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Iceland, rejected by McDonald’s: desire and anxieties in a global crisis

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Iceland’s increased involvement in global economic markets in the early 2000s came to a sudden halt in autumn 2008 when Iceland became at the time the worst case of the global financial crisis. The discussion focuses on anxieties in relation to the aftermath and how they reflect internal Icelandic discussions that are entangled with Iceland’s past as a Danish dependency. The closing of McDonald’s restaurants in a year after the crash is a vivid example of anxieties in regard to Iceland’s global circumstances, simultaneously reflecting persistent geopolitical order of an unequal world.

Key words: crisis, globalisation, identity, postcolonial, Iceland

Introduction

When the first McDonald's restaurant opened in Iceland on 9 September 1993, the event featured in all major newspapers. The Prime Minister symbolically welcomed the fast food outlet and literally embodied it by consuming the first Icelandic McDonald's burger. The media image of his big bite can be interpreted as the full internalisation of global symbols, officially marking the beginning of a new era in Iceland. The event coincided with the increased neoliberalisation of Iceland's economy, usually seen by scholars as beginning in the mid 1990s (Ólafsson 2002), and which ostensibly led to massive economic prosperity.¹ The celebration of the opening of McDonald's in Iceland can be ascribed to its symbolic marking of the country's full entry into 'modernity', which is associated in Iceland with the narratives of linear progress that anthropologists have worked so hard to disrupt (e.g. Ferguson 2006: 183).² The Prime Minister's big bite became emblematic of a society that overcame past conditions of poverty and foreign rule to truly belong in the modern globalised world. This era of economic prosperity ended abruptly, however, with Iceland's economic crash in October 2008 (see Sigurjónsson and Mixa 2011), and one year later, McDonald's closed down in Iceland.

This essay focuses on the interplay of desires and anxieties in the context of the economic crisis in Iceland, using the closing of McDonald's as an example to tease out some of the significant issues in everyday discussions in Iceland. When seeking full independence from Denmark in the early 20th century, Icelanders emphasised their differences from other colonised subjects by reproducing racist and imperialistic narratives (Loftsdóttir 2009a).³ Nationalistic discourses attempted to demonstrate to other Europeans that Icelanders were capable of modernisation in line with other European countries, emphasising as well the resilience of Icelanders as surviving in an inhabitable country under foreign rule through the centuries. Seeking modernity for Icelanders was thus an integral part of disentangling the nation from the heritage of Danish colonial rule and establishing Iceland's sovereignty. Within the current economic crisis in Iceland, the anxieties that flow from not being fully acknowledged as one of the powerful Western countries have gained

¹ The concept of neoliberalism has for many been useful for promoting deeper understanding of the current restructuring of the global economy as a social and political project (Jessop 2013), even though the more nuanced ways in which neoliberalism should be theorised have been extensively debated among anthropologists (Collier 2012)

² The opening had been resisted by Icelandic labour unions due to McDonald's trying to circumvent union laws in Iceland.

³ Gained in 1944.

new focus, reflecting how questions of identity are inherent parts of economic predicaments. Current anthropological research on the economic crisis and global financial markets has followed a long disciplinary tradition of looking at economies holistically as an intrinsic part of society (Schwegler 2009) and treating finance within larger configurations of social relations and history (Peebles 2010) while simultaneously criticising the ‘mystification’ of finance and economic processes (Ho 2009).

My discussion here tries in particular to gain deeper understandings of the articulation of the past in the current economic crisis, and how within such an environment certain desires and anxieties can be mobilised. While recognising the novelty of the present moment, these transformations of interlinked social, economic and technological aspects can simultaneously be seen as a repetition of an ‘old story’, whereas capitalism for decades has ‘depended as much on a changing foundation of fantasies, desires, and dreams as on shifts in technology or material relations’ (Downey and Fisher 2006: 5). In Iceland, the transformation into a more globalised and neoliberal system depended on desires and dreams, which were enacted with uncritical views of modernity and Iceland’s past status under foreign rule. My approach is inspired here by Andreas Huyssen’s (2001) work on how the past provides an important resource in understanding the complex global interrelations in the present. Memory always involves a relationship between the past and the future, meaning that the past has an active existence in the present and as such becomes politically significant (Popular Memory Group 1982: 211; Climo and Cattell 2002). As such, the passion in keeping memory alive or recreating it is in itself subject of analysis (Werbner 1998: 3).

After the economic crash, Icelanders continued to engage with questions regarding Iceland’s global circumstances in a dynamic relationship with notions of their own past. In line with anthropological perspectives on economics as holistically embedded in other aspects of society (Ho 2009; Schwegler 2009), it has to be emphasised that the notions of ‘crisis’ are entangled with multiple meanings that cannot be reduced to pure economic variables. In a wider perspective, these anxieties in Iceland can simultaneously be seen as mirroring, on a deeper level, the persistent global inequalities and the increased sense of precariousness (Muehlebach 2013; Klein 2007). Current global discussions of different spheres of society in crisis – environmental crisis, financial crisis and the social crisis often presumed to be ‘a crisis of multiculturalism’ – reflects, furthermore, how ‘crisis’ has been taken up as an organisational symbol for the present. The need to make sense of a disorganised and unequal world through the metaphor of crisis can

be linked to Sherry Ortner's (2005: 41) comment that the centrality of 'anxiety over meaning and order' has to be acknowledged. An order has to be imposed on a confusing world, and anxieties arise where that order no longer seems to make sense. Thus, current notions of the present are increasingly characterised by anxieties and nostalgia over what could be lost – even though it has not always been lost yet. In short, something has changed or is changing in people's current societies and connections to the outside world – but the nostalgic feelings of what has been lost, and what changes have actually occurred, can be seen as contested and confusing. As Muehlebach reflects, many look back at the past promise of a rather predictable future feeling now disposed of it, even those who criticised it (2013: 297).

My analysis is based on different materials, including an analysis of business media discussions, which occurred during 2006 and 2007, as well as an earlier analysis of Icelandic schoolbooks. With regard to the closing of McDonald's, I rely in particular on blogs and news stories, in addition to interviews with individuals who worked in the financial sector in Iceland, as well as various other informal fieldwork materials based on my participation and research in Icelandic society. The individuals in the finance sector that I conducted formal interviews with were mostly in good positions in the banking sector in middle management levels or as investors, but spoke in interviews also as Icelandic nationals. Of the 8 men and 9 women who took part in the research, most seemed pleased to reflect on their experiences, while almost all expressed fear of disclosure of identity and possible loss of job due to participation. Herein, I only focus on those parts of the interviews that had to do with Iceland's international status in relation to the closing of McDonald's.

My discussion is also informed by an analysis of media discussions, which included a sample of media coverage from the main Icelandic newspapers concerning the closing of McDonald's, a total of 44 articles.⁴ Blog discussions connected to the online newspapers' stories and comments on news stories were analysed, as well as news reports from non-Icelandic sources. Reporting on the closing of McDonald's was found in 26 foreign newspapers. In sum, this represented 313 pages of material, the oldest being from 8 January 2009 and the most recent 13 July 2010. Most of the material was written during the period from 26 October to 31 October 2009, during the closing of the company. I have paid attention to blog discussions because they have become extremely influential in Iceland as elsewhere in the world, and allow individuals to engage

⁴ DV, Fréttablaðið, www.eyjan.is, mbl.is, pressan.is and ruv.is and visir.is

in various acts of self-representation (Havern 2004: 322). Comments attached to online foreign newspapers totalled 234 (both in English and Icelandic). Blog entries, comments to blog entries or comments attached to online newspapers analysed about the closing written in Icelandic were in total 220.

The first part of the essay outlines the main issues at stake and how the social memory of Iceland's status as a Danish dependency and desire to 'show' other nations their importance has to be seen as stimulating the wide acceptance of the economic boom rhetorically. I point out the importance of nationalistic rhetoric in making 'sense' of the economic boom, and how this nationalistic rhetoric took place within an increasingly globalised context (Loftsdóttir 2009b, 2010b, 2012). I show how relations with others were envisioned in the early 20th century when Iceland emphasised its independence from Denmark, and how these were then reused within the economic boom period. My discussion then takes the closing of McDonald's in Iceland in 2009 as an example of how these desires and anxieties are visible in the present, suggesting continuity between past and present simultaneously as reflecting concerns with wider global inequalities.

The crisis in Iceland: economic and identity

For more nuanced understanding of nationalistic rhetoric so important during the boom period and Icelandic desires for belonging, I briefly contextualise my discussion within early 20th-century nationalism. As earlier stated, Icelandic nationalistic sentiments exhibited in the late 19th and early 20th centuries reflected a desire to distinguish Icelanders from other subjugated or colonised people (see Loftsdóttir 2008, 2009a). Anthropologists have demonstrated how Icelanders have always been preoccupied with the international image of Iceland, both in internal and external discussions (Pálsson and Durrenberger 1992: 313). The notion of Iceland's unique characteristics and concern with Iceland's representation was coupled by a desire for recognition. Very scant interest or sympathy with colonised people is evident and the Icelandic writers uncritically adopted the racialised language of that time (Loftsdóttir 2008, 2010a). Anne Brydon (1995: 246) has drawn attention to how the 'language of the center' was often appropriated selectively by the colonised as a way of self-inscription in a process of 'transculturation'. In this light, Icelandic writers used the racialised language of the time to better position themselves in their own eyes and others within the category 'civilised' and 'modern' (Loftsdóttir 2008, 2009a, 2012). The Icelandic students' protest of the Danish colonial exhibition in Tivoli in Copenhagen in 1905 highlights their anxieties

over being classified along with colonised people (Loftsdóttir 2012). The protest by these students concerned how Icelanders were displayed on the wrong side of the line, i.e. with the colonised people, but not the inhumanity of such exhibitions. Icelandic desires to be acknowledged by the powerful nations were clearly articulated in 1903 in one of the most influential texts in regard to Icelandic nationalism, *Íslenskir Alþýðufyrirrestir*, where the author expressed the hope that sooner or later the Icelandic nation would have the opportunity to demonstrate to other nations its importance to world culture (Jónsson Aðils 1903). Icelandic desires for recognition as a modernising state on par with greater European powers at the time were entangled with the desire to become a sovereign state. But for that to be realised, it was necessary to demonstrate that they could govern themselves.

Iceland was on the threshold of undergoing intensive global integration and processes of neoliberalisation at the time of the Prime Minister's big bite in 1993. The country's population had increased gradually during the course of the 20th century to approximately 250,000 people in the early 1990s. Iceland joined the European Economic Area (EEA) in 1994 and became part of the Schengen Area in 2001 as well as liberalising capital flows in the process. In 1997, the process of privatisation of the Icelandic banks began, finishing in 2003 when the three largest banks had been fully privatised (Sigurjónsson and Mixa 2011). The social and economic consequences were extensive. The enormous growth of financial institutions, a boom in the real estate market and high inflation rates, led to extensive consumption and debt accumulation (Mixa 2009). Added demands for labour led to the number of foreign nationals growing from 1.8% of the national population in 1995 to 7.4% in 2007 (see discussion in Skaptadóttir 2004). There was a high labour demand for women in the service sector and for men in the booming building industry, including the construction of an aluminium smelter and the construction of a large power plant (Skaptadóttir 2010: 38–9). Intensified social inequalities increased with lowered expenditures by the Icelandic government in the social welfare system (Ólafsson 2002). Neoliberalism has also globally revolved around new techniques of governing subjects (Dunn 2004: 7), which in Iceland is reflected in an increased emphasis on auditing practices and surveillance techniques (Rafnsdóttir et al. 2005).

These neoliberal policies in Iceland did not necessarily signify a break with ideas of 'modernity' or a transformation into second modernity, which some scholars see as characterising the present (Beck 1992; Latour 2003). Human geographer Karl Benediktsson (2009) points out that there was emphasis on flexibility and change with increase in information industries and a

more virtual economy, but simultaneously the traditional industries continued to be emphasised as well. Politicians and local authorities promoted heavy industries such as aluminium smelters, seeing ‘industrial jobs that result in a material, tangible output’ particularly important (Benediktsson 2009: 27). The strong hold of the idea ‘modernisation’ is reflected in Anne Brydon’s (2006: 236) comment that Icelanders find foreigners incognisant of Iceland’s ‘full modernity on a par with that of Europe and the United States’, which indicates that modernity as such is not under debate from the Icelandic perspective, but more that Iceland has ‘gained’ modernity. Iceland can thus be seen as interesting in terms of questioning to what extent the world has in fact moved beyond conceptions of ‘modernisation’, even though the idea of full mastery and control of humans over nature is problematised (Latour 2003: 36) in Iceland as elsewhere.

In the year 2000, it seemed that the moment that the early 20th-century nationalists had hoped for had arrived. The growth of the Icelandic banks had been extraordinary, with assets multiplying by factors of 8 and 12 during 2003–2007 (Sigurjónsson and Mixa 2011: 211), creating strong purchasing power in the general population of Iceland, as well as stimulating them to invest in the Icelandic stock market where it seemed that endless profits could be made. This extensive growth of the Icelandic economy was led by Icelandic investors – so-called business Vikings – who were buying up companies in other countries, especially Denmark and Britain (2011: 211), which caught the attention of the international media. The period has been referred to as the ‘Manic Millennium’ years (Mixa 2009), capturing the sense that the turn of the century would represent the starting point of a new era.

Interestingly, along with more global integration, there was an intensified nationalistic discourse that focused on the image of the business Viking as a reflection of the intrinsic Icelandic character. It was based on the familiar image of the Icelandic settler from early 20th century, mobilising what Arjun Appadurai (1991: 6) has called ‘warehouse of cultural scenarios’; imagination, as Appadurai claims, based on desire and memory. This intensified nationalism can be linked with the reification and marketing of ‘culture’ as one characteristic of the neoliberal global economy (see Lavie and Swedenburg 1996). After 2006, the Icelandic government and leading institutions increasingly stressed ‘nation branding’ and amplifying the nation’s presence on the international stage. In 2007, I used the term ‘ethno-nationalism’ to attempt to capture the importance of nationalistic signs in a globalised world, and the ways in which they were renegotiated within highly individualistic and market-orientated discourses (Loftsdóttir 2007). I

symbols were recycled in Iceland, renegotiated and even reformulated in a highly globalised context and complex interplay between the ‘global’ and ‘local’. Even though the concept ‘modernity’ is not always used by people, it seems to be, as Brydon’s comment (2006) suggests, a prism through which relations with others are understood. This desire for modernity entangled with the social memory of Iceland as lacking modernity contributed to the strong social acceptance of the economic boom, reflected in the absence of critical discussions at the time. The Icelandic media started actively reporting on the luxurious lifestyle of the business Vikings (Mixa 2009), but extensive luxury consumption and association with international superstars was unknown in Iceland prior to this time; equality was strongly emphasised as a basic characteristic of Icelanders (Durrenberger 1996; Pálsson 1989).

Coinciding with this essentialising of Icelandic identity, one can see underlying references to Iceland’s past status as under Danish rule, often exemplified in discussions of the difficulties shown by Danes in accepting Iceland’s new status. An opening piece of the weekly newspaper *Markaðurinn* in 2006 starts with the headline: ‘Danes are in battle mood and no mercy is expected from there: [We] Have to fight against the lies ourselves’ (Helgason 2006: 12). Similar concerns with Iceland’s rise in the international arena can be seen in the words of a manager of the company *Intrum Justita* in Iceland in 2006 in a media interview also published in *Markaðurinn*. He explains the reaction when Icelanders came to the headquarters in Sweden after the Icelandic Landsbanki had become the single largest shareholder of the Swedish-based company. His statement that ‘they don’t laugh at us anymore in Sweden’ and that the Icelanders were *now* met with respect (*Markaðurinn* 2006: 14, emphasis mine), engages with the memory of past subjectification of Iceland and the desire for acknowledgement so important when Iceland was trying to gain independence. The pre-crash discourse in Iceland was thus based on nationalistic discourses, endowed by a masculine emphasis on Icelanders’ special characteristics, which was negotiated simultaneously within a global neoliberal emphasis and from pre-independence rhetoric of Icelanders as deserving of independence.

Iceland’s economic collapse and the closing of McDonald’s

While the restaurant chain McDonald’s is not the topic of this article, but how it was used as a symbol of a particular situation in Iceland, it has to be acknowledged that McDonald’s is an interesting site to look at the intersection of the local and global. The restaurant is often

conceptualised as a one of the key symbols of globalisation as the phrase ‘McDonaldisation’ reflects, referring to McDonald’s as synonym for technological rationalisation, uniformity and efficiency on a global scale (Ritzer 2004). Along with other global brands such as Starbucks and Coca-Cola, it has also been seen as symbolising imperial conquest by corporate America and multinational corporations (Izberk-Bilgin 2008), in addition to its association with unhealthy diets and antagonistic relations with organised labour (*Strategic Direction* 2007). As other global symbols, McDonald’s is interpreted differently in diverse places (Stephenson 1989: 242; Turner 2003), where individuals ‘actively engage with the institutions and forces with which they coexist’ (Caldwell 2008: 249). McDonald’s adapts its restaurants and products to local customs to a certain extent (Biers and Jordan 1996; Wilken and Sinclair 2011; Fischer 2012: 21) but, as claimed by Carlos Petrini (2001: 29) in the context of Italy, McDonald’s claims of using locally produced materials often disguises the local introduction of environmentally destructive industries and homogeneity.

In Iceland, the adoption of McDonald’s didn’t necessarily involve more ‘rationalisation’ as implied by Ritzer’s metaphor (McDonaldisation). Kentucky Fried Chicken had operated in Iceland since 1980 – so the celebration of its opening has to be taken more as symbolic.⁵ Izberk-Bilgin (2008) asserts that in spite of protest against McDonald’s in both the global north and south, the chain is simultaneously often the ‘foci of consumer desires’ in the latter, due to the prestige that multinational brands carry. This is of course not uniform: in the case of Bolivia the brand failed due to lack of interest (Foxnews.com 2013), which affirms the complex ways in which McDonald’s intersects with local understandings (Turner 2003). The point is that the celebration of McDonald’s opening in Iceland is in some sense in line with Izberk-Bilgin’s comment as confirming a membership of more marginal parts of the world in the larger global order. Prime Minister Davíð Oddsson’s willingness to become a part of a publicity stunt thus can be seen as an attempt to associate his policies with the interconnected modern world and with neoliberalism by following in the footsteps of Margaret Thatcher, who opened an enlarged McDonald’s in Britain in 1989 (Margaret Thatcher Foundation 2013).

⁵ There were some conflicts between the company and the Icelandic trade unions, which ended with McDonald’s capitulation (*Morgunblaðið* 1993).

When the closing of McDonald's was announced in October 2009, it marked the one-year anniversary of the economic collapse almost to the date. The Icelandic government bailed out the three major commercial banks in October 2008 (privatised only five years earlier), after they failed to refinance their short-term debt and a run on deposits took place in the UK and the Netherlands (Sigurjónsson and Mixa 2011). The acting Prime Minister of Iceland announced in a speech on 6 October 2008 that emergency laws were now enacted in Iceland, while not explaining the exact nature of the difficulties, thus contributing to the anxieties and disbelief of what was happening (Danielsson and Zoega 2009: 16). For a great majority of Iceland's population, the realisation of the country's impending economic collapse happened at this moment. The shock and surprise of this realisation is probably best reflected in that many of those working in the collapsing banks were also equally surprised that the country was collapsing economically (Mixa forthcoming). Between 33% and 60% of non-financial firms became 'technically bankrupt'; in addition various industries that had benefitted from borrowed money 'became obsolete overnight' (Danielsson and Zoega 2009: 16). The Icelandic government frantically tried to secure loans to save the economy, which proved difficult due to disputes with the British and Dutch governments in relation to the internet bank Icesave, a subsidiary of the collapsed bank Landsbankinn. The Central Bank even announced on 7 October, a pending loan from Russia at the amount of €4 billion, which never materialised (Danielsson and Zoega 2009: 16). Iceland was approved in November 2008 for US\$2.1 billion assistance from the International Monetary Fund (2008),⁵ becoming the first 'developed' country to seek IMF relief since 1976. Extensive discontent of the general public – that identified corruption in the financial sector as the reason for the collapse and made possible by failure of the government to regulate it – led to mass protest and riots, resulting in the government resigning in January 2009 (Ragnarsdóttir et al. 2012: 6). Constant news of past and ongoing corruptions, furthermore, created a sense of social and political collapse that extended beyond the economic realm (Jónsson 2009: 286).

After the imminent closure of McDonald's was announced, the news media reported on the vast lines of people who queued to purchase the 'last' hamburgers, some 10,000–15,000 people per day or almost one third of the entire Icelandic population (*Vísir* 2009). The closure was presented as one casualty of the crisis. It constituted a major media event with the Icelandic media dutifully repeating the owners' explanation that it had to close due to the rising cost of imported raw materials. There was a vivid blogging as well and the international media such as *Bloomberg*,

Financial Times, *Wall Street Journal* and *Fox* picked up the issue and reported so extensively on it that one Icelandic newspaper claimed that it was reported on almost as much as the collapse of the Icelandic government in the beginning of the year and the Icesave dispute (*Visir* 2009). Some of these foreign newspapers remarked on the irony that the ‘free-market championing’ Davíð Oddson had opened the place at the beginning (*IceNews* 2009).

The owner of McDonald’s in Iceland explained in the media that the place had to close due to a demand from McDonald’s to use imported raw materials, now made impossible by the devaluation of the Icelandic Króna. However, when McDonald’s originally opened, the Icelandic origin of all the raw materials was publicised (except the hamburger bread due to lack of factories to make it), apparently to ensure the buyers that the hamburgers were of high quality (*Morgunblaðið* 1993).⁶ Several sources have maintained to me that McDonald’s bought its raw material in Iceland at the time of the crash, further affirmed by a photo of Certificate of Inspection from EFSIS (provider food safety certificates) from 2005 stating an Icelandic producer of meat met the criteria for McDonald’s. Why the owner wanted to present the collapse of McDonald’s in this way is unknown, but it could be due to presenting it as an ‘innocent’ casualty of the crisis and it looked better than closing down for other reasons. Simultaneously as announcing the closing of McDonald’s, the company Lyst ehf declared that a new restaurant would open under the name Metro, offering almost the same products and menu at the same place that McDonald’s stood, with the only difference that the products were sourced from Icelandic ingredients, which is certainly interesting when considering that McDonald’s seems also to be made from Icelandic ingredients. The restaurant Metro was sold in 2010, and the owner of Lyst ehf declared Lyst bankrupt the same year (*Viðskiptablaðið* 2013).

Discussions about the closing

The different Icelandic blogs and comments on news stories discussed various aspects of the closing, which revolved around multiple issues ranging from opinions about the taste of the hamburgers to food preparation tips in regard to how people themselves can make a ‘real’ McDonald’s burger. Many also expressed surprise that the raw materials were mostly bought abroad, obviously assuming that the burger was made with Icelandic materials. The comments that

⁶ Petrini (2001: 29) points out in regard to Italy that a few years after it was announced that 80% of ingredients were locally produced, that this was in fact no longer the case. So in some cases McDonald’s restaurants can start by using locally produced products but then change toward probably less expensive imported materials.

I focus on here, and which I link with my interviews, are those having to do with how the McDonald's restaurant is seen as reflecting something of Iceland's status in the world. These comments are mixed with expressions of disappointment and a sense of loss, as well as dissatisfaction with the closing down of the restaurant, in addition to some speculations in regard to why it was closing down. What is relevant in my analysis here is how these public discussions often address, in one way or another, Iceland's position in a global economy and its relationship with the outside world. Underlying these discussions often seems to be a sense of vulnerability, exemplified as a fear of losing natural resources to other nation- alities or multinationals. Iceland's global involvement has of course changed in the sense of not being as much about Icelanders buying up companies in other countries, but involving the interest of non-Icelanders in Iceland. These concerns are mixed with familiar concerns regarding Iceland's status as a 'civilised', 'modern' country in terms of Iceland's international reputation, to fears of what it means to lose that status and face the same problems as many of the so-called 'third world' countries. My discussion is limited to how McDonald's closing both symbolised and intensified the sense that Iceland was in crisis, as well as to how the discussions about the closing exemplified and focused these fears and anxieties.

The strong sentiment about the closing of McDonald's as reflecting Iceland's situation in a wider sense took place regardless of whether individuals celebrated the chain or not. This can clearly be seen spelled out in the following comment by a blogger, which refers also to the Icesave dispute:

The disappearance of the McDonald's brand from Iceland ... the disappearance of the hamburger chain marks possibly the beginning of going back to isolation and nationalistic values. The minister of business announced earlier this year that Iceland could become Cuba of the North if the Icesave contracts were not signed. In that context it interesting to observe that in Cuba there is a McDonald's place. Cuba thus has today better access to these extremely popular hamburgers.⁷
(Gunnarsson Þ. 2009)

⁷ In Icelandi: Brotthvarf McDonald's- vörumerkisins af Íslandi... brotthvarf hamborgarakeðjunnar markar ef til vill upphaf afturhvarfsins til einangrunar og þjóðlegra gilda. Viðskiptaráðherra lýsti því yfir fyrr á árinu að Ísland gæti orðið að Kúpu norðursins ef Icesave samningar yrðu ekki undirritaðir. Í því samhengi er skemmtilegt að segja að á

The closing of the chain as symbolising a failure of the country in general is also reflected in this blog: ‘There are not many nations who cannot or do not trust themselves to run a hamburger joint but Iceland is one of those. A nation that cannot run a McDonald’s can hardly run a bank!’ (Andri Geir 2009).⁸ Here the closing is a symbol of an incompetent nation. This sense of comparison to Third World countries was also evident in those I spoke with who were connected to financial or government institutions like Ása. She stressed that she was against the arrival of McDonald’s to Iceland, celebrating when its operations stopped, but stated nevertheless that probably many felt ‘that now we have the ultimate proof that we belong in the third class. Except that they have McDonald’s in all the Third world countries.’ She laughed and added then more seriously: ‘Probably people felt that this was only a sign of what was to come. Now Iceland would be abandoned by everyone.’ Or as one blogger phrased it: ‘A feeling of rejection. Iceland is on the edge of falling out of the International community’ (Hrafn 2009, np).⁹

Concerns with Iceland’s placement within the international community were voiced by a banker who I spoke with in a coffee shop. He explained to me: ‘This was symbolic; we are not a nation among nations. We don’t even have a McDonald’s here anymore. That is how it is.’ He elaborated by speaking about the McDonald’s index, making fun of it but adding that in spite of people making fun of this index, it is still used. He emphasised: ‘And I mean, we are even unable to participate in this. Because we don’t have a McDonald’s place. I think it is only a question in regard to whether we are a nation among nations’. The phrase ‘nation among nations’ is particularly interesting because it draws out clearly how embedded this sense of loss is to the nation as such, the nation becoming a particularly meaningful construction. In these blogs and the interviews the concepts ‘we’, ‘nation’ and ‘Iceland’ are used to refer to shared circumstances of Icelanders having to go on without a McDonald’s, but also as seeing the closing as not about the failure of the owner or managers of that particular restaurant but as telling a wider story about Icelanders. The closing of a particular restaurant thus reflects on the national character of a collective ‘us’ or the Icelandic nation. This reflection of the national character and its status is further affirmed by a statement by one of the bloggers quoted earlier that: ‘From now on we have

Kúpu er rekinn McDonald’s- staður. Kúpa er því í dag betur sett en Ísland hvað varðar aðgengi að hamborgurunum sívinsælu.

⁸ In Icelandic: Það eru ekki margar þjóðir sem ekki geta eða treysta sér að reka McDonald’s hamborgarabúllur en Ísland er eitt þeirra. Þjóð sem ekki getur rekið McDonald’s getur varla rekið banka!

⁹ In Icelandic: Héðan í frá verðum við að láta okkur nægja misgóðar eftirlíkingar.

to be satisfied with copies of different qualities'¹⁰ (Hrafn 2009, np). The reference to 'copies of different qualities' probably refers to the new restaurant Metro – advertised as the same as McDonald's except for the name. In my daily life I have occasionally heard Metro referred to in this way. Even my ten-year-old son who has never been to Metro often refers to the restaurant in a dismissive tone as a 'fake' (eftirlíking) and my teenage nephew who is three years older uses the word 'impersonator' (eftirherma).

In some other blogs the marginalisation of Iceland also revolves around envisioning going 'back in time' which is in line with predominant views of modernisation as being one of linear progress. One blogger raises this issue clearly:

But what does it mean that McDonald's is leaving the country? Does it mean that we have been sent 15 years back in time? That we are a little corner of the world that is not worth hosting this famous chain? That we are really becoming more isolated from the rest of the world?¹¹ (Gunnarsson G. 2009)

A similar point is stressed here: 'But beside people's opinion on the quality of McDonald's meals, hamburgers or salads [...] it is the first stop to a journey back to the past. Spring water and slátur (bloodpudding) will probably be what lays ahead, homespun cloth instead of Visa [cards]'¹² (Velvakandi 2009). Going back in time seems in many of these blogs to reflect a wider abjection within the international community, straying somehow from the path of modernisation. As such they evoke the importance of the idea of modernisation for Iceland, as part of moving forward.

Discussion and final words

Andrea Muehlebach's (2013) mapping of the contemporary moment reflects how for many looking back at the past has been important in the current situations of insecurities. For Icelanders, looking back was an important aspect of setting the stage for the crisis as well, but in the current atmosphere memories or images of Iceland's past subjectification under foreign rule have been

¹⁰ In Icelandic: Höfnunartilfinning. Ísland er á barmi þess að detta úr alþjóðarsamfélaginu.

¹¹ In Icelandic: En hvað þýðir það að McDonald's sé á leið úr landi? Þýðir það að búið sé að senda okkur 15 ár aftur í tímann? Að við séum afkimi sem ekki er þess verður að hýsa þessa frægu keðju? Að við séum í raun að einangrast frá umheiminum.

¹² In Icelandic: En burtséð frá áliti fólks á gæðum McDonald's máltíða, hamborgara eða salatréttu (sem mér þótti reyndar frábærir), þá er þetta fyrsta skrefið í vegferð aftur til fortíðar. Bergvatn og slátur er trúlega það sem koma skal, vaðmál í stað visa o.s.frv.

used to make sense of these new and confusing situations of an increasingly global neoliberal world of growing marginalisation, where there are rising differences and marginalisation on planetary scale, as well as growing class differences on national scale (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000). Iceland's international position right after the crash seemed to become precarious again, or it was at least perceived as such, and as the comments in relation to the closing of McDonald's indicate there were anxieties of isolation or abjection from a particular part of the world, interconnected with historical desires of gaining recognition from more powerful European countries. These anxieties in Iceland say something about global inequalities between north and south, of intense poverty of one part of the world, which is not the result of traditional lives as is often assumed in popular rhetoric, but a part of processes associated with 'modernity'. Societies are entangled in different ways with global economic markets, some producing raw materials or working in factories in slavery-like conditions. Naomi Klein has portrayed a vivid picture of current global inequalities by using the 'Green Zone' created in 2003 in Baghdad as a metaphor. The Green Zone in Iraq, Klein explains, was as a 'giant fortified Carnival Cruise ship parked in the middle of sea of violence and despair' (2007: 48), where you could order a cocktail by the pool, isolated from the horrors just few metres away. Klein also points out that the Green Zone is what the free markets are doing 'to our society in the absence of war', referring to the USA where infrastructures are crumbling from the inside and those carrying the burden of the crisis are low- or middle-income people. Her criticism draws out the stark contrast between what is generally seen as the global south and global north (even though not fully capturing changes in global geopolitical power dynamics) but also the intensification of inequalities within the global north, and as argued by James Clifford the end of the 'First world's bubble of security' (2012: 426). I am not claiming that these current public discussions in Iceland are conscious criticisms of global inequalities, or that Iceland is at risk to become like the poorest of the poor. Rather, I think the expression of the fear of becoming the 'other', being treated like the 'others', exposes the dualistic classification at play in a wider geopolitical context, where some nations see it as natural to be treated better than others as well as this growing sense of precariousness that Andrea Muehlebach (2013) writes about. The point is not that Iceland or Icelanders are in any way treated as those from countries now occupied by Western militaristic powers such as Afghanistan, but their open rejection of being put into that category naively brings out the world-politics at play. Even with changing global landscapes of centre and peripheries, past classifications of north and south are

still resilient.

While scholars have shown the flexibility in how McDonald's is perceived in the contemporary world (Stephenson 1989; Turner 2003), the closing of McDonald's in Iceland in October 2009 seemed for many in Iceland to symbolise that all was lost. Perhaps economic collapse was so shocking because it engaged with the historical memory of foreign subjectification and thus almost seemed to reposition Icelanders as subjects unable to govern themselves. Even those who would probably have celebrated its closing under different circumstances saw it as a reflection of the general state of affairs in Iceland. The closing garnered a high level of attention from foreign media as earlier stated, and an editor of the Wall Street Journal pointed out that, in addition to Iceland, only extremely poor and war torn countries do not have McDonald's. As I have tried to emphasise here, it is necessary to delve into historical and geopolitical contexts to gain insights into the effects of the economic collapse on continuing processes of identity formation leading to new and old questions about Iceland's status as a European country. As elsewhere in Europe, people in Iceland are trying to make sense of their experiences in the context of insecure labour markets and intensified social insecurities by linking their anxieties to existing nationalistic ideas and by contextualising their experiences into frameworks that have been made accessible and meaningful within the current global condition (such as within the framework of 'crisis of multiculturalism'). People try to make sense of situations where they experience growing disparities within Iceland, where some Icelanders seem to have become part of a global elite that lives very different lives from the rest of the world. This realisation is entangled with the sudden questioning – especially immediately after the crash – if Iceland as a whole will be able to stay within the comfort and privileges of being a western nation. Who wants to be on the other side of the fence, outside of the Green Zone?

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