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The Power of Words in International Relations

Birth of an Anti-Whaling Discourse

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Making Meaning Matter in International Relations

Well into the second half of the twentieth century the world was largely a whaling world. Whales comprised a strategic resource, a key raw material, a fuel, and a food. Whaling was just as important to us then as the oil industry is today, with the “baleens” providing us the equivalent of plastic, and whale oil lighting the streets of New York or London. Consequently, whales were ferociously hunted down, to the point where there were dangerously few left in the seas, and whaling itself became uneconomical. At the same time, other substitutes (notably petroleum and plastic) increasingly replaced the main uses of whale parts. Both people and states thus turned away from whaling. In fact, whales point to one of the most dramatic cases of complete turnabout with regard to a natural resource, and a fundamental restructuring of the resource base of our economies. Whale oil constitutes the only form of energy that our societies both centrally depended upon and turned away from completely. At a time when the reliance on oil raises increasing questions, this in itself is food for thought.

If that were the end of the story, the whales would have simply gone their way, and so would we. Yet the story did not stop there. What eludes an account that focuses exclusively on the configuration of material interests is why states continue to *care* so much about whales.¹ In 1946 twelve whaling states set up the International Whaling Commission (IWC) to endeavor to contain a ruthless and self-destructive trade. As whaling slowly petered out, by such materialist account, states should have lost interest in the international organization created to regulate it; at least those who no longer whaled should have. Yet states stayed. In fact, more states joined—and more yet, many more, including many who had never had anything to do with whaling, even some landlocked states, such that the IWC membership today is over six times larger than

it was in the heyday of whaling and covers almost half that of the United Nations (UN). Since 1982, commercial whaling has been precluded under an international moratorium upheld by a majority of states at the IWC, and it is widely frowned upon. How did the course of whaling matters alter so suddenly and so completely? States' turning to save-the-whale policies can hardly be explained by security or economic interests or by any other material factors traditionally relied upon in political science to account for state actions. The main argument of this book is that this change was brought about by a *powerful discourse*. And so I begin by considering these two terms in turn.

Powerful Discourses

Discourse confers meanings to social and physical realities. It is through discourse that individuals, societies, and states make sense of themselves, of their ways of living, and of the world around them. A *discourse* is a cohesive ensemble of ideas, concepts, and categorizations about a specific object that frame that object in a certain way and, therefore, delimit the possibilities for action in relation to it. It is a structured yet open and dynamic entity. This book is concerned with the discourses about whales, that is, ways of knowing, envisaging, and talking about whales that determine what we do to them. In effect, it is concerned with two discourses, one geared toward killing whales and the other toward saving them, and with how the latter superseded the former in the second half of the twentieth century. Schematically, studying, perceiving, and writing about whales as an oil resource or as a raw material makes no sense in a society that no longer whales and that sees whales as endangered species. Discourses are inherently social phenomena. They are what bind individuals together and enable them to engage, interact, and function socially. There would be no society without discourse. Running through the social fabric, they are like the lifeblood of social formations.

A *powerful discourse* is, quite simply, one that makes a difference. The rise of the anti-whaling discourse delegitimized a hitherto normal and widespread practice at the global level. The effects of a discourse, that is to say, its power, are at the heart of this book. Methodologically, a powerful discourse, the anti-whaling discourse, provides an applied entry point into the theoretical question of the power of discourse. At the same time, as Michael Barnett and Raymond Duvall (2005) pointed out, the question of power has forcefully returned to the forefront of the study

of politics since 2001.² This book partakes in the broader effort to reopen the question of power. For, as they also underlined, most attempts to resurrect the concept in the discipline of international relations generally fall back to “realist” conceptions of the state’s ability to control and coerce—in short a statist, top-down understanding of power (see Baldwin 2006 for a good example). This reduction of power to its physical and manipulative dimensions overlooks the generative, facilitative, strategic aspects of power operating from the bottom up, in short, a *productive* power that constitutes the very meanings and social relations it regulates (Barnett and Duvall 2005, Goverde et al. 2000, Litfin 1994, Clegg 1989, Fowler 1985). Locating such power in the discourses themselves was, in turn, made possible by Michel Foucault’s broader reexamination of the nature of modern power. Foucault identified a power that no longer operates on the model of the premodern sovereign exerting its will from above and without. Rather, modern power is immersed in the social body; it has shifted from its head to its arteries, to string out the classical analogy of the body politic. Modern power circulates through the social order, and what it produces (and reproduces) is the capitalist social order itself, both discursively, through disciplinary norms, and through the subjectivities it creates.

With Foucault, power is no longer a quality, an attribute, or a capacity of the subject (individual or state). His key contribution, as Gilles Deleuze pointed out, was to undo the assimilation of power with property or appropriation. “Power is exerted rather than owned; it is not the acquired or preserved privilege of the dominant class, but the overall effect of its strategic positioning” (Deleuze 1986, 32–33, my translation). Foucault revealed the fundamental fluidity of power: “power passes through individuals. It is not applied to them” (Foucault 2003, 29).³ This reconceptualization has two major consequences for appraising power. First, it displaces the analytical focus to power *relations* rather than power *per se*. Second, it depersonalizes and, consequently, also *de-essentializes* power. That is, it replaces the notion of power as a “thing” wielded by particular social agents with a relational understanding of power, lodged within the discourses. Discursive power is not a fungible entity, yet it has very real effects. This type of power displaces the perspective of enquiry: the focus is not so much on what power *is* (its essence) but on *what it does* (Foucault 2003; see also Guzzini 2008). Henceforth the question of power becomes foremost an applied question (Foucault 1980; see also Weldes et al. 1999, 10; Weldes 1999; Edkins

1999; Lynn Doty 1996; Weldes and Saco 1996; Campbell 1992, 1994). This perspective entails a commitment to a situated research (Haraway 1991) that starts from a particular set of social relations within particular “regimes of practice” (Foucault 1991, 75) and works from the ground up, progressively unearthing power’s particular modes of exertion within it. In other words, and centrally here, social relations are both *simultaneously* the locus of power and the site for the production of meaning. My main argument in this book is that these two key elements of social life, power and meaning, are fundamentally intertwined, and much more so than has tended to be recognized in the study of international politics.

Discourses as Signifying Practices

The Coconstitution of Discursive and Material Practices

Put simply, discourses are sense-making practices. We string words together into sentences to make sense of the world around us, both to ourselves and to others. The focus on discourse as practice obtains in the type of explanation that has not causality but *meaning* as its main focus. In one of the founding moves of the social sciences, Max Weber famously divided all studies of social phenomena into those concerned with *explaining* them, which seek to uncover the causal laws governing positive facts and operate around a clear-cut distinction between the subject and object of analysis, and those concerned with *understanding* them, which have taken the turn toward meaning (Hollis and Smith 1990). The latter, reflexive turn has cast the focus back onto the social processes by which we know and construct the world we live in, thereby paving the way for analyses broadly concerned with “the social construction of,” to which this book belongs. While useful to legitimizing both of these ultimately “irreconcilable stories” (Hollis and Smith 1990, 215), this distinction is coming under increasingly critical examination from within the reflexive turn (Parsons 2007, 111–112; Hansen 2006; Bially Mattern 2005). It precludes apprehending “meaning” as a cause of social action and as a factor of change and continuity, thereby undermining its explanatory purchase. The point here is not to salvage the language of causality in the study of meaning but rather to clear the grounds for establishing that the discursive approach I propose here does away with the distinction between explaining and understanding.

Discourses are thus the focus for a type of analysis concerned with meaning, that is, an explanatory mode centered on the construction of

meaning. Consequently, a key concern is with identifying *where meaning is produced*. Discourses interest us not for their own sake but only insofar as they comprise sites for the making of meaning. However, material practices too constitute loci where meanings are produced. Whaling is a very concrete, material practice. It is also the repository of a whole host of meanings pinned upon the whale (for example, as source of raw material, as a food, or as a fiendish beast) that are reproduced every time a whaling expedition sets out. Discourses and material practices are thus tightly bound up and mutually constitutive (see also Pouillot 2007), and a discursive study is centrally concerned with any kind of practice implicated in the making of meaning. Insofar as ways of consuming the whales (or not) serve to reproduce the particular sets of significations associated with them, consumption constitutes an important signifying practice, and it is central to the analysis here. Words are examined insofar as they signify, that is, insofar as they constitute *signs*. Hence any type of sign, written or oral, visual or auditive, may qualify. Concretely, the analytical material for this book includes words, actions, music, and centrally in the case of whales, images.

The coconstitution of discursive and material practices moves the debate beyond a dichotomy carried over, beyond Max Weber, from the old divide between ideational and materialist lines of explanation, which also surfaced in international relations' founding disciplinary debate (pitting "realists" and "idealists"; Hollis and Smith 1990). This divide, in turn, is fundamentally rooted in a Western philosophy of *essences*. Here is not the place to engage in a discussion about the philosophical merits of the materialist/ideational divide.⁴ The point is simply that when one starts from concrete, real-life practices, the separation between the ideational or the discursive and the material collapses insofar as what is said about whales is intimately tied to what is done with them, and neither is possible without meaning.

The connections between "doing" and "saying" have been unpacked from many different directions. Speech-act theory, in the wake of John Austin (1962) and John Searle (1969), showed how, in speaking certain words (such as "I do"), we were performing certain deeds (getting married). Ludwig Wittgenstein's (1969) "language games" cast the analysis of language itself upon concrete observations of the ways in which meanings are produced and modified in specific social contexts. In his wake, any serious examination of *language-in-use*—another possible definition of discourse (Dijk 1985a)—therefore requires observing how it actually

is used in everyday practices—for example, those that involve whales. Laclau and Mouffe (1985) did away with the binary altogether by taking the logical step beyond Foucault, who ambiguously retained the dichotomy between the discursive and the nondiscursive (Howarth 2000, 104). Since discourses have very real, material effects, as indeed Foucault had shown, it simply makes no sense to consider them as “immaterial.” Meanwhile, from the sociological perspective, Bourdieu’s analysis of *praxis* emphasized the unity of thought and action, as indeed did the title of one of his major works, *Le Sens Pratique* (1980), which highlights both the meaning and direction inherent in social practices.⁵

To summarize the points made so far, discourses comprise sense-making practices that regulate what we do with, for example, whales, by pinning certain meanings onto them (a lubricating fuel or a magnificent and rare creature). Put simply, discourses “do” two things of concern here. First, they constitute a “space of objects” (Milliken 1999, 233). They render real things, such as whales, meaningful to us in particular ways. This space of meaningful objects is the space of a particular discourse, and what constitutes it as a bounded structure—as a discourse about whales, as opposed to a discourse about something else. Second, discourses constitute the identities of social actors, by carving out particular *subject-positions*, that is, sites from which social actors can speak, as the I/we of a discourse (for example, as an anti-whaler). In what follows these two key dimensions of discursive productivity are further developed.

The Production of Meaningful Objects

Toward a Relational Understanding of Meaning

Along with the discourse/practice binary, a more fundamental distinction is dissolved within the reflexive turn, between the world and the word, between an objective reality “out there” and the subjective world of speech and thought, such that the former would be more or less accurately reflected in the latter. The word is not the mirror of the world, because meaning is neither “innate” nor “fixed” once and for all. The central tenet of constructivism, namely, that the social world, unlike the natural world, is not “given” but rather socially construed, has been made possible by the fundamental shearing of the relationship between the word and the object “out there” that underlies all correspondence theories of the world. This, in turn, was ushered in by a closer under-

standing of language, or rather the processes by which we make sense of the world around us. Ferdinand de Saussure's analysis of *signification* had shown that the relationship between the word and the object, or the *signifier* and the *signified*, far from being "innate" or "automatic" is purely arbitrary, since different languages each feature their own sign for the same object. This makes several critical moves possible. First, meaning is not inherent but contingent and always in the making, since words do not "contain" meanings as real things. In fact, words are inherently *empty*. For meaning is not a thing in itself, a positive entity or essence. Not only do words have no meaning in isolation but their meaning is both yielded and exhausted by the play of differences between them. For example, the meaning of "hot" is given by the contrast with "cold," and vice versa, and on its own the sound of the phoneme "hot" does not trigger any meaningful associations in the mind of someone who does not speak English. Meaning thus emerges not from an inherent relationship of the word and the object, or between the signifier and signified, but from *a contingent relationship between the signifiers* (or signs).⁶ Hence what "fills" a word or signifier with meaning—what renders it "meaning-full"—is for it to be set into relations with other signifiers within a discourse. Discourses are the *articulatory practices* that create these relations (Howarth 2000, 1995) and, therefore, meaning itself.

Yet a rift has opened up within the scholarship broadly concerned with the "social construction of." Many constructivists in the field of international relations sought to "seize the middle ground" (Adler 2006; see also Guzzini 2000; Wendt 1999, 1992, 1987; Checkel 1998) and retain the link to the physical world "out there" by epistemological recourse to "scientific realism" (Wendt 1987, 1992). As part of broader attempts to "rescue the exploration of identity from the postmodernists" (Checkel 1998, 325), this move was perhaps strategically necessary to be able to continue to claim the all-powerful mantles of "science" and "realism" by asserting that it, too, was studying the real world in proper scientific fashion and should therefore not be dismissed as fiction. As this book will endeavor to demonstrate, clinging on to this link is not a precondition to being able to go out there and study either identity or the world as it really is. In other words, it is not only unnecessary methodologically but it amounts to collapsing back the very distinction (between the social and the natural world) that had opened up the space for constructivist approaches in the first place.

As I hope the whales will drive home, there is no disagreement among approaches concerned with examining the “social construction of” that there really is a world out there. Once again, whales are very real and very much out there. The question is thus not whether material objects exist but how they become meaningful for us. With whales an additional conundrum is how did they come to hold such contradictory meanings. The productivity of discourse does not mean that material objects are physically brought into existence—a rather incongruous thought, at least so long as there are some flesh-and-blood whales left in the seas. Rather, these physical objects are brought into a system of meaningful relations. They are *linguistically* brought into existence, by being placed into relationships with other objects within a system of signifying differences.⁷ The focus on discourse offers ways of apprehending the fundamental unfixity underlying the making of meaning, instead of evacuating it in favor of a nostalgic return to that long-lost link of the word to the world.

Toward a Discursive Understanding of Power

Constructivists’ long, drawn-out efforts to rehabilitate “ideas” as explanatory factors in their own right have successfully moved the debate beyond the materialist stronghold in the study of international politics. They no doubt deserve all the credit for breaking the hold of the power–interest dyad in the explanation of social phenomena. However, because their strategy has amounted to wanting to “be part of the debate,” at which they have been extremely successful—to the extent that they inaugurated the discipline’s so-called Third Debate (Lapid 1989)—they have by the same token left the terms of the debate itself intact. They have, as a result, maintained, and even helped to reproduce, an essentialist epistemology, when it need not be, *for what they themselves set out to do*, as this book will endeavor to show. In other words, they have both successfully triangulated *and* preserved an essentializing debate. To the extent that, forcing the trait here only slightly, to acquire legitimacy new studies of international politics need only specify which of the three—power, interests, or ideas—they are positing as their independent variable (Checkel 1998). My argument here is that the terms of the debate are still set within a positivist framework that is inherently geared toward approaching *all* factors as material factors, or quasi-essences.

Two main problems follow from this. First, and notwithstanding efforts to examine issues of authority and legitimacy, there has been a tendency within the scholarship interested in the “social construction

of” to evacuate power, especially in the branch concerned with norms (Risse 2006; Checkel 2005, 1998; Joachim 2003; Klotz 2002; Josselin and Wallace 2001; Finnemore and Sikkink 1998; Keck and Sikkink 1998; Nadelmann 1990). Interests have, for their part, been recovered, to show how they are constructed by the ideas people have and the cultures to which they belong. Overlooked, as a result, are nonmaterial, discursive forms of power. I do not mean the benign power to bring about consensus, or to persuade, which is how power’s productivity has tended to be operationalized in the analysis of norms. For “being persuaded” is not the same thing as having no choice but to talk (and act) in a certain way, because other ways of talking about the issue have been actively evacuated, a possibility which is made little room for in the emphasis on persuasion. Discursive power has been neglected, I argue, because insufficient attention has been paid to the construction of *meaning* rather than ideas or norms. If the world we live in is socially construed, it could have been construed otherwise; that much few constructivists would disagree with. However, it is not just that these social constructs are historically contingent. More fundamentally, their construction has *excluded* other possible sets of articulations or meanings. The prevailing of one particular social construct is an effect of power. It is this specific point of the process (of social construction) that is foregrounded in the discursive approach developed in this book, the moment where alternative constructs were evacuated. While contingency is given full consideration at the theoretical level in the constructivist literature, it is seldom mobilized into an applied analytics of power.⁸

Casting the focus upon shared meaning rather than ideas in people’s heads draws out the fundamental unfixity and indeterminacy underlying its construction. Meaning emerges out of a process of determination that excludes other possible sets of articulations. In fact, a primary determination in the fixing of an object’s meaning is the evacuation of *what it is not*: in the Spinozist formula (1674), logically “every determination is a negation.” This, however, is not merely a semantic but a social process that centrally involves power relations. The fixing of meaning or the filling of the signifier is the outcome of a political struggle, which has foreclosed other possible meanings. The rise of a “hegemonic articulation” signals the victory of a particular configuration of meanings and social relations (Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Howarth 2000, 1995). Likewise, what is experienced as “common sense” is produced within specific historical contexts. It is born of a progressive sedimentation, in which

particular configurations of meaning were sealed in, and others left out. The ultimate *product* of a powerful discourse is common sense, or *doxa*, to use an expression revitalized by Pierre Bourdieu, the habitual ways in which a society thinks. A “naturalized” discourse is one whose statements are experienced as “obvious,” “true,” and even “necessary.” In other words, their historical contingency is evacuated, the fact that alternative meanings were ruled out, that, at one point, other significations could have obtained. At the outset of this process, the “evident” is powerful because it is unquestioned. Hence securing the domain of the “taken-for-granted” seals the moment of victory, the point at which a discourse becomes dominant, when its frames of thought and action become entrenched as the only possible ones. Thus routinized, these frames become modalities of social regulation (see also Mottier 2002; Torfing 1999, 2002; Shapiro 2002; Carver and Hyvärinen 1997; Faclough 1992; Dijk 1985a, 1985b; Seidel 1985; Fowler 1985; Danet 1985).

This common sense is also the locus of what Bourdieu (1983, 1991, 1998, 2002c, 2003) analyzed as “symbolic domination,” that is, a form of power that *does not need to coerce*, because it commands consent—in fact, operating at the level of meaning and social interactions, it works consent from within, for it sets the terms that make these interactions possible in the first place.⁹ Uncovering the workings of this discursive, social power was one of his most important contributions to a relational understanding of power. Because it sets the terms of the debate, symbolic domination forecloses from the onset the possibility of any “serious deliberative argument” (Checkel 2005, 813) taking place. In fact, it evacuates the need for such argument to take place at all. Because the possibility of deliberating is entirely built on the presumption of an ideal communicative situation—two actors talking and listening to one another on a relatively level playing field or public space—in placing so much emphasis on deliberation the socialization literature assumes (without demonstrating) relatively undifferentiated positions of power and the discursive autonomy of the social actors engaging with one another. This presumption of equal positions of power is yet another way in which actual power relations are evacuated. What has been treated as persuasive authority may sometimes be nothing more than the power to impose norms without actually being seen to be doing so, by dictating the terms within which the deliberative argument will take place.¹⁰

The second main problem that stems from the constructivist’s strategy to rehabilitate the ideational is the atomistic, reifying approach to the

ideational it has yielded. Adding one more explanatory factor certainly opened up the list beyond power and interests, but it has also turned it into an endlessly expanding list onto which new items are constantly added, depending on where one is schooled—norms, ideas, rules, knowledge, cognition, beliefs, *principled* beliefs, attitudes, values, ideology, culture, symbols—all of which point to the importance of the ideational, to be sure, but there comes a point where it becomes difficult to discern between them and to know which does what, or, more importantly, whether we are all still talking about the same thing. The more fundamental problem that stems from this one-more-on-the-list-of-causes approach has been a tendency to treat “ideas” (used here as a shorthand for all of the above) as things, almost as positive entities. And I do not mean only that, in wanting to salvage their causal purchase, they have been reduced to mechanistic forces that effect change, like a cue pushes the ball around the billiard board, but that it is as though these ideational factors themselves look like as many dispersed, atomized entities. Both that which links them together, and that which constitutes them, namely, discourse, fades out of sight. As Karen Litfin (1994, 3) already pointed out in what was effectively the first systematic and extensive attempt to deploy a discursive approach in the study of international politics, these ideational factors are singularly disembedded, not so much from the social or institutional but from the *discursive* relations in which they first took shape.¹¹ Hence it is not that discourses serve to “communicate” ready-made ideas; it is that they constitute them (Schmidt 2008). Ideas do not exist outside of discourses, and discourses are not merely their “containers” or “transmitters.” Consequently, ideas have become reified. That is, they are treated as neatly demarcated, finished products that are used to explain other things nonideational (such as differences in labor practices in the textile industry; Biernecki 1995), but the process of their own making is rapidly eclipsed. Having begun to deconstruct our social “givens,” it is as though the “given” has been merely shifted—away from “interests” and even “norms,” for sure, but toward “ideas” and “identities” instead (see Zehfuss 2001 or Hansen 2006 for the latter critique). In other words, the stuff of it all—namely, discourse—is rarely taken as the analytical material itself, into which to sink one’s scholarly teeth. This is what I propose to do in this book. Most importantly, the making of meaning is far messier, and it rarely yields such clear-cut, fixed things. The focus on meaning restores the dynamic and bloody processes that constituted these ideas in the first place. For ideas are fragile

constructs; even when they endure, they are but temporary fixations of signifiers, always potentially undone by possible rearticulations.

The Denaturalizing Task of Critique

The discursive understanding of power proposed in this book takes conflict rather than cooperation to be the main modality of political life, and ruptures rather than continuities as the determining moments of history. If the social order is not pre-given and constantly being reasserted, politics is not simply an additional layer tagged onto an inherent order wherein preexisting social conflicts would be managed or resolved. Politics is rather the struggle to shape this order itself. In placing the focus on the articulatory struggles underlying the making of meaning and social formations, discourse theory epistemologically foregrounds the ontological “primacy of politics” (Howarth 2000, 104). Consequently, in terms of research design, conflicts are especially useful as catalysts for exposing particular constellations of meanings and power. Thus the interesting moment in a discourse perspective is not when cooperation runs smoothly but rather *when it breaks down*—hence the salience of the whaling issue, where the lines of the battle are drawn out in the open. The whaling regime, which is increasingly polarized between an anti- and a pro-whaling faction, presents a case of failed cooperation. Whaling is banned internationally, yet it is actually increasing on the ground. The failure of cooperation is rooted in a struggle to impose what international whaling relations should really be about: saving whales or managing whaling. Thus a discourse perspective, far from taking cooperation as its starting point, begins by questioning it. More broadly, the fact of cooperation raises the question of what power differentials needed to be smoothed over in order to achieve it.

It will be clear by now by now that the discursive approach deployed in this book belongs to a Foucauldian rather than the Habermasian lineage.¹² The attention to discourse developed in the wake of Jurgen Habermas’s theory of communicative action are geared to the possibility of arriving at a reasoned consensus (Risse 2006, Kratochwil 1989, Onuf 1989). This possibility, in turn, is grounded in the Kantian belief in reason as a constitutive feature of the human essence, which grows old roots in Western philosophy reaching back, beyond Plato, to the Pre-Socratic thinkers. When the question of essences is ontologically and epistemologically suspended, as it is in this discursive approach, the ground wears thin under the possibility of building consensus. Therein lies the crux of

the difference in the way of envisaging norms that has prevailed in the constructivist literature, where they tend to be seen as “neutral” or generally even “beneficial” (such as human rights or environmental norms) rather than as effects of power.

Taking discourses as an object of study aims to denaturalize what we assume to be right, or, to put it in yet another way, to dissolve the *doxa* we unquestioningly dwell in (Wacquant 2001). It is to raise the question of how the categories of a discourse (the objects and subjects it produces) are wielded in the production of “objectivity” and “truth.” Hence faced with a discourse, the task is not to query whether its statements are true but to study how its “truths” are mobilized and meted out.¹³ The question I ask in this book is not which discourse, whaling or anti-whaling, is the more truthful. Rather, I consider their truth *effects*. For “the truth” is potent; its power is wielded in particular discursive economies of power. Thus it becomes necessary to assert the relativity of truth claims and to consider them in relation to the particular configuration of power relations within which they obtain. More generally, studying discourses is a means to taking a critical step out of what the discourses actually say, in order to observe what they do.

Problematizing the Subject

The Duality of Discourses

A social actor is also a *speaking* actor, and therefore the subject—the I/we—of particular discourses. In speaking, the actor does things; it achieves certain concrete, practical results. However, it also positions itself in relation to other speaking actors, it marks itself in a particular way—that is, it also “does” something for its identity. Hence at these two levels of action and identity, speaking, making sense, is a modality of the actor’s agency. Discourses are *enabling*, in that they allow the actors to act in the social world. They are by the same token *constraining* (Giddens 1979, 1990, 1991). In order to make sense to others, the social actor has to both speak and behave according to shared social conventions. It has to observe the rules of this syntax, so that its statements and actions may be deciphered by these social others.

Discourses are thus constraining in terms of the technical requirements of sense making, that is, in terms of “being understood.” They are constraining also in a more moral, normative sense. For discourses are the repository for the benchmarks of good and bad behavior; they contain

a society's values and norms—that is, its modalities of social regulation. For norms are, in Foucault's words (2003, 38), the “natural rule,” through which society is regularized, and discourses are its structures of normalization. The normal and the deviant are located within hegemonic discourses (Foucault 1967). Whaling was normal until the mid 1960s. The new anti-whaling discourse displaced the norm, such that it became “unacceptable,” even “barbaric.” Normality is thus relative and discursively ordained. Most importantly here, where the norm lies is an effect of power.¹⁴

Subject-Positions versus Subjectivities

Approaching social actors as speaking actors has significant repercussions for the study of identity, a defining concern for the constructivist scholarship (Price and Reus-Smit 1998, Wendt 1999, Guzzini 2000, Wight 2004, Flockhart 2006). It shifts the focus away from the production of “subjectivities” to “subject-positions.” Against the evacuation of agency that had tended to occur in the Marxian appraisal of the subject as produced exclusively by material/social structures, and subsequently in Foucault's own approach to discourse, discourse theory distinguishes between “subject-positions” and “political subjectivities.” Only subject-positions are produced by discourses; social actors' political *subjectivities*, on the other hand, cannot be reduced to discursive production (Howarth 1995, 123). This distinction is key to opening up the space for a relational approach to international relations. In other words, a *subject-position* refers to a *position within a discourse*. By contrast, “subjectivity” is a much more extensive and, consequently, a more unwieldy concept, one that can include things that elude processes of symbolization (such as bodily functions, or Lacan's categories of “the real” and “the imaginary”). Both similarly point to the making of identities. What I attempt to show in this book is that, in separating out these two dimensions, the discursive approach steers clear of many of the hurdles that have encumbered the study of identity in international politics. Once that distinction between subjectivity and subject-positions has been drawn, it becomes possible to approach “every subject-position [as] a discursive position” (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 115), and as a discursive position *only*. That is, it becomes possible to bracket issues of subjectivity.

To return to our social-speaking actor, how then is its identity discursively produced? I argue that in *stepping into* a particular subject-

position carved out by a discourse, in taking on the “I/we” of that discourse, the actor’s identity is produced in a very specific way. In doing so, the subject is establishing itself as the subject speaking the particular discourse, such as the anti-whaling discourse, and thereby marking itself as an anti-whaler. This is very different from internalizing the norm that condemns whaling. For a start, it is a much more active process. The actor is making its own identity rather than receiving a norm from an external authoritative “socializing agent” (Checkel 2005, 813). Moreover, it no longer becomes necessary to assess “how much” the socialized agent “truly has” internalized the norm and been “really” persuaded, as opposed to behaving in that way because of the instrumental payoffs tied to it, something which may be at any rate very difficult to prove without opening up the actor’s “head.” What matters is, quite simply, what the actor says. If it speaks the anti-whaling discourse, then it is marking itself as an anti-whaling subject. From there, the analysis can begin to examine what made this possible in the first place, and what exactly the actor is accomplishing in positioning itself thus. Most importantly, focusing on subject-positions gets much closer to explaining how actors’ identities and interests are actually constituted. For the norms actors adopt do not effectively define them, even while they may be fully internalized, and if they conform their behavior to it. What *actually* defines, what shows that they recognize themselves in that norm, are the discourses they speak. The discourses they speak mark who they are, both to themselves and to social others.

This significantly opens up the analytical scope. First, if the social actor is a speaking actor, and a social system is one where discourses circulate, then the international system can be approached as a social system. Of course, approaching the “society of states” as a space of social interactions is nothing new, growing deep roots, beyond constructivism, in the English school, where the expression was first coined (Bull 1977). Both of these, however, largely overlook the *social* dynamics, because they tend to reify actors’ identities—in constructivism, because of the treatment of identity as “given” rather than as a dynamic process of *identification* (see Zehfuss 2001 for this critique); in the English school, because a largely state-centric focus has barred from the analysis non-state actors who may, as the whaling issue will show, quite literally step into states’ subject-positions in international organizations (see chapter 8). Social dynamics necessarily become much more central to the analysis when they are seen as actually producing actors’ identities.

Consequently, states are seen to be part of a dense social fabric, where the way individuals interact in everyday life can shape the course of interstate relations. By placing at the center of its focus the very medium through which all interactions occur, a discourse perspective properly foregrounds the relational dimension of international *relations*.

Second, the distinction between “subjectivity” and “subject-positions” resolves the levels-of-analysis problem in international relations. That social actors are speaking actors applies equally to individuals and corporate actors, to nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) as well as states. A significant advantage of a discourse perspective is that it enables the enquiry to travel the full length of the levels-of-analysis spectrum, from the individual to the state level. Individuals, NGOs, states, are all potentially the subjects (the I/we) of a discourse. Hence by approaching the subject as a discursive category, discourse theory introduces a degree of *equivalence between subjects* pertaining to otherwise different levels of analysis. This yields a certain flexibility in approaching the subject, and the possibility of tapping into theories of formation of the subject wherever relevant to understanding the subject under discussion.

Chapter Outline

The chapters of this book fall into three parts. Part I examines a past whaling world where the dominant discourse was about killing whales. The production and reproduction of the mirror opposite dominant discourse about saving whales is the object of parts II and III, respectively. This book is thus built around a rupture, between a whaling “before” and an anti-whaling “after.” Juxtaposing side by side two completely opposite discourses about the very same resource is a way of utilizing the “jarring effect” that can sometimes stop us in our tracks and make us reconsider what we normally leave unquestioned—here, our prevailing notions about whales and whaling. It serves, in other words, to undertake the denaturalizing task of critique.

Retrieving a long-forgotten but not-so-long-gone whaling order from within our own whaling past in part I serves three main purposes. First, it sets up a foil for reflecting upon where we stand today. Our own whaling past is used to create the critical distance from which to examine the current anti-whaling order. If appraising historical contingency is indeed one of the main drivers of the turn toward the examination of “the social

construction of,” then the pertinence of the whaling issue is that it shows not only that things *could* have been otherwise but that, in this case, they actually *were*. The constructivist concern is unencumbered with any speculative nostalgia for alternative perspectives that could have prevailed if the world were a better place that can sometimes burden attempts to uncover subaltern perspectives and subjugated knowledges, to borrow Donna Haraway’s (1991) term (see, for example, Shiva 1998).¹⁵ In the case of whaling, we really were on a completely different path, one that was about hunting whales to extinction rather than saving them. Setting up this foil serves to draw out the historical relativity of the discourse that prevails today and the extent to which its “truths” are not absolutes but hold currency only in specific historical epochs.

The second important aim is to render visible a world that remains invisible by an effect of power. This “rendering visible” is key to the task of unmasking a particular form of power whose principle of effectiveness is its invisibility, namely, symbolic domination. Excavating the past whaling discourse draws into relief the functioning of the current anti-whaling discourse. For “our” past whaling world is not just “passed,” it is actively forgotten. Amnesia constitutes a key mechanism of the anti-whaling discourse, whose main subject-position, the anti-whaling “us,” is constituted through the active denial of any similarity with the whaling “them.” A third methodological aim in revealing this whaling world is to draw out the unity of a social system within which discursive and material practices constitute each other. This shows how an individual is connected to broader structures of normalization that are deployed from the individual to the global level. Indeed, this whaling discourse is what holds the whole social system together. It is also what links the various levels of analysis. Part I thus unpacks the whaling order at three successive levels of analysis, proceeding from the individual to the global level. The following chapter begins on the ground, as it were. There examination of concrete whaling practices brings to light the extent to which whale parts were pervasive in the life of the modern individual. Chapter 2 thus begins by surveying the various forms of consumption of the whale, thereby revealing both the omnipresence of the whale resource in everyday lives and the varieties of whaling around the world, some of which continue today.

Moreover, chapter 2 addresses the question of material interests by analyzing the political economy of modern whaling. Discourse is not

center stage in this chapter. It examines, first, the way in which the industry modernized its productive structures, in line with rapidly industrializing economies, and second, the factors that continued to fuel the demand for whale produce, thereby upholding the industry beyond the point where whaling itself had become unsustainable, both economically and ecologically. A key factor that accounts for the endurance of the modern whaling industry, despite plummeting whale stocks and technological innovations that progressively substituted the main uses for whale parts, was the phenomenon of “whaling nationalism,” which saw more and more countries competing for fewer and fewer whales. In other words, far from turning away from whaling as the whales declined, countries wanted to whale *even more*. Methodologically, by showing that the interest in whaling endured beyond the point where it was sustained by the configuration of economic interests, chapter 2 disjoins the *material* whaling interests from the *interest in* whaling, thereby clearing the ground for a discursive approach. In sum, the West remained interested in whaling well after Western commercial interest had abandoned the trade, because its interest was framed by an entrenched whaling discourse.

Chapter 3 continues to unravel the significance of whaling to this past whaling world. It examines the nexus of whaling and the state, so as to tease out the role of whaling in processes that shaped the modern nation-state. It deploys Foucault’s distinction between “sovereignty” and “governmentality” as two different lenses for drawing out the connections between whaling and state practices. The chapter then analyzes the particular constellation of power/knowledge in which whaling was enmeshed. There it examines the relationships between the state, science, and the whaling industry that led to the development of cetology (the science of whales) within national structures of knowledge and power centered around the whale.

Chapter 4 analyzes the emergence of a common international whaling discourse that took shape around the development of whaling regulations. Starting from measures in place at the national level, it retraces the halting progression toward international whaling regulations that eventually yielded, in 1946, the IWC. Methodologically, the chapter takes issue with both regime theory’s traditional accounts of the international politics of whaling, in both its neorealist and neoliberal institutionalist versions, and shows the need for a properly sociological account of the dynamics of interstate actions, *even when* they are driven mainly

by competition rather than cooperation, which are both inherently social phenomena. It then deploys such an approach, using Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *field* and his analysis of interests. Stretching interests toward a sociological understanding puts further pressure on the narrow conception of the concept which has prevailed in the study of international politics. In the subsequent analysis of the "society of whaling states," states are envisaged as *social-speaking actors*, whose identity is constituted not only by the way they interact with one another within a social field but also by their *belonging* to the particular society it defines. The chapter shows that the dynamics of state belonging are a key explanatory factor in accounting for the ways in which states have behaved within this international organization. Both when it was the so-called club of whalers and subsequently when it became a club of *anti-whalers*, states have been consistently driven by their wanting to belong to it. For many states, being an IWC member is not about material payoffs, nor about making international cooperation work, nor even about what happens to the whales. Rather, what matters is where the *nomos* lies and to be seen to be embracing it by speaking the discourse that encapsulates it—then the whaling discourse, now the anti-whaling discourse. This explains how states have been able to so easily switch their expectations as to what the organization does (regulating whaling or precluding it) and take on radically opposite discourses about whaling. The IWC is a stage for performing states' socially constituted identities. Then, the "right" sort of state to be was a whaling state, and now, it is an anti-whaling state, a point which will be further developed in chapter 10.

Part II then appraises the birth of a mirror opposite, anti-whaling order. Chapter 5 analyzes the production of a new, dominant global discourse about whales that featured them as endangered, intelligent, and extraordinary mammals that needed to be saved from the whalers. The main theoretical issue foregrounded in this chapter is how to address the question of normative change in international relations, which has been approached from two different fronts, namely, the global environmental politics scholarship and the literature appraising the role of non-state actors. The chapter thus begins by positioning the analysis in relation to these literatures, as well as the field of critical security studies, which has so far been the most attuned to the role of discourse in international politics. The anti-whaling discourse challenges the latter's selection of dominant discourses, which tend to be reduced to state discourses. In this case, the national security discourse was a *whaling*

discourse. The anti-whaling discourse, by contrast, arose from the margins of political life and successfully imposed itself upon a state from the ground up. The brunt of my critique of the literatures on normative change is that an excessive agentcentrism has reduced their ability to appraise the productive, structural power of discourse, which is more than a weapon in political actors' arsenal: it actually produces their social identities. The chapter introduces some conceptual tools to analyze the anti-whaling discourse, notably *articulation* and *interpellation*, and, from the discursive policy literature, *story-lines* and *discourse coalitions*.

The analysis of the discourse unfolds in two parts. The first part shows how the anti-whaling discourse rose to prevalence because it welded together two, preexisting metanarratives: that of the Cold War discourse on capitalism and democracy and that of a nascent environmental discourse. Specifically, the chapter analyzes the double synecdochic move that fixed the whale signifier in this new discourse in such a way that saving the whales became shorthand for saving endangered species, and the endangered planet as a whole. The second part of the chapter examines what the new discourse actually achieved. First, at a specific juncture in the early 1970s in American politics, it created a vast discourse coalition of anti-whaling state and nonstate actors that extended to the international level. Once again, this illustrates the methodological importance of finding ways to cut across the domestic/international divide in order to encompass the various levels of analysis at play (Walker 1993). Second, it provided a specific script for "doing something" about the environment, thereby yielding a new grammar for environmental activism at large.

Chapter 6 analyzes the role played by science in the whaling regime in order to appraise its power. Science is approached as the authoritative discourse on truth, regulating both what can and should be known within particular discursive orders, or "regimes of truth" (Foucault 1980, 131). Given the failure of the community of whaling scientists to build a scientific consensus as the basis for policy making in the IWC, the chapter starts by questioning the epistemic community approach, which is grounded in assumptions about science's ability to attain "the truth" about an issue and, from there, to drive policy making disinterestedly forwards. It then examines how much science was able to weigh into the policy decisions about whaling management, in each of the three phases that saw the consolidation of a science of whale management. What the history of IWC science shows is that, despite significant im-

provements in whale science over these three phases, to the extent that it became a model for fisheries management elsewhere, it was increasingly *ignored* by policy makers. The chapter thus shows that the power of science to influence policy makers is actually relatively limited. It is constrained by the particular epoch or *episteme* within which both the science and the policies are produced. What it does not appear to have is the power to make policy makers step out of its underlying normative order or *nomos*.

The anti-whaling campaign, the object of chapter 7, was one of the first successful global environmental campaigns. That chapter examines in detail the series of actions and strategies with which activists succeeded in shifting the *nomos* underlying whale related discourses and practices. Anti-whaling NGOs won over to their cause, first, members of an increasingly wider and more global public, and second, many formerly whaling states, which passed legislation to protect whales at home and actively pursued anti-whaling policies internationally. NGOs achieved this by calling both individuals and states into the newly created anti-whaling subject-positions. A key strategy to denormalize whaling consisted in rewriting the discursive categories underpinning both the perceptions and practices of whaling. In this way the anti-whaling discourse successfully displaced the boundaries of the acceptable/unacceptable and even the legal/illegal. It also defined the categories through which whaling would be thereafter managed at the IWC, including the category that served to suspend it, namely, “commercial” whaling, distinguished from “aboriginal” whaling. The chapter ends on the strategies deployed to engineer the 1982 commercial whaling moratorium vote at the IWC, which marked the final stage of the transformation of the “society of whaling states” into a “society of anti-whaling states.” Methodologically, this account of the anti-whaling campaign is useful for expounding the difference between *actors* (individuals or states) and discursive *subjects* (or I/we).

Having examined different facets of the *production* of the dominant anti-whaling discourse, part III considers the factors sustaining its *reproduction*. A discursive approach entails simultaneously a series of theoretical commitments (discourse theory) and a method of analysis (discourse analysis). Chapter 8 undertakes an applied analysis of the anti-whaling discourse. Taking as its basis a boycott advertisement authored by a coalition of anti-whaling NGOs in 1974, and drawing parallels with a contemporary anti-whaling caricature, it examines the space of relations

staked out by the anti-whaling discourse. The whales-object cast as passive victims conjures up two subjects set up in a binary, “them-whalers” and “us-anti-whalers.” Thus, whereas the previous chapter showed how the new subject-position created by the anti-whaling discourse was mobilized in the campaign itself, this chapter examines more closely how it was actually carved out. This subject-position was tailored for the contemporary global individual consumer who cares about the environment. My main argument in this chapter is that the anti-whaling discourse has been able to last because it created identity categories that tapped into, and reinforced, existing representations that obtained in particular political economic relations—for example, between the United States and Japan. Schematically, the rise of Japan as an economic threat thus coincides with the representation of the Japanese as a threat to the whales. Methodologically, in terms of the discursive approach to the making of identity, the chapter draws out a key distinction between *subject*, that is, a space within a discourse, and *subjectivity*, which refers to the actual identity taken on by flesh-and-bone individuals.

The analysis in chapter 9 remains at the level of the individual and considers the consumptive practices that sustain the anti-whaling discourse to this day. It begins with a typology of “nonconsumptive uses of the whale” to use the discourse’s own terminology, which mirrors the survey of consumptive uses underpinning the whaling order that opened chapter 2. The anti-whaler, this chapter will show, is constituted as much by what she or he says as by what she or he consumes. Particular image-based and virtual forms of consumption thus comprise another key factor enabling the reproduction of the anti-whaling discourse.

The last two chapters shift to the other end of the level-of-analysis spectrum and analyze the conflict between anti-whaling and pro-whaling states currently being played out at the IWC. This conflict is used as a catalyst to expose the dynamics of the confrontation between a dominant anti-whaling discourse and a pro-whaling discourse of resistance. Chapter 10 examines the ways in which states take on the anti-whaling discourse in order to position themselves within a broader society of states. Two key methodological aims are achieved in this chapter. First, the ways in which a particular discourse relates to broader discourses are explored. Second, and crucially for a discursive approach to the construction of state identities, the chapter elaborates the distinction between state *subject-positions* and state *identities*. In analyzing how states step into the anti-whaling subject-position, I hope to show how “subject-

position” offers a far more adequate conceptual tool for the analysis of state identities than the concept of “identity,” which is a concept first deployed at, and better left for, the individual level of analysis. “Subject-position” provides a way of analyzing state identities that excludes the dimension of subjectivity.

Chapter 11 serves as the counterpart to chapter 10. It examines the recent formation of a pro-whaling discourse developed *against* the anti-whaling discourse, as an “anti-anti-whaling” discourse. The subject-position carved out here is not simply the same old subject-position carried over from the past whaling order; rather it is one developed from a position of resistance. As a result, the whaling identity itself has been transformed. In other words, the subject-position proposed in this discourse is not simply a whaler’s; it is a *pro-whaler*’s. The analysis travels once again along all the levels of analysis, examining how the discourse has taken shape at the national level, within relations between states, in relations between states and substate communities, and lastly between substate whaling communities. At stake for this new, pro-whaling discourse is recovering the power to define their whaling identities.

