

FAROESE PILOT WHALING IN A COSMOPOLITICAL WAR

A study on political ontologies, multinaturalism and eurocentrism

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ABSTRACT: This article examines the controversy surrounding Faroese pilot whaling (grindadráp) through the lens of political ontologies, encapsulating how differing worldviews shape the interpretation of pilot whaling in the Faroe Islands, and what implications these have for local-global dynamics and cultural sovereignty. By comparing Faroese perspectives of subsistence, cultural sovereignty, and sustainable local governance with activist framings of animal rights and global ecological protection, the article highlights the clash between multinaturalist and eurocentric “One World World” ontologies. The findings suggest that the conflict extends beyond debates on sustainability, revealing deeper struggles over authority and the right to define ethical relations with nonhuman life.

KEYWORDS: pilot whaling, tradition, political ontology, eurocentrism, anthropomorphism.



Introduction

On September 24, 2024, The Great Escape Festival, the premier festival for emerging music in the UK, announced via Instagram that they would sever their partnership with the Faroe Islands as their lead country partner (The Great Escape Festival, 2024). This decision was prompted by criticism from the Sussex Dolphin Project (SDP), which condemned the traditional whaling practices (known as “grindadráp”) of the Faroe Islands (Sussex Dolphin Project, 2024). The partnership was part of a collaborative effort with Faroe Music Export (FMX) to promote Faroese musicians such as Æggrasoppar and Joe & The Shitboys, both of whom have earned international acclaim (Faroe Music Export, 2024). Previous collaborations between the festival and FMX had established the partnership, which was now under scrutiny. The Sussex Dolphin Project’s claim was that FMX engaged in “artwashing”, using Faroese music exports in attempt to distract from the negative international media coverage surrounding pilot whaling.

The case of Faroese pilot whaling is significant as it embodies a deeper conflict between global environmental advocacy and local cultural practices. This case highlights how multiple ontologies ascribe varying values to natural resources based on historical, social, and economic contexts. By investigating this topic, I hope to gain insights into how cultural practices can become battlegrounds for larger ideological wars and what this means for balancing tradition, environmental ethics, and global responsibility. In this case study I want to examine the conflict through the lens of political ontologies, seeking to understand the deeper cultural and environmental stakes at play. The primary research question guiding this analysis is: How do differing worldviews shape the interpretation of pilot whaling in the Faroe Islands, and what implications do these have for local-global dynamics and cultural sovereignty?

This case study draws on the article “Love-iathan, the Meat-Whale and Hidden People: Ordering Faroese Pilot Whaling” by Benedict E. Singleton (2016), which frames the conflict as a “cosmopolitical struggle” involving two opposing systems of ordering. Singleton’s approach is useful

for understanding how cultural practices and environmental ethics intersect in the debate. Additionally, statements from The Sussex Dolphin Project and comments by Fríði Djurhuus, the lead singer of Joe & The Shitboys, provide empirical material for assessing different perspectives. Key theoretical insights from the course are drawn from Marisol de la Cadena's work "Uncommoning Nature", which discusses the anthropo-not-seen and OWW (one world world), which John Law defines as a hegemonic metaphysics that assumes there is only one objective reality – being the Western – a colonial imposition that erases or subordinates other realities (Law 2015). To further discuss the OWW, I engage with the work of professor of anthropology Tania Murray Li, "What is Land? Assembling a Resource for Global Investment," which highlights how resources gain value through socio-cultural processes. Lastly, I will briefly touch on Emily Yates-Doerr's text "The world in a box? Food security, edible insects, and 'One World, One Health' collaboration", where I shall discuss the edibility of whale meat.

Local governance and ecological protection

Li's notion that resources acquire "resourceness" through social, cultural, and economic assemblages is essential for understanding the Faroese perspective on pilot whaling (Li 2014). For the Faroese, *grindadráp* is more than a resource; it embodies cultural identity, sustenance, and local governance (Singleton 2016). Anti-whaling groups, by contrast, frame whales as part of a global ecological system that should be protected, reflecting divergent values surrounding nature and animal rights. Recognizing these different "assemblages" of meaning regarding whales could help both sides understand the cultural and economic stakes involved. Li's analysis of "inscription devices" like statistical data, maps, and regulations could relate to how anti-whaling groups use media and graphic documentation (images, videos) to make the Faroese whale hunts visible and morally questionable on a global scale (p. 594). These devices often frame whaling in terms of animal rights and ecological health, aiming to shift the perception of whales from a local resource to a protected global asset. Conversely, the Faroese use their own devices, such as communal gatherings, education on sustainable practices, and local regulatory frameworks, to legitimize whaling within their cultural context. The ethical debate over the "right manner of disposing things," as discussed by Li, frames

the conflict as a question of authority (p. 591). Who has the right to decide how whales should be treated, as a cultural and nutritional resource or a protected species? This framing leads to larger questions about the rationale behind resource regulation, and the tensions between local autonomy and global norms (which can be key to understanding the Faroese desire to retain local control).

Anthropomorphism plays a significant role in shaping public perceptions of whales. As Rowley (2018) notes, animals perceived as intelligent, social, or capable of empathy are met with greater sympathy. Whales, known for their complex communication and social behaviours, are often anthropomorphized, creating a stronger emotional connection with humans. This contrasts with livestock animals, which are typically met with moral disengagement and thus evoke less public empathy (Camilleri 2020). Media portrayals and advocacy campaigns amplify these biases, influencing public opinion and policy. In the statement released by the SDP, the *grindadráp* is portrayed as a “medieval practice” that has “*no place in an ethical and progressive society*” (Sussex Dolphin Project 2024). This claim positions SDP within the modernist activist movement, as they portray whaling practices as incompatible with contemporary ethical values. They argue that “*Tradition can no longer be excuse for the barbaric massacre of animals*” as this conflicts with environmental stewardship (ibid.). This, however, leads to further debate on whose authority it is to define what is considered ethical or acceptable.

Resistance to external values is a recurring theme in Li’s work and is echoed in the Faroese response to anti-whaling activism. Friði Djurhuus, the frontman of Joe & The Shitboys, encapsulates this sentiment in a popular Instagram post, which circulated among Instagram users, by pointing out that replacing traditional whaling with imported industrial meat does not offer a sustainable or ethical alternative (Djurhuus 2024). His argument challenges the selective moral focus of global environmentalism, questioning why Western nations, such as the US, which leads in oil and beef production (Reuters 2024; Ritchie 2017), are not subjected to similar boycotts. It also frames the importance of recognizing the limitations and potential backlash when global norms conflict with local customs. He challenges critics to “*compare the grind to what’s going in your backyard*” (Djurhuus 2024). Friði’s statement offers an aggregate of opinions and assertions expressed by critics of anti-

whaling groups, such as biologist Bengt Holst which states that the *grindadráp* is no different to what happens in other abattoirs and therefore not permitted the immense global criticism (Thomsen 2015). In 2015 the Faroese political party Tjóðveldi (republican separation party), campaigned for the upcoming election with a draft bill for a Faroese constitution, as a replacement to the current Danish constitution (Floksskrivstovan 2015). In the proposal Tjóðveldi highlighted the “fundamental right to kill pilot whales”, which demonstrates the importance of *grindadráp* in the continuation of a Faroese national and cultural identity. Thus, the *grindadráp* practice symbolises the Faroese separatist struggle against Danish rule.

Singleton’s analysis of pilot whaling highlights the clash between Faroese Pro Whaler (FPW) actors and the anti-whaling activist group Sea Shepherd Conservation Society (SSCS) (Singleton 2016). The FPW view *grindadráp* as a lawful, sustainable practice integral to Faroese heritage and livelihood. It supports local food security, reinforces cultural identity, and is regulated to ensure minimal suffering. Proponents argue that the practice is a form of resistance against globalization and the imposition of foreign values preserving a connection to local resources and reinforcing Faroese identity. (Many Faroese people, including government officials, see whaling as a right backed by national autonomy within the Kingdom of Denmark, with *grindadráp* considered a purely Faroese matter.) SSCS, on the other hand, frames *grindadráp* as an unethical assault on marine life and opts for direct action to prevent it. Their confrontational tactics are intended to raise international awareness and frame the practice as a “barbaric” and “sadistic” act that must be stopped (Singleton 2016: 37). The killing is performed in a glass abattoir; a spectacle in which the locals take part or stand by and witness, utilized by the SSCS and appealing to global audiences through powerful visual and emotional storytelling, illustrated in the picture with bloody waters and emotive text (p. 29).



This argument points to the selective moral outrage that prioritizes certain animals like whales, dolphins, and elephants over others, based on perceived intelligence, social complexity, and emotional behaviour. Whales have sophisticated communication skills, live in family pods, and exhibit behaviours interpreted as empathy or mourning, making them relatable to humans, who project human-like qualities onto them. Public perceptions are shaped by media portrayals and advocacy that highlight these traits, fostering empathy and a sense of responsibility. Conversely, animals used for food, such as cows, receive less sympathy as their behaviours are less

anthropomorphized and society rarely portrays them as individuals with complex lives (Rowley 2018). Valentina Crast, second in command at Sea Shepherd Denmark, asserts that there is no need for pilot whale consumption in a modern globalized world, and that the hunting is therefore only for entertainment purposes (Thomsen 2015). She states that the *grindadráp* is a barbaric and unnecessary act of violence against the ocean's ecosystem and points to the same barbaric acts committed in other commercial abattoirs. The whales serve an important role in the ocean's ecosystem, which the Faroese people disturb. She emphasises the difference between the slaughter in commercial abattoirs and the *grindadráp*, where commercialized meat-animals are production animals and do not affect the surrounding ecosystem (ibid.). This argument does however disregard the considerable methane emissions in the meat and dairy industry (Foodrise/Friends of the Earth/Greenpeace Nordic/IATP 2025). Crast highlights the importance of a healthy ecosystem and simultaneously enacts the ecocentric ontology of anti-whalers. Captain Alex Cornelissen, CEO of Sea Shepherd Global, denotes the same nature-centred system of ordering:

“Considering the times we are in, with a global pandemic and the world coming to a halt, it’s absolutely appalling to see an attack on nature of this scale in the Faroe Islands. [...] If we have learned anything from this pandemic is that we have to live in harmony with nature instead of wiping it out.”

(Sea Shepherd 2021)

Alex Cornelissen expresses deep respect for nature and the earth. In his statement, nature is personified and sacralised, where “the attack on nature” evokes imagery of violence, implying that nature itself is a moral subject deserving protection. This reflects an ecocentric environmental ideology, common in Western activist discourse, where nature’s purity is contrasted against human exploitation. However, this also works a discursive move that universalizes Western environmental ethics, while implicitly “othering” local, culturally embedded practices like the *grindadráp* – a moral framing positioning the Faroese as “perpetrators” of ecological violence, while Sea Shepherd assumes a universal moral authority over what counts as right or natural.

Archaeological findings prove that people in the Faroe Islands have hunted pilot whales for food since the Viking Age, with official records dating back to 1584.¹ This long-standing practice is seen as a vital component of cultural heritage and food security. FPW actors view pilot whales as a sustainable local food resource, embedded in Faroese culture and heritage. They assert that the *grindadráp* practices are scientifically managed and regulated, with government oversight and measures in place to ensure minimal suffering (Singleton 2016: 29). This is however a relatively recent change in the organization and execution of the practice, as described in the folk ballad *Grindavísan*², it was a rather ruthless and violent affair.

48. Hård var striden og kostede blod,
her kunde man få at vide,
at Færøs drenge med mandemod

¹ Whaling.fo: “450 years of statistics”.

² The old Faroese folk ballad *Grindavísan*, was translated from Faroese to Danish by the Danish bailiff Christian Pløyen and published in Copenhagen in 1835.

- tør gå i kampen og stride.
49. Til grinden iler med glæde enhver;
det rinder ingen i tanke,
at mellem døden og ham der er
ikkun en skrøbelig planke.
50. Hisset knuses en båd med brag,
den fyldes med blodigt vand;
her får en mand et vældigt slag
og bæres, som død, på strand.

The ballad recounts the warlike nature of the *grindadráp*, as practiced before modern regulations, similarly depicted in the painting below. The chaotic watercolour brush strokes portray the bloody ocean during a hunt, hence successfully conveying the fragility between life and death during the struggle. The picture also portrays the men as a swarm of shadowy figures, looming over the whales, symbolizing death and suggesting that this is a slaughter. At the same time, man, boat, ocean and whales flow into one another in Mikines' brushstrokes, becoming hard to tell apart, illustrating that man and nature are inseparable.



*Sámal
Joensen-
Mikines,
1942,
painting,
Watercolor
over pen and
brown ink on
yellow paper.
Statens
Museum for
Kunst,
Copenhagen*

The massive critique of *grindadráp*, solicited the Faroese people to reflect on the execution of the practice, and for the better, as it incited legal changes to and regulations on the practice to ensure minimal suffering. FPW proponents argue that this tradition respects the natural cycle of resource use and is no more harmful than industrial livestock farming (Singleton 2016: 35). They see SSCS's stance as imposing foreign values and misconceptions onto Faroese society, especially given that international industrialized nations contribute more to ocean pollution than localized whaling does, and view the SSCS ordering as "*ethnocentric cultural imperialism*" dependent on emotional and irrational thinking (p. 36). The clash reflects a broader cosmopolitical struggle between differing worldviews, one rooted in global environmentalism and animal rights, and the other in local cultural traditions and sustainable resource use, reflecting the multinaturalism ingrained in the conflict rather than multiculturalist views (Blaser 2005: 11). Multinaturalism represents a challenge to the Western notion of nature as a singular, objective reality, that can be scientifically proven and factual. It instead emphasizes the importance of acknowledging different perspectives and lived experiences, rather than promoting a single, universal truth. The multinaturalist understanding deviates from the multiculturalist understanding that "*refers to the modern ontological assumption that multiple cultures are more or less partial perspectives on a single nature or reality.*" (p. 15).

As Singleton notes, the two groups draw on different systems of ordering, deviating vastly from one another (Singleton 2016). The SSCS ordering deems *grindadráp* to be highly unnecessary in 'civilized' Europe and claims it to be preventing the Faroe Islands from taking part in the 'modern world'. The 'crisis ontology' of the SSCS is clearly stated as a SSCS member says "*We view the whales the same way we would view a human: that to kill a whale is murder. I have the same reaction if someone were to attempt to kill you: I would interfere*", which supports the notion of anthropomorphizing of whales (p. 33). Ólavur Sjúrdaberg, head of the Grindamannafelag (the official pilot whaling committee) says:

"Tað skal vera ein mønustingari, sum er gjørdur eftir tekning, og sum lýkur ávís krøv, so at vissa fæst fyri, at hann hevur tað rættað sniðið sum tryggjar, at hvalurin verður avlívaður skjótt og pínuleyst."
("It must be a spinal lance, produced according to specific dimensions, that passes certain safety

regulations, to ensure it has the right design guaranteeing that the whale is killed quickly and painlessly”) (Bertholdsen 2013).

As demonstrated in the quote, the FPW’s exhibit profound respect for, and around, the whales during the *grindadráp*, as the ocean envelops them in the same way as the cetaceans, consequently making it vital for survival and sustenance in the harsh subpolar climate. In the Faroe Islands it is a part of cultural practices to hunt birds and whales, raise sheep and catch fish, which the economy currently relies heavily on³, in the form of industrial fishing. These practices have been foundational and life sustaining for the Faroese people consequently representing the self-sufficiency of the culture. The precariousness of living in the Faroe Islands has for centuries made *grindadráp* essential for survival as it is, and always has been, a free food source, although not bearing the same essential role today. Today it remains as the only food resource that is not monetized or commercialized, where all people will receive their share if they wish, even if they do not participate in the killing. As Singleton points out, *grindadráp* mitigates the precariousness of living in the North Atlantic Ocean (p. 29). Following centuries of becoming-with pilot whales, they are not considered superior or inferior to other meat-animals, but as a natural food resource necessary for subsistence in the precariousness of the Faroes (ibid.).

While the SSCS claims that there is not enough sufficient data on long-finned pilot whales surrounding the whale population and sustainability (Singleton 2016: 35), the North Atlantic Marine Mammal Commission (NAMMCO) claimed that *grindadráp* is inconsequential to the whale population. There seems to be no successful outcome, as it becomes clear to me that this conflict lies deeper than a difference of opinion or practice. It constitutes a political ontology, which Mario Blaser defines as “*the conflicts that ensue as different worlds or ontologies strive to sustain their own existence as they interact and mingle with each other*” (Blaser 2009), which consequently creates dysfunctional interactions between the groups. A FPW says “... *we apparently seem to be living in two different worlds. The urban culture trying ... to impose their point of view to the Faroe Islanders.*

³ The fishing industry accounts for majority of export in the Faroe Islands, fluctuating between 81-99%, 96,8% in August 2025 (Hagstovan).

... *[telling] us how we shall live in the Faroe Islands.*" (Singleton 2016: 33). The FPW's remark demonstrates the political ontology in its whole. The opposed systems of ordering are "living in two different worlds", constructing a political ontology turning into a cosmopolitical war. As described by Crast and Cornelissen, the anti-whaling ordering is founded in an ecocentric ontology as opposed to the anthropocentric ontology of the FPW's – as defined by Crast (Thomsen 2015). However, this definition doesn't account for the self-sufficient ontology that underpins Faroese whaling practices. *Grindadráp* enacts the self-sufficient Faroe Islands as an ontological world in which human, animal, and environment are interdependent rather than oppositional. The practice does not merely represent a means of subsistence but performs an ordering of life that ties community, ecology, and identity together. Within this framework, whales are not simply resources or protected species but part of a relational system that sustains both material and social reproduction. Thus, the Faroese ontology resists external ecocentric classifications by asserting a locally embedded cosmology of balance and reciprocity, where whaling becomes an act of belonging rather than domination.

Uncommoning the Faroese ocean, my predecessor

The term "commons" traditionally describes shared resources (like forests, rivers, or knowledge) that communities manage collectively for mutual benefit. "Uncommoning" highlights the processes that break apart these communal relationships, often through privatization, commodification, or state intervention (De la Cadena 2015). Such interventions have been successfully executed by the SSCS and other environmental organizations since the 1980's, which have gained an audience around the world, creating a whirlwind of critique and backlash on pilot whaling in the Faroe Islands and the Faroese culture (Singleton 2016). Uncommoning points to the systemic and institutional forces that alienate people from shared resources and communal practices. For instance, when indigenous lands are seized for industrial development, the communal and cultural bonds tied to those lands are eroded (De la Cadena 2015). Uncommoning often criticizes the historical processes of colonization and capitalism that transformed commons into private property, sidelining local or indigenous practices of collective care and governance. In essence, "uncommoning" is not just about the loss of shared resources but also about the loss of shared practices, knowledge systems, and relationships

that sustain ecological and social balance. Marisol de la Cadena analyzes these (local-global) dynamics in her text “Uncommoning nature”, which she illustrates through the struggle between the Awajun-Wampis indigenous group and the police force, taking place in northern Peru, where the indigenous group protested oil extractions. The conflict is a clash between worlds; between what is seen as real and what is *not seen*. This is what she calls the anthropo-not-seen, a world-making process that isn’t made through the human-nonhuman divide dictated by the eurocentric OWW but rather focuses on what is *not seen* in the anthropocentric separation of nature and culture and serves as a direct criticism of the anthropocentric ordering (ibid.). The same uncommoning seems to be the case for the Faroese ocean and cetaceans, where a loss of *grindadráp* practices is a loss of shared practices, knowledge and relationships for locals. The immense criticism from environmental organizations, tourists and other spectators does not solely result in a loss of resources, but also creates boycotts of the Faroese culture, production and other commodities.

In their text “The world in a box? Food security, edible insects, and ‘One World, One Health’ collaboration”, Emily Yates-Doerr states: “*what is non-toxic for most, might still be deadly for some*” (Yates-Doerr 2015). This highlights the complexity of the OWW notion and questions Eurocentric worldmaking. Following multinaturalism, multiplicities in food consumption will manifest, which is the case for many indigenous groups. Whale meat being no exception. However, due to ocean pollution and climate change, whale meat is contaminated with mercury, PCB and other toxins, and consumption of whale meat is therefore under dissuasion (Heilsufrøðiliga starvsstovan 2011). The SSCS considers whale meat inedible because of moral reasoning and claims it to be just as bad as committing child abuse, rape or serial killing. The FPW and Faroese anti whalers, on the other hand, may find whale meat unfit to be a qualified food source because of the contamination. The discrepancy between the arguments highlights the political ontology in the struggle between the groups.

A member in the leadership of the Peruvian indigenous group Awajun-Wampis affirms that “*The river is our brother, we do not kill our brother by polluting and throwing waste on it*” (De la Cadena 2015). He exhibits kinship with the river and acknowledges it to be more than non-human (De la

Cadena 2014). He is grateful for the water the river gives him and cherishes it as it is his own predecessor. The human defines the river as much as the river defines the human, hence one cannot be without the other, human cannot be without non-human. In this co-becoming, the river is not only non-human, and the Awajun-Wampis is not only human. The animism portrayed contrasts with eurocentric world-making and highlights differing systems of ordering between the colonizer and the colonized. Animism is often misunderstood or undervalued within eurocentric frameworks, with the colonized being unfairly characterized through stereotypes that position them as "other" or in need of change. Similarly, Faroese culture is sometimes viewed through an external lens that labels it as unusual or in need of adjustment, reflecting a lack of appreciation for its intrinsic values and practices.

Conclusion

This case study illustrates a broader cosmopolitical struggle between global environmentalism and ecological protection, and local cultural sovereignty. The analysis demonstrates that competing systems of ordering around resources, in this case whales, can lead to deep-seated conflicts over values, rights, and representation. While the Faroese view *grindadráp* as an essential cultural practice embedded in sustainability, anti-whaling groups argue from a standpoint of ecological protection, conservation and animal rights. The opposed systems of ordering seem to agree on sustainable ecological protection, however the question of correct sustainable practice and nature governance arises in this political ontology. The analytic approach, drawing on political ontologies and resource assemblages, underscores the importance of understanding both perspectives in their respective contexts. Future analyses could explore alternative frameworks, such as postcolonial perspectives, to further examine power dynamics, climate crisis and stakeholder visibility in these debates



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