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Arctic geographies in the making:

understanding political economy,
institutional strategic selectivity, and agency
in tourism pathway development

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Abstract
Tourism has long been promoted as a catalyst for socio-economic development in sparsely populated areas based on the commodification of culture and natural environments. This thesis examines the case of Arctic tourism in the two neighbouring northern counties of Finnish Lapland and Norrbotten (Sweden). Although characterised by similar resource endowments for tourism, these two regions have historically pursued divergent pathways, leading to different industry characteristics and spatial development outcomes. More recently, Lapland and Norrbotten have witnessed a remarkable increase in Arctic-themed tourism featuring soft nature-based winter activities and resort accommodation for export markets.

To better understand the complex factors facilitating the emergence and consolidation of this pathway, a theoretical framework combining perspectives drawn from evolutionary economic geography, geographical political economy, and the strategic relational approach to structure and agency was selected. Through this theoretical lens, the thesis studies how wider politico-economic trajectories, institutional priorities and strategic selectivity, and entrepreneurial agency are intertwined in tourism path creation that takes place in path-dependent regional opportunity spaces. Empirically, the thesis rests upon a case study methodology that integrates expert interviews, document analysis, and spatial mapping of regional development funding for tourism projects and firms.

The findings show that the geographical reimagining of Lapland and Norrbotten as Arctic tourism regions is part of wider socio-economic transformations. Export-oriented Arctic tourism is linked to a global political economy promoting economic growth and entrepreneurship, governed by multiscalar public-private networks, as the foundation of sustainable development and social wellbeing. For local places, the alignment with the Arctic represents an upscaling strategy to gain visibility and competitiveness within globalised politico-economic environments. At the regional level, public organisations mediate Arctic tourism pathways *inter alia* by granting funding and financing for firms and public-private development projects. The institutional strategic selectivity entailed therein privileges commonly established actors and business ideas over new ones, fostering pathway reproduction and the (unintended) continuation of uneven development structures. These opportunity spaces also conditioned the rise of Arctic-themed resort enclave as a distinct tourism product in Lapland and Norrbotten. Although these venues offer potential for new tourism development in previously underdeveloped locations as well as local business cooperation and spin-offs, there remain challenges, not least in relation to their limitations regarding year-round employment and a homogenous market focus implying a boom-and-bust vulnerability.

To summarise, the findings of the four papers included in the thesis provide a nuanced picture of the processes that have shaped Arctic tourism in the two case study regions, raising attention to the limits and opportunities of export-oriented tourism for regional development and local communities in sparsely populated areas.

Keywords
Arctic tourism, political economy, institutional strategic selectivity, agency, tourism pathways, uneven development, metagovernance, regional development funding, resort enclave, firm financing

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