

THE USELESS ARCTIC: EXPLOITING NATURE IN THE ARCTIC IN THE 1870s

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Near the beginning of *I May Be Some Time: Ice and the English Imagination*, Francis Spufford traces an image of the Arctic repeated by very different authors. Contradictory in a way typical of imagery of the Arctic, it presents a place both devoid of and teeming with life. Barren land exists side by side with oceans full of marine animals and air full of birds. What is made of this contrast depends however on the author concerned. Spufford shows how Arctic travellers like William Scoresby or Edward Sabine, writing at the beginning of the 1820s, describe the Arctic life of birds in terms of material use and of scientific specification (Spufford 1996, 8–9). The natural historian Thomas Bewick, also writing in the 1820s and basing himself on Sabine, attempts to see this plenitude of birds in the Arctic as a geographically distant and unknown niche within a larger system, suggesting a proto-ecological understanding of the Arctic (Spufford 1996, 9–14). Bewick, Spufford underlines, must make use of the imagination to understand this connection between niche and system (Spufford 1996, 12), and he also activates a related aesthetic category, that of the sublime. Finally, the novelist Charlotte Brontë, writing in the 1840s, lets her heroine Jane Eyre read Bewick as a gateway to sublime, albeit domesticated fantasies of the Arctic (Spufford 1996, 11–14). Spufford sums up:

Sabine simply records bird-life. Bewick wonders at the generosity of nature that allows life to exist abundantly in desolation. Brontë, abandoning the marvel of the glaucous gull, points to the life that the pole can have in a desolate mind, integrating it, not into an ecosystem, but into the systems of images by which a person helps or harms herself. She shows, like Sabine and Bewick, that the Arctic has a place in the world of life; she conveys, enormously changed, the same astonishment that the polar wastes are connected to life we recognize. (Spufford 1996, 14)

Thus Spufford demonstrates how several different British authors, writing within the space of three decades, produce different though connected images of the Arctic, according to their respective points of departure. Moreover, their images represent different hegemonic discourses of our relationship to nature. Significantly, the position sketched out for Sabine corresponds to one of the three approaches to nature singled out by Gísli Pálsson (1996): the “orientalist”, which differentiates between nature and human, and is based around a dynamic of exploitation (as opposed to a “paternalist” form of protection, which also differentiates between nature and the human). Bewick, with his emphasis on a global, ecological connection between the distant Arctic and more familiar climes, represents the potential for Pálsson’s third approach, the “communalist”, focussing on mutual dialogue and relation, questioning

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the divide between nature and culture. Brontë's approach would in Spufford's presentation be categorized as orientalist insofar that nature is outside the human, but exploitation is here purely symbolic.

With different images of the Arctic, different Arctics emerge. Spufford provides a further key when he points to these positions as being determined by distance, i.e. by the way they negotiate the relation between points of origin and the Arctic (Spufford 1996, 12), suggesting that culturally differentiated attitudes to the Arctic may be regulated by perceived separation from the Arctic (cf. Keskitalo 2002). Whereas Spufford draws on British examples, we will be looking at two countries which are geographically very differently placed in relation to the Arctic. Our main example, Austria-Hungary, is a case in point, being seen as distant from the Arctic and a surprising base for such a significant expedition as that of the Austro-Hungarian Arctic Expedition (1872–1874). In the Austrian reception of this expedition, the source of most of the material we will be examining here, the Arctic is mainly seen as a symbolic resource. In contrast, our other example, Norway, which lies closer to the Arctic, shows a more mixed approach in its reception of the same expedition, emphasizing a more material perspective. Most importantly, Spufford sheds light on a subtle shift from a geographical to a mental landscape. Exploitation goes from being material to being symbolic. Perhaps this more symbolic approach in the Austro-Hungarian context was precisely a solution to the conundrum of being a “non-Arctic Arctic nation”.

The Austro-Hungarian Arctic Expedition had discovered land in the Arctic in 1873, naming it Franz Josef Land, and was met with huge popular enthusiasm, expressed through celebrations and immense media coverage across Europe after their return to Vardø at the northeastern periphery of Norway in September 1874. We are particularly interested in the approaches the Austrian print media employed to describe the Arctic in the wake of the expedition's return. Our analysis emphasizes the importance of symbolic capital as central to relations between a colonialist European sphere and a partly inaccessible Arctic. Even when the Arctic is seen as too dangerous, too remote or even too useless to exploit in material terms, it can still be exploitable on a symbolic level. Building on previous work on the cultural and political reception of the expedition (Schimanski and Spring 2015), we suggest that the Arctic could function as a symbolic resource for national or state identity formation and that different images of nature in the Arctic indicate different ways of legitimizing such symbolic exploitation. Moreover, we argue that this Arctic symbolism was structured by a series of paradoxical ambiguities that made possible transformations from one approach to the natural world to another. This article contributes to an understanding of how a more ecological perception of the Arctic could come into being.

Although our findings concern the nineteenth century, they have relevance to discussions of the symbolic dimension of present-day appropriation of the Arctic. Today we see activists, states and corporations attempting to use the Arctic either as an ecologically protected space or as a space of natural resource exploitation. As Keskitalo has suggested, much of the political discourse about the Arctic in the present recycles older images in an uncritical way (cf. Keskitalo 2002, 20–23), and it is thus important to trace the genealogy of such discourses and interrogate the

conditions which brought them into being and helped to maintain their symbolic power.

Arctic Competences

The polar regions were embedded within different discourses of relevance in the 1870s. A central topic for nineteenth-century seafaring states was the question of who owned Arctic competence (Ryall et al. 2010, x-xi). This ran parallel to a growing competition over economic resources, technological advancement and scientific knowledge between nations and states in Europe and North America. Moreover, with the political map changing or being challenged as the result of nation-building processes, the Arctic could function as a space of projection for articulating desires and wishes for the future of the nation or the state.

Whereas Canada, the Nordic countries and Russia had both economic and symbolic interests in the Arctic, with the polar regions increasingly becoming part of their respective national or state identities (Piper 2010, 8), for Austria-Hungary the Arctic was primarily of symbolic importance. As we have shown elsewhere, the expedition could be used as a symbol of unity in the multicultural monarchy of Austria-Hungary, where movements for more national autonomy existed parallel to the wish to tie the various peoples closer to each other (Schimanski and Spring 2015, 224–31). One of the aims of the Austro-Hungarian Arctic Expedition was to contribute to scientific knowledge, and since science was considered to be disinterested *per se* and to contribute to the progress of the world in general, the expedition could also be used to communicate to the outside world that Austria had taken part in an idealistic endeavour with no apparent benefits for Austria-Hungary itself. In Norway, the idealistic focus of the expedition was acknowledged, but could be complemented by a more materialistic interest in new knowledge which could be used in the on-going exploitation of Arctic bioresources. As we will show, the Arctic was thus discussed from different angles in the two countries, with Norway mixing mercantile and idealist interests, while in Austria idealism dominated.

The different approaches in Norway and Austria-Hungary also had consequences for the imaginings of the nature in the Arctic. In Austria, descriptions of the landscape and fauna of the North and Franz Josef Land were mostly based on the symbolic forms fiction and fantasy, with only a few efforts being made to relate them directly to the daily space of experience of the Central Europeans. In Norway, mercantile interests and the fact that some of its citizens had the Arctic as their working place, led to more profane descriptions, with a focus on the Arctic as an economic resource.

The two attitudes were also reflected in the media coverage of the expedition after their return from the ice. Speeches held at the banquet in Bergen welcoming the explorers on their return emphasized the relevance of scientific expeditions for the opening up of more hunting areas in the North.¹ Schoolmaster and politician Ivar Chr. S. Geelmuyden argued that geographical contiguity gave Norway an Arctic competence: “Our land lies as an advanced post in the polar sea, our landsmen, especially from the northern parts of the country, are indeed the most energetic and

¹ Cf. “Bergen den 21de September,” *Bergensposten*, 22 September 1874.

bravest navigators of these inhospitable and cold regions [...].”² Johannes Ziegler, a correspondent of the Viennese newspaper the *Fremden-Blatt* who had travelled to Kristiansand to meet the polar explorers on their way home from the Arctic, praised the Norwegian population for their understanding of the expedition as being relevant for science and the exploitation of the sea,³ implying that science was seen as a very material concern in Norway. Norwegian skippers on hunting expeditions in the Arctic were often portrayed as being pioneers on behalf of scientific exploration.⁴ But Arctic competence and geographical nearness could also have a symbolic, nation-building function in Norway. At the celebration in Tromsø of the Norwegian participant of the expedition, polar captain Elling Carlsen, schoolteacher Thorkild Olsen Fosse symbolically claimed the North Pole for Norway in his allegorical speech on the Norwegian flag, with the white part of the flag symbolizing “the white carpet over the North Pole’s icy regions. It is a reminder that the flag that is flown by those so sturdy seamen, who have already carried the praise of Norway from out of the Arctic ice wastes and spread it across all civilized nations, has a rightful claim to be the first of all nations’ flags to sway at the North Pole.”⁵

In Vienna however, any practical use the expedition might have was seldom mentioned, and idealist ideas such as heroism, sacrifice, and progress dominated. Nature in the Arctic had to serve these ideals. In this discourse, the Arctic was a space where human progress could be proven and executed; it became a laboratory for Austrian heroism and idealism, more a means for something and less something which existed in and for itself. We suggest that the horrors of the Arctic helped underline this argument: An environment as fiendish, challenging and little known as the Arctic was a necessary precondition for this discourse, as only in such an extreme situation could a “true” Austrian self emerge and be tested (Schimanski and Spring 2015, 451). Accordingly, the Arctic had to be represented in a way that confirmed this image of natural dangers and obstacles.

For journalists in Vienna it was taken as given that the newly discovered land was of little practical use in terms of economic capital. Expedition co-leader Julius Payer contributed to this image of the Arctic as useless by writing in a newspaper article that “[t]he vegetation is highly inferior to that of Greenland, Spitsbergen and Novaya

² “Unser Land liegt ja wie ein vorgeschossener Posten wider das Eismeer da, unsere Landsleute, besonders der nördlichen Theile des Landes, sind ja seit Jahren die eifrigsten und kühnsten Befahrer dieser unwirthlichen und kalten Gegenden, [...]” “Bergen, den 19. September,” *Bergensposten*, 20 September 1874. (German in original.)

³ j. z., “An Bord des ‘Finnmarken’, auf der Rhede von Christiansand, 21. September,” *Fremden-Blatt*, 25 September 1874.

⁴ Cf. “Bergen, den 19. September,” *Bergensposten*, 20 September 1874; Stellar, “Polarfahrten,” *Deutsche Zeitung*, 5 September 1874, Morgen; Dr. Joseph Chavanne, “Oesterreichs Nordpol-Expedition,” *Neue Freie Presse*, 19 September 1874, Morgen; “Bergen, 21. September,” *Bergensposten*, 22 September 1874.

⁵ “det hvide Dække over Nordpolens islagte Egne. Det er en Erindring om, at det Flag, der føres af saa kjække Sømænd, og som allerede har baaret Norges Ros ud af den arktiske Isørken og spredt den ud over alle civiliserede Lande, har en retfærdig Fordring paa at være det første af alle Nationers Flag, som vaier ved Nordpolen.” “Tromsø den 28de Oktober 1874,” *Tromsø Stiftstidende* 29 October 1874.

Zemlya, and in this respect there is perhaps no poorer country on Earth.”⁶ The image of the barren and useless Arctic prevailed in newspaper reports,⁷ with very few exceptions, such as when financial journalist Theodor Hertzka pointed out the potential practical usefulness of the land in terms of hunting and of acquiring new navigational and meteorological knowledge.⁸

However, the symbolic use of the new territory as cultural capital was frequently emphasized in the Viennese papers. Most importantly, the expedition represented a counter-image of Vienna and Austria, which at the time were in the midst of an economic depression and had suffered military defeats against Prussia in the recent past. The explorers’ success offered a more promising image of the future than reality seemed to have in stock. Indeed, as we will show, a perception of material uselessness was central to the symbolic importance of the Arctic in Austrian eyes. An idealistic world without material benefits could be contrasted to the materialistic world of Central Europe. In line with this logic, when a group of politicians submitted a motion for financial support of the explorers to the Diet (provincial assembly) of Lower Austria in September 1874, their justification was the idealistic orientation of the expedition and its significance for the future of Austria as a modern state. The explorers were “not driven by fame or avarice or a vain thirst for adventure, but rather by the most noble of sentiments”.⁹

The fact that the discovery of Franz Josef Land in 1873 coincided with the stock exchange crash in Vienna helped underline this argument. The effects of the crash led to a downturn in the world economy which was to be felt for many years. As the *Presse* put it, at the same moment that the “world, which had built itself on illusion and sand” had collapsed, “the following words sounded out in the furthest North, on board the *Tegetthoff*: Land! Land!”¹⁰ The constant movement and instability of sand was implicitly contrasted to the stability and endurance of a new-discovered land in the shifting ice. The material world had been revealed as a sham, and heroic and scientific ideals could emerge as an alternative for the future. The expedition represented an alternative to an Austria marked by economic failure. It showed a way out, no longer through a focus on the material aspects of life and on local interests, but on how to contribute to the betterment of humankind (Schimanski and Spring 2015, 98; 173; 352–54).

The focus on the idealistic character of the expedition also helped legitimize an expensive expedition, which after all had not achieved most of its aims and had little to show in terms of significant scientific results. The expedition ship, aiming at exploring the north of Siberia and possibly the as yet untraversed Northeast Passage had only a few days after leaving Tromsø in August 1872 been caught in the ice and

⁶ “Die Vegetation steht tief unter jener Grönlands, Spitzbergens und Nowaja-Semljas, und in dieser Hinsicht gibt es vielleicht kein ärmeres Land auf der Erde” (Payer 1874, 4).

⁷ Cf. e.g. –rh–: Feuilleton. Franz Josefs-Land. *Fremden-Blatt*, 13 September 1874, Morgen.

⁸ Dr. Th. H . . tz . a., “Unsere Nordpolfahrer,” *Neue Freie Presse*, 6 September 1874, Morgen.

⁹ “nicht von Ruhm oder Geldgier oder eitler Abenteuerlust getrieben, sondern von den edelsten Gefühlen,” “Niederösterreichischer Landtag,” *Wiener Zeitung*, 16 September 1874, 889.

¹⁰ “Welt, die auf Schein und Sand sich aufgebaut hatte”, “erscholl es im fernsten Norden vom Bord des ‘Tegetthoff’: Land! Land!” “Wien, 24. September,” *Die Presse*, 25 September 1874.

drifted to the north-west instead, leading to the unexpected discovery of Franz Josef Land. Moreover, when the men had to decide to abandon the frozen ship in the ice and embark on foot and by boat to Europe, they could only take with them a limited selection of scientific samples and notes (Berger et al. 2008, 371–75). Franz Josef Land could here function as a physical symbol of the expedition's success in spite of these failures. This differed from the perception in Norway, where knowledge of the Arctic had obvious practical consequences for daily life and expeditions such as this one had a certain legitimacy from the outset. The successful return of the Austro-Hungarian expedition was accordingly used in Norway as an argument for funding future Norwegian polar expeditions.¹¹

Ambiguities of the Viennese Arctic

In the Viennese media discourse, the Arctic was presented in form of ambivalences: empty/full, beautiful/dangerous, known/unknown, scientific/literary etc. As we will show, there was a constant gliding back and forth between the binary poles of these oppositions, and the resulting ambiguities helped reinforce the Austrian discourse of heroism and idealism and continuously translate the language of materialism into that of idealism. Occasionally, such shifting significations could also create alternative approaches to nature in the Arctic.

The perceived emptiness of Franz Josef Land as a space devoid of human settlement meant that a topos of peaceful conquest could be applied, and associations with self-interested colonialism could be forestalled. The notion of scientific idealism as opposed to military conquest played an important role here. The Viennese newspaper *Die Presse* wrote: “The jubilation with which we receive our polar explorers thus pertains to a victory for idealism [...]. To risk one's life for such victories, to fight for such victories, is to exact the recognition of the whole world, is to secure world-wide fame.”¹² The frequent use of military metaphors – in this case “victories” and “to fight” – helped communicate the importance of the expedition to the Austro-Hungarian public. In this discourse, military expansion in wars was seen as negative, whereas expansion and the conquest of “empty” lands in the name of science was considered positive (Schimanski and Spring 2015, 374; 474–75). As Stephen A. Walsh has recently pointed out, the expedition helped establish a perception of Austria's specifically scientific altruism in not pursuing colonial aims, a perception which he sees as covering up not only the extent to which Austria enjoyed the mercantile benefits of European colonialism, but also how the discovery of Franz Josef Land could be used to bolster Austria's standing in the world (Walsh 2015, 152–56; cf. Schimanski and Spring 2015, 351–52; 392; 448–50).

While the topos of the empty Arctic helped confirm the image of the disinterested and peaceful Austria, the contradictory topos of the full Arctic could be used to

¹¹ “Idet ‘Tromsøposten’ finder det hævet...,” *Bergens Adressecontours Efterretninger*, 26 September 1874.

¹² “Der Jubel, mit welchem wir unsere Nordpolfahrer empfangen, gilt daher einem Siege des Idealismus, [...]. Für solche Siege das Leben einzusetzen, solche Siege erkämpfen heißt der ganzen Welt Anerkennung abnøthigen, heißt sich Weltruhm sichern.” “Wien, 24. September,” *Die Presse*, 25 September 1874.

strengthen a heroic image of the Austrian explorers. Nature had to be conquered and obstacles overcome. Mountains blocked the view to the North, moving ice hindered the progress of the men on their way home, and weather conditions made geographical mapping difficult. The *Fremden-Blatt* evoked a “desperate struggle with the most dreadful forces of nature”.¹³ In most cases, the topos of the full Arctic referred to images of nature (Friedrich von Hellwald’s image of the Arctic as “swarming” with ships of various nationalities was an exception¹⁴). The presence of animals such as polar bears filled the Arctic with danger and was seen as a visible and concrete proof of the men’s heroic achievements. Hence, the fact that the polar explorers had killed 67 bears during the expedition was frequently commented on.¹⁵ Robert G. Davis points out that in nineteenth-century Great Britain polar bears served to illustrate the invincibility of the Arctic; an invincibility which the British had no need to question, because in contrast to in Africa or Asia, they were not interested in civilizing missions and subordination mechanisms in the far north (David 2000, 177). The Austrian material shows however that the impracticality of realizing any colonial ambitions in Franz Josef Land was accompanied by a phantasmal desire to control the Arctic. Ironical images in the satirical journals of polar bears dressed in European clothes or adopting Viennese ways of life playfully illustrated the subjugation of polar bears and other animals to Austrian rule (Schimanski and Spring 2010, 459). We have found very few examples where polar bears were imagined as leaving this symbolic sphere and being turned into an actual economic resource because of their furs and meat.¹⁶

However, it was not only important that dangers to be overcome awaited the men in the North; equally, signs of their heroism had to be left behind in the Arctic, marking these empty spaces with visible traces of exploration. The most important remnants of the expedition were the ship *Tegetthoff* and the grave of the machinist Otto Krisch, with many images, poems and other textual descriptions having the ship or the grave as their topic.¹⁷ These helped affirm the desolation, danger and sublimity of the Arctic and the power of man over nature. In 1892, expedition co-leader Julius Payer would paint the *Tegetthoff* as a distant image in the background of his famous painting depicting the men’s struggle for survival, *Nie zurück!* (“No Turning Back!”). In this painting, the ship became a symbol of civilization and of scientific and technological progress, illustrating human power over nature. At the same time

¹³ “verzweifeltem Kampf mit den furchtbarsten Naturgewalten.” “Willkommen!” *Fremden-Blatt*, 25 September 1874, Morgen.

¹⁴ “schwärmen”. Friedrich v. Hellwald, “Ueberschau der neuesten Polarforschungen,” *Wiener Abendpost*, 11 September 1874.

¹⁵ Cf. e.g. “Unsere Nordpolfahrer kommen,” *Morgen-Post*, 22 September 1874.

¹⁶ Cf. e.g. “Börse-Bericht,” *Kikeriki* 13 September 1874; “Banknachrichten,” *Der Kaktus*, 20 September 1874.

¹⁷ Ship: Cf. e.g. Julius Payer, “Der verlassene ‘Tegetthoff,’” *Neue Illustrierte Zeitung*, 4 October 1874, Extra-Beilage; P. K. Rosegger, “Vom Eise,” *Die Presse*, 29 September 1874, Local-Anzeiger. Grave: Cf. e.g. “Allerseelen am Nordpol,” *Neuer Freier Kikeriki*, 7 November 1874; Graf Albrecht Wickenburg, “Das Begräbnis am Nordpol,” *Das Neue Jahr* 4, 1876: 144–45; ***, “Das einsame Grab des Nordpolfahrers Krisch,” *Die Dioskuren* 6, 1877: 328.

this topos continuously shifted into its opposite: the lonely ship in the ice meant that in the end nature had triumphed, had shown its power over any efforts at human control.

Krisch's grave was a visible proof of the sacrifices the men were to make in the name of progress. At the same time, the return of all the explorers barring one was again a symbol of human power over nature. Also here we can observe the gliding from one topos into another, their opposite meanings reinforcing the message of Austrian heroism. While Krisch's death might signify the power of Northern nature, it at the same time challenged this image. Krisch had brought his illness, tuberculosis, with him to the Arctic; tellingly, tuberculosis was called the "Viennese illness" in the nineteenth century, drawing an explicit line to Vienna and Austria and locating the responsibility for Krisch's death there and not in the Arctic.¹⁸

The mysterious character of the Arctic, unknown as much of it was to humankind, and therefore full of unimaginable dangers and horrors, was a repeated topos. With the Arctic being unknown to most Central Europeans, it could retain its mystical and dangerous status, and the heroism of the polar explorers could be underscored. At the same time, the Arctic had to be made *known*, with its secrets slowly being revealed by self-sacrificing explorers and scientists. Descriptions of Franz Josef Land and its nature constantly oscillated between the known and the unknown, reinforcing the discourse of Austrian heroism. The topos of the unknown Arctic shifted into that of the known Arctic and, we would like to suggest, helped emphasize the scientific prowess of the Austrians in revealing nature's secrets, thus strengthening the image of Austrian polar competence.

Hence, the *Neue Freie Presse* saw "the riddle of the Nordic Sphinx unveiled for a large part",¹⁹ in its welcoming article from 5 September, while the *Deutsche Zeitung* praised the polar explorers who "had fought with nature itself and had torn from it anew a portion of those secrets which she with great suspicion hides from the searching eye".²⁰ According to Cajetan Felder, the mayor of Vienna, the explorers had helped lift part of the "secretive veil" covering the polar regions.²¹ The topos of the unveiling of secrets helped to position nature in the Arctic in a Western knowledge system, where mystery should ideally be replaced by scientific rationality.

Nature Descriptions

We suggest that the ambivalences we describe here – and the shifts between them – model different approaches to nature in the Viennese and Norwegian receptions of the expedition. Our claim is that such approaches function as discourses. Following

¹⁸ "Die österreichische Nordpol-Expedition zurückgekehrt," *Fremden-Blatt* 4 September 1874, Abend. See also Stellar, "Polarfahrten," *Deutsche Zeitung*, 5 September 1874, Morgen.

¹⁹ "das Räthsel der nordischen Sphinx zu einem guten Theil enthüllt." Dr. Joseph Chavanne, "Oesterreichs Nordpol-Expedition," *Neue Freie Presse*, 19 September 1874, Morgen.

²⁰ "mit der Natur selbst gekämpft und ihr wieder einen Theil jener Geheimnisse entrissen, die sie so argwöhnisch dem forschenden Blicke verbirgt." "Willkommen!" *Deutsche Zeitung*, 5 September 1874, Morgen.

²¹ "geheimnißvolle[n] Schleier." "Die österreichische Nordpol-Expedition," *Neue Freie Presse*, 19 September 1874, Morgen. Cf. also "Om Festen i Kristiania," *Bergensposten*, 24 September 1874.

Laclau and Mouffe's theory of discourses, certain "nodal points" with ambiguous meanings can function as hinges between one discourse and another, and allow the formation of new discourses (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, 112–13). In this material, we suggest a strong connection between discourses forming around nodal points such as "emptiness", "danger" and "uselessness", in which the Arctic is seen as an "other". The orientalist approach, with its exploitation of nature, dominates both in the Austrian and Norwegian receptions of the expedition. When present, a communalist, "de-othering" or ecological attitude to the Arctic appears only in the form of a future potential, the promise, as in Spufford's Bewick example, of turning around the nodal point of "emptiness".

The possibility of such shifts is already in place in a piece on Arctic animals and hunting on Greenland by expedition co-leader Julius Payer, published in the influential geographical journal known as *Petermann's geographische Mittheilungen* in October 1871 (Payer 1871), during the preparations for the Austro-Hungarian expedition. Part of a series of texts on the Second German Polar Expedition to Eastern Greenland (1869–1870), in which Payer had participated, this description of nature in the Arctic was also deemed to be of interest to a Northern Norwegian public – perhaps because of its practical usefulness as a guide to Arctic animals – with a Norwegian version being published in the local newspaper *Tromsø Stiftstidende* in April 1872.²² In Payer's text, animals are seen mainly as things to be described or to be hunted, killed, eaten and used for their fur, making them nodal points within an exploitation discourse. They are of interest in relation to expeditions for three reasons: firstly because one must learn to defend oneself against them, secondly because they may be studied by zoologists, and finally because they increase the length of time for which an explorer exists in the Arctic without access to other sources of food (Payer 1871, 413). It may appear that Payer's attitude to nature in the Arctic is primarily an exploitative one. However, as Sigfrid Kjeldaas argues, hunting may be "regarded as an activity through which a reconnection with the natural world is still possible" (Kjeldaas 2014, 74), and in reading Payer's text, we wish to highlight junctures where a more ecological perspective is suggested.

When describing the more dangerous and stranger animals which may be met in the Arctic, especially the polar bear and the walrus, Payer both implicitly reinforces the heroism of Arctic explorers in general, and invokes tropes of the sublime and the grotesque which allows an exploitation discourse to take on more aesthetic and symbolic forms. The polar bear "is in terms of strength and dangerousness no lesser than the lion or the tiger",²³ and Payer goes on to compare it with a tiger twice more, even calling it a "tiger of the ice".²⁴ "If any animal does", the walrus in turn deserves "the name monster", with a voice as "truly demonic" as its appearance;²⁵ Payer later compares it with a torpedo (Payer 1871, 421) and describes some walruses in a

²² "Dyreliv i Nordpols egne og grønlandsk Jagt," *Tromsø Stiftstidende* 7 April 1872; 11 April 1872. The text was also later incorporated into Payer's expedition account of the Austro-Hungarian expedition, which included his accounts of the earlier expedition (Payer 1876, 516–556).

²³ "steht an Kraft und Gefährlichkeit weder dem Löwen noch dem Tiger nach" (Payer 1871, 413).

²⁴ "Tiger des Eises" (Payer 1871, 417).

²⁵ "Wenn irgend einem Thiere"; "der Name Ungeheuer"; "wahrhaft dämonisch" (Payer 1871, 420).

bloody encounter with hunters as “gruesome sphinxes” and being of “uncanny hideousness”.²⁶ In a way typical for his other writings, Payer drifts from the scientifically denotative into the literary connotative. He makes his descriptions more accessible to lay readers by anthropomorphizing Arctic animals and providing a series of anecdotal stories of encounters with polar animals (in all 11 anecdotes are devoted to polar bears), emphasizing the sublime, the grotesque, but also repeatedly the comic. Payer describes the final sighting of polar bears on the 1869–1870 expedition using an term central to nineteenth-century aesthetic appreciation in various media: the “Tableau” (Payer 1871, 417; cf. Schimanski and Spring 2015, 425; 427; 467).

Moreover, by emphasizing the sublime dangerousness of polar bears and walruses, Payer also gives them agency. Payer can also show what Kjeldaas, discussing the much later and primarily ecologically minded author Barry Lopez, calls a “sensibility towards animals” (Kjeldaas 2014, 73). At one point, Payer ascribes subjectivity to polar bears, and sympathizes with their plight, providing what must be described as an ecological explanation of the bears’ role in an environmental system: “The bear however deserves also our sympathy, [for] his life forms a chain of nutritional worries [...]”.²⁷ In this sympathy (perhaps even empathy) and in other references to seasonal and geographical sustenance patterns in the Arctic, implying a notion of systematic ecological niches, Payer’s text promises a potential future discourse based around a communalist attitude to nature. Notably, this potential is dependent on both a form of scientific analysis and on an aesthetic dimension, what Fredrik Brøgger has called an “imaginative identification” with animals (Brøgger 2010, 96). In addition, Payer ascribes individuality to polar bears in no uncertain fashion: “The contradictory reports about its courage are explainable through the fact that the behaviour of one bear can never be indicative of another’s, that thus each acts in an individual fashion and is regulated by its respective needs for sustenance.”²⁸ Payer thus draws attention to what Pálsson calls the “contingency” of the communalist approach to nature (Pálsson 1996 67; 72) in a way which points forward to Lopez’ focus on the individual personalities of animals as social-ecological beings (Kjeldaas 2014, 79).

Payer makes several references to Greenlandic hunting practices, notably – and in contrast to a later explorer like Knud Rasmussen, writing from a different cultural context – without making any reference to the category *Naturvölker* (cf. Brøgger 2010, 85). Differences between explorers and Greenlanders are for Payer primarily a matter of technology and technique, and differences in world view are only hinted at. Both are subject to same conditions of being forced – as Brøgger writes about Rasmussen’s description of Inuit practices – into “devising strategies by which to ameliorate and counteract [the Arctic’s] extremely severe and violent forces of nature” (Brøgger 2010, 85). As such, Payer’s sympathy with the polar bears reveals

²⁶ “greulichen Sphinxen”; “unheimlicher Hässlichkeit” (Payer 1871, 421).

²⁷ “Doch der Bär verdient auch unser Mitleid, sein Leben bildet eine Kette von Nahrungssorgen, [...]” (Payer 1871, 414).

²⁸ “Die widersprechenden Berichte über seinen Muth erklärt der Umstand, dass sich aus dem Verhalten eines Bären nie auf das eines anderen schliessen lässt, dass somit jeder individuell auftritt und von dem jeweiligen Nahrungsbedürfniss geleitet wird.” (Payer 1871, 413).

that he sees animals, explorers and indigenous peoples as all subject to the same primary conditions of existence. A contrast is made only to industrial (that is, more exploitative) forms of European fishery and hunting: for these, the liver oil from walrus and seals is “important”, while for the Greenlanders they are “invaluable”.²⁹ If there is anything specific about Greenlandic practices in relation to Arctic animals, it is in a perception of totality, with each part of the animal coming to use: “For the Eskimo, seals and walrus are of universal usability. [...] – in a nutshell: seal and walrus are literally swallowed up through the presence [*von dem Dasein*] of the Eskimo” (Payer 1871, 422).³⁰ The Greenlanders are thus represented as having a no-waste culture in which uselessness would presumably have no role and there would thus be no differentiation between materialism and idealism or indeed anything outside the ecological cycle.

In his descriptions of Greenland, Payer gives an impression of a “full” Arctic, the home of many animals and not least of birds, at least on a temporary seasonal basis (Payer 1871, 422–23). Payer’s description of the uses of these birds’ eggs and skins is firmly embedded in a topos of total use by the Greenlanders, and also explains their migratory patterns and when describing their parental behaviour, imparting upon them a certain anthropomorphic subject status. Here again his text indicates the future possibility of a communalist, ecological discourse.

Payer’s reference to an Arctic full of life and especially birdlife recurs in his 1874 article on the Austro-Hungarian Arctic expedition for the *Neue Freie Presse*, paradoxically in the same text where he claims there is “no poorer country on Earth” than the southernmost parts of Franz Josef Land, as quoted earlier. As we have argued elsewhere (Schimanski and Spring 2015, 537–38), his highly picturesque description of scenes full of noisy birdlife and the tracks of Arctic mammals on the northernmost parts on Franz Josef Land are framed in sublime terms, located as they are at the very northernmost extent of the sledge journeys made during the 1872–1874 expedition (Payer 1874, 4–5). The description of what seems like an Arctic paradise in line with older mythic traditions must be understood as part of a heroic narrative of reaching the most extreme geographical point of the expedition. The “full” Arctic can be read as a reward for the explorers’ struggles, gold at the end of the rainbow, so to speak. Payer juxtaposes this scenery with the act of flag-raising, again reinforcing the symbolic status of the expedition for Austria-Hungary.

That Franz Josef Land and the Arctic are primarily exploitable in symbolic terms is emphasized in an essay by the author and columnist Hieronymus Lorm (a pseudonym for Heinrich Landesmann) published in the *Wiener Abendpost* and reprinted in the *Neues Fremden-Blatt* in September 1874, just before the explorers arrived in Vienna (Lorm 1874). Lorm reflects on the “uselessness” (*Nutzlosigkeit*) of the expedition and of polar exploration in general, reconfirming the idealist import of the expedition for Austria in terms of some of the ambivalences we have sketched out above: full/empty, beautiful/dangerous, known/unknown, scientific/literary,

²⁹ “wichtig”, “unschätzbar” (Payer 1871, 420).

³⁰ “Dem Eskimo sind Seehunde und Walrosse von universeller Verwendbarkeit. [...] – mit Einem Worte: Seehund und Walross werden von dem Dasein des Eskimo geradezu verschluckt” (Payer 1871, 422).

materialism/idealism, etc. As do Spufford's authors, and as does Payer, Lorm gives a portrayal of birdlife in the Arctic, basing himself on the diaries of a Russian merchant in Siberia, published in German some fifty years beforehand (Lorm 1874, 1732).³¹ Lorm's description is even more oxymoronic in its juxtaposition of Arctic silence and the "[m]illions" of birds of various species than that of Payer, Lorm writing that the birds' "clamour forms [...] a continual echo and this is the only voice of life". For Lorm, the birds are situated in an Arctic sublime, in the "passage between organic nature and death";³² his description exemplifies a generally orientalist description of the Arctic.

However, by letting the Arctic and its own aestheticism work together, Lorm's text hints that his idealist, anti-materialist attitude to the expedition potentially includes a communalist or ecological discourse. That is to say, Lorm partly does what Spufford shows that Brontë does with Bewick's descriptions of Arctic birdlife, "integrating it, not into an ecosystem, but into [...] systems of images" (Spufford 1996, 14); or rather, Lorm brings nature and writing onto the same level. His way of praising the idealism of the expedition is to portray polar expeditions as a useless activity, as a child's game and as a form of poetry (Lorm 1874, 1732). Children's games share a sublime quality with poetry and "the play of our imagination", because children, "still fresh and inexperienced, also in the horrors of the world[,] glimpse its grandeur".³³ Polar exploration let us realize that the uselessness of such play is shared with nature: The accounts of these expeditions have "intoxicated us with the most poetic notions about the sweet uselessness of the world", while "Nature plays its useless children's games at the poles of the Earth".³⁴ Giving a personified Nature agency in this way, Lorm goes on to emphasize that Nature plays "for its own delight, not in order to entertain humans [...]; that is, completely in contradiction with a limited teleology that devises utility everywhere for the unfeathered on two legs".³⁵ His focus on a lack of utility prepares the ground for describing animals and aesthetic practices on the same level. Lorm's playful and highly literary essay, which he sees as "a contribution to [the] poetry of the event", itself partakes in the idealism of uselessness.³⁶ The Arctic expedition is not only scientific, but also poetic (Lorm 1874, 1733). Significantly, he names his essay "North Pole Arabesques" (*Nordpol-Arabesken*), an ambiguous title which combines the notion that the essay consists of a series of nature ornaments in an oriental style ("written arabesques concerning the Arctic") with another, more radical inter-

³¹ We have unfortunately not been able to identify Lorm's source.

³² "Millionen"; "[...] Geschrei bildet gleichsam ein stehendes Echo und dies ist die einzige Stimme des Lebens"; "der Uebergang der organischen Natur zum Tode" (Lorm 1874, 1732).

³³ "noch frisch und unerfahren, das Spiel unserer Phantasie"; "auch in den Schrecklichkeiten der Welt nur ihre Herrlichkeit erblickte" (Lorm 1874, 1732).

³⁴ "uns mit den poesievollsten Gedanken über die holde Nutzlosigkeit der Welt berauschten"; "[a]n den Polen der Erde treibt die Natur nutzlose Kinderspiele" (Lorm 1874, 1732).

³⁵ "zu ihrem eigenen Ergötzen, nicht zur Unterhaltung der Menschen, [...]; also ganz im Widerspruch mit einer beschränkten Teleologie, welche überall den Nutzen für den unbefiederten Zweifüßler herausklügelt" (Lorm 1874, 1732).

³⁶ "ein Beitrag zu [der] Poesie des Ereignisses" (Lorm 1874, 1732).

pretation, that the Arctic is in itself primarily the location of natural “ornament”, of something useless to humans (“the Arctic’s arabesques”). The material world and the world of symbols are now no longer seen as separate spheres. The implication is that Arctic nature and writing can become part of a common ecology in which both the Arctic and an idealist discourse can work together, hand in hand, against exploitation.

Conclusion

Pálsson (1996) argues that attitudes to nature can belong to three different categories: the orientalist (which he defines as an exploitative domination of nature, either as a resource or as a scientific object), the paternalist (which also “others” nature, but as an ecological object to be protected) and the communalist (in which one engages with nature, becomes part of the ecological and allows it contingency). In our material, the paternalist is hardly present, and in the wider historical perspective, may be argued to be a variant of the orientalist (indeed, Said’s concept of orientalism may be said to encompass a paternalist attitude, e.g. Said 1978 32–33). The dominant divide is that between an exploitative or “othering” and a communalist or relational discourse.

As Pálsson suggests for his categories, such divides are relative; his categories may be “polyphonically” present in the same “text” (Pálsson 1996, 77). However, he does not explicitly detail the structure or dynamics of shifts between categories. It is here we suggest that by treating attitudes to nature (in our case the exploitative and the communalist) as discourses in Laclau and Mouffe’s terms, and examining the nodal points in these discourses for their ambiguities, we may sketch out openings and disjunctions in the system which can account for the introduction of communalist viewpoints. Here “emptiness” and its counterpoint “fullness”, “usefulness” and “uselessness”, “idealism” and “materialism”, “science”, the “sublime”, “empathy” and the “ecological” may be identified as nodal points in our material. We have attempted to show in our analysis how at a certain historical juncture (1874), material exploitation is subject to the contingencies of geography (Austria-Hungary and Norway), bringing about a shift to symbolic exploitation (especially concerning national identity), which in turn opens up to a potentially more relational discourse. Primarily, it is the instability of the discursive ambiguities at play in European attitudes to the Arctic natural world which produces the possibility of a future ecological discourse. In general we would like to suggest that analysis also of present-day attitudes to the Arctic would benefit from taking into account the entanglement of both material and symbolic forms of exploitation.

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Summary

What is the discursive genealogy of an ecological approach to the Arctic? Building on distinctions suggested by Francis Spufford and Gísli Pálsson, this article examines a specific juncture in the history of European–Arctic interaction – the reception of the Austro-Hungarian Arctic Expedition in 1874 – and traces the potential for ecological and relational understandings in what seems to be an orientalist and exploitative material. Examining the medial reception in Austria and in Norway, along with certain key texts in which Arctic wildlife is described, we find that the Norwegian reception of the expedition emphasizes practical issues connected with resource exploitation in the Arctic, while the Austrian reception mostly sees the Arctic as a symbolic resource with which to negotiate issues of identity and modernity. The Austrian discourse revolves around a set of paradoxical contradictions, the most central being those between materialism and idealism and emptiness and fullness; we argue it is the instability of such ambiguities which produces the possibility of a future ecological discourse.

Keywords

Nature, the Arctic, Austria-Hungary, Austro-Hungarian Arctic Expedition, ecology, discourse, exploitation, Norway.