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Assembling the Whale: Parliaments in the Politics of Nature

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ABSTRACT *In the field of science and technology studies (STS), much research has been concerned with politics. Nevertheless STS research tends to disregard the work of conventional political institutions such as parliaments, especially in the politics of nature, which is often seen as delegating ‘nature’ to science. Parliaments work on nature-objects through documents; paperwork is crucial in its procedures for delegating an issue to be further worked upon at other sites, for securing the issue’s return and for enabling a decision. This mode of circulating an issue amounts to a central infrastructure for taking nature into account in politics; this infrastructure enables ‘assembling work’ as a specific mode of parliamentary practice. In the late nineteenth century the Norwegian parliament handled a controversy over whaling. New species, questions and publics were entangled with the whale issue through the parliament’s work, its tools and procedures. As such, parliament enabled, worked upon and modified the issue. By assembling the whale issue it performed a politics of nature in rich, complex ways. Hence, understanding the specific site where an issue is taken up is necessary in order to grasp its trajectory and to understand how conventional political sites do politics of nature in practice*

KEYWORDS: parliaments, infrastructures, issue-politics, politics of nature, whaling, documents

Introduction: What Place for Parliaments in the Politics of Nature?

How are environmental concerns and controversial human–nature relations handled? Where, at which sites and by which means? In recent years so-called ordinary political institutions, such as parliaments and ministries, have lost

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some of their former centrality. It has been argued that much of the political power formerly belonging to such institutions has moved elsewhere: at one end of the scale, the institutions of the nation-state have lost ground to forces working on a trans-national or global scale; at the other end, decision-making has been pushed beyond the traditional political sphere to new fora, including the people affected (e.g. Honig, 1993; Beck, 1997; Habermas, 2001; Marres, 2005; Callon *et al.*, 2009).

In short, political power is not assembled in the same places as before. Recent trends in social and political theory have focused on extra-parliamentary political activities and political power *beyond* the state (Rose and Miller, 1992). Within the broad field of science and technology studies (STS) in particular, this has been linked up with a pragmatic approach seeing politics in principle and potentially everywhere (e.g. Dewey, 1927; Latour, 2007). The task becomes to analyse how things and settings are potentially *made* political (Barry, 2001; Asdal, 2014; see also Brown, 2015 for a typology).

As regards the politics of nature, it is even argued that we need new forms of parliaments in order to take nature-objects into account. Latour advocated a ‘parliament of things’—equipped to handle tangled ‘matters of concern’—replacing the modernist binary separating ‘matters of fact’ from the ordinary political business of human values and social relations (1993, 2004). One upshot is the temptation to assume that modern political institutions always try to maintain such a demarcation, and to look for the politics of nature anywhere but traditional sites, such as parliaments.

Instead this article will explore one such site—the Norwegian Parliament (the *Storting*)—while employing analytical resources developed within STS, including the pragmatic approach to politics. We argue that parliaments (and other traditional political sites) merit closer empirical attention, and that this is simultaneously one way forward for a richer understanding of politics—and a richer understanding to which STS can indeed contribute. Moreover, disregarding such institutions misses the role of nature-objects in ordinary political practice. We argue that traditional parliaments have been important sites in the politics of nature; the challenge then becomes to explore *how* parliaments handle such issues and, conversely, how ordinary political sites shape environmental issues. What are the implications for conceptualizing parliaments and politics in STS?

Analytical Perspectives

This article extends an approach arguing that, rather than simply calling for new institutions or looking for politics everywhere, we also need to explore the traditional sites of politics such as parliaments, ministries and offices of administration with new lens. By paying close attention to the ‘little tools’ (Becker and Clark, 2001; Asdal, 2008), strategies and ordinary technologies and offices of politics (Asdal, 2014), we may understand how issues emerge and are modified and

transformed within everyday political procedures (Asdal and Marres, 2014; Asdal, 2015). Hence we may add to Barry's (2001) point about the *work* necessary to produce the political.

Parliaments as Infrastructures

Parliamentary decisions are designed or patterned in specific ways, and can be understood as a form of 'domestication' (Law *et al.*, 2014). In other words, parliaments work by regulating or managing differences in a way which tames or domesticates them, for instance in the final vote cast by representatives elected through carefully constructed procedures. But voting is only one mode of handling difference involved in parliamentary work. Prior to the final voting, an often immense labour by diverse actors has formulated and framed the questions, drawn up dividing lines and included or excluded actors, related questions or materials.

Working from here, this article extends a recent direction of the STS analysis of politics, centred around *issues*, developed from the pragmatist tradition (Dewey, 1927; Lippmann, 1927; Latour, 2007; Marres, 2007, 2012). We contribute to understanding the mutual formation of issues and their publics through a particular *site* and address how the specificities of the site take part in enabling, modifying and transforming issues.

From laboratory studies within STS, one lesson was precisely the importance of paying close attention to a specific setting and its contribution (Latour and Woolgar, 1986; Knorr-Cetina, 1995). However, the analytical tools developed in order to analyse the laboratory setting have been little utilized to investigate the 'conventional' key sites of politics (but see Dányi, 2011; Hull, 2012; Barry, 2013; Law and Singleton, 2014). STS has yet to explore politics with the same degree of empirical attention as it has devoted to analyse science. But this is a promising way forward for a more nuanced and specific understanding of politics in STS—and beyond. This implies that sites are analysed in their own right, and not simply as one side of the science–politics interface or science–politics co-production (Jasanoff, 2004).

But why discuss this in terms of infrastructure? Of course, parliaments can be described and understood through more familiar imagery. Clearly they are institutions, they are arenas for political struggles, and they hold a particular place in normative political theory. 'Common metaphors present infrastructure as substrate: something upon which something else "runs" or "operates"' (Star and Ruhleder, 1996, p. 112, see also Edwards, 2003).

In this paper we employ the term 'infrastructure' as an analytical device. In the tradition of Star and others (Star and Ruhleder, 1996; Star, 1999; Star and Bowker, 2010), infrastructure encompasses more than mere substrate. Infrastructure is a relational concept; instead of a thing isolated from its use, 'it becomes infrastructure in relation to organized practices' (Star and Ruhleder, 1996, 113).

In other words, we are interested in parliamentary arrangements and procedures as an integral feature of parliamentary politics (Palonen, 2014). This

understanding helps to highlight details of parliamentary work that are otherwise taken for granted as mere substrate. An infrastructural approach may also bring us closer to ‘politics as usual’, that is, the ordinary, everyday workings of parliamentary politics. This contrasts with the issue-centred approach favouring the *exceptional* cases where issues and publics emerge because the ordinary workings of administration and politics fail to contain an issue. Furthermore, infrastructure is a helpful term, as it helps us to highlight that politics is very much a material and technical affair—more than programmes, ideologies and ideas.

Finally and not least, these material arrangements are dynamic and debated. Sites and issues emerge and become transformed in intimate exchanges with one another. This goes nicely together with the more fluid concept of infrastructure that emerges from the literature on information infrastructures (Jensen and Winthereik, 2013). We tease out how a distinct site takes part in modifying, enriching (or delimiting) and sometimes transforming issues. When studying parliaments as infrastructures, we simultaneously want to explore how they in turn serve to infrastructure nature-issues.

Assembling by Paper

This paper will focus in particular on one material, or rather material-*semiotic*, site-specific side to parliamentary work, namely documents and paperwork. To take into account how actors encounter ‘nature’, we must take seriously the extent how this happens through documents—that is, in their material-semiotic versions. If we are to understand what is going on with ‘nature’, we need to attend to paperwork (Asdal, 2015).

A series of scholarly contributions have addressed the importance of documents to bureaucracies and the work documents do (e.g. Riles, 2006; Scheffer, 2007; Latour, 2010; Hull, 2012; Ween, 2014; or fail to do, Kafka, 2012). This approach can be traced back to Weber’s (1968) work on the bureaucracy (see also Becker and Clark, 2001). Hull (2012), in his ethnographic study of bureaucracy in Pakistan, works from a material-semiotic approach in his studies of what he calls ‘government of paper’. In a related way, this paper addresses what we call assembly *by* papers: Parliament is a site that crucially works by documents, whereby nature-objects become available to parliament. Approaching parliaments in this way is inspired by the material-semiotic approach of laboratory studies: Latour and Woolgar (1986) pointed out how lab-workers were indeed ‘manic writers’ and that writing and inscription devices, were indeed constitutive to the laboratory setting. Moreover, these inscription devices were that which enabled objects to be set on the move, enabling the movement of nature-objects into lab-rats, samples, graphs, draft papers and finally in the end scientific papers and facts.

In related ways, parliaments are sites for what we call ‘assembling practices’. At these sites, entities are drawn in and set on the move, enabling the circulation of ‘things’—within the parliamentary setting, as well as between parliament and



Figure 1. ‘Assembling work’ as paperwork. The Storting, 1902. Photo: Anders Beer Wilse/Norsk Folkemuseum.

external actors. This document work is simultaneously ‘thing-work’. Here an infrastructure of document flows, everyday rhythms and procedures that simultaneously do modifying work, constantly acts upon the very issues at stake (Figure 1).

Quite concretely then we suggest to analyse parliament, which in Norwegian literally goes under the name ‘The Large Thing’ (*Stortinget*), as a particular version of infrastructure. It is a site where nature-objects are assembled, a site for a politics of things (Latour, 2005). It is simultaneously a site where issues are being transformed in intricate exchange with the rhythms, devices and procedures of ordinary site-specific work.

An Emerging Whale issue in Encounters with Ordinary Site-specific Work

This paper analyses the so-called ‘whale-issue’ which emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century (Johnsen and Tønnessen, 1982). The controversy in parliament lasted so long, involved so many various actors and took so many dramatic turns that it was described as ‘the thirty years war’ (Negotiations of the Storting, hereafter abbreviated NS, 1903-04, Od.td. p. 61).

The whale issue was made possible by the grenade harpoon, whose use was pioneered by the Norwegian Svend Foyn in the 1860s–1870s. This new ‘technology

package', chiefly involving the use of small steamers with mounted cannons firing grenade harpoons, made it possible to hunt rorquals such as the enormous blue and fin whales, whose speed and strength had previously made it unfeasible to hunt them. This technique spread globally, but was developed on the whaling grounds off the coast of Finnmark in the far north of Norway. Even as early as in 1911, the invention was depicted as a 'march of death', passing through all the oceans of the world 'with undiminished force' (Collett, 1911, p. 557). This paper does not narrate the dramatic history of whaling, the sad fate of the large whales or the controversy over the industry—a rich topic in STS and beyond (Blok, 2007, 2011; Burnett, 2012; Kalland, 2012). Here we take the whale issue as the point of departure for exploring 'thing-work' in the assembling work of parliaments, which crucially, we argue, involves 'nature-work'.

In February 1879, a brief document proposing a law banning whaling inside Norwegian waters during the capelin-cod season was put forward to the Storting (NS 1879, Dok. 31, p. 1). This was a so-called private bill—submitted by an individual member of parliament, Christian Andreassen. As the Bill noted, it was common knowledge that in the Varanger fjord in the east of Finnmark a war of extermination had begun against the species of whales occurring there. The common view among the fishermen, the document continued, was that the 'fisheries in the region depended substantially on the presence of the whale, since the whale supposedly drives capelin close to shore'. What needed no explanation, apparently, was the fact that capelin itself was only of secondary interest to the fishermen; the so-called capelin-cod fisheries was one of Norway's most important seasonal fisheries, occurring every spring in the northernmost region when cod in large numbers followed schools of capelin close to shore to feed on them.

In the two-page proposal for a new law, then, in play were three distinct species (the cod-fish, the capelin and the whale) and two opposed ways of living—local fisheries from small open boats, versus whaling with the steam engine and grenade harpoon. The situation was presented as urgent, referring to another company that soon would 'join the slaughter'. Caution warranted regulation, without awaiting the 'result of a possible scientific investigation [or] commission' (NS 1879, Dok. 31, p. 1).

'Out of the Question': Passing on Documents

As a matter of routine, the proposal was passed directly to the permanent committee responsible for questions regarding the fisheries. Already in the mid-nineteenth century, committees were a crucial part of the way parliaments were organized. In the Norwegian case, every member of parliament had a seat in one of the permanent committees, and they often sat on the same committee for many periods. In this way they often developed a thorough acquaintance and experience with the committee's topic, hence they became semi-experts in their fields.

The committee comprised nine members of parliament. Three weeks after the original submission they unanimously declared that bringing the question forward for a full treatment in parliament was 'out of the question'. Their decision, which was formally only a recommendation to parliament, took the form of another written document to accompany the original proposal for a new bill. Following the standard procedure, the document summarized the history and arguments related to the case, for then next to point towards the further course of action for parliament. In case of disagreement, the document would be organized around a majority and minority position which would each add their separate reasoning and proposals. This document is the only formal trace of the negotiations as the committee was (and still is) a non-public space within parliament. Their work and meetings are closed to outsiders, and no minutes or records of the preceding discussions are taken (see further Danielsen, 1964).

For the whale issue, the legislative proposal was dismissed in just three paragraphs. However, it was also noted that the proposal 'bore witness to' how the question had been 'accorded considerable weight among the populace [Almuen] of the district'. Therefore it should be sent to the government for further consideration (NS 1879, Indst.O. No. 14).

Simultaneously, the government sent the Storting committee a letter on the same issue. The ministry reported that, following a request from three local councils, they had commissioned a zoologist to travel and conduct investigations during the upcoming season's capelin-cod fisheries, and judge whether 'said fear could be considered to be founded or not' (NS 1879, Dok. 41). The highest government official of the region was ordered to arrange for the zoologist to have 'access to trustworthy local men, experienced in the fisheries, in order to acquire necessary information about local conditions'. Six letters were appended (the original requests and the ministry's correspondence)—and asked to be returned.

The letter made its appearance in the official records of parliament only 10 days later, when the committee's recommendation was scheduled for debate on the parliamentary agenda. Or, to be more precise, on the agenda of the lower chamber: At the time the Norwegian parliament had a peculiar, 'semi-bicameral' arrangement, where the same assembly would divide into a lower and an upper section (Odelsting and Lagting) for legislative questions only, where proposals would be circulated and amended in sequence, with the possibility of returning to the full assembly for a final vote if agreement had not been reached after two rounds (Danielsen, 1964). But the debate turned out to be brief: the president (speaker) read out a letter from Andreassen, saying he was ill, and requesting the debate to be postponed (NS 1879, Od.td, pp. 22). The chairman of the committee concurred, and took the opportunity to inform the assembly of the letter from the ministry, that had now been printed as 'Document No.41'.

A month later, the case came up again. Andreassen opened the debate by stating that there was 'naturally' no point in trying to argue one's case against a unanimous recommendation. However, he regretted their decision: 'It could not be

unknown to anyone in the assembly' that it was indeed possible for species of whale to become extinct. The reference was to the bowhead whale, now, as the representative put it, 'practically vanished without a trace'. He then added that regulation could well prove to be profitable in the long run, as these animals 'did not breed like flies'. Scientific investigations were 'all well and good', but here it was truly a case 'where the cow is dying while the grass is growing' (NS 1879, Od.td, pp. 497–498).

Scientific investigations would take years before anything could be said for certain. The message was that there was indeed a need to act, even without the help of science. After a brief exchange, the committee's recommendation gained a unanimous vote. The whale issue, with all the documents thus far produced, was sent to the government for further consideration.

Delegating an Issue to Outside Issue-experts

As the Storting in its 1879 session was debating the whale issue, the zoologist Professor G.O Sars had already arrived in Finnmark (Sars, 1879). The procedure of commissioning science in this way could easily be described as applying science as a basis for the ensuing political decisions.

But such an account is also too simple. First, parliament was a precondition for the relevant science in the first place. Professor Sars was already in charge of the 'practical-scientific fisheries investigations', initiated through a proposal to the Storting, and funded from 1860 onwards (Schwach, 2000a, 2000b, 2013). One of the chief aims of these studies, organized as a standing commission, was to gain a better understanding of the great seasonal fluctuations in the fisheries, as a basis to improve them. Hence, fisheries science¹ was developed in close exchange with political institutions—thus exemplifying a distinct science–state nexus (Asdal and Gradmann, 2014)—and in our case in close exchange with parliament.

Already, five years earlier, Professor Sars had investigated the capelin-cod fishery. He had previously put forward a plan to the ministry, repeated in the ministry's budget proposal and later approved by the Storting. Further knowledge of the natural history of the cod, the proposal stated, was a prerequisite for beneficial, practical results, otherwise one would 'act blindly, and easily be led into loose hypotheses and false conclusions' (NS 1871, S.prp 1C, p. 52). The plan initially failed to gain adequate funding by the Storting, but for year 1874, he was granted the necessary research funds through the parliamentary budget documents and could now include travels to Finnmark.

Several letters sent to the ministry the same year expressed fears over harmful influence on the important capelin-cod fishery by Foyn's whaling enterprise (NS 1875, S.prp 1C, p. 56). Sars's report to the ministry refers to these complaints. His own report however, concluded that the whales Foyn caught had 'nothing to do

with capelin' (NS 1875, S.prp 1C, p. 56). A more detailed report to the Academy of Science and Letters in Christiania (present-day Oslo) states:

A point it was urgent for me to clarify, in particular as various parties have voiced fears of the disturbing influence Foyn's whaling could have on our fisheries, was what constitutes the nutrition of this whale species. I had the opportunity to thoroughly examine the contents of the stomach and bowels of freshly caught specimens, and this has convinced me of the strange fact that this colossal animal, the giant of all living organisms, almost exclusively feeds on a small crustacean, hardly one inch long (. . .), often called *Kril* by the local fishermen. (. . .) I therefore have reason to assume that the blue whale has nothing to do with the migrations of schools of herring or capelin to the shores of Finmark. (Sars, 1875, p. 238)

'Giant of All Living Organisms': Its Role in 'the Household of Nature'

The whaling industry, which had been facilitated into being by the authorities through patent grants and legislative changes (see further Johnsen, 1959, pp. 218–222, 367–373), enabled closer encounters with the large whales, previously available only through the occasional stranded whale and observations at sea. But the large whales, this 'giant of all living organisms' was still a 'very little known' creature. The practical-scientific investigations on behalf of the authorities provided Sars with an excellent opportunity to study the whales at the whaling station before their carcasses were processed.

His report to the Academy worked further from earlier descriptions, and proposed that the organism he had been able to examine was the same species as had famously been described earlier (in Sweden by Malm in 1865 who took it to be a completely new species, by Gray in 1847 and others). The report put forward the proposal that the species should be called the blue whale like the whalers did: 'The name currently employed by Foyn for the species in question, *the blue whale*, appears to me very appropriate, and I therefore suggest that this is taken up as the popular term for this species' (Sars, 1875, p. 233). Hence, rather than simply *applying* science to the whale issue, the species were emerging through these investigations, taking part in complicating the issue further by producing new questions and relations.

The delineation of the species by name and diet was not in itself sufficient to clarify the relations between whales, cod and capelin. Sars's commissioned report to the Ministry in 1879 brought forward another way in which the whale could possibly be related to the fisheries, namely its larger role in the fisheries as more of a companion species—to use Haraway's (2003) notion.

'As is known', the report states, 'it was the old notion', that it was the whales, and the whales alone who 'brought capelin and herring close to shore'. The

assumption, the report continues, was that ‘the true purpose of these giants’ was ‘to collect the scattered schools of capelin and herring from the different regions of the ocean, and chase them in a united mass, like a flock of sheep, close to certain regions of the coast’, ‘so that the people there could have their share of the wealth of the oceans’ (Sars, 1879, p. 21). In other words, the whales that in this document-way entered parliament were not simply whales with differing diets. Instead, what was also brought forward was a whale with a specific role in the oceans, or in Sars’s words ‘helpers in the service of providence’.

By the time of Sars’s investigations in 1879, the question of the feeding habits of the whale was already a more complex one. Even if the blue whale did not feed on capelin, others apparently did. The smaller fin whales, Sars could now conclude after investigating their carcasses, were ‘stuffed with capelin’ (Sars, 1879, p. 24)—and hence, the argument for the whales’ having nothing to do with capelin was gone.

Moreover, as much as the report brought the version of the whale as a companion species forward, it was also simultaneously dismissed. According to the ministry’s commissioned report both whales and cod simply *followed* the capelin. What the fish followed was *their own* instinct. As the report stated, it had been ‘sufficiently proven that spring-herring and capelin both by their own instinct migrate to shore at certain times of the year’ (Sars, 1879, p. 22).

However, another but still slightly related role for the whales was put forward, this time related to their assumed role in the great household of nature:

Even if one cannot assume that these animals play the improbable role one previously attributed to them, it is nevertheless beyond doubt that they have their significance in the great household of nature, as they contribute to maintaining the balance that is necessary for animal life in the oceans to keep its present character. Any violent disturbance of this balance will always be a cause for concern, as one cannot know which further consequences will accompany it. (Sars, 1879, p. 25)

The whale it seemed, was about to be modified—from a companion species, to playing a role in the assumed larger ‘household of nature’. At the same time the direct link to the capelin–cod fishery was cut off.

Securing the Return of the Issue to Parliament

But what happens when the issue *returns*, in the form of a written report, to be included in parliamentary procedures and documents? How is the scientific authority that expert reports speak with (e.g. Hilgartner, 2000) handled and encountered within the assembly? This was precisely one of the questions centrally at stake in the whale issue. To get a handle on this, we need to return to the

details of how the report came to circulate and be worked upon through the ensuing document flows and debates as part of the legislative procedure.

Sars's report was printed in 1879 and then officially submitted to the Storting the following year, when it became attached to a government proposition for a new law regulating whaling (NS 1880, Ot.prp 23). It was not included as an officially printed appendix in the collected proceedings of the Storting of that year, but copies were provided along with the law proposal. The formal document also referred directly to the original expert report. The expert report, however, was not simply passively passed over to parliament; instead the ministry initiated its circulation in order to secure and include further comments. These were later to be reprinted in the proposition and presented to the Storting.

First, it was sent to the highest government official in Finnmark, the *Amtmand*, who was requested to 'summon men within the district, who were presumed to be acquainted with the matters in question' (NS 1880, Ot.prp 23, p. 3). Minutes and a statement from the meeting, as well as a long letter from the *Amtmand* himself, critical of Sars's report, were reprinted in the proposition. The ministry further found it 'desirable' to gather statements from scientists other than Sars, and formed an ad-hoc committee of three scientists and a merchant with local knowledge. They submitted a statement that supported Sars, but accorded the fishermen's opinion much more weight, and went further in their recommendations, arguing that 'the authorities should not wait any longer' in setting up restrictions on whaling during the capelin-cod season (NS 1880, Ot.prp 23, p. 8). Sars, in the meantime, had read the critical comments from the region, and submitted a long rebuttal.

The situation brought forward by the document was much more complex than can be accounted for here. However, to make a complex story short, the ministry, after having summarized the various statements, recommended a ban on whaling in Finnmark, between 1 January and 30 May. This was roughly in line, not with the initial expert report, but with the recommendations of the ad-hoc committee. As the year before, the proposition was handed over to the permanent committee. It opens with a customary summary of the history of the issue and the documents handed over to the committee. The proposition from government however, was not the only document the committee was now to consider. The committee had received a string of letters, as well as a telegram from Svend Foyn, attacking the proposal, as giving in to 'chatter', 'prejudice' and 'ignorance' (NS 1880, Dok. 41).

This time the committee was not able to present a unanimous position and the document following their debate was organized around a majority, 7 out of 9, and a minority position. The majority recommended the proposal to be postponed until better information was available. It stated that cautiousness in favour of regulating whaling was valid—in principle. But for this cautiousness to be applied, alleged detrimental effects had at the very least to be plausible and likely (NS 1880, Indst. O.40, p. 122).

The minority position affirmed the government's, adding that 'it could not share the majority's hope' of gaining any significant new knowledge by postponing the issue (NS 1880, Indst. O.40, p. 124). When entering the plenary however, the assembly did not follow any of the two positions that the committee's document put forward. Instead, the plenary took it upon itself to perform what they called an 'experiment' and voted for a temporary law, valid for five years. The temporariness was conceived as an intervention that would act directly upon the complex nature-issue in question. As one representative put it:

I will vote for this law, considered an experimental law; with this ban in these months, one will gain experience of its effects, and only then can one establish whether the ban is absolutely necessary or not. (...) The scientific investigations will, in my opinion, not reach any definite conclusion without at the same time having this ban as its support. (NS 1880, Od.td, p. 409)

According to its proponents, this was indeed a 'large and important experiment'—but an experiment which would only be maintained or pursued if it stood up to 'the trial of experience' (NS 1880, Od.td, p. 416).

In other words, when encountering a complex situation a range of tools were set on the move: First, circulating the commissioned expert report among new publics, including a wider collection of scientists in order to continue the assembling work. Second, considering the different concerns involved and what 'precaution' should, in practice, entail. And finally, enacting parliament as an experimental site—a site where issues could be handled *precisely* because of their complexity and difficulty. This again, is related to the enlisting of a distinct political authority equipped with the capacity to judge all matters, regardless of their complexity, hence to do political work.

Assembling Public Opinion

The 'experiment' did not go according to the plan: No new investigations took place. A year before the law was due to expire, the ministry received a letter from the Amtmand of Finnmark, which stated that 'whaling in Finnmark has in the last 3 or 4 years seen an extraordinary development, previously unimaginable' (NS 1885, Ot.prp 15, p. 2). While there had been two whaling establishments in 1880, there were now 19 at the end of 1884. The letter brought forward demands from a public meeting as well as local and regional councils, to renew a stricter version of the experimental law. This would mean not simply banning whaling inside the Norwegian territory (as was the case in the present legislation), but also the processing of whales caught further out at sea.

The letter was reprinted in a proposed new law submitted by the ministry to the Storting in 1885. Together with the letter was a collection of a series of new

statements, letters and signed petitions, as well as a statistical overview of the catch of whales.

The committee treated the matter very briefly. In a two-page document it was noted that a precise presentation of the issue would be 'limited to copying the [ministry's] proposal' (NS 1885, Indst.O 40, p. 58). Instead of the previous majority and minority positions, the new recommendation was signed unanimously by the committee. The document stated that one 'would not dwell' on a number of factors, explanations and concerns and instead concluded that more than enough was said 'to prove that the time has not yet come to securely settle a permanent arrangement' (NS 1885, Indst.O 40, p. 59). The plenary session also found no reason to dwell. Only two members spoke before the experimental and preliminary law was renewed for another five-year period.

But new demands made its way into the Storting before the five-year period was over. In 1888, 'Document no.77' assembled a complex and indeed confusing series of documents that had been submitted to the Storting, and then sent to the committee for consideration. The committee recommendation, later agreed to in the plenary session, was to pass the documents on to the government. Already the following year, however, another private proposition to further restrict whaling was submitted to the Storting by six representatives. The document stated that they, in representing the region where 'this opinion is dominant', had a duty to do what they could to 'help the expedient solution' of the question (NS 1889, Dok 91, p. 4).

But was the 'opinion' a legitimate actor in issues like these? Precisely this question emerged as an unresolved and contested issue. How could the public opinion be assembled and eventually taken into account? A document produced by the government only a few days after the intervention from the six elected members of parliament, suggested funding a commission to deal more comprehensively with the question.

As this was a matter of funding of a commission, not the regulation of whaling, the issue was this time passed onto a different committee, the budgetary committee. The majority held the main questions as more or less settled, and concluded with recommending only a reduced amount for unspecified 'investigations' (NS 1889, Indst. S 181, p. 494).

However, the ensuing plenary session acted differently. The commission's task must be something else than simply reporting on the 'facts'. The vote was for a commission that would include members from both parties. Its members were tasked to work as a 'commission of reconciliation', invested with a 'particular authority' that could act as an arbiter between the parties (NS 1889, St.td., p. 1791).

The committee travelled around the region, holding public meetings where evidence and testimonies were given in front of the committee (see further Eythórs-son, 1996; Alvestad, 1999). Finally, around 70 pages of edited transcripts of the testimonies and the examination were appended to the ensuing report, which

was delivered to the ministry, and then reprinted as an appendix to a later governmental proposition. The questioning however took a quite different form than simply recording viewpoints. Rather than seeking to more neutrally assemble the public opinion, the committee critically engaged with it; demonstrating what was considered inconsistencies, hidden motivations and superstitious beliefs. The entity that was finally brought back into the assembly was a particular version of a public and its opinion—a backward culture of the fishing communities and a culture of ‘parroting’ each other’s viewpoints. What was demonstrated, according to the committee, was ‘that “[public] opinion” has not yet passed the test as a scientific argument’:

The ‘opinion’ has, as we have seen, become an argument. It has been so repeatedly referred to, that it could almost be called the main basis of all propositions to alter the law of 1880. However, the committee can only accord it little weight on its own, when it has no more solid foundation than guesswork or prejudice. (NS 1895, Ot.prp 13, app., pp. 21–22)

In this way the public opinion assembled on behalf of parliament was simultaneously cut off from acting upon parliament’s decisions. The test as a scientific argument had not been passed. But as we have seen, the ‘opinion’ carried a different weight for members of parliament—one of obligation towards the population they were to represent. The report and its struggles speaks directly to debates over the legitimate role of public opinion in this period (see e.g. Habermas, 1989; Borch, 2012; Thompson, 2013), and warrants an analysis of its own. Here it must suffice to point out how assembling the ‘public opinion’ became integral to parliamentary work—which took part in enacting, enriching and ‘complexing’ the issue.

Expanding the Issue to New Publics and Species

But ‘the public’ is not simply made up by ‘opinions’. The whale committee’s report simultaneously expanded and altered the scope of the whale issue by including new publics by way of a new species—the herring. The whale committee was instructed to expand its investigations in order to take the herring fisheries into account, even though conflicts between herring fishers and whalers had been relatively few. This was not simply about a new species being added to the scientific equation; attached to the herring came new questions, regions and communities.

The herring fisheries took place in areas spread out along almost the entire coastline, for the most part without any whaling. However when the whale committee’s report proposed to lift restrictions on whaling during the herring fisheries, a legislation that had roots back to the thirteenth century, hundreds of coastal communities thus far not involved were defined as interested parties. What followed from the ministry were formal requests to submit their views on the report and

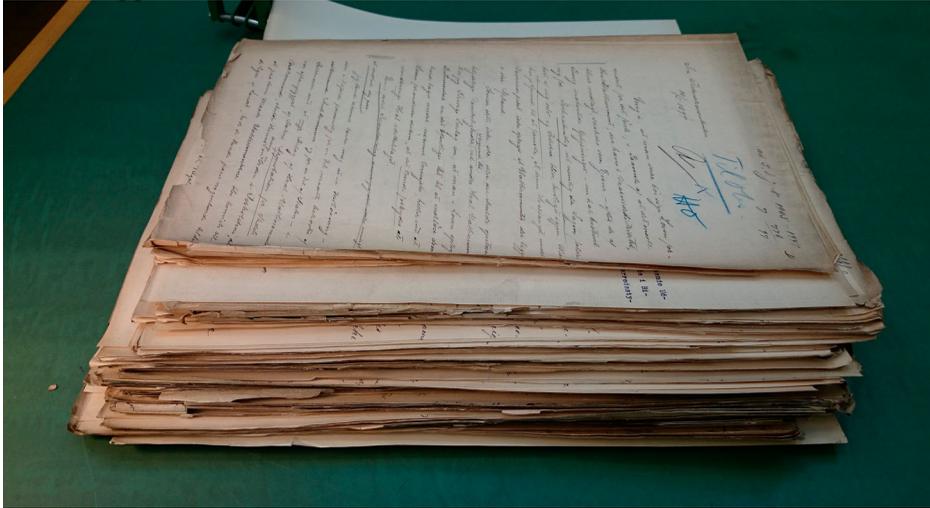


Figure 2. Assembling work: Circulating and expanding the issue. Responses to the herring-question, 1892. Credit: National Archives of Norway, RA/S-3997/D/Dd/L0050.

the proposed regulations, thus enabling the whale issue to circulate among hundreds of new local assemblies and officials. Then next, their statements were drawn together and printed in the proposition submitted to the Storting for decision (NS 1895, Ot.prp 13). Hence, the whale issue was extended from a regional issue, to an issue belonging to a substantial part of the fishing population of the entire country (Figure 2).

For the herring fisheries, the whales were a distinct kind of companion species (Haraway, 2003). Included in the ensuing government proposition to the Storting in 1895 were reports about statements from experienced fishermen:

For next to all of our fishermen, herring and whales are two inseparable concepts—if the whales don't arrive, telling of herring, the herring will also be absent, one stubbornly believes. Seemingly incredible notions of the necessity of whales for the migration of herring still prevail, but this much is certain: if some day we saw no more whales, this would be sorely missed by the herring fishermen—their venture is already hazardous enough, without having to search at random. (NS 1895, Ot.prp 13, p. 20)

The ensuing legislative process carefully assembled the herring fishers who were now actively solicited in order to consider the prospect of a diminishing stock of whales, which they feared would leave them clueless as to where the schools of herring could be found. Hence, as regards the herring, the whale was perceived as a helper in a more concrete sense than in the capelin–cod fisheries. When it came to protecting the whale, the herring fishers aligned themselves with the

cod fishers in the North. In other words, the interconnected assembling practices of parliament and government actively took part in expanding the issue, and with it, the involved publics.

The Rhythms of ‘Thing-Work’

Statements from the local councils were briefly summarized in the proposed law in 1895—in appendix 9, to be more precise, compressing more than 200 statements down to 16 pages. In total, when counting the report from the whale committee, also appended separately, the ministry’s proposal amounted to around 250 pages, compared to the 2-page original proposal in 1879. The sheer amount of documents made the issue hard to handle in a parliament constantly pressed for time. The committee simply noted that ‘as one has not yet had the time to take this extensive issue under consideration’, and further due to the parliamentary session being close to its end for the year, it suggested the issue be postponed, unanimously agreed to in the plenary session. A new law was indeed passed the following year, but the issue was by no means closed.

In March 1900, the ministry submitted another document to the Storting—this time not a proposition for a new law, but rather an explanation of how it was handling a continued series of propositions, demands and statements it had received about the whale issue. These had in part already been debated in the Storting, but then passed over again to the government (NS 1899-00, Ot.md 1). Somewhat surprisingly, in the concluding paragraph, a new species makes its appearance: the harp seal. The ministry had received several reports about the devastating effects on the fisheries by increasing masses of harp seal migrating west from Russian waters, amounting to a ‘seal invasion’. The ministry had concluded that before any measures were decided on, scientific investigations should be undertaken, and these ‘after conference with Dr. Hjort, could be taken up with the whale-investigations’.

Hjort was the new leader of the practical-scientific investigations after Sars and had been able to secure funding by the previous session of the Storting for the building of a new steamboat for use in the investigations. The whale issue had been listed as one of the questions a steamer would help solve:

Anyone, upon closer consideration, will have to admit how hopeless, yes, one could almost say pathetic, a scientist is situated in the waters of Finnmark without a proper vessel. While in a boat with two men and his little tools he attempts to fathom the ocean, the whalers steam by (...) If the *state* wants master these questions on the basis of true *knowledge* and not simply through the *opinions* of the interested parties, the question must be studied *throughout the year*. (NS 1898–99, S.prp 82, p. 6, original emphases)

Hence, the whale issue was again delegated to practical-scientific investigations, this time including seals. Again, parliament would await another report that would again enter the document circuitry of the ministry, which would compile a collection of assessments, recommendations and statements before it could then possibly return to the Storting as a proposition for whaling legislation.

However, waiting was not the only option for parliament. The yearly budgetary debates relating to the practical-scientific fisheries investigations provided an opportunity to press the issue. But this was a controversial approach, as members of parliament criticized the strategy as a waste of the assembly's precious time to raise an unprepared issue when debating the budget:

Why can we not in this case wait until all documents have been presented before us, that would make the assembly, whose members have no personal experience or insight in these matters, capable of forming an opinion on them? (NS 1901–02, St.td, p. 962)

In other words, the assembly practices were intimately tied to the thing-work; the rhythms of parliamentary work demanded its own pace. Nevertheless, the expert reports, statements and opinions were the tools through which the assembly could form an opinion of their own, reach their decisions and do their political work. As we have seen, rather than contain the issue, the documents entangled the whale with a growing number of publics, species and communities. But importantly, decisions *were* reached while the questions regarding science and facts remained open. However, simultaneously, the whales themselves were disappearing, or as one elected member of the assembly put it:

It may even seem unreasonable to bring up the whaling issue, when one, as happened to me when bringing it up in one of the ministries, is met by statements such as this: 'Why speak of a ban on whaling? The whales have ensured their own ban; they are soon history along our coast'. (NS 1900–01, St.td, p. 1659)

For the fishermen, the rhythms of parliamentary work were in tension with the seasonal fisheries and the whale issue as this was lived and experienced locally. Within parliament selected members of the assembly therefore constantly sought to push the issue beyond the customary procedures in order to align these conflicting rhythms. This tension became even more urgent in the years to come, as extra-parliamentary political mobilization challenged the legitimacy of parliament's decisions—which even took part in altering the composition of the assembly itself—finally leading to a ban on whaling in 1903.

The issue we have traced relates to important lessons from the literature on infrastructure (e.g. Star and Bowker, 2010). Assembling work and paperwork is much more than 'silent background'. Infrastructure is not neutral: The

parliamentary procedure for assembling an issue and enabling a decision acted both as a condition of possibility and an obstacle for the fishermen in their efforts to have their concerns resolved in parliament.

Conclusion: Nature-Politics as an Ordinary Part of Parliamentary Work

We opened this article by asking where to look for the politics of nature, and argued that traditional political institutions merit a closer empirical analysis. The whale issue shows how a national parliament worked actively upon the questions, species and publics involved—rather than delegating nature-objects to scientific experts. This has implications for two important, related images of politics in STS.

First, analysing parliamentary work adds a crucial dimension to the approach to politics in STS. The pragmatist approach to politics generally sees issues and publics emerge in the exceptional cases where the ordinary workings of administration and politics fail. Although the Norwegian whale issue was highly controversial, and in many ways indeed exceptional, it nevertheless stayed part of parliamentary procedures and practices for more than 20 years, decisively shaping the scope and the issue itself. The dynamics of the whale issue became inseparable from parliamentary procedures as a key site or infrastructure.

This implies that conceptualizing politics simply through stages of issue- trajectories misses important dimensions of politics in practice. Latour (2007) lists five distinct stages of an issue: emergent unintended consequences of new associations, the formation and materialization of a public around this issue, the taking up of the issue in the formal political system and administration, public deliberations, and finally routine handling by administration. From the analysis of the whale issue, we see how these aspects are rather at play simultaneously; they shape one another, and they find their places in the particular rhythms and timeframes of the very setting: The site itself; parliament, often in intimate exchanges with government, took important steps that formed new publics, connected to new questions and investigated new associations.

Second, the whale issue case diverges from the image of political institutions in Latour's work on the modern constitution (1993). Parliament is not only a strictly ordered and procedural site; it is also an *experimental* site. The Storting assembled the whale issue. It performed nature-politics, rather than simply delegate 'nature' to science. Hence, the unfolding of the whale issue diverges from a diagnosis of a modern politics unable to deal with nature-objects. Species, their interrelations with communities, interests, concepts of nature and political ideals all confronted one another.

The shared lesson from these two points is simple: The infrastructures of ordinary political work profoundly shape how issues emerge, are circulated, investigated and acted upon. This role is easily missed by formal conceptualizations of politics if not balanced with detailed empirical studies. In its material-semiotic

specificity, the *setting* is an integral part of political work that must be taken into account, in similar ways to what the laboratory studies have shown for scientific work. Hence this paper has argued for a site-specific approach to the study of politics, especially through ‘thing-work’ and ‘assembling work’ as conceptual tools for exploring politics in practice. Moreover, even when analysing tense controversies, a study should take into account the ordinary procedures which are often seen as the silent background of political work.

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¹ ‘Fisheries science’ is a simplification when applied to the period in question, used here to denote a combination of disciplines employed for investigations oriented towards questions pertaining to the fisheries, such as oceanography and basic zoological investigations, see Schwach (2013).

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