

Cultural Violence, Stigma and the Legacy of the Anti-Sealing Movement

Danita Catherine Burke

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At the heart of hardline anti-sealing activism is a strategy of stigmatization to both dissuade individuals, business and countries from association with anyone or anything connected to the practice of sealing and to justify and normalize behaviours, actions and attitudes against targets of anti-sealing activists and their supporters. To unpack the relationship between cultural violence, stigmatization and activism, the chapter first introduces the concept of culture. This sets the stage for the examination of the implications of breaking down the meanings and practices of a group through stigmatizing and alienating them, which can lead to the possible destruction of a group's cohesion by making group members fearful of, and threatened against, openly expressing or participating in the activities and beliefs that are central to the fabric of the group's identity.¹

Culture and Cultural Violence

Broadly speaking, culture can be understood as “a system of meanings and practices that are transmitted and maintained over time by a group of people” and it “shapes individuals’ understandings of the world and the self, enabling them to interact with others and the environment in ways considered appropriate by the group” (Kashima 2010, 164). However, culture is a fuzzy concept because “[m]eaning are a subjective part of culture that constitutes numerous beliefs, evaluations, expectations, ideas and various rules” which are shared and understood by a group of people (Kashima 2010, 164). Due to the fuzziness of culture, there are individuals and entities that argue that culture should be abandoned based on the belief that culture is “an obstacle for scientific progress” (Causadias 2020, 310). This idea that culture is a hindrance, and should potentially be eradicated because it is in the way of scientific progress is illustrated in a response to an op-ed piece about the impact of the anti-sealing movement on remote Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities in the Canadian Northeast written by this book's author.

An individual responding to a 2021 op-ed on the impact of the anti-sealing movement on sealing communities and families in coastal communities in Canada argued vehemently against sealing culture. The individual even went

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so far as to state that Inuit are not “fully human” if they retain and practice sealing. The individual went on to state that sealing is “some stupid, irrelevant and moronic ‘traditional’ life style” because in their view:

How many cancer scientists are never going to pick up a test tube or write a paper cos [*sic*] they are living impoverished and patheitic [*sic*] lives to provide seal fur to rich women to wear? How many rocket scientists [will] never see a rocket engine, how many virologists are up to their armpits in seal guts instead of working on a vaccine?

The individual’s argument is that the world must stop seal hunting and other “noble savage” traditions because in their view to stop sealing is a net positive for the world because: “They [Inuit] deserve better than terrible homes in frigid and near uninhabitable environments, they should literally be moved and retrained for their own good and futures” (reader comments made in response to Burke 2021b).

According to Johan Galtung (1990, 291) cultural violence means that the “aspects of culture, the symbolic sphere of our existence – exemplified by religion and ideology, language and art, empirical science and formal science (logic, mathematics) – that can be used to justify or legitimize direct or structural violence”. In the literature on the circumstances that result in forms of cultural violence, which at its most extreme can result in cultural genocide, common themes emerge in how situations unfold, and the mentality of individuals is expressed, that ultimately result in experiences of cultural violence. These themes include that: violence is typically unidirectional; violence tends to be inflicted against people identifiably different from the inflictors; perpetrators often believe that they are morally justified in their actions; for those experiencing the violence, there is a degree of immobility for them which means that those attacked cannot move elsewhere to continue their existence as a cohesive cultural group; and those perpetrating violence against a target group make an effort to assimilate their targets into their way of viewing the world (e.g. Belsky and Klagsbrun 2018; Campbell 2009; Kingston 2015; also see Burke 2021b, c).

The study of violence is about “the use of violence and the legitimatization of that use” (Galtung 1990, 291). The literature on cultural violence has evolved from the wider body of literature on cultural genocide, starting with Robert Lemkin and his struggle to get cultural genocide recognized as an issue beyond the overarching term (physical) genocide in the post-Second World War development of human rights laws (e.g. Novic 2016; Payam 2016; Berster 2015; Kingston 2015). Cultural genocide is “the destruction of those structures and practices that allow the group to continue as a group” (Truth and Reconciliation Report 2015). Since Lemkin’s introduction, recognition of cultural genocide as a concept and the factors that lead to it have grown. As recognition of cultural genocide has grown the term has evolved to reflect a gradual shift in thinking from a focus on tangible cultural heritage, such as monuments and art, toward

the inclusion of intangible elements of culture such as languages and traditional practices (e.g. Belsky and Klagsbrun 2018; Mullen 2020).

There is an emerging body of literature dedicated to case studies of cultural genocide and cultural violence that explore the most extreme forms of cultural violence that escalate to cultural genocide in recent memory. The most prominent examples in the literature are the experiences of Indigenous peoples whose children were forced into residential schools run by states and religious organizations in many areas of Canada and Australia resulting in thousands of deaths and attempts at assimilate children through the destruction of Indigenous languages and the prevention of the passing on of Indigenous Traditional Knowledge (e.g. Kingston 2015; Mahoney 2019; Paquette 2020; van Krieken 1999). There is also the example of the ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia which encapsulated cultural violence leading to cultural and physical genocide (e.g. Novic 2016; Mullen 2020; Berster 2015). Both of the above examples that are frequently associated with cultural genocide and acts of cultural violence in current literature focus on the state and state-supported actors as the central perpetrator(s) of violence. Traditional political actors such as states and organized religions continue to dominate the case study explorations of cultural genocide and cultural violence. This book posits that more contemporary actors like environmental and animal rights organizations can also act in ways which inflict and encourage cultural violence and contribute to circumstances that can result in cultural violence being inflicted by third parties persuaded by their narratives, arguments and worldviews.

While this book does not argue that the anti-sealing experiences of fishers/sealers, their families and communities in Newfoundland and Labrador, or other rural and coastal non-Indigenous sealing societies in northeastern Canada, reach the threshold of cultural genocide yet, it does argue that acts of cultural violence have been, and continue to be, experienced as a result of anti-sealing protesters and the organizations leading the cause. There appears to be an underpinning desire by some protesters to suppress the province's cultural and economic sealing practices that are embedded in the traditional Newfoundland and Labrador society, especially those associated with non-Indigenous peoples. Furthermore, the cultural violence being experienced by Newfoundland and Labrador sealers, their families and communities has been normalized and ignored by many academics, mainstream media and activists. The normalization and ignoring of cultural violence has occurred through the repetition of activist narratives and actions and the wilful blindness of media outlets, politicians and authority figures to the harms being inflicted and experienced by rural and coastal communities and their peoples.

According to Johan Galtung,

To some, this [siege/blockade (classical term) and sanctions (modern term)] is “non-violence”, since direct and immediate killing is avoided. To the victims, however, it may mean slow but intentional killing through

malnutrition and lack of medical attention, hitting the weakest first, the children, the elderly, the poor, the women. By making the causal chain longer the actor avoids having to face the violence directly ... meaning the loss of freedom and identity instead of loss of life and limbs. (1990, 293)

As this book illustrates, cultural violence is insidious because it “makes direct and structural violence look, even feel, right – or at least not wrong” (Galtung, 1990, 291). Anti-sealing protesters have illustrated, as this book will show, that they are skilled at presenting direct and structural forms of violence against rural and coastal sealers, their families and communities as a net positive for the world (e.g. Felsberg, 1985; IFAW, n.d.).²

Stigmatization as a Tool of Cultural Violence

The process of stigmatization is a key way in which environmental and animal rights organizations have approached issues and topics that they seek to shame and devalue to justify their position against an “other” and convince people to support their cause and methods of pursuing it. The stigmatization process is central in a lot of activism because at the heart of activism is a competition for moral legitimacy.

Moral legitimacy is socially constructed by giving and considering the reasons for justifying certain actions, practices, or institutions ... audiences can assess an organization’s moral legitimacy by evaluating ... outputs and consequences (doing the rights things), techniques and procedures (doing things rights), categories and structures (the right organisation for the job), and leaders and representatives (the right person in charge of the tasks).

(Liu et al. 2014, 635)

Moral legitimacy is the primary form of legitimacy that activist organizations claim to possess as they present themselves as operating on behalf of the common good (Baur and Palazzo 2011, 584; Marberg et al. 2016, 2737–8).

The repercussions of a lack of perceived moral legitimacy can hinder an actor, such as an environmental or animal rights organization, because they are tied to the idea that they help to “point out problems in society and give a voice to the marginalized, and this ‘moral voice’ is what strengthens their legitimacy” (Puljek-Shank 2019, 7). Therefore in the pursuit of a cause, environmental activist organizations must find ways to establish and maintain a perception of moral legitimacy for their attitudes, actions and the outcomes of their lobbying and advocacy amongst their core supporters and desired audiences for their messaging because moral legitimacy is “the most meaningful type for judging the legitimacy of NGOs” (Baur & Palazzo 2011, 584).

Though stigma can have both negative and positive forms (Page 1984), typically stigma and stigmatization are viewed as having a negative connotation. Pescosolido and Martin (2015, 91) define stigma as “the mark, the condition, or status that is subject to devaluation” whereas stigmatization is “the social process by which the mark [of stigma] affects the lives of all those touched by it” (Page 1984, 16). Stigma is often associated with negative connotations and results when actors label others in a derogatory way to brand them as “deviant and undesirable” (Connor 2014). The attribution of a stigma can also be used to convince audiences that actors, places, things or issues “possess (or are believed to possess) some attribute, or characteristic, that conveys a social identity that is devalued in a particular social context” (Crocker, Major and Steele 1998, 505, as quoted in Blodorn & Major 2016).

Thornicroft et al. (2007, 192) argue that “stigma refers to problems of knowledge (ignorance), attitudes (prejudice) and behaviour (discrimination)” and “is a mark or sign of disgrace usually eliciting negative attitudes to its bearer”. Stigma can lead to negative discrimination and “is sometimes but not always related to a lack of knowledge about the condition that led to stigmatization” (Thornicroft et al. 2007, 192). Though there are variations in the definitions of stigma in academic literature (Link and Phelan 2001, 364–5), Thornicroft et al.’s (2007) definition of stigma in the context of people dealing with mental health challenges encapsulates key notions of stigma that are important to remember when discussing the concept and its implications in the context of this book: stigma typically has a negative connotation; there are risks associated with the discrimination for those who become stigmatized; and stigma often results from a stigmatizer’s lack of knowledge.

Another important dimension of stigma to consider when discussing both stigma and its ties to cultural violence is that behind the attribution of stigma are the motives of a stigmatizer. According to Link and Phelan (2014, 25) “whether it is to keep people down, in, or away ... we might expect people to use power to achieve the ends they desire ... stigma is frequently the power mechanism of choice”. For instance, Phelan et al. (2008) identify three broad ends that people can achieve through stigma.

In the first, exploitation and domination or “keeping people down,” wealth, power, and high social status can be attained when one group dominates or exploits another ... In the second, enforcement of social norms or “keeping people in” ... Stigma imparts a stiff cost that can both keep the norm violator in and serve as a reminder to others that they should remain in as well ... In the third, avoidance of disease or “keeping people away” ... The evolutionary advantage of avoiding disease might have led to a more general distaste for deviations from any local standard for the way humans are supposed to look or carry themselves leading to

a strong desire to stay away from people who deviate with respect to a broad band of physical or behavioral characteristics.

(Phelan et al. 2008 as discussed in Link and Phelan 2014, 24–5)

Link and Phelan argue that “[w]hen people have an interest in keeping other people down, in or away, stigma is a resource that allows them to obtain [the] ends they desire”. Link and Phelan refer to this resource as “stigma power” which they discuss as “instances in which stigma processes achieve the aims of stigmatizers with respect to the exploitation, management, control or exclusion of others” (Link and Phelan 2014, 24).

Link and Phelan draw upon the work of Bourdieu and symbolic power to make their case about the connections between stigma and power. They point out that “[f]or Bourdieu (1987) symbolic power is the capacity to impose on others a legitimized vision of the social world and the cleavages within that world” (Bourdieu 1987 as paraphrased in Link and Phelan 2014, 25).

Indeed Bourdieu argues that:

What is at stake in symbolic struggles is the imposition of the legitimate vision of the social world and of its divisions, that is to say, symbolic power ... the power to impose and to inculcate [teach] principles of construction of reality, and particularly to preserve or transform established principles of union and separation, of association and disassociation already at work in the social world such as current classifications in matters of gender, age, ethnicity, region or nation, that is, essentially, power over words used to describe groups or the institutions which represent them.

(Bourdieu 1987, 13–14)

The struggle for the imposition of a legitimate social world vision is important to recognize to better understand stigma and the interconnectedness of the concept with instances of cultural violence. This is because “cultural distinctions of value and worth are critically important mechanisms through which power is exercised” and stigma is a form of symbolic power because “stigma represents a statement about value and worth made by stigmatizers about those they stigmatize” (Link and Phelan 2014, 25).

Since the 1980s, non-governmental organization (NGO) advocacy has risen, as has the number of NGOs (Collingwood 2006, 440; also see Dhanani and Connolly 2015) with growing involvement in politics and policy-making (Vedder 2007, 1; also see Jenkins 2012, 460). Advocacy is the effort to change institutions, actors and policy and is “based upon policy analysis, research, and the channelling of information” (Hudson 2001, 333). According to Betsill and Corell (2007, 2), “[d]espite mounting evidence that NGOs make a difference in global environmental politics, the question of under what conditions NGOs matter generally remains unanswered”. One big issue at the centre of

discussions about NGO influence focuses on legitimacy with questions such as: “Who do they represent?” (Hudson 2001, 331; also see Ossewaarde et al. 2008).

Awareness about the growing power and impact of activists is on the rise, and as a result, debate over non-governmental organization conduct and the legitimacy of undemocratically elected entities to claim to represent large segments of society and have a significant impact on policy and the lives of vulnerable peoples are being questioned. Questions about non-governmental organizations’ legitimacy arise in part because these political actors operate from the basis of moral preferences (Baron 2001) and they are not directly accountable to the public despite impacting the daily lives of people and “wield[ing] power in ways similar to governments” (Vedder 2007, 7). NGOs use threats and their private potential to harm actors to push for change. The potential to harm can be achieved through activities such as boycotts, naming and shaming, and cyber-activism (Daubanes and Rochet 2016, 1). With such power to impact peoples’ lives, it is therefore incumbent upon us to question how NGOs work and achieve their outcomes and the role that strategies like stigmatization and the normalization of forms of violence play in their effort to shape society’s moral preferences.

Notes

- 1 In this book sometimes you will see the words “non-violent”, “nonviolent”, “non-violence” and “nonviolence”, depending on quotes and sources referenced. This is something to note as according to Baldoli and Radaelu (2019, 1166) the hyphen is significant in the nonviolence literature (see Sharp 2005) as the hyphen is often viewed as a demarcation of mindset toward the concept of nonviolence. Baldoli and Radaelu observe that those that tend toward the use of the hyphen are often associated with viewing nonviolence as merely the absence of violence. The specialized literature on nonviolence, however, often using the spelling “nonviolence” rather than “non-violence” because “nonviolence” has positive properties beyond the refusal to not use violence (Baldoli and Radaelu 2019, 1166; Sharp 2005).
- 2 IFAW states on its website that in response to the Government of Canada raising seal hunt quotas in the 1990s, the organization “knew we needed to do more than just raise awareness. So we partnered with European politicians to implement a European ban on all seal products. And we worked to defend this ban when it was challenged by Canada and Norway at the World Trade Organization. Once that ban was in place, the number of Canadian sealers dropped by 90 percent” (IFAW, n.d.). Unacknowledged in IFAW’s declaration, for example, is that EU ban is based on “moral concerns regarding seal welfare” rather than scientific evidence, for example, about the survival of the species (World Trade Organization, 2014) and the IFAW statement does not acknowledge that Canadian Inuit, as represented by the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, are against the EU ban that IFAW pushed for and have denounced the WTO ruling (Nunatsiaq News, 2013; World Trade Organisation, 2014). Additionally the idea is presented by IFAW that a 90 percent loss of sealers in Canada is inherently good. IFAW does not acknowledge or give value to the cultural, economic and societal repercussions that a rapid 90 percent loss of active sealers would have on the cohesion of cultural groups with strong ties to sealing, its members and community structures.