the emotions associated with the given community at the given point in time. . . . In order for the community to be able to draw on the social capital as a resource, the community's boundaries must be continually affirmed and reaffirmed in exchanges. Active future-

making is a possibility. [...] The potential benefits of such communitifications are considerable, in so far as the successful demonstration of boundaries may come to demarcate who is to be allocated what resources. [...] Emotions are key to understanding these social dynamics; they frame what *uchronotopias* can be narrated, and they may, therefore, impact heavily on the communities' abilities to create desirable futures for themselves. (Jørgensen, 2021, p. 9)

In the concept of communitification Jørgensen developed in the context of Arctic extractivism, active future-making is presented as desirable. In my encounters with Longyearbyen residents of different nationalities and professions and of varied Svalbard age, a feeling of helplessness, loss and confusion emerged about what Svalbard's "desired futures" are. The trouble with local community – the mismatch between the goal of sustaining a Norwegian community (meaning settlement) and the wish of Longyearbyen residents to conjure up a community laden with different values and emotions – hinders a bottom-up formulation of *uchronotopias*, "narratives connecting place with a vision for a perfect time to come" (Thisted, Sejersen & Lien, 2021, p. 1).

When I met Sunniva who shared with me her Christmas tree metaphor to illustrate what she feels "the local community" is in need of, my being in the field was fresh and I had little auto-ethnographic material to reflect upon. Almost a year later when meeting Olaf, I had been through the struggle with the language barrier, efforts to become part of "bubbles" that were difficult to access, and more than 100 conversations with people sharing their lived experience from a place in midst of change.

Researcher: I hear there should be mostly Norwegians living here. I am struggling to understand what that means. Am I a threat as a non-Norwegian living in Longyearbyen?

I don't understand this either. Frankly, I think it's about money. It's just to harvest (*tine*) money from the big society (*storsamfunnet*). It's used as an excuse to get economic support for the Svalbard community (*Svalbardsamfunnet*). We have become so self-centred and cynical in our community (*samfunn*) that we do whatever to reach economic goals. [...] We need a common goal. Without a common goal we won't succeed. But today we pull different strings and nothing happens.

(Interview with Olaf, 31 January 2020)

Olaf's common goal resembles Sunniva's Christmas tree; it is a call for a narrative that would connect instead of a polarising one. During one of our research conversations, Wenche came up with another metaphor touching upon the same issue:

I don't know, but if you would think about it as a boat... There is an expression saying "We are all in the same boat" (*vi er alle i samme båt*). So a boat needs a hull and some deck joints that are crucial for the boat to float. To move forward. To exist. [...] And then somebody must be the captain, somebody who has a direction in mind, a vision. And somebody must push the boat forward, you need a propeller, an engine, a fuel, well something physically and economically must be in place. [...] And there is space for quite many on board. But just a few are the officers and more can be the crew. And some are just guests and passengers. There is space for many, but people have different roles. And I think there must be at least some scaffolding, a certain framework for the leadership to navigate the boat. You need a course and a map for the navigation, and a clear delineation of roles and responsibilities. [...] And I think that's where Longyearbyen is struggling. A clarification in roles and expectations is missing.

(Interview with Wenche, 31 January 2020)

In the wish to pursue a vision for the future of the "community", both Olaf and Wenche recall the central authorities who are seen as co-responsible for the lack of course and blurred legal landscape that allows negative patterns evolve while singular entities (individuals or companies) profit economically. When I asked Simon

about his potential agency in a situation that he describes as discriminating, he held back:

As a minority, you always have this disadvantage. [...] It's just the reality that you have to live with. [...] You just have to accept it.

Researcher: But can you do anything about it? I mean here. Is it possible to play an active role in all this?

Personally? I don't think so. [T]his is a big political level game play, me as a single pawn in the game has nothing to do with it.

(Interview with Simon, 12 October 2020)

Mobility determining life in Longyearbyen is more "likely to be informed by a general ethos of movement and personal development that emphasises social disjunction than one which emphasises continuity" (Amit & Rapport, 2002, p. 35). Social actors that gather in groups, personal networks, subcultures, "bubbles" and "parallel communities" of Longyearbyen "can call into play cultural imaginings: categorical identities, notions of home, belonging or community" (Amit & Rapport, 2002, p. 23). The town experiences top-down measures presented as protecting Norwegian interests (such as initiatives to increase the Norwegian population percentage, or policy and legal practices that certain segments perceive as discriminating). These measures have a polarising effect amplified by the factor of turnover, and mobility in general. The tightened political grip combined with transience resulting in lack of locally unifying vision hinders Longyearbyen's communitification potential.

Conclusion: a future already decided, or an improbable political act?

Longyearbyen is a community (*samfunn*) in constant change, both in short and long term. Change is part of the real life in this community. I must face it, I am part of it.

(Interview with Wenche, 8 January 2020)

Longyearbyen is a place in transition, entangled in processes that impact many other places. The essentialist representation of Longyearbyen as a "Norwegian community" is disrupted by the multilayered realities of the town. The lived experience is, among other things, constituted by the feeling the micro-scale of an individual life with its wounds, hopes and dreams clashes with a much larger scale of machineries that are interconnected and difficult to transform. Is that a reason to conclude the future has already been decided, and that – paraphrasing Simon's words – the people of Longyearbyen are little pawns in a high political game?

For communitification, emotions are crucial. While some factors stay the same over time (such as the legal and political framework of Svalbard or transience of Longyearbyen's residents), others have changed significantly (the population's texture, the town's economic base, the archipelago's accessibility, the local governance regime, and beyond). Emotions emerging from these changes, and the impacts thereof, point to the direction of lack of *fjelleskap* and vision. While one could expect such emotions to become an impetus to political mobilisation, it is not the case.

The aim of my study was to document tensions Longyearbyen residents across categories of nationality and citizenship, age (including Svalbard age) or occupational identity live with, sometimes pragmatically, sometimes in a painful way. Agency gained through communitification that enables an active role in the future-making of a place reconfiguring its economic base is what people hope for, but do not see coming. Mechanisms that hinder communitification contribute to disempowerment, alienation, frustration and eventually turnover and thus impact negatively

the social climate. Illustrating areas include Facebook pages such as *Homeless – 78 Degrees North* and *Spitsbergen Association of Unwanted Foreigners*, and strong local reactions opposing strict regulations suggested by Norway's government in 2021 in spheres such as environmental protection, movement, tourism, services for children with special needs, and taking away voting rights from people without three years of residency in mainland Norway. Future research will hopefully explore the impacts of these changes in sight.

People witness a change in time; the town has developed since the 1980s into a more “normalised” settlement according to Norwegian standards, as if “the world came to Svalbard” (Strømme, 2016) with diverse cultures, inequalities and hierarchies rooted in “differentiated ability to master the proper forms of sociality” (Bruun et al., 2011, p. 2). But it has also become *unorsk* in the sense that while people expect values to play a role (clearly the direction into which the new *Lokalsamfunnsplan* goes, for example), they are astonished, frustrated or shocked when they see the rhetoric of *lokalsamfunn* as used in the strategic governmental documents is empty for values. The geopolitical purpose of the *settlement* is emotionless and “people have no meaning,” as my conversation partner who claims to “be sitting in the room when decisions are being made” commented.

The need to engage with the place my interlocutors inhabit and love, and to do it as dignified agents, with emotions and value negotiations rather than as geopolitical puppets, is present and unlikely to disappear. I see labelling such hopes, dreams and expectations as “false” or “naive” in line with the arrogance of dislocalised governance that considers life stories meaningless and would object to partaking in reproducing such a narrative.

In today's world “the construction of communities should never be treated as simply probable” (Amit & Rapport, 2002, p. 25) and “any easy summoning of ‘community’ either as pre-existing or as a simple aim” is rendered problematic (Massey, 2004, p. 6). The study raises the question of communitification as a political act performed despite the improbability of its success. Societal drivers of change in relation to future-making hinted in the study of Kaltenborn et al. (2020) referenced earlier deserve further attention in Longyearbyen, which is a site of “conflictual negotiation” (Massey, 2004). While the questions of “Who is local?” or “Is there a local community?” are wrongly posed, ethnography can contribute to critical explorations of “Who is deprived from agency to co-shape Longyearbyen's future, and how?” and “What can be done about it?”

Communitification as a process of community empowerment challenges the discourse of victimisation suffered when exposed to processes such as “climate change,” “globalisation” or “big politics.” Such a vulnerability-centred narrative takes away responsibility. Engagement with *felleskapet*, imagined by Sunniva as dancing around a Christmas tree or by Wenche as navigating a boat, requires action that cannot be expected as a top-down quick fix. To address issues that hinder communitification in Longyearbyen means first acknowledging their existence and offering a language to discuss them, that is, where ethnography can also be useful. To make them become actual political agenda is a task ethnography can neither refuse nor fulfil alone. Arenas enabling open, transparent, democratic and public negotiations about Longyearbyen's “desired futures” are scarce. Now that the suggested reduction of participation in the political life of the town got approved (Regjering.no, 2022), even the existing arenas will diminish. Inclusive encouragement to take part in *felleskapet* (e.g. in the form of multilingual communication, accessibility of a

language course, adjustment of the legal framework to minimise exploitation of workforce, change of housing policy or incentives to decrease the turnover) belong to on-the-ground actions that can improve Longyearbyen's communitification potential. Such an enhancement would strengthen the claim Longyearbyen is a Norwegian settlement with a vibrant community sharing values that help it navigate towards an alternative, not-yet-decided future.

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