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Wolves and eco-power

A French-Norwegian analysis of the narratives on the return of large carnivores

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Abstract : The reappearance of wolves has led to conflicts in many rural areas. This paper focuses on South-Eastern Norway and the French Alps, where the conflict patterns are similar. Diverging interpretations of the situation are supported by narratives that are shared to varying degrees among those who occupy different positions within what we might term the « wolf field ». Among these narratives there are two varieties in both Norway and France that catch the eye and that appear to have become increasingly significant as elements in the discourse on wolf reappearance. Rumours about the secret

reintroduction of wolves by the authorities are common among wolf adversaries. Another narrative, important to the pro-wolf camp, is based on the notion that local opposition to the wolf presence is unique to either Norway or France. Yet, while the reintroduction-conspiracy rumours are frequently ridiculed, the notions of unique national conflict patterns have achieved a status almost of official truth. We suggest that this difference of treatment can be analyzed as a manifestation of eco-power.

Keywords : Rumour, eco-power, large carnivores, France, Norway.

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Studying the reactions to the reappearance of the wolves in the French Alps (Mauz, 2005) and in South-Eastern Norway (Skogen & Krange, 2002), we were struck by the similarity of the narratives which accompany this return and which are shared to varying degrees – by people who occupy different positions in what we might term the « wolf field ». Two of these narratives appear to be particularly important to the discourses on wolf reappearance in Norway and France and are recurrent in the in-depth interviews we conducted as well as in the written material collected (newspaper articles, pamphlets, websites).

These two types of narratives aim at answering two major questions for the people concerned by or interested in the wolf return: how did the wolves get there? And why is their presence rejected by part of the local population? The first type of narratives, which claims that wolves have been secretly reintroduced, is common among wolf adversaries. These clandestine operations are allegedly conducted either by extreme environmentalists or by an alliance between environmentalists and government agencies. The second one is expressed by members of the pro-wolf camp and depicts the opposition to the wolf return as unique to each region: Norwegian wolf proponents contend that the Norwegian situation is singular, and their French counterparts make the same claim for France.

Although they both are questionable, these two narratives are treated in different ways both in France and Norway, the first one being very often ridiculed while the other is hardly criticized. Why such a difference of treatment? This is what we would like to clarify in this paper.

We will first present the two narratives in more detail and highlight their convergences and differences in France and Norway. In order to clarify their scientific status, we will then introduce the concept of rumour with which they will be confronted. Lastly, we will show that they are indeed treated in different ways and we will suggest that this difference can be understood as a manifestation of « eco-power » (Lascoumes, 1994).

Surprisingly similar narratives in France and Norway

The theory of the secret reintroduction

In France, wolves had been extinct for a long time when they officially reappeared in 1992 in the Mercantour national park. In Norway biologists were inclined to believe that a few wolves from the native southern Scandinavian population had survived and multiplied, possibly with some « help » from wolves coming from Finland¹. However, recent genetic analyses have demonstrated that all the wolves that are currently in Scandinavia are of Finnish extraction, and that the native population must be considered lost.

In both countries, the official account states that the wolves have migrated from neighbouring countries – Italy for France, Finland for Norway and Sweden – and that such dispersion is to be expected when wolves are not pursued by humans. Young wolves leave their packs and roam great distances to find suitable territories of their own, which, under favorable conditions, they will eventually colonize.

These explanations are based on biological science, and are advanced by wildlife biologists, wildlife managers and by resource management agencies. Such accounts also have the full support of environmental organizations. Convincing as they may be, they do not go uncontested. In both France and Norway alternative accounts of wolf reappearances flourish among those who do not welcome the returning wolves – most notably farmers and hunters with firm roots in a traditional resource extraction culture.

There certainly are differences between the French and Norwegian stories contradicting the official thesis of the wolf spontaneous return and between the people who tell them. For example, Norwegian traditional hunters seem to be more against the wolf than their French counterparts² and readier to claim that the predators have been reintroduced. The precise way in which the reintroductions are supposed to have been carried out and the

1 • Norway and Sweden share the Scandinavian wolf population. The animals migrate across the border, and at least three packs use areas on both sides. Therefore, research and management between the two countries are closely coordinated.

2 • One striking difference between France and Norway, which may account for much of the differences in hunters' attitudes, is the fate of the hunters' beloved dogs. In Norway and Sweden, but not in France, many hunting dogs have been attacked and killed by wolves, not only while hunting, but while chained to their owner's doorstep. Knowing the affectionate relationship between hunters and their dogs and the tremendous amount of time and money that many hunters invest in training their dogs, it is no surprise that the wolves are not popular. Indeed, the typical Scandinavian hunting methods, which entail the use of untethered dogs, are now seen as impossible in areas with wolves. Because many hunters regard their cooperation with their dog as more important and more rewarding than the actual kill, the loss of this form of hunting is even more aggravating. So far, their French counterparts have not undergone these experiences with the wolves.

objectives ascribed to the people accused of having reintroduced the wolves may also vary from one country to the other. In Norway, there are stories about the feeding of wolves which we did not encounter in France. In France, some sheep farmers are convinced that wolves have been reintroduced primarily to accelerate their disappearance. They consider the wolves to be « biological weapons » and see themselves as victims of a plot contrived by powerful groups who loathe rural people and their way of life. The same image was drawn by Norwegian informants and is found in written material in Norway, but more modest versions of the story are more common. The harm caused to rural areas is seen not as the chief goal behind the introductions, but as a side effect of a strategy aimed at reconstructing a scenic wilderness as a playground and esthetic object for city people.

However, these differences remain secondary and are far less striking than the similarity of the stories: in both countries, we find similar accounts of fishy activities (vehicles loaded with dog cages on remote roads, usually after dark), of wolf behaviours or appearances considered as « unnatural » (lack of shyness, wolves only nibbling at the sheep they kill, colours of their fur supposed to be different from that of « normal » wolves, etc.). It is also said in both cases that old plans for wolf reintroduction officially abandoned were actually secretly implemented. Our informants usually spoke in the same general terms, pointing to « those » who have released wolves. When asked to elaborate, most informants incriminated extremist environmentalists, but resource management agencies were also frequently mentioned. Therefore, the core of the story does not vary: in both cases, it seems essential to at least part of the wolf opponents to insist on the wolves not belonging to the area and being, in fact, aliens.

The theory of unique conflicts, lazy farmers and outdated attitudes

It seems that the presence and even more the return of wolves have always and everywhere generated conflicts with farmers (Garde 1998, Linnell and al. 2001). However, this is not the opinion of many wolf protectors, who hold farmers in France and Norway to be particularly opposed to wolves and especially unable to protect their sheep properly. Again, very similar narratives can be collected on that topic in Norway and in France. In fact, the interview material contain statements that might have been translated directly from one language to the other.

Conservationists from both countries often claim that regional or national modern shepherding practices have characteristics that significantly increase problems with wolf predation on sheep, and that the farmers in their country have particularly primitive attitudes toward the utilization of natural resources and the value of biodiversity. Certain practices held to be responsible for much of the predation – such as leaving sheep in the mountains and forests without permanent human supervision, which is common both in the French Alps and in Norway –, are described as being unique to the area in question and unknown in other countries. It is contended that sheep farmers in other countries herd their sheep or take other measures which effectively prevent attacks. Therefore, the conflicts between

sheep herders and wolves are unique to France say the French conservationists – or unique to Norway say the Norwegians. Everywhere else, so the stories go, there is harmony between wolves and rural people. People in other regions of Europe are said to be astonished to hear about the fierce conflicts in Norway – or in France.

The wolf discourse of many conservationists is dominated by images of current sheep herding practices as something that could happen only there, because sheep farmers receive such generous subsidies and because French or Norwegians are accustomed to using nature as they please for their own benefit, and have lost touch with the traditional ways of sustainable resource utilization.

Scandinavia's popularity as an exemplary model declined in France after the elimination of one Norwegian wolf pack by the authorities in 2001 (a pack that had settled outside the wolf management zone, and which was regarded as a serious threat to sheep farming). Italians and Spaniards are still popular examples, however, and farmers from Eastern Europe (above all Rumania and Bulgaria) are admired even more, because they allegedly live with much larger carnivore populations but have few problems – and if they have problems, they accept the carnivores as « natural » and « valuable » anyway.

In both countries farmers from the past are used as positive examples, along with farmers from other countries. The old-time farmers are supposed to have had much closer relationships with their animals, and cared for them through the grazing season. This active shepherding allegedly prevented carnivore attacks, so that the relationship between farmers and large carnivores was much less strained than it is today – much like the somewhat mythical situation in contemporary Rumania. Farmers that are distant in space or time are hence considered as models for modernisation sheep herders – for their attitudes, and indeed for their herding practices.

The national media seem to have picked up on these stories, and generally convey the same picture. Such views seem to have been disseminated throughout significant parts of the population in both countries.

Help from the sociology of rumours

How are these stories to be considered? Can they be regarded as examples of the same phenomenon?

The reintroduction narratives have already interested social scientists, at least in France, who have noticed that they strongly resemble other phenomena that have been studied extensively in the last few decades. It is not the first time people have claimed that undesirable species have been released – accidentally or deliberately. Many New Yorkers, for instance, are convinced that there are alligators in the city's sewers (Kapferer 1990; Renard 1999). In several regions of France, there is a widespread conviction that helicopters drop boxes containing vipers (Rémy 1989; Campion-Vincent 1990). Some informants explicitly established the connection, and told us that wolves are being released, exactly like vipers.

Such stories have been defined as rumours (Campion-Vincent, 2004, 2005). A rumour is the emergence and circulation of a collective interpretation of a problematic event that official sources deny or have not yet confirmed. People tend to repeat a rumour, to contribute to its transmission, or even to nourish it, because they are seduced by its content, and particularly because their pre-existing opinions and interpretations are reinforced. Rumours are not necessarily false but they are unverified. Rumours are counter-narratives, providing as they do alternative explanations for events or phenomena that are less open to scrutiny than the official story, while being more exciting and disturbing. Rumours are rarely simple if they can be complicated. Obvious interpretations and objections are often rejected and replaced by more convoluted reasoning. Rumours are often « black » (Kapferer, 1990), in the sense that they present a negative interpretation of events considered to be problematic; they tend to attribute what actually or fictively happened to persons and collective agents in such a way that they are discredited or dishonoured (Morin, 1969). Rumours are flexible; they spread rapidly, and are likely to turn objections and denials into new arguments.

The wolf reintroduction narrative is clearly in opposition to the official account. By incriminating state services, scientific institutions and the people associated with them, wolf opponents launch resistance against the power of the state and its associates, the urban conservationists. It is indeed « black », as it denounces the scandalous existence of a reintroduction network or even a secret alliance compromising people in high places – a former Minister of the Environment in Norway and a former Director of the Directorate for Nature in France were held by some informants to be personally involved. And further, objections and arguments supporting the official version often do nothing but strengthen it. Hence, wolf opponents' reintroduction stories possess all the characteristics of rumours outlined above. They are indeed among those particularly stubborn rumours which are almost impossible to refute. As Kapferer suggests (1990: 285), it is difficult, perhaps impossible, to prove that something did *not* happen.

Let us turn to the story of local wolf opponents being an exception in time and space. Can it also be regarded as a rumour?

The negative picture of farmers is not the official one³, but it is spread very widely among the wolf proponents. It is obviously appealing: if local farmers are different from farmers elsewhere, and are inordinately incompetent and careless, then it is all the more obvious that they must change their ways, and that there is nothing wrong with the wolf. Besides, to present the farmers' opposition to the wolves and the resulting conflicts as specifically French or Norwegian allows to regard it as a « ridiculous » behaviour ridiculing the country. The explanation is repeated without much scrutiny, by people who frequently do

3 • The state supports sheep farming economically, compensates losses, supports preventive measures, and attempts to accommodate the interests of sheep farmers when wolf protection policy is being shaped. In Norway, the government has even sided with the farmers in extremely controversial matters, such as the elimination of an entire wolf pack to protect sheep farming interests. This was carried out despite the presence of numerous Norwegian and foreign activists who tried to stop the hunt. In France, a small number of wolves were legally shot in 2004 and 2005.

not have the desire or the possibility to check it. Some of the wolf proponents do travel abroad in order to watch wolves and to exchange with other wolf-supporters. Meetings with farmers may be set up on these trips, but these farmers are very likely to have been chosen for their relatively positive attitude to the wolf presence.

It can also be noted that the incompetent farmers' thesis is « black »: wolf supporters denounce the decay of a very old and so to say universal order: a farmer must protect his animals against predators and especially herd the flocks through the grazing season. Farmers are therefore charged with having dropped the most elementary professional ethics. They are said to be « subsidies' hunters » and the part of public money in their income is constantly underlined. The denunciation of the farmers' unique incompetence and negligence is an unofficial, unchecked, « black » and collective interpretation of an uneasy situation, and it indeed shares several characteristics with rumours.

However, the stories about unique herding practices are met with alternative accounts to a very limited degree. That the situation in each country is unique is widely accepted to the extent that sheep farmers also propagate the notion. Meanwhile, the narrative of wolf reintroduction, which cannot logically be demonstrated to be completely false, is ridiculed⁴ and overrun by a dominant, official story. Now, why might that be?

Opposite relationships to science and to local conditions and events

The answer seems to rest in our informants' relationships to science on the one hand, and to local conditions and events on the other.

Wolf proponents show a genuine faith in scientific findings. When they contest the wolf reintroduction theory, they resort to genetic analyses or to the monitoring of radio-collared wolves, which conclude that the predators indeed arrive from nearby Italy in the case of France, and from Finland in that of Norway and Sweden. Highly sophisticated techniques and specialized scientific knowledge are therefore essential to their position. The fact that many local farmers and/or hunters are not convinced by these results and remain sceptical or even incredulous is considered as a sign of their anti-scientific attitude, anti-modernism and backwardness and allows to ridicule them along with their reintroduction stories.

This gives a good idea of the dominant and uncontested place acquired by science in environmental movements. Many supporters of these movements take for granted that scientific and technical knowledge should have a major influence on the debates and on the determination of political choices, an evolution that Pierre Lascoumes (1994), drawing his inspiration from Foucault's biopower, proposes to term « eco-power ». Although the relationship between the environmental movement and dominant science is often construed as one of conflict (cf. Beck 1992), we believe that this is at best an incomplete under-

4 • It should nevertheless be noted that some social scientists have tried to show that these rumours could be taken seriously (Campion-Vincent, 2000).

standing. There are of course some important incongruities between typical environmental movement perspectives and those of mainstream science. Most notably, antagonism is apparent between environmentalism and those strands of science that are manifestly embedded in a utilitarian understanding of nature and frequently interwoven with what is perceived by many as the interests of « industrialism » or « capital ». But the environmental movement does not generally appear to be estranged from science, and there are strong historical ties between the environmental movement and the life sciences. The predominant environmental discourse is powerfully informed by science, and environmentalists regularly claim a scientific basis for their arguments, even when it serves to underpin a more fundamental ideological stance.

The prominence of scientific understanding within the environmental discourse can be linked with the predominant middle-class basis of the environmental movement. Some of the groups that comprise the core constituency of the environmental movement are situated within academia itself, further accentuating this connection. Resource management agencies are staffed almost exclusively by academics, (some of whom having a background in the environmental movement), and all these factors help to generate a discourse that is largely shared with the environmental movement. Although there may be considerable differences in emphasis regarding fundamental political issues and in the interpretation of concrete situations, there is generally a common conceptual ground that appears to provide a familiar and comfortable frame around the exchange of diverging opinions.

A narrative that disregards scientific results, as the secret reintroduction narrative, appears to be very easy to ridicule as « medieval ». But the incompetent farmers' theory hardly clashes with scientific findings. While some comparative studies have been conducted at a European scale on the influence of the wolf presence on sheep-farming, such as (Garde, 1998), they remain little known and cannot be compared to the numerous and thorough investigations carried out for years by natural scientists on wolf migrations and genetics. Even if they have been proved to be false, the incompetent farmers' narratives do not appear to be anti-scientific.

Let us now consider the relations of our informants to the local conditions and events, to which wolf opponents generally pay a very strong attention. Their stories about wolf reintroduction are usually based at least partially upon real observations and upon solid knowledge of the areas in question. While sometimes expanding into the realms of national politics, they are always about activities that allegedly take place precisely in the areas where these people live. To the extent that they are based on observation and « data », these are accumulated locally or recounted by local people.

Moreover, the sheep farmers rarely contest the uniqueness of their situation, but rather choose to defend it as necessary given local conditions, and as desirable for the environment and for animal welfare. In fact, in the Norwegian material, some of the most elaborate accounts of national uniqueness came from people associated with farming rather than from wolf supporters. Sheep farmers had accepted their isolation as a truism and hereby contributed to the success of the story which discredits them. At least two factors could

reasonably be thought to play a part in this acceptance of the national uniqueness image. First, seeking support and documentation in distant places is not near at hand as a strategy for people who are closely tied to a particular locality and who may have such local attachment as a core element in their identity projects (Skogen 2001). Seeking information about conditions elsewhere in the world to counter images drawn by people known to be well connected internationally, would require quite different data collection techniques than those they are used to. It would also require that someone had a suspicion that there was something fishy in the dominant narrative. Second, the image of national (or regional or local) uniqueness is not necessarily an unpleasant one to people who identify strongly with a particular place, and who may deliberately construct their identities in opposition to current social forces of urbanization and globalization.

The wolf proponents adopt a totally different attitude to local conditions and events. They construct a general picture to make the particular case appear as a meaningless exception to the rule: all farmers but these look after their sheep and put up with the wolf presence. What they deem interesting and worth considering is therefore not what is going on *hic et nunc*, but the situation elsewhere and before.

We have identified two reasons why the secret reintroduction narratives are easily mocked: they are clearly not congruent with scientific findings and they focus on a very local scale. The incompetent farmers' narratives also clash with the studies available but these are few, not well known and they might appear less serious than studies in natural sciences using genetic analyses and bio-mathematics.

Conclusion

Comparing two European regions that are generally seen as different in a number of ways allowed us to scrutinize the idea of national uniqueness and to display the similarities of the narratives collected in far-distant places. Of course this comparison should be extended to other parts of Europe to find out the extension of these narratives and to analyze their variation over space and time.

The two questions which have been constantly raised since the wolf arrival each receive two competing answers. The first one belongs to the animal's biology or ethology. The second one prefers a human, sociological cause. Biological explanations are not always expressed by those who were expected: farmers and their allies speak of the diet and predation strategies of wolves to justify their difficulties, whereas naturalists and protectors resort in this case to economic and social factors. This is the first lesson of our study. A second one can be drawn.

Both pro- and anti-wolf sides defend notions which very much resemble rumours and which allow them to give a convenient answer to the difficult problems they are facing. Academic education clearly does not protect against this temptation.

Lastly, the discrepancy in the treatment of the two narratives examined in this paper confirms the weight gained by science in the environmental movements, and the priority

commonly attributed to the general over the particular. These two elements can be considered as complementary aspects of eco-power. Farmers do not resort to science and are often reluctant to trust scientists and their findings (Wynne, 1996); they pay most of their attention to the local conditions and events and find it difficult to adopt a broader perspective. Wolf conservationists are perfectly at ease with life sciences, they regard natural scientists as important allies and they tend to draw global pictures that, in the case of the incompetent farmers' stories, turn out to be false but that manage to escape criticism. In a context where scientific approaches and general pictures are prioritized, farmers appear to be doubly dominated.

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