
The Power of Words in International Relations

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The Power of Words in International Relations

Birth of an Anti-Whaling Discourse

Charlotte Epstein

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Preface

Let me make this absolutely clear right from the start: in no way am I advocating the killing of whales. What has puzzled me about these animals is the way in which, sometime in the middle of the twentieth century, we shifted dramatically from a world where killing whales was widespread and unquestioned to one where it is morally wrong and those who continue to do so are frowned upon. Yet, by that point, blue whales had been known to be endangered for over three decades, and this did not stop us from hunting them down all the harder. Was this really, then, about protecting whales? Or was this more about us humans and how we interact with one another? Or perhaps it was both, about how we relate to one another and to our natural environment.

Another important clarification is, I feel, necessary from the onset. The whaling issue is also a story about environmental nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Indeed, it is their first global success story. It is always quite uncomfortable to critique the “good guys.” This book should not be read as a condemnation of NGOs, whose broader political function is not under question here. It was they, after all, who brought home the realization that if we did not stop, there would be no more whales left in our seas. However, as with any other political actors, they cannot be spared the critical scrutiny they are sometimes loath to accept, especially since they often escape the more traditional systems of political accountability. Their powers can be quite extensive indeed, as this story will show, and as with any other powers, they cannot be left unchecked.

This leads me to my choice of discourses. First, I should specify that I am talking about words strung together in a discourse, not words on their own. There are a few methodological reasons why discourses on whales and whaling lent themselves especially well to a discursive approach, which are revealed in the following chapter. The point I want

to make here is that too often discourse analyses tend to target discourses that belong to “other,” distant people—no doubt because, not being immersed in them, the critical distance is easier to achieve. To me, it was important to take one of our own, one that *we* tend to reproduce automatically without pausing to consider what we are saying. I too, like most people of my generation, grew up with the conviction that whales needed to be saved from the cruel people who kept killing them. I remember how, as a child growing up inland, who had never actually seen a whale, I would stick “Save the whales” logos to our bathroom walls and muse about these magical creatures while wallowing in the tub. The picture was, as I found out, a little more nuanced than the loud logos would let on.

Another key reason for my choice is that whales are useful for dispelling the still widespread misperception that studies that take discourses as their main focus cannot handle material reality—that they lose themselves in endless deconstructions where reality soon dissolves into thin air. More broadly, the enquiry into the social construction of reality does not deny that there is a reality “out there.” Whales are indeed very big, very real, and very far out there. Moreover, our relationship to them is not just about words but rather about very material, indeed sometimes very bloody practices. Casting the lens upon real, natural creatures is also especially useful for emphasizing the task of “de-naturalising the taken-for-granted” (Weldes et al. 1999, 19) that drives the critical examination of the social processes by which we construct the world we live in. Whales are no doubt natural creatures. The way we relate to them, on the other hand, is socially constructed—so much so that, historically, we have been able to find ourselves in two radically opposite relationships with them: one that was all about killing them, and the other, all about saving them. The former is useful for bringing into relief the latter, the one we now naturally take to be the “right” way of envisaging whales. The key insight that brought about the reflexive turn in the social sciences is the realization, not only that the social world is constructed but, consequently, that it could have been constructed otherwise. What whaling draws into relief is that *it really was* construed in a very different way.

Finally, I would like to say a word about a specific relationship between theory and practice that I attempt to develop in this book. Let me start with an anecdote: one of my reviewers queried whether the book was about discourse or about whaling. The answer is both, in equal

measures. Whales/whaling is simultaneously an object of analysis in its own right and a lens for examining key theoretical concerns related to the use of discourse in analyzing international relations. Consequently, the book breaks the habitual separation where a “theory chapter” caps the “case study chapters.” Rather, the theory is woven into the analysis of the case itself. Every chapter considers an aspect of the case that speaks to a specific theoretical concern. Each one begins by identifying the theoretical issues drawn out by the case and by positioning them in relation to the broader literatures. This choice beckons your patience as a reader. While you are welcome to travel along the chapters and select specific aspects of either the case or the theory, like as many dishes on a buffet, I would like to invite you instead to sit down to the full course meal, which I hope to be a far more satisfying experience.

At this stage, I will simply state the two axes around which the book is laid out. The first is horizontal and temporal—a before/after axis. The second is a vertical, levels-of-analysis axis. The book is structured around a rupture, between a past whaling world and a current anti-whaling world. This rift articulates the passage from part I to part II of the book as a whole, but it also runs through many of the chapters themselves. The focus on discourse—what the social actors say—enables the analysis to scale up and down the levels of analysis, from the individual to the state, and vice versa.

Research for this book began as a PhD project at the University of Cambridge, and I would like to thank my supervisors, the late Nick Sinclair-Brown and James Mayall, as well as my friends in Cambridge for some lovely times there. I had the opportunity to observe the international politics of whaling “in vivo,” as it were, by attending two annual meetings of the International Whaling Commission (IWC) in London in 2001 and in Berlin in 2003. I also spent some time in with the whalers in Lofoten off the coast of Northern Norway in the summer of 2003. I would like to thank my hosts in Lofoten, Laila Jusne and Rune Frovick. I am also thankful to the helpful staff of the IWC Secretariat, the many scientists, NGO officials, and members of state delegations I was able to interview. I acknowledge the financial support of the British Council (for a Chevening scholarship), the British Academy’s Arts and Humanities Research Board, and the Cambridge European Trust as well as that of my college, Sidney Sussex. A scholarship from the Georges Lurcy Foundation enabled me to finish the PhD as a visiting scholar at the University of California, Berkeley, and I am grateful to my friends there for

distracting me with the joys of the Bay Area. Finally, I thank Sydney University's Research Institute for Humanities and Social Sciences for granting me a Writing Fellowship that bought me precious time to bring the book to a close in Sydney. On a more personal level, I thank my mother, Anne-Marie Epstein, for believing in the project well before I ever began to, my father, Marc Epstein, who, in never remembering its title, made me realize the need to change it, my sister Sophie Epstein, for feeding me endless jokes about whales (and there are many), Evatt Hawkes, a "hard" scientist readily convinced of the power of words, for his unwavering support, and Mark Blyth, for patiently putting up with my arguing against every one of his suggestions for improving the manuscript.