Colonial Push and Pull: Toward a Typology of Circumpolar Relocations and Resettlement Studies

There has been some interest expressed in resettling the original settlement since the community’s closure. To this time, we have seen that the absence of state-sponsored infrastructure availability—pull without push—occurred in the absence of state-induced infrastructure availability. To be more specific, we have seen that the absence of infrastructure availability was not prompted by environmental causes but by patrimonial policies of colonial states. In the high North, these colonial policies often didn’t start until the 20th century. In many semi-nomadic groups in the circumpolar North, the first result of state intervention was often sedentarization, which made these groups easier to administer and brought them into the orbit of change. With the possible exception of Finnmarkia, communities throughout the North experienced state-induced relocations in the 19th and 20th centuries (e.g., Buskerud and Martinse 2005). From the Soviet policies of uprooting (“consolidation”) to the relocation of Alaskan Athabaskans to the Canadian High Arctic relocations to the Canadian High Arctic relocations as part of post-World War II modernization programs, southern states seemed to be engaged in constructing “high modernism” (Scott 1988), which often meant that villages located in ecologically and historically to be abandoned. In the following, we will focus on Alaska and the Chukotka Peninsula. Russian Federation, for comparative purposes. These two neighboring areas, only separated by Bering Strait, have been divided by radically different political systems during most of the 20th century.

Introduction

There is a long history of distinguishing between forced and voluntary migration (Fairchild 1923), which has also been used in the field of relocation and displacement studies (e.g., Schmidt-Sehle and Brockington 2007; Olsen-Smith 2009). At the same time, it has been understood that the situation on the ground and the actual decision processes underlying migration and relocation events cannot easily be reduced to this dichotomy (see, for instance, Forsus 2003).

Once we recognize that many of the relocation events of the 20th century do not fit the dichotomy of “forced” versus “voluntary” relocations, an alternative classification devise seems needed. Here, we suggest a continuum of combinations called “push” and “pull” factors, in which state-sponsored infrastructure plays a critical role. Any continuum has an unlimited number of points between extremes. For convenience’ sake, we are limiting our continuum to four points: “push without pull”—which marks the “forced” end of the continuum—“push through state-induced infrastructure closure”—which involves the closure of infrastructure by state officials and agencies—“pull through state-induced infrastructure availability”—which involves locating state-sponsored infrastructure elsewhere—and “pull without push”—which brings us to the “voluntary” end of the continuum.

Recent Data: Alaska

We have 103 documented cases of abandonment/closure in Alaska for the late 19th and 20th centuries (four of them were environmentally induced and are not further considered here). As you can see from map 1, we have more documented cases from the Seward Peninsula than from elsewhere in the state (there are more than 30 Inupiat villages among them). Of the one hundred, this reflects the researchers’ bias, since our interest is focused on the Bering Strait region. On the other hand, the gold rush of 1898 and the influenza pandemic of 1918 were transformative (demographic) events, which led to many incidents of village abandonment.

If you look at the categories just established, “push without pull” in Alaska is represented by 5 cases, all of which have to do with the military. During World War II, nine Aleutian communities were relocated to the Japanese-owned islands of Dutch Harbor and the nearby island of Nikolski, Alaska, led to the establishment of a Chukotka community, which maintains its separate identity until today. It is noteworthy that almost all of these twelve cases concerned Eskimo (Yupik and Inupiaq) communities, rather than Chukchi villages. This might be an indication that Eskimos were viewed more suspiciously because of their proximity to the United States and their kinship bonds across Bering Strait. This even becomes more evident when we break down the 20th century into at least two periods, before World War II and during and after World War II. All of the “push without pull” cases on both sides of Bering Strait occurred during the second period. Actually, both categories on the “forced” end of the continuum (red and yellow) are predominantly phenomena of World War II and after. This indicates that war and cold war attitudes played a role in these relocation plans. At the same time, the 1950s and 1960s, when most of these “push” events happened, were the heydays of paternalism and the idea that rural villages in the interior were small (mostly indigenous) communities to areas that made sense to government officials but not to local residents was a clear expression of such a paternalistic mind-set.

Interestingly, infrastructure has emerged as a determining factor in distinguishing various relocation events during the 20th century. To be more specific, we have seen that the absence of infrastructure availability in a given community can serve as a powerful push in relocation, while the presence of such services elsewhere can serve as pull. Given that a number of environmentally induced relocation events were identified as such, we should use this as a benchmark of how critical the availability of infrastructure for community viability is. The extent to which local input will prevail over government-sponsored decisions in this context will be the litmus test of having moved beyond colonial push and pull.

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