

The Changing Imagery of the Big Bad Wolf ^[*]

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Abstract

The current work is part of the author's ecosemiotic analysis of Norwegian/Scandinavian wolf management in the period 1855-2010. In Norway, as in several other countries, wolf management is controversial. For some on the countryside it has come to symbolize the ignorant hostility (and imperialistic tendencies) of the urban elites. There is a wide gap between perceptions on the conservation side and in the antagonistic camp, and the proper role of folklore — which is considered by wolf ecologists as unscientific — has never been agreed upon. Field observations confirm that the political and cultural strife has little basis in actual wolf ecology — sheep, for instance, which play a marginal role in Scandinavian wolf diet, are currently major players in popular imagery (and, ironically, management policies) only. As symbols have grown and developed, cultural representations of wolves appear, at least in part, to have decoupled from ecological reality. In what ways have our conceptions of wolves changed from the extermination campaigns of the 19th century to the conservation efforts of our generation? To what extent have wolves, in modern times as well as earlier, symbolized human traits, religious ideas etc., and to what extent have they represented actual phenomena of nature? By offering a series of examples of animal representations involving wolves — in fiction and popular culture, in myths and in legends — I will inquire into these questions, aiming at approving our understanding of how human cultures has co-evolved not only with wolves, but further with a rich human imagery of these creatures, the infamous ancestors of man's best

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The current work is part of the author's ongoing ecosemiotic analysis of Norwegian/Scandinavian wolf management in the period 1855-2010. In Norway, as in several other countries, wolf management is controversial. For some on the countryside it has come to symbolize the ignorant hostility (and imperialistic tendencies) of the urban elites. There is a wide gap between perceptions on the conservation side and in the antagonistic camp, and the proper role of folklore, which is considered by wolf ecologists as unscientific, has never been agreed upon. Simultaneously, field observations confirm that the political and cultural strife has little basis in actual wolf ecology. Sheep, for instance, which play a marginal role in Scandinavian wolf diet, are currently major players in popular imagery only, not in the reality of wolf ecology. Ironically, management policies appear to give just as much weight to popular imagery as to hard ecological facts, even when one sphere directly contradicts the other. The result, one might say, is management policies that are based on fiction just as much as they are based on science.

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Paintings entitled «The Wolf Hunt», such as those by Nikolai Sverchkov (1817-1898) and Alexandre François Desportes (1661-1743), no doubt tell a revealing story about our past (and for some present) way of relating to this shy, yet social carnivore. At this occasion, however, I will limit myself to presenting a selection of cultural impressions and expressions, mostly from the Norwegian scene, and mostly with regard to a political context. Here, I will report from the campaign leading up to the recent Norwegian parliamentary election, which took place September 14th, 2009, and in conclusion allude to the subsequent governmental platform, presented to the public less than one week prior to the completion of this paper.

A SYMBOLIC SPECIES

My main hypothesis can be phrased like this: As an animal which is under current circumstances dominantly conceived by people in terms of a symbol, what wolves are taken to signify depends not so much on actual wolf ecology as it depends on certain cultural/societal developments. These are, justly or unfairly, associated with the presence of wolves, and with governmental conservation policies. The changing symbolic perceptions of wolves followingly represent a mirror-image of cultural developments. By studying our perceptions of the wolf we can learn to get a better understanding of ourselves.

«[A]s culture can be represented by man», write Hall and Sharp (1978: xiii), «so can nature be represented by animal. Expressed as an opposition between man and animal, some of the symbolic loading becomes obvious, and if we consider the wolf not as an animal but as a specific symbol of animal, then the loading is even clearer». In our cultural tradition, they continue, where nature is intolerable and animals are inferior, «the wild wolf becomes not only intolerable and inferior but downright immoral in its refusal to accept the position allocated to it. Only the devil opposes the just and moral goals of Christian Western man, so it is not surprising that the wolf is our prototypical symbol of evil».

That has many places been the traditional meaning carried by the wolf. But what about today? Are wolves still conceived of as the incarnation of evil? By many, evidently, they still are. In my work related to the Norwegian situation, I have found that the wolf is symbolizing (i.e. taken to represent/confused with)

- a) the wild
- b) «nature»
- c) «urban folks»
- d) the central government (which is by many on the countryside conceived to be overtly intellectual/academic/scientific, elitist, without real-life competence and without any understanding of (and empathy with) the challenges of the countryside)
- e) the threats, dangers and decline facing Norwegian agriculture
- f) foreign invaders (such as Swedes — our brother people — with whom we have long since found peace!)
- g) WTO?

THE POLITICS OF WOLVES AND SHEEP

An informative introduction to Norwegian culture and identity is offered in the brilliant little *How to understand and use a Norwegian: A User's manual and troubleshooter's guide*, by the Norwegian comedian Odd Børretzen. Here, we are told that the Norwegians emerged as a people when the ice retreated at the end of the last ice age. The Norwegians were those who, accustomed to the ice and uncomfortable with its absence, followed it as far north as practically possible.

The current management regime can only be understood on the background of certain aspects of Norwegian identity. The politics of wolves and sheep is what we have to deal with, and it is an area that is not only thoroughly politicised, but drenched with deeply symbolic flavourings. Two facts: The number of wolves in Norway has the last few years been around 10-15 (not counting «border wolves»). The number of sheep in Norway is around 1-2 million, depending on the season. Why all the fuzz?

In the farmer-based daily *Nationen*, September 3rd, 2009, we could read the following brief note:

'Only one thing represents a bigger threat than carnivores — Fremskrittspartiet getting power.'

— Liv Signe Navarsete (Sp) brought the wolf into the election campaign while visiting wolf-opponents at Finnskogen in Hedmark.

For the first time, Fremskrittspartiet («The progress party» — a populist, rightwing party, contemporarily Norway's second biggest party) had been challenging Senterpartiet (Sp — «The center party», the farmers' party) in who could shout «wolf!» with the loudest voice. Both parties now favour extinction of the wolf in Norway (why can't the Swedes take care of the wolves, they ask — or the Russians; after all, they are ultimately emigrants from the Russian population of wolves).

In a whole-page add in the same newspaper September 9th, Sp announced that they «ask for your continued support to [...] have a carnivore policy where we prioritize grazing animals over carnivores». They also promise that if they get enough support, «the smell of asphalt will be felt in towns and on the countryside!». The same day, Lars Haltbrekken, a leading environmentalist, says in *Nationen* that «[t]he last few days Sp has fought a hard battle against wolves, so there will be a lot of discussion about this in a red-green coalition government». In addition to Sp, the red-green coalition government includes SV (Sosialistisk Venstreparti — «Socialist left-party», a party supporting wolf conservation) and Arbeiderpartiet (Ap, «The workers' party», Norway's social democrat and biggest party). Ole-Anton Teigen, the leader of an NGO representing small-scale farmers, agreed: «Carnivores and conservation has been among the big topics of disagreement internally in the government the last four years, equaling the question concerning Norwegian presence in Afghanistan. And these internal strifes will continue if the red-green coalition government continues».

THE PRIME MINISTER'S HUNT

There is no doubt what side *Nationen* is on. In an editorial August 31st, entitled «One wolf worth 2,1 million NOK — so far», they state that the «Galven bitch in Hedmark has as of now killed more than 70 sheep». And still, the conservation authorities hold their hand over «the grey-legged one» [gråbeinen]. The 70 sheep killings are thereby blessed and approved by the authorities». The authorities' work related to the Galven bitch, *Nationen* claimed, «has in three months cost no less than 2,1 million NOK. This compares to the amount the state spends supporting nine farmers throughout an entire year». These numbers, finds the newspaper, «illustrate the madness of today's wolf policies». *Nationen* claims that a characteristic nutrition chain has arisen in pastureland-Norway. «On top are the researchers who make a living studying wolves and other carnivores. Below them are the carnivores, who make a living eating sheep. Then come the sheep. The sheep depends on the farmers, who are at the bottom of this nutrition ladder».

As mentioned, the current management regime only makes sense on the background of certain aspects of Norwegian identity. Norway is a country where support of whaling and (to a somewhat lesser extent) seal hunting is widespread, despite international pressure. In fact, it seems like the international consensus against Norway in these matters just reinforces the Norwegian near-consensus in favour of these «Norwegian traditions». The underlying premise is that natural resources are there to be utilised, not to be romanticised (at least not in any

outlandish manner). Norway's Prime Minister, Jens Stoltenberg (Ap), recently went hunting deer in Rendalen in Hedmark. The timing was suspicious — right ahead of the national election. But no, Stoltenberg was not campaigning, he was simply going hunting (that does in fact appear to have been the case). Nevertheless he found time for a couple of meetings with the locals, who strongly oppose the current wolf management policies.

Rendalen happens to be Norway's biggest municipality, measured by land area. It also happens to be the one place in Norway where opinions about wolf policies have been the most divisive, in a social context — and dominantly hostile to conservation efforts.

IDENTITY UNDER PRESSURE

Current carnivore management would not have met such hostile resistance on the countryside, had it not been for some fundamental facts that are of great concern to rural populations: Since 1999, one third of all farms in Norway have been closed down. All this has occurred in only 10 years! Most often these farms have been rented or sold to neighbouring farmers. The bottom line is fewer farmers and bigger farms. While crop land and livestock populations have overall been fairly stable, there's a clear tendency toward bigger units with more land and more animals per farmer.

Traditionally, Norway has experienced a strong communal spirit, an emphasis on «full employment», and egalitarianism implying that urban/rural relations should be fairly balanced. «Distriktspolitik», the Norwegian notion of «rural policies», aims at counteracting centralization through subsidies and investment programs. What, then, of today's development? It appears that the wolf is a scapegoat for structural societal developments for which partly the government, partly international trade institutions/agreements are to blame.

Surely, Norwegians generally have a «green» and (supposedly) nature-friendly identity. Norway is not only a country of whaling, but also the country of Gro Harlem Brundtland, the leader of the world commission on environment and development (cf. *Our Common Future*). Of the four Norwegian political parties mentioned in this text, three have logos with symbols taken from nature (Ap uses a rose, Sp a clover, Frp an apple). «Home to a green-minded people and government,» *The Economist* commented January, 2009, with reference to Norway's role as a major oil and gas exporter, «Norway exports the dirty stuff to the rest of the world».

THE AFTERMATH

A first conclusion (and new questions): From an Umwelt perspective, it is reasonable to assume that people might, under some circumstances, tend to hold on to the identity of a former occupation much longer than they hold on to their occupation. This is assumedly particularly relevant in cases where a whole family line have had a certain occupation (here — and dominantly — farming) for generations. The apparent stasis of the Norwegian carnivore debate — despite a rapidly declining farmer population — points in that direction. We know the numbers of people with farming as occupation — but how many still have an identity as farmers?

- «All who were once farmers»?
- «All who grew up on a farm»?
- «All who live in rural areas»?

And in what way are farmer-sympathizing ex-farmers/non-farmers' world views different from those of current farmers? Are stereotypes reinforced, as rural dwellers are alienated by central policies?

– In the municipality of Rendalen, Sp (which has a nationwide support of around 6%) got around a fourth of the vote at the national election, and Ap close to half. Both parties experienced minuscule advances. In the region Hedmark as a whole, Frp and Sp are still no bigger than in the country as a whole.

More interestingly, it seems like the Prime Minister, Jens Stoltenberg, changed opinion about wolf management after his hunt in Rendalen. According to newspaper reports, it was his holiday visit to Rendalen that convinced him that «there's a lot of anxiety about the wolves», and that more of them should consequently be shot. According to several media analyses, the new government platform facilitates such policies (though the whole management policies are up for new negotiations in 2010).

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