

Editorial: A Nobel Target

Let's think about what could have been — a Nobel prize for enlightened research in the Arctic. It is interesting, perhaps, to consider how one might go about earning a Nobel prize for arctic work. Nobel prizes are given for a wide variety of human accomplishments ranging all the way from the depths of the real world, such as chemistry, to the social science mysteries, including those in the fields of economics.

If we set our terms of reference for the Nobel prize that we seek that we must relate specifically and centrally to the Arctic, we can immediately rule out all approaches in the physical sciences, since the laws of physical science apply everywhere with no special reference to arctic regions. In fact we could rule out everything except the social sciences, and even they are not unique contenders. Yet, the social sciences within the Arctic Circle could provide a reasonable challenge where a measure of brilliant human endeavour might not only be effective, but might also attract a fair degree of reasoned attention from the rest of the world.

Clearly, the most direct approach to qualifying for a Nobel prize in arctic economics would be to focus on something totally brilliant, and to bring it forward through stages of design and application, with a regional focus that was obviously compelling. Economic considerations unique to the Arctic would include major elements of fourth-world social principles extending an economic quantum step beyond the present fascination with sustainable economies.

The fourth world — aboriginal nations within “advanced” societies — and the next step beyond current sustainable economies together present a substantial challenge to even the most enlightened scholars. Yet it can be done! And the arctic region offers a clear-cut locale for conceptual design and practical realization.

What we are envisaging in this run for the Nobel economics prize is not an election campaign with tens of millions of advertising dollars to promote a particular issue or superficial image — even though that might well produce the desired end of winning — but, rather, a brilliant demonstration that common sense and ordinary people matter.

Virtually all historical excitement focussed on the Arctic died when the Franklin expedition died nearly 150 years ago, and in any event such events were all based on foreign interests that had little to do with the Arctic itself. It was just a manifestation of temporary military underemployment and political-industrial fantasy nurtured by an egocentric Britain, even though it was patently obvious to all that there wasn't a snowball's chance of finding a commercial northwest route to the Orient since the time of Bylot 200 years earlier. So, as is customary in most fourth-world situations, the “advanced” people in their explorations ignored the aboriginal people, pushing them off into the corner, while proceeding with normal economic booming and busting.

In astro-physics a few years ago, most excitement centred on the development of string theory to tie everything together in a general theory of everything in the world of primary particles. This excitement is now being overtaken by the chaos theory in the macro-physical sciences, where scientists have discovered that most real things are largely unreal in a welter of non-linear systems with pockets of chaos dominating in an otherwise ordered Newtonian world.

Sustainable economics are fine, except that most of them as presently proposed are not sustainable in the long run — they merely prolong the depletion of resources. What is really needed is an economy in which the resource capital is simply not depleted. It may be changed, converted or exchanged, but must never be depleted. Indeed, the world is chaotic — not only in a sense of regionalized social disorder, but also in its micro manifestation — and the time is appropriate for recognition of the realities and design for systems where Schumacher's people matter. True, the entropy concept (of increasing disorder) of classical thermodynamics must be respected, but this world is a net receiver of energy (and, hence, resources), so we should have no fundamental barrier to a truly sustainable state.

Northern people have been around for thousands of years and they occupy a region of the world clustered around a frozen mediterranean sea surrounded by more “advanced” peoples anxious to have their resources. Wouldn't that be a great place to earn a Nobel prize in economics?

— Gordon Hodgson