

Culture



Why Do Sealers Seal? Cultural versus Economic Reasons for Participating in the Newfoundland Seal Hunt

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Article abstract

The protest against the Newfoundland seal hunt has helped to put the hunt in a position of prominence as an important symbol of Newfoundland identity. This has given the sealers an extra set of motivations for participating in it, beyond economics. However, the sealers are reticent about revealing the non-economic motives for sealing. This paper proffers certain social and cultural motives and explains the methodology necessary to discover them.

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Why do Sealers Seal?

Cultural versus Economic Reasons for Participating in the Newfoundland Seal Hunt

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Introduction

Recently some economic anthropologists have been turning away from looking at the purely "rational" forms of means/ends relationships and are beginning to go back to the socially and culturally meaningful aspects of economic activity, an approach that began with Malinowski. Maurice Godelier, and other structural Marxists, have argued that many traditional Marxist economists have placed too much emphasis on purely economic processes, disregarding the determining factor of social relations (Godelier, 1966). Marshall Sahlins has more recently been critical of "...the idea that human cultures are formulated out of practical activity and, behind that, utilitarian interest" (Sahlins, 1976: vii). This paper follows the spirit of these suggestions, arguing that people's motives for participating in an economic activity cannot always be explained solely in economic terms.

My fieldwork on the 1979 Newfoundland seal hunt has provided evidence that men pursue sealing, which is primarily thought of as economic activity, for both economic and social/cultural reasons.

A huge herd of harp seals migrates past the North East coast of Newfoundland every spring to give birth to their pups on the ice off the coast of Northern Newfoundland during the first part of March. Newfoundlanders have been exploiting this resource for over two centuries by sending large vessels into the breeding area to kill the newborn seals which are valued for their white pelts and thick layer of fat that is

rendered into oil. Federal government population estimates place the original size of the herd at 10 million seals, but overexploitation in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has reduced the total population which is now estimated to be approximately 1.4 million, protected by a strict government quota system (*The Seal Hunt*, 1976).

The sealers have long suffered tremendous hardship for a meagre reward. Until the operation modernized after World War Two, men were sent "to the ice" in old ships that were barely seaworthy. Two hundred men or more were crowded into the holds of ships just two hundred feet in length. Their often ruthless captains, who were far more interested in the size of the catch than the welfare of their men, sometimes caused major disasters through negligence.

The risk and hardship involved in the seal hunt have loaded it with cultural meaning. The hunt echoes the history of a poor colony whose citizens were exploited by a ruling elite and who had to survive in a marginal environment. It has become a metaphor for all that is strong and stoic in Newfoundland's collective ethos.

In the past decade, a considerable voice of protest against the seal hunt has been raised by environmental groups who consider it to be both unnecessarily cruel and ecologically dangerous. The protesters, particularly the Greenpeace Foundation and the International Fund for Animal Welfare seek to stop the hunt by bringing world attention to it through a massive

publicity campaign. Reaction to this protest in Newfoundland has heightened awareness of the hunt as a cultural event which is supported by the institutional structure of the province. The government, the churches and schools, etc., have promoted it against outside opposition as an economically necessary and culturally valuable endeavour. The publicity engendered by the protest and counter protest has given new life to many of the "culturally meaningful" aspects of the hunt which has waned since the operation was made less risky and more comfortable after the war.

An ecumenical blessing of the sealing fleet, the "sealer's sendoff", has been resurrected in the past two years. Each time, a crowd estimated to be about 4 000 people has turned up to bid good voyage to the fleet as they leave St. John's harbour. Sealing is clearly recognized in large part as a cultural activity having important symbolic meaning for the province. The payoff for the sealer is to provide him with a direct source of prestige for participating in an activity that is considered a "true test" of his dedication to a cultural ideal.

The cultural heritage

Since confederation in 1949, rural Newfoundland has been caught between the forces of modernization and traditionalism. Participation in the Canadian state has brought increased economic benefits, but at the same time it has eroded the traditional structure and orientation of the outport. This dichotomy has created an *us* against *them* attitude in Newfoundland, in which the mainland is considered an evil necessary to the material well being of the province, but which, in the process of supplying benefits, tends to accentuate the differences between rural Newfoundland and urban mainstream Canada, in what is seen as a patronizing manner. This pattern results in at least two outcomes for Newfoundland. In the first case, a large number of mostly young people leave their homes to migrate to mainland Canada where they think better economic opportunities are available, while those who are left hold on to the traditional lifestyle even more staunchly and defend its values against encroachment from the outside. The sealers and their sponsors, for the most part fall into this latter category and the seal hunt has become an expression of the desire to keep rural Newfoundland protected against outside interference.

The protest which began in earnest in the latter part of the 1960's has reawakened interest in the hunt because it is seen as a direct interference with the prevailing cultural ideal, which is to promote the outport as a valued part of Newfoundland's heritage. It is a direct intrusion by *them* against *us*, of urban values clashing with rural traditions, which seems to sum up

various complaints Newfoundlanders have about the intrusion of mainland cultural values to the detriment of their own heritage.

The protesters try to underplay this cultural aspect of sealing, something they are not prepared to deal with, preferring to argue that since the seal hunt adds only about \$5 500 000 (which is only 0.2% of the gross provincial product) to the total economy of the province, it cannot have a claim as an important or vital part of the economy (Greenpeace figures). The sealers are led to believe that the outside world thinks of the hunt in economic terms and respond to the protest and to outsiders by arguing that they seal for economic reasons; "because they need the money".

The economic argument is a presentation they give to outsiders because they believe the *outsiders* are only interested in the material viability of the hunt, evidenced by the protest propagandists who pay scant attention to the social and cultural side of the issue. The result is that the culturally meaningful aspect of sealing is rarely discussed except among insiders, using an *insider's* code.

To try to explain the *insider's* point of view to an outsider would be confusing and difficult if not impossible for the sealers because it has essentially an experiential, evaluative meaning. It can take place only within an "emic" sphere, in which there has been some shared experience. When I ask questions about the seal hunt as an *outsider*, the sealers give me their stock economic answer and believe that should be enough to satisfy me. Yet, if I speak with them as a friend, an *insider* who has shared a common experience, they express the culturally meaningful element of sealing in an indirect way, at an "emic" level in *insider* terms. The following ethnographic examples should give us some insight to this meaning.

Towards the end of the trip on the sealing ship, conversation among the sealers seemed to turn naturally to speculation about who would be coming next year. Most of the men say they have had enough punishment and that there is no way on God's earth they are going to return for more next year. The old hands, however, realize they will be back the next year and admit, "Oh yeah, I haven't missed a spring yet. I'll be out next year." The younger men say things like, "Well, I wanted to see what it's like and now I have, so I don't think I'll be back." Or, "I've been out three springs now. I think it's time to take a break." Then, after the ship has been unloaded and they have money in their pocket, the tune suddenly changes. "I suppose I might be back if I'm asked. It wasn't all that bad." This change of mind can be explained by the fact that in the first case the men are physically tired and sick of having worked with seals for a long time. However after the work is done, with money in their pockets and change of clothes, they can experience the more congenial atmosphere of the venture; the re-

freshening side of working the body to near its limits, the companionship amongst men who have spent a month together and have shared a great experience. They also leave with the knowledge they have been through an experience that will enhance their position in the community. The sealers can tell men who have not been on the ice what it was like and will be able to participate in the conversations of veterans of the hunt, with some authority.

My master watch, or foreman at the ice had told me several times, "Well Guy, you know we don't do it for fun." Part of his reference in this statement is a defense against the protest movement, which is regarded as naively believing that the seal hunt is an easy job and done for sport as much as anything else, or some kind of primeval thirst to see blood and kill "babies". But also, characterizing sealing solely as an economic activity reflects the inability or the unwillingness to communicate its cultural aspect. A sort of plea: "Please don't characterize us as being slaves to tradition." When I asked if there wasn't some aspect of "fun" involved, like being together with a good bunch of fellows and playing the odd trick on other crewmembers, my master watch replied: "Well, there's that, sure. But it's not like you can sit and have a beer at the end of the day and enjoy yourself. It's rough, you know that." Yet, this man seems fairly well-off financially in comparison with other sealers and was probably not desperate for employment. Furthermore, he had a bad experience sealing twenty-five years before and swore that he would not be to the ice again, but decided two years ago that he might like to give it another try. He and his best friend had been stranded on a pan of ice all day and into the evening. When the ship finally came, the mate at the helm had been drinking and the ship hit the pan too fast. The ice cracked and the pelts they had collected were lost, although the men managed to remain on the ice and were finally rescued. His friend continued sealing and bet a bottle of rum he would be back to the hunt again in spite of his experience. Twenty-five years later the rum was exchanged.

My master watch's friend, claims he would not know what to do if he couldn't go to the ice in the spring. He is an excellent carpenter and is in good demand as a contractor. He can afford to pick and choose his work and recently got the notion he would rather go back fishing for a while and give up contracting for a summer. He claims this decision was made on sentimental grounds rather than from economic necessity. Money is not his main incentive for sealing. He participates in the seal hunt because he has a deep attachment to it, based on a great deal of experience and experiences, some good, some bad, but in an important way, usually meaningful. His regular contracting work slows down in the winter and spring and he likes to get out of the kitchen, "Away from under-

foot all the time". His wife concurs that she doesn't know what he would do if he couldn't go "ice huntin'" in the spring. Much of this man's motivation for going sealing reflects a need to reaffirm to himself that he is still a vital man, capable of doing any task which a younger man can do. At the ice he would push himself to work harder than the young men, even when conditions seemed to warrant stopping work altogether.

Another sealer seems to have primarily economic motive for returning to sealing after several years absence. He wanted enough money to invest in a trap boat and fishing gear with a partner. The seal hunt was the only way he could earn enough money in a short enough time that he would be able to fish the coming season. Yet although he came sealing for this specific economic reason, he was one of the most vehement proponents on the ship, of the cultural side of sealing. When I produced my camera he told me, "Don't you go taking no pictures of the whitecoats, there's more of those than we'll ever need." This was a direct statement against the protest and an intimation that the thought I might be a journalist who could harm to hunt and therefore, Newfoundland. "I've got a right," he said. "My father was a sealer, and his father. If they (the protesters) stop the seal hunt and if we can make \$2 000 on this trip then it's \$2 000, that I wouldn't have and that I have a right to." His statement expresses an economic concern. But its implication is cultural, for it expresses commitment to a traditionally accepted economic activity. He has given me, the outsider, an outside rationalization for the seal hunt; that it is done for money. But hints that there is much more to it.

This man expresses an anger about what he sees as meddling in the affairs of his outpost tradition by outsiders who seek to impose their values upon him. I was the outsider in this case and he wanted to give me a statement which reflected his deep feeling about the hunt. By referring to his father and grandfather as sealers, he legitimizes a claim to the seal hunt as "his territory," and tells me his right to seal is based on heredity. It is not only a way for him to earn his \$2 000; he is carrying on a family tradition and the tradition of his community. It is his right, and his duty to defend his family, and his community against an outside threat to its spiritual survival. But at that time I was an outsider and he thought I would be incapable of understanding all that the seal hunt means to him, so for my benefit he couched the argument in economic terms, which he thought I could understand and would want to hear.

The above examples illustrate two aspects of the culturally meaningful element of sealing. The sharing of a great experience with fellow workers creates a camaradery, and the ability to work hard under severe conditions enhances a sense of self worth. Because sealing ships work on a share system, hard work and

extra work is done for the common good and rewarded by approval from one's fellow workers. Secondly, the hunt offers a socially accepted, non-disruptive prestige gaining mechanism within the sealer's home community. Outport society is egalitarian and the social ideal is to play down any status differences. But since sealing is recognized as an important cultural event and because everyone within a sealer's small community knows who has participated in the seal hunt, prestige comes automatically. A part of the reason why the men explain their motives to me in economic terms is because to do so in another way would be being braggardly, which is not acceptable within the community.

The best example of a sealer expressing how much the hunt means to him beyond the simple economic motive was given to me by a man who had worked on the "Prince Andrew" the year I was out. His ship became jammed in the ice in one of the small harbours of northern Newfoundland and the crew spent the entire month of the seal hunt trying to loosen the ship from the ice. The crew worked the entire month without earning a penny, but this didn't seem to bother the sealer at all. In fact, he claimed he would certainly be out again next year and that in any case money was not his main incentive. "It's in my blood me son, and it's in your's too. I can tell that by talkin' to you. You go out to the ice and if you like it, it just gets to you. It gets under your skin."

This statement sums up a whole series of cultural values about sealing. It is a reference to the tradition involved, the camaradery of men working well together, the personal satisfaction that comes from doing a difficult task. It is not an attempt to gloss over a complex problem by giving a simple answer. Rather, it is an eloquent attempt to state a complex problem in simple terms. By saying "it's in my blood," there is no attempt to rationalize the meaningful dimension of sealing, or to relegate the cultural element to an economic motive. The comment came at the end of an enjoyable evening spent comparing experiences at the seal hunt. Although he realized I was going to write about the hunt, we spoke not as interviewer/interviewee, but as acquaintances with a shared experience. We were both able to appreciate what the other had done, although we had been on different ships and had different experiences. There was no need to *explain* the outside point of view, only to *evaluate* the inside code. In the previous examples the sealers regarded me as an outsider. Either, because I was a relative stranger, someone who's motives they had not yet come to trust, or because I was asking them in my role as outside investigator "what does it really mean to be a sealer," questions to which they could not give a complete answer. Of course I have shared experiences with these men now, and most often speak with them in insider terms, but only after I drop my role as

investigator. With Bill the question of my status as investigator never arose. I made no attempt to extract an explanation from him and so we accepted each other as insiders and spoke within the insider code. I never asked the question, "why do sealers seal?" but he gave me the answer anyway. "I do it because it's in my blood." Bill said further that, "it's in your blood too," which meant that he looked upon me as being an insider and one to whom there is no need to explain the seal hunt in rational or economic terms. He understood that I understood the irrational, or culturally meaningful element of the seal hunt, and there was no need to resort to the economic explanation.

Conclusions

Besides the empirical considerations, this paper has raised a methodological problem. There is a strong inclination, especially recently, to use formal interview procedure for the collection of anthropological data, whether the information is gathered through a questionnaire, or through structured questioning aimed at proving or disapproving a real or imagined hypothesis. My experience, and evidence in this study, shows some of the limitations of a too formal, scientific approach to data collection. I found the sealers to be very reticent in response to answering "deep" questions about what the hunt means to them. Any interview which I attempted to structure, even in an informal way, was met with superficial answers or a polite non-committal reply. Yet once I understood that the sealers were uncomfortable in a structured environment in which we both had roles defined by the *outside* structure of my "scientific" investigation, I dropped the role of investigator and tried to find as much as possible what it felt like to be involved in the seal hunt. My most productive efforts were spent not in interviewing, but in sealing. Trying to get "into the skin" of the sealer as far as possible. Consequently, my data is based more on the qualitative, and personal aspect of what it's like to be a sealer, rather than on explanations given by informants. By assuming more of the role of participant observer, (with the emphasis on *participation*) than that of *outside* investigator, we are likely to come into fuller and more meaningful contact with the people and events we are studying. We are also more likely to produce literature which is richer in emic, *inside* meaning.

NOTE

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