Modes of production and minke whaling: The case of Iceland

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CHAPTERS:

Introduction

In a democratic society, where people like to think they are well informed and that they ought to make rational decisions about their lives, environmental debates should always be matched by plenty of scholarly reflection and academic discussion. It would be somewhat simplistic to claim full independence for the academic world, to present science as an enterprise totally removed from the social context to which it belongs. After all, knowledge of nature is always shaped by social context and absolute standards of objectivity and neutrality may be difficult, if not impossible, to define (see, for instance, Worster 1977, Merchant 1980). It would be dangerous, on the other hand, to go to the other extreme, to deny the academy any degree of autonomy and to relegate the quest for knowledge to an Orwellian Ministry of Environmental Truth. We have learned too many lessons from totalitarian regimes.

In many countries, the hunting of sea mammals is an important political issue. Not only is it a highly politized issue in a domestic context, internationally debates on animals and the environment have taken dramatic turns. Indeed the emphasis on the global context is one of the peculiar characteristics of modern Euro-American environmental discourse (see Willis 1990). Over the last two centuries or so, the inhabitants of the industrialized world have often presented themselves as masters of their environments, as godly beings removed from nature and accountable only to themselves; we need not elaborate on the tragic consequences of this anthropocentric and expansionist world-view. Nowadays, in contrast, people increasingly think of themselves as very much belonging to nature (Descola and Pálsson 1986, Ingold 2000) - along with other animals, including sea mammals. In this latter view, humans have a particular responsibility to meet, not only to other humans but also to members of other species, fellow inhabitants of the animal kingdom, and the ecosystem of the globe.

Whaling, then, ceases to be merely 'economic production', the extraction of 'resources' or lumps of energy from the sea.

Indeed, some of the key issues of environmental discussion in the coming years are likely to focus around ethical questions, on human responsibility. But just as the scientific enterprise is inevitably shaped by the society in which it occurs, environmental discussions are necessarily rooted in their times. It is important, therefore - and for environmentalists as well as for academics - to step back from time to time and to evaluate the state of the art. Such a re-evaluation raises complex issues and difficult questions. Rather than avoid complex issues and difficult questions, however, we should confront them with frankness.

In this paper I shall take a critical look at one particular issue - environmentalist notions of 'subsistence' economies and 'commercial' production, with particular reference to Icelandic whaling. I discuss three modes of production, distinguishing between subsistence ('primitive') hunting, simple ('petty') commodity production, and industrial ('capitalist') whaling. Minke whaling in Iceland, I hold, is best described as simple commodity production, given the social relations of the producers. I suggest that the policy which grants 'subsistence' hunters exclusive rights to sea mammals - the present policy of the International Whaling Commission - reflects both an obsolete romantic image of the 'noble savage' (as a being totally removed from culture and commerce) and an erroneaous view of the simple commodity producer as a capitalist.

The Hunter And The Primitivist Fallacy

A longstanding tradition in Western discourse classifies hunters and gatherers as 'food collectors' operating outside society. Thus, Marx and Engels argued that humans 'begin to distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they begin to produce their means of subsistence' (cited in Ingold 1988: 270). From this perspective, hunters and gatherers are not 'producers' of food, as they simply consume what nature provides, unlike agriculturalists who really transform their means of subsistence. By extension, hunter-gatherers are permanently in the state of nature.

Few people nowadays may subscribe to such a view. And yet many people are committed to a view of 'simple' societies that logically seems to lead to a similar conclusion. Some anthropologists and many environmentalists assume that the members of simple societies are above all 'rational' beings who always find the right solutions to their problems. This notion is reflected in the primitivist

fallacy of ecological functionalism which assumes that simple societies are closed systems in perfect harmony with their environment (see Ellen 1982: 73). 'They' adapt and ensure the sustenance of renewable resources while 'we' ruin the environment and drive the ecosystem out of balance and control. Given such assumptions, in 'simple' societies people always develop sound analyses of ecology and environmental problems, unable to make mistakes. As McGoodwin remarks, this is 'practically a cliché in the litearature concerned with preindustrial peoples' (1990:56). The behaviour of hunters and gartherers, especially, is assumed to be responsive to ecological relations.

To some extent, perhaps, this view was necessary to redress the balance, to contest the earlier, ethnocentric view of Tylorian intellectualists, for whom 'primitives' were disadvantaged, badly informed, and generally seriously misguided in their efforts to understand the world (Kuper 1988). The image of hunters and gatherers as lay ecologists, then, has replaced their image as primitives (see Bettinger 1991). However, the model of the lay ecologist is equally simplistic. It, too, assumes that material context largely accounts for what hunter-gatherers do. They are no longer, perhaps, regarded as fossils from the remote past, but they clearly adapt to the ecological conditions that prevail. They are no longer at the 'edge' of subsistence, but unlike us they are permanently in the state of nature.

Such an idea is illustrated by Mauss's work (1979[1906]) on the coastal economy of the Inuit, an early work that to some extent anticipates the modern model of the lay ecologist. Mauss's analysis hinges on the simple ecological observation that the Inuit as well as the animals they hunt disperse and concentrate according to season:

In summary, summer opens up an almost unlimited area for hunting and fishing, while winter narrowly restricts this area. This alternation provides the rhythm of concentration and dispersion for the morphological organization of Eskimo society. The population congregates or scatters like the game. The movement that animates Eskimo society is synchronised with that of the surrounding life (Mauss 1979:56).

During the summer, the Inuit are isolated and fragmented. According to Mauss, 'there is no religion' since the myths that 'fill the consciousness of the Eskimo during the winter appear to be forgotten during the summer' (p. 75). 'Life', he adds, 'is that of the layman'. During the winter, on the other hand, when the population congregates, there is a 'genuine community of ideas'. The contrast

between summer and winter, then, parallels that between individual and society. In the individual mode, during the summer, the Inuit are 'lost children, as it were' (Mauss 1979:52), providing for themselves as individuals. The isolated hunters or fishermen keep their kill to themselves without having to consider anyone else. During the winter, on the other hand, individuals become social beings. The producers become subject to strict rules concerning the distribution of food. Food is collectively shared within a settlement rather than being limited to the individual or nuclear family. This suggests that the Inuit are perennially split between the individual and collective, the natural and social. In winter there is a lot of society in the individual; in summer, much less. Given such distinctions, hunting must take place in nature. The appropriation of nature only becomes social when the resources extracted from nature enter relations of sharing or exchange among groups (Pálsson 1991: Ch. 1).

The idea of subsistence hunters as lay ecologists or 'noble savages' operating ouside, or on the margin of, society in an isolated world of their own has often appeared in recent debates on animal rights. While animal rights activists like to think of themselves as the spokespersons for indigenous hunters, they often misconstrue the hunters' thinking and way of life, as anthropologists have recently pointed out. Animal rights activists share the hunters' respect for animals and their concern with environmental problems, but in many other respects the two groups are likely to disagree. Trapped in objectivist, Western discourse on science and the Other, animal rights activists make a fundamental distinction between 'them' (indigenous hunters) and 'us' (Euro-Americans), between nature and society, and between animals and humans. This contrasts sharply with the ways in which hunters themselves often represent their relations with society and the animate world. Thus, Inuit and Cree think of themselves as being in communion with nature, animals, and fellow humans (see Wenzel 1991). In their view, there is no fundamental distinction between nature and society, animals are regarded as social persons, and to kill them is a sign of responsibility and not a criminal act, at least as long as certain technical and ritual conditions are met.

The environmentalist view may express charitable and humanitarian motives. However, it is not an objective account of the real world but an ethnocentric statement grounded in the historical realities of particular groups of Euro-Americans. Humans, whatever their mode of production or subsistence, are simultaneously part of nature and society.

Modes Of Production

We may well argue, on the other hand, that the kinds of social relations in which humans are involved when appropriating natural resources differ from one society to another. And this brings me to modes of production. The kinds of attributes one adopts as criteria of classification of modes of production and subsistence depend on the theory informing the analysis. However, reasoned anthropological comparison and informed environmental decision-making necessitate both that the units of comparison be established on some logical basis and that they be critically examined and refined from time to time. Everyday classifications, as Hewes remarked year ago (Hewes 1948:238), need to be critically examined and refined every now and then, if only 'to reassure their users that they are more than accidental classifications, and are valid rubrics beyond our own language or culture'. One of the significant social differences in fishing systems concerns the nature of production units, their organisation, and the motives of the producers. A distinction can be made between household producers, capitalistic firms, and simple commodity producers.

In household economies, the 'domestic mode of production' (Sahlins 1972), production is motivated by the subsistence needs of the domestic unit. The household unit is never a completely self-sufficient one, but given the emphasis on use values and livelihood, production is set low and, consequently, resources are often under-used. Summing up the evidence in relation to hunter-gatherers, Barnard and Woodburn argue that the theory has stood up well to ethnographic research, emphasising that it is not wants that are set low but production targets (1988:12). The theory of the domestic mode of production was developed by Chayanov in relation to peasant economies. Chayanov's theory predicts that there is a 'natural' limit to peasant production in that the intensity of labour is proportional to the total needs of the household, including the ratio of consumers to workers, taxes, and debts. Some economic anthropologists have made use of Chyanov's theory in relation to fishing (see, for example, Jorion 1984).

In the second kind of production system mentioned, in capitalist production, production is motivated by the accumulation of profit and capital, and production targets are indefinite. In this case, fishing crews are unlikely to be organized on the basis of kinship and friendship. What matters, from the point of view of the producer, are abstract exchange values, not concrete goods or use values. The capitalist firm is, therefore, usually very responsive to changes in the relative profitability of fishing and processing. If the profitability of a particular fishery goes down, the company is likely

to transfer some of its capital to another fishery, to processing facilities, or some other enterprise.

There are some grounds for arguing that nowadays, and for much of recent history, there is only one mode of production, the capitalist one. Practically all production is somehow involved in the world capitalist economy. Some production systems, however, can neither be described as peasant households nor as capitalist firms. In the anthropological literature they are often referred to as 'simple commodity production'. McCay summarizes their characteristics as follows (1981: 2-3):

Their systems of production are based on relatively small-scale, simple technology; work groups organized around kinship, friendship, or temporary collegiality but with little difference between owners and laborers; widespread sharing of costs, risks, benefits, and windfalls; and a variable subsistence/market allocation of production.

Such systems have often been associated with agriculture (see Cook 1982), but they can also be found in whale hunting (Cassell 1988) and fishing (McCay 1981, Russell and Poopetch 1990). The simple commodity producer shares the characteristics of the fishing peasant in one important respect. In both cases family members pool their resources, capital and labour. By pooling available resources the producer safeguards himself against the vulnerability of the business. Market conditions fluctuate, the productivity of fishing differs from one season to another, and the need for labour varies with season and fishing gear. One of the barriers to converting a small family business into a company is precisely the difficulty in responding to such fluctuations, while at the same time responding to the demands of the labour market. Skippers who own boats do not have to pay salaries every week. The absentee-owner, in contrast, must conform to the formal demands of labour unions for immediate payments in order to keep his workers. The extent to which the simple commodity producer is able to draw upon the labour of his family, however, varies with its composition and stage in the development cycle. The skipper-owners who are the most vulnerable are those who have no sons or whose sons are too young to join them.

Simple commodity production, then, is highly adaptive in times of financial difficulties. For the individual producer, it is enough to survive the year and hope for better luck next year. Many skipper-owners form share-holding companies, together with family members, in order to prevent total loss of property in case of bankruptcy. Unlike absentee owners, the capitalists, skipper-owners

continue to invest when fishing ceases to be profitable, but unlike peasant fishermen they do accumulate capital when it is possible to increase returns. Such differences in organisation are likely to correlate with differences in perception of environmental problems. Although the contrast is by no means a stark one, the skipper-owners are more likely than the absentee owners to define environmental conditions as problematic and to take direct collective action to redress the balance.

Fishing And Minke Whaling In Iceland

I now wish to apply the threefold categorization of modes of production discussed above to Icelandic society. During the medieval period, Icelandic fishing was organised on the basis of the household (Pálsson 1991). In the household economy there was always some kind of ceiling on production, as fishing effort was limited by a series of ecological, social and technical factors. This was not an isolated economy, however, without commerce and markets. Indeed, during much of the medieval period surpluses were syphoned off through colonial relations. Timber and handlines were imported as well as other necessities, such as grain, and these could only be obtained by selling household products to colonial merchants. Colonial influence on the Icelandic economy was particularly strong from 1602 to 1787 when Danish merchants monopolised foreign trade with Icelanders. Under this system, the producers were compelled to sell their products to one particular merchant who determined the terms of trade. The right to trade with Icelanders was sold to the highest bidder at auctions in Copenhagen. Access to foreign markets was limited because of Iceland's status as a colony. People could have invested in boats, but capital accumulation was negligible due to colonial relations and restricted markets for fish. The hunting of sea mammals, particularly seals, was a significant part of the Icelandic household economy (Einarsson 1990, Pálsson 1990). Minke whales, however, were seldom hunted because people considered them to be 'good' whales, sent by God to protect humans against 'bad' species of whales (Sigurjónsson 1982: 291). In recent decades, prior to the ban imposed by the International Whaling Commission, Icelandic whaling has largely been organised on the basis of capitalist production. Most of the whales landed in Iceland have been caught by the vessels of a single company (Hvalur, see photo below).In Iceland, independent boat-owners or simple commodity producers sustained capitalist fishing in its initial phase of development at the beginning of the twentieth century (similar observations have been made for other fisheries; see, for example, Breton (1977:130) and McCay (1981)). Boat-foremen often owned shares in their boats together with a local merchant or capitalist. Sometimes the foremen

managed to buy out the capitalist's shares and establish full ownership after a few years of fishing.

Their sons often became crew members while other household members worked at washing and processing the catch. Despite full-scale capitalist development in some sectors of the fishing industry, capitalist relations of production have never managed to fully penetrate Icelandic fishing and the simple commodity producer has never disappeared. Judging from data on patterns of ownership in one fishing community on the south-west coast, it seems that initially (from around 1913) capitalists owned a substantial part of the local fleet while later on there was a gradual increase in fisherman-ownership (see Pálsson 1982: 67). Minke whaling, in particular, has always been the business of simple commodity producers.

The minke whalers operated from several fishing communities, primarily from the northern coast (for a detailed description, see Sigurjónsson 1982). Their boats were fairly small (18.9 ton on the average in 1980), with crews of 2 to 3 men. After 1975, the number of boats was regulated by the Ministry of Fisheries, with licences issued to individual boat owners. Not only was the number of boats subject to control, there was a ceiling on the total annual catch of whales. The whalers themselves decided how to divide the total annual catch among licenced whalers. Each baot was allocated a limited number of whales, a specific quota (see Table 1). Since 1989, the whalers have been organized in a national union.

Year	No. of licences issued	No. of vessels participating	No. of boats taking more than 10 whales
1975*	6	9	4
1976	12	11	5
1977	14	10	6
1978	10	10	7
1979	11	10	5
1980	11	8	7
*In 1975, 10 whales were caught by three unlicenced vessels.			

In the case of the simple commodity producer, the family budget is closely tied to that of the boat, even though the latter may be kept separate on paper to comply with tax laws. Usually, the whole nuclear family, and some neighbouring kinsfolk as well, are engaged in production related to one boat. The wife of the skipper-

owner takes most of the responsibility for running the household while the husband is working irregular hours. Furthermore, she may bait lines, prepare nets, and work in a freezing plant. The wife's earnings may be an important source of additional income, especially if the boat has not been doing well.

If the skipper-owner has one or more sons interested in fishing he may expand his business and buy a larger boat. As the sons of the skipper-owner grow older they are likely to take over the enterprise. If the owner has several children he may sell the boat when he quits fishing, but more often the boat remains the property of the family. Sometimes an expanding company of shareholders is formed at this stage. This has not happened in minke whaling, however, for three reasons. First, government policy restricts minke whaling to small-scale producers (boats under 30 tons). Secondly, family enterprises often split as they expand. While brothers often pool their resources, their cooperation is usually limited to a few years. As they establish their own families, their resources and commitments become different and, consequently, they are likely to have different opinions in matters of investment and maintenance. Thirdly, during fishing trips the symmetrical relations between crew men who are not only brothers but also co-owners of the boat tend to be incompatible with the authority relations between skipper and deckhands.

The income and food provided by one whale boat normally supported 4 to 5 families. The products of the whale hunt were partly consumed by the households of the crew men. Some parts were sold directly by the whalers to local people for consumption, while the rest was packaged and frozen for both domestic markets and export - particularly to Japan, the Faroe Islands and Norway. Minke whaling was usually a summer-activity closely linked to the cod fishery during the winter. After the introduction of the whaling ban, minke whalers have had a hard time. They have tried to compensate for the lack of income from whaling by increasing their participation in the winter fishery. This is not that easy, however. To fully participate in the winter fishery in rough weather on distant grounds would demand much larger boats than applicable to minke whaling. Also, since 1985 the cod fishery has been strictly regulated on a quota basis, and minke whalers are only entitled to minimal quotas, as quota allocation is based on average cod-catches in the past, i.e. in the days of minke whaling (see Pálsson 1982, Durrenberger and Pálsson 1985). Some have become bankrupt and lost their boats, others have managed to survive hoping that the ban on whaling would be lifted in the near future. Minke whalers have found it very difficult to understand why they should yield to a multinational authority that denies them the opportunity to catch

minke whales, while at the same time granting indigenous hunters in some other countries privileged rights of whale hunting. And, indeed, it is difficult to justify such an arrangement. In both cases, the household is the focus of production efforts. Both the indigenous hunter and the simple commodity producer are involved in the a cash economy, both participate in local networks of exchange, and both are anxious to protect the stocks they have used against overexploitation.

Conclusion

To conclude, human production systems differ with respect to social relations. I have emphasised - drawing upon recent developments in economic anthropology - a distinction between three modes of production: household economies, simple commodity production, and capitalist firms. While in some ways simple commodity production resembles industrial, capitalist whaling, and may therefore be regarded as quasi-capitalistic, it also has much in common with household production. Simple commodity production, then, deserves a taxonomic place of its own as a mode of production which is neither fully capitalist nor simply domestic. Minke whaling in Iceland, as I have tried to show, is best described as simple commodity production. Here production is partly geared for the marked, but what motivates the producers is not primarily profit but rather social responsibilities, local committments, and kinship relations.

There are good reasons why one should bother to construct and refine concepts of modes of production, including categories of whaling. For one thing, some kind of conceptual umbrella is needed to appreciate the different ways in which humans appropriate aquatic animals. If anthropology deserves to be called a comparative science, the units of comparison must be established on some logical basis and not just on the grounds that they are traditional. Also, classificatory schemes are often central for resource management and environmental rhetoric, especially with respect to sea mammals. A case in point is the notion of 'subsistence' production employed by the International Whaling Commission, for whom whaling is the privilege of 'indigenous' hunters who do not produce for markets and are, therefore, only minimally involved in the world economy. Such a notion, I have argued, is highly romantic in that it presents indigenous hunters as lay ecologists, as being closer to nature than the rest of humanity. While it may represent charitable motives, it has much in common with the ethnocentric discourse of the colonial past. Humans, whatever their mode of production or subsistence, are simultaneously part of nature and society. Modern policy on animal

rights and the environment should be based on that premise - and not on the idea that humanity, or some part of it, is suspended above nature.

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