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Norwegian petroleum extraction in Arctic waters to save the environment: introducing 'discourse co-optation' as a new analytical term

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Abstract: In this article, the term discourse co-optation is introduced based on a socially oriented discourse analysis of the Norwegian petroleum debate concerning petroleum extraction in the Barents Sea. The introduction of the term is based on empirical findings from two different studies of public discourse through four Norwegian newspapers published between 2000 and 2006. Discourse co-optation describes how one discourse 'burrows into the heart' of a counter-discourse, turns its logic upside down and it is put to work to re-establish hegemony and re-gain political support. One discourse is strengthened by the addition of a new, powerful argument; the other is weakened almost to the same degree.

Keywords: Discourse co-optation, interdiscursivity, interdiscourse, Barents Sea, High North, European Arctic

This article sets out to further conceptualise a discursive phenomenon from the vantage point of what could be termed a Foucauldian or socially oriented discourse analysis. My ambition is therefore primarily theoretical in that I want to show how 'discourse cooptation' gives us a better handle on a certain form of interdiscursivity. I have sourced the data I shall be using from two of my own Norwegian studies. In the first, I analysed the debate in Norway over the merits and demerits of an offshore oil and gas industry in the Barents Sea (Jensen 2007). In the second, my colleague Geir Hønneland and I analysed government policy on the European Arctic (High North) post 2000 (Jensen and Hønneland 2011).

In the field of sociology, and possibly organisation theory in particular, co-opting processes are conceptualised as response mechanisms available to an authority to ensure stability in the face of a threat (Selznick 1949, Bertocchi and Spagat 2001). I believe we can identify similar and analytically useful mechanisms operating at a more abstract, discursive level. In this article I shall examine co-optation and co-opting processes to help me conceptualise the discursive phenomenon I have called 'drilling for the environment' (Jensen 2007). I hope in this way to arrive at a tentative definition of what I suggest calling 'discourse co-optation'.

Since a socially oriented discourse analysis gives precedence to the aggregate level over the textual, to make my approach more accessible and relevant, I shall therefore start with a presentation of classic co-optation and the Norwegian context, followed by discourse as a concept and discourse analysis as the analytical approach as it was practised in the two aforementioned studies (Jensen 2007, Jensen and Hønneland 2011). The article's empirical part is followed by a short discussion and is rounded off with my attempt at defining discourse co-optation as an analytical concept.

Co-optation

Co-optation as a concept can be traced to Robert Michels (1915), but Phillip Selznick's (1949) is the more frequently invoked name. Selznick used the term in a study of the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) to describe relations between authorities and grass root organisations. In his definition, 'Co-optation is the process of absorbing new elements into the leadership or policy determining the structure of an organization as a means of averting threats to its stability or existence' (1949:13). Co-optation is a process to bring what is outside (generally the deprived) inside (usually the prosperous) so as to make outsiders' opinions intelligible on the wavelengths of the central authority (Chan and Lee 1991:291). The meaning of the term, as it is applied in the literature, varies somewhat, along with the level of precision. Meeuwisse and Sunesson belong to those who enlist a larger number of features and a higher level of specificity.

Co-optation means to disarm threatening elements by giving them a hearing in the decision making process, or demonstrating public support in some way or another. From the government's point of view, co-optation is doubly attractive because an aura of respectability is eventually transferred from the co-opted elements to the administration as a whole, strengthening the government's authority in a sector of society while also guaranteeing unobstructed access to the co-opted organisation's know-how. (1998:177)

A similar take on co-optation, it would be reasonable to assume, underlies Lars Gulbrandsen's statement in an article on environmental labelling, '[c]ooperation with business interests can also mean that environmental organisations are co-opted into industry-friendly schemes and used by the industry to legitimise the schemes' (2005:410). Ingerid S. Straume arrived at a similar conception. Co-optation is to incorporate the views and thinking of oppositional groups into an institution; by appropriating their critique, they are rendered harmless. Jørgensen describes co-optation as a strategy, 'the rationale of which is to neutralise challengers, renew legitimacy and re-establish authority and political support' (Straume 2001:12; Jørgensen 1997:77 in Straume 2001:12).

Bernt Aardal discusses a paradox. '[T]he success of the environmental movement in gaining the backing of parties and wide swathes of the public, can turn into defeat for conservation as a prime consideration when planning the society of the future' (Aardal 1993:10). Environmentalism has been co-opted and disarmed, he says. Environmentalists' interests are secondary to economic growth targets – an issue he suggests will be of central importance in the environmental debate moving ahead (Aardal 1993:9). Environmental considerations, writes Ingerid S. Straume,

are now discursively compatible with every other consideration: ethics, profits and self-interest, etc. Everyone is 'green' and proclaims 'it pays to think green'. These changes make it difficult to distinguish between the interests of civil society, market and state. The grounds for critique, debate and reflection are seriously undermined by all considerations apparent unification under the market economic paradigm. (Straume 2002)

There is a good deal of sympathy for Straume's view by writers such as Dryzek, Downes, Hunold, Schlosberg and Hernes (2003). Given that Norway has one of the strongest corporative systems, efforts by the government to assimilate the environmental organisations into the public sphere, they suggest, divest them of both freedom and autonomy. The all-embracing, inclusive state de-radicalises the organisations, bringing them into line, while significantly shrinking oppositional space (22–27, 171–174). The ideas put forward by Aardal, Straume and Dryzek et.al go a long way, I suggest, to explaining how 'drilling for the environment' became possible and, perhaps, why discourse co-optation apparently enjoys such a fertile milieu in Norway in political debates on resources and environment. But I shall not pursue this idea further in the present context. We have seen different writers highlight different aspects of co-optation depending on academic vantage point and objective; some use it without defining it clearly however.

Chan and Lee's widening of Selznick's definition is fruitful even if it does contain something all co-optation definitions share, 'intension' and 'full rationality' in the sense of a pre-planned, controlled action with co-optation as the clear objective. If one turns to the communications and media studies literature, it is, as far as I have been able to see, universally assumed that 'persuasion' (O'Keefe

1990), 'framing' (Goffman 1974) and other reality productions are observable, comprehensible, planned strategic acts with a clear, rational goal in sight. For me, though, the very scope of the discourse across time and space makes it academically meaningless to speak of some form of pre-meditated, managed rationality by a single powerful individual or handful of powerful individuals. I will come back to this later in the article in relation to the 'drilling for the environment'-discourse.

Discourse analysis as an analytical framework from a political science perspective

The manner in which 'discourse' is used and interpreted varies widely from discipline to discipline, whether we are talking about linguistics, anthropology, psychology, sociology, political science, etc. There are even substantial differences within one and the same scholarly tradition. In my subject, political science, discourse is normally understood to be a relatively uniform way of describing something, a tacit understanding of a particular situation. Jørgensen and Phillips (1999:9) say, for instance, that the manner in which we express ourselves does more than simply reflect a neutral picture of our surroundings, identities and social relations. It is positively instrumental in creating and changing them. According to the central tenet of discourse analysis, we interpret subjects without access to an independently pre-given world; the way we gain access to our various realities is mediated by and through language. The central point, according to Neumann (2001:38), is to analyse meaning as an aspect of the general social field in which meaning is formed. One looks first at the language, written and spoken, because although other social practices produce meaning as a secondary outcome, the principal purpose of language is to create meaning (ibid.). The verbal concepts and ideas we use to describe the world are what makes it possible for us to understand the reality in which we find ourselves. Language, in this sense, defines the limits for what we can think and say, and constitutes in consequence the toolbox with the requisite resources with which accounts of reality are constructed (Ball 1988:15).

Foucault gives 'discourse' a relatively wide definition, moving beyond speech, writing and text. This in contrast to, for instance, Fairclough's (1995), and van Dijk's (1988) exemplary contributions, who are far more text-centred and 'linguistic'. These and similar approaches examine discourse carefully and in detail at the level of the sentence. However, as Dryzek (1999:9) points out, there is also room for breadth as well as depth in analysing discourse, for looking for the big picture rather than the details. In that sense, my contribution sacrifices some the richness of Fairclough and van Dijk in favour of a broader view of a much bigger territory based on thousands of texts. In the kind of analyses I have conducted, the object of analysis (copious texts) and conclusions tend to occupy the aggregate level, rather than the level of specific texts and events. The socially oriented discourse analysis conducted by Foucault (1972) is therefore particularly useful. There is a set of rules, Foucault (1972) maintains, according to which certain statements are considered meaningful and true at a given time in history. In this article I rely on the following definition of discourse, which, apart from agreeing with Foucault's conception, is relatively concrete, which Foucault's is not, and therefore easier to operationalise.

Discourse is an interrelated set of texts, and the practices of their production, dissemination, and reception, which brings an object into being. (Parker 1992:3)

Although discourses exist and unfold in texts of many different kinds, the main point is this: a discourse exists 'somewhere above' its constituent texts. Under a socially oriented discursive conception, these texts are not meaningful in and of themselves. It is only by dint of their 'interconnection with other texts, the different discourses on which they draw, and the nature of their production, dissemination, and consumption that they are made meaningful' (Phillips and Hardy 2002:3-4).

Discourse analysis applied

Now in Neumann's (2001:50–51) view, a successful discourse analysis depends rather on the cultural competence of the analyst. Put simply, she should need a certain knowledge of the field in focus. The ideal situation, he suggests (2001:54–55), is to take account of as many of the likely permutations as possible by reading as much as possible from as many of the written genres as possible. In fact, Foucault insisted, we should study everything. As this is relatively impractical in the normal course of events, this study too will unavoidably run the risk of overlooking some relevant texts. Neumann's (2001:54–55) principal point, however, highlights the critical importance of reception: more or less irrespective of the scope of a given discourse, its main points of reference will be contained in a relatively limited number of texts. Hopefully, the two data sets, representing over 4,000 Norwegian newspaper articles in all over a seven year period, provide a good idea of the key elements of the discourse as it unfolded in the newspapers and elsewhere without one having read the entire output of Norwegian public discourse during the period in question.

Public documents, inquiries and studies also formed part of the backdrop to the studies, and were used as corrective, complementary sources. Two government documents were particularly helpful for forming a picture of important themes, *Mot Nord!* ([Look North!] NOU 2003:32) and *Muligheter og Udfordringer i Nord* ([Possibilities and Challenges in the High North] St.meld.nr.30 2005). The widespread references to the two documents invoked different forms of intertextuality (Kristeva 1980) ranging from direct quotes to more subtle, conceptual references. They are instances of what Neumann (2001:52, 177) calls 'monuments', i.e. important texts which act as discourse hubs or focal points. In addition to the reports and topical pieces in the newspapers, there was a great deal of useful commentary. Having followed the media debate over such a lengthy period, I believe I can say with some confidence that my judgements rest on a relatively firm basis. Reading public documents also brought home to me their tendency to reflect the debate in the popular press, even though language of government is obviously an exception.

The first account of the discursive phenomenon called 'drilling for the environment' in the Norwegian petroleum debate appeared in connection with a qualitative study of texts appearing in the Norwegian papers¹ *Aftenposten*, *Dagens Næringsliv*, *Nordlys* and *Klassekampen* between 1 December 2003 and 4 October 2005 (Jensen 2007). The findings in this study were based on a qualitative reading of 1,162 Norwegian newspaper articles relating to the Norwegian petroleum debate retrieved from the Atekst² database by using the search string Barentshav* AND (Petroleum* OR Olje* OR Gass* [Barents Sea* AND (Petroleum* OR Oil* OR Gas*)]. As the database had a relatively advanced and sophisticated search engine it was possible to achieve high levels of precision and relevance in the results as long as the search terms and their combinations were appropriate. The search string I ended up with came after numerous explorative searches and readings. The Boolean operators AND and OR allowed me to define a precise search string. AND told the engine to retrieve articles containing both or all of the terms; OR told the engine to return articles containing at least one of the terms. I used the wildcard character * to obtain all variants of the terms. By entering petroleum*, for example, I was able to retrieve terms like

¹ The newspapers were chosen because they represented different readerships, profiles and focus areas, which improved the quality and broadened the scope of the analysis. At the risk of oversimplifying, one could say that *Aftenposten* (circulation per 2010: 239831) is the main national newspaper with conservative leanings; *Dagens Næringsliv* (circulation per 2010: 80559) is the business and finance paper; *Nordlys* (circulation per 2010: 24458) is the leading paper in the North of the country; and lastly, *Klassekampen*, (circulation per 2010: 14390) despite its uncompromising name [*Class Struggle*], is a left-leaning paper with radical pretensions (Jensen 2007:248).

² At the time of the search, the database was a division of the Retriever company and owned by the Schibstedt media group. The database includes a text archive of eighteen newspapers, periodicals and news agencies. These sources are updated continuously, and more than 4.7 million articles were searchable.

petroleumsutvinning [petroleum extraction], petroleumsforekomster [hydrocarbon deposits], petroleum, petroleumsdebatt [petroleum debate].

The trends I identified in my material found further confirmation in a more recent study with a wider empirical footprint. This was a study by Geir Hønneland and myself of Norwegian (foreign) policy on the High North post 2000 (Jensen and Hønneland 2011). Data for this study too we obtained by searching the media. Indeed, the study's approach was similar to the one I had used a few years before (Jensen 2007). After testing numerous exploratory search terms and configurations, we selected a relatively broad search string Nordområde* (High North*) which we fed into the Atekst database. The period went from 1 January 2000 to 31 December 2006. It resulted in 3,043 hits in the same four newspapers. The quotations in this article to illustrate and document 'drilling for the environment' derive from this data set. Both studies were based on systematic, chronological and extensive and qualitative reading.

Drilling for the environment

As the '90s progressed, developments in North Western Russia moved Norway to amend its High North policy. The old threat of military aggression on which foreign policy perceptions rested and which justified policy making was jostled aside by the new environmental threat from nuclear waste and widespread industrial pollution (Hønneland 2003, 2005: 23). The Norwegian media spoke of 'blackened tree stumps', 'lethal clouds', 'radioactive hell', and 'scrap-value nuclear submarines' anchored in Murmansk harbour like 'ticking time bombs'. Perceptions of the 'radioactive' Kola Peninsula, with its 'lunar landscape' and 'black deserts', became part of the public vernacular as represented in the print media.

These perceptions, I want to suggest, appear to have given rise to a view in the public mind of Russia as an 'environmental laggard'. This, I believe, was a crucial premise of one aspect of the Norwegian debate on oil and gas operations in the Barents Sea (Jensen 2007: 252). Under the 'petroleum' subsection of the High North debate, two mutually reinforcing factors dominated the print media in the early 2000s. First, there was the controversy for and against an oil and gas industry in the Barents sea. The column inches dedicated to those in favour far exceeded the opposition's, unsurprisingly. Second, there emerged in the same media a surprisingly uncontested idea which soon gained general traction: that Norway should get a move on and start 'drilling for the sake of the environment'. The plot, narrative (Czarniawska-Joerges 2004) or story line (Hajer 1995), of what we can term the 'drilling for the environment' discourse, can be condensed as follows. 'The Russians are already in full swing in the Barents Sea. Their approach to the environment is doubtful. We should therefore help them achieve acceptable environmental standards in the Barents Sea.' Whether this was an accurate picture of the Russian approach to environmental protection, is not the task of this article to say. What is interesting is that, as a version of reality, it was largely accepted by the public at the time – at least going by the evidence of the analysis of the newspapers.

Since I have chosen a more socially oriented version of discourse analysis, and am mainly interested in the larger picture in the debate over 'exactly who said what and why behind which closed doors to whom else about a particular point, and how the other responded' (Dryzek 1997:9), I shall not be identifying the individual actors to any extent. I shall simply note, following Dryzek (1997:16–17), that actors can be either individual or collective. Of course, discourse analysis depends on human actors. They perform the actions that give life and dynamics to a discourse. The most prominent and active actors in the 'drilling for the environment' discourse were journalists, newspaper editors (just a few), national and local politicians, and quite a few rent-a-quotes of varying calibre. To show the breadth of the discourse – and the stringency in argumentation over

time – I would like to present a selection of typical, chronologically ordered quotations from the material.³

‘Were Norway to signal dwindling interest in an oil and gas industry in the High North, it would be bad for business and bad for the environment.’ These sentiments belong to Johan Petter Barlindhaug. ‘The deposits of gas discovered by the Russians in the Stockmann [sic] field are much larger than Norway’s total production,’ he says, ‘and they intend to develop the field. The Russians lack environmental know-how. They are interested in partnerships with western companies. If we say no thanks, the area isn’t interesting, by putting the lid on oil and gas extraction in the Barents Sea, we are also saying we’re not interesting partners. It’s a risky environmental undertaking and bad commercial strategy,’ says Barlindhaug to *Nordlys*.... ‘We need to signal the seriousness of our intent with the High North. I’m worried about what seems to be a rush for political consensus, that is, proceeding with the Snow White development but stopping all new activity for five years. It would be fatal, not least because the Russians will be moving forward, and we have the know-how to reduce the environmental risk.’ (*Nordlys*, 7 December 2001)

Above all, the Stokman [sic] field looks to become a gigantic gas field in just a few years. A field the Russians are preparing to develop already.... Many are asking whether the policy to let the Norwegian Barents Sea lie fallow without a petroleum industry is very sensible, knowing as we do what the Russians will be doing to develop their own fields. (*Nordlys*, 24 April 2002)

Snow White, according to FNI [Fridtjof Nansen Institute] director Willy Østreng, is a threshold project which primarily brings the oil and gas age to the Barents Sea. The importance given to the environment in connection with the Snow White development will hopefully spread to the Russian oil and gas industry, he says. (*Nordlys*, 11 September 2002)

Not least because the Russians are already busy developing [the field], something which makes it possible to protect the entire area, as will be the case in Lofoten. If Norway is actively involved rather than sitting on the side lines like a spectator to what promises to be a very comprehensive commitment indeed to oil and gas, it would help raise environmental standards no end. (*Klassekampen*, 12 September 2003)

The Barents Sea has been open for oil and gas operations for a long time. As we know, Norway does not own the Barents Sea alone, and it won’t help to blind ourselves to the fact that Russia plans to initiate large-scale oil and gas projects in our common waters. One simple conclusion follows from this. Norway can sit round the table and make a difference to the environmental standards and technology in a sensitive marine area, or we can stand by. That the leadership of the Centre Party wants to see Norway take active responsibility for the environment and biological resources in the Barents Sea is very extremely positive. (*Nordlys*, 18 September 2004)

‘The Centre Party’s approval of drilling in the Barents Sea gives Norway the opportunity to show leadership in the region,’ suggests Jan Henry T. Olsen. He trusts the Socialistic Left Party will follow suite.... ‘Drilling will take place whether Norway decides to seize the opportunities provided by the enormous oil and gas deposits in the Barents Sea or not,’ he continues. ‘Norway’s involvement is important,’ he contends, ‘if the country is to tackle the environmental challenges in the region. That’s something the Left Party should bear in mind. I hope the Left Party reverses its stance and gives its approval to drilling in the entire Barents Sea on the map, which would secure the environmental standards Norway wants to impose on activity in the Barents Sea.’ (*Nordlys*, 20 September 2004)

‘In reality, Russia and the international companies it is working with is ready to extract their share of the oil and gas in our immediate neighbourhood. The Stockmann [sic] field. Oil and gas are already being brought up in the High North. Norway, with our technology and our experience of drilling in northern areas, should absolutely be involved in this industrial adventure, and we could also help with our recognised environmental technology.’ (Eva M. Nielsen, member of parliament for the Labour Party talking to *Nordlys*, 14 April 2005)

Whenever they set their minds on something, the Russians can do it. They were the first in space, they’ve made the world’s fastest fighter planes, the world’s biggest atom bomb, etc. And the Russians have demonstrated on many occasions that they don’t care [about the environment]. We could mention the destruction of the Aral Sea, the nickel smelters, the countless dilapidated nuclear subs lying around disintegrating in Murmansk and threatening all life in the Barents Sea. Pictures from the oil fields in Baku are also telling. No one thinks the Russians are planning to repeat the Baku experience in the Barents Sea, but you never know when the worst kinds of greed and ignorance will find an outlet. Everyone agrees about the need for a clean oil industry. It was plain silly to release 1,500 litres of hydraulic oil. It can have been avoided. The fishing industry isn’t clean either. No one’s ever seen a fishing boat deliver old hydraulic oil or

³ The quotations are translated from the Norwegian exactly as they were printed, including grammatical mistakes, linguistic peculiarities etc. While some of the quotations are shortened to save space, it should not affect the meaning/content as it applies to this article.

engine oil on land. I hope Norwegian technology and know-how are allowed to show what they're worth in the precious Barents Sea, and show the Russians how it's done. If we're left standing on the platform while the Russians foul up the Barents Sea because of a political mess, it would be a very sad day indeed. (Jon Herud, *Aftenposten*, 11 May 2005)

The most remarkable thing about the 'drilling for the environment' discourse is that it seems in many ways like an environmental discourse (Dryzek 1997) but in reverse. The story line seems to go something like this. 'Norway should not back away from extracting oil and gas from the Barents Sea because of the environment. On the contrary, Norway should get a move on and help the Russians operate in a more environmentally friendly way'. An important premise of this aspect of the petroleum debate must therefore be an expectation that the Russians are going to bring up the oil and gas very soon, irrespective of Norwegian participation or not. Another important premise for the proponents of this discourse appears to be that Russia lacks both the ability and the will to run an offshore petroleum industry with satisfactory environmental standards.

This discourse is interesting for several reasons. First, there is the assertion, remarkable in itself and not immediately intelligible without foreknowledge of well-established notions of Russia and the country's environmental record, that an early start to drilling would actually benefit the environment. Second, a discourse promoting an offshore oil and gas industry in the Barents Sea 'pierced the heart' of one of the environmental discourse's key premises and challenged its cogency by turning the argument upside down. The 'drilling for the environment' type of reasoning makes Norwegian participation seem like a win-win situation. By going ahead in the Barents Sea, Norway is giving the Russians a helping hand, benefiting the environment, and earning good money to boot.

In effect, this discourse involving many different actors over time actually managed to beat the opponents at their own game by adopting their main environmental argument and using it to justify drilling. But the environmental case for an early start to oil and gas extraction in the Barents Sea is only possible and intelligible if there is a relatively broad, general and unquestioned perception of Russia as an environmental laggard. What makes it more than a planned rhetorical move by a handful of rational stakeholders in possession of perfect knowledge is precisely its temporal and spatial dimensions. It is about the emergence of a discourse based on identities and collective ideas that appear to be deeply engrained in a sort of a shared Norwegian mentality, with echoes of 'being good is typically Norwegian' and 'being bad is typically Russian'. Drilling for the environment resonated with established opinions on both sides of the discourse about Russia and the environment. Russians and environmental care in the High North, the idea goes, are close to mutually exclusive. It is not difficult to identify representations of Norway as the 'environmentally friendly problem-solver with the world's best technology' in the Norwegian petroleum debate, while the Russians are generally given the role of 'poor, environmentally damaged country, with a large appetite for capital' (Jensen and Hønneland 2011). Something about the environmental discourse in combination with Norway and Russia is redolent of a cunning, powerful rhetorical device which marginalises environmentalist opponents of petroleum extraction. When 'drilling for the environment' became an established truth in the debate, the pro-production lobby dislodged the environmental argument – the cornerstone of the conservation discourse – and spun drilling on the Norwegian shelf as a sensible environmental strategy.

It would be totally impossible for one or more stakeholders to decide to establish and sustain a 'drilling for the environment' discourse given the sheer amount of text, time and complexity involved. Not to say that no one might have thought the thought or wanted to, or were not happy with the current situation. But the point is that no single actor or small group of actors could have had the prescience and power to turn the discourse into what it is today. This discourse started out as marginal, scattered representations in the material, but grew over the space of several years to become a leading discourse in the Norwegian petroleum debate. It has involved a large number of very different stakeholders in terms of geography, demography and socio-economic status. This is

an important reason I decided not to focus on stakeholders individually, or subject positions as Fairclough would have called them, but on the discursive, aggregate level. It is through discourse that people create the structures and institutions in which action is embedded, and which the actions of the stakeholders serve to sustain (Straume 2001:10).

In this way, we begin to understand what Neumann (2001) calls power relations. Discourse analysis is, in principle, an analysis of power, though its conception of power differs from the more traditional approach of the political scientist (Lindseth 2002). A one-dimensional power analysis would, for instance, explore what A does to get B to do something he would otherwise not have done. This conforms to the conception of power that underpins all the contributions on co-optation cited in this article, and pre-supposes a lucid understanding of the situation and an intent which, to the discourse analysis, will seem chaotic at best, and probably non-existent. The focus of a non-discursive approach is usually the decisions made by A about something to do with B, where B puts up some form of resistance to A's advances. In this analysis, B's ignorance of the structural bias implied by the behavioural context has some significance. It is also the case from the point of view of the discourse analyst that A's knowledge of the situation may also be wanting (Neumann 2001:166–169). And this latter point is the thing to emphasise: the 'drilling for the environment' discourse emerged – and grew in strength to become undeniable – without anyone actually sitting down to plan its conception, diffusion and, not least, influence.

Discourse co-optation

But why should it be necessary to conceptualise the phenomenon further? I could easily have put it into one of the several available analytical discursive pigeon holes. But I would be guilty of what Giovanni Sartori calls 'conceptual stretching'. To stretch concepts is in many ways to take the path of least resistance whenever we meet new phenomena. As researchers we are increasingly prone, according to Sartori, to stretch concepts, producing in turn 'vague, amorphous conceptualisations' (1970:1034). I could, to take an example, have applied Fairclough's (1992,1995) conception of interdiscursivity to the 'drilling for the environment' discourse and stopped there.

As far as 'drilling for the environment' and interdiscursivity are concerned, the most eye-catching and intriguing thing is how pro-production actors succeeded in appropriating the clothes of the environmental discourse, giving themselves a surprising makeover in the process. The result was a new discursive mixture which, according to Fairclough again, indicates a driving force in the discourse along with a possibility of social change. I am in no doubt that 'drilling for the environment' satisfies the 'interdiscursivity' criteria, but I also believe it is necessary to increase the level of precision because we are talking about a special form of interdiscursivity inasmuch as theoretically 'one discourse (the actors promoting it) benefits from the loss suffered by another discourse (the actors promoting it) of one of its main components'. By calling all this 'interdiscursivity and leaving it at that, I would be risking that whatever I gained in scope and generality could be undone by inadequate connotative precision. As Sartori suggests, 'we can cover more – in travelling terms – only by saying less, and by saying less in a far less precise manner' (1970:1035). Through writing this article I have tried to avoid this by using de-politicised and co-opted Norwegian environmental politics as a sort of analytical analogy combined with discourse analysis to formulate a tentative definition of discourse co-optation as an analytical concept:

Discourse co-optation describes how one discourse burrows into the heart of a counter-discourse, turns its logic upside down and puts it to work to re-establish hegemony and re-gain political support. One discourse is strengthened by the addition of a new, powerful argument; the other is weakened almost to the same degree.

The conception of discourse co-option under the analytical perspective of a socially oriented discourse conceptualises a particular form of interdiscursivity. Analytically, it could possibly reveal powerful discursive processes and, on a more theoretical plane, also demonstrate how power

unfolds in the actual discourse (Foucault 1972), beyond the control and comprehension of one or more stakeholders. How far one can move up the 'ladder of abstraction' (Sartori 1970:1040) or 'ladder of generality' (Collier and Mahon 1993:846) cannot be addressed in this article, not least because it is an empirical question requiring further study.

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