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# Social representations of the wolf

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## Abstract

Restoring species to their former range has become a major goal in official environmental policy. Under strict protection, the expansion of a new wolf population has been taking place on the Scandinavian Peninsula since the late 1980s, leading to much controversy in rural areas. Most research on conflicts concerning wolves has taken antagonistic attitudes as a point of departure. In this article we question such an approach. Taking social representations as our framework for analysis, our aim has been to find out how wolves are perceived and whether an analysis of such cultural meanings could contribute to a better understanding of the conflicts accompanying wolf recovery. Focus group interviews in two areas in Eastern Norway suggest that it is not antagonistic interpretations of the carnivores' nature that fuel the conflicts over wolves, but different views as to whether they belong in the areas where they are now found. Yet, at the same time, it is against the undisputed background of the wolf's perceived character that the negotiations over their belonging to Norwegian nature make sense. We so argue that the theory of social representations provides a comprehensive framework for studying the complex relationship between consensus and diverging opinions, and between culturally embedded representations and conflict, that appears to lie at the heart of such issues.

## Keywords

common sense, conflict, large carnivores, environment, focus groups, lay knowledge, Moscovici, nature, social representations, wolves

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## Introduction

After a century marked by the almost complete absence of wolves on the Scandinavian Peninsula the expansion of a new wolf population has been taking place since the late 1980s. Although the present population is quite small, it has been the subject of heated debate and controversy in both Norway and Sweden.<sup>1</sup> Wherever wolves have appeared, their presence has resulted in deep conflicts between supporters and adversaries: between nature managers and sheep farmers, between conservationists and local residents, and between biologists and hunters, to mention but a few. Similar scenarios have unfolded elsewhere in the world, in other areas of wolf recovery, such as in North America and the French Alps.

The issue we address in this article is the extent to which disputes over wolf protection are related to representations of the animal. Is for instance resistance to wolf recovery rooted in a negative image of the predators? Employing the concept of *social representations*, as developed by Serge Moscovici, we wish to elucidate an aspect of the human–carnivore relationship that departs from the attitudinal and socio-economic explanations that have so far dominated the field, at least within the Scandinavian and North American context. At a more theoretical level, we aim to explore the virtues of a representational approach in sociology through an empirical example, asking what role representations might play in social conflicts, for instance over specific species.

Ultimately, this leads to asking whether social meaning has any explanatory power or, in the words of Alexander (2003), ‘cultural autonomy’, justifying the *analytical* uncoupling of culture from social structure. While we are not in a position to address the latter issue in all its complexity, we agree with Franklin (1999) that ‘animals are good to think with’ in our pursuit of a better understanding of how culturally elaborated meaning intersects with social forces such as power or class structure (see Alexander, 2003: 14).

## Wolves, representations and conflicts

During the past two decades, a number of studies have placed human-wolf conflicts firmly within the social realm, describing them as deeply embedded in broader patterns of cultural and economic divergence. The material impact of the reappearance of wolves (such as the killing of domestic animals and competition with hunters for game) has of course played a significant role in the heated debate, but research has demonstrated that the controversy extends beyond antagonisms related to physical impacts. Factors such as rural decline and urban prosperity, socio-cultural tensions related to class, and struggles over the hegemony of scientific knowledge have been the focus of much of this work (e.g. Dalla Bernardina, 2002; Krange and Skogen, 2007; Mauz, 2005; Skogen et al., 2008).

These efforts to understand controversies surrounding wolves in a broader societal context, we believe, have been important in breaking new ground in terms of deepening the understanding of social conflicts related to large carnivores. Yet one might ask whether previous research on human-carnivore relations not a little too easily has taken antagonistic attitudes to wolves for granted. Based on a conflict perspective, various contributors have sought to expose underlying socio-cultural causes of the controversies accompanying the presence of wolves (e.g. Kaltenborn and Bjerke, 2002; Skogen and Thrane, 2008; Wilson, 1997). However much this has contributed to a better understanding of conflicts over conservation generally, the wolves themselves have almost been driven from the scene in the sense that the debate on their recovery appears as somewhat disconnected from the social meanings attributed to the animal species. Despite general agreement that the wolf has a particular iconic power in social imagery (e.g. Kellert et al., 1996; Lopez and Lopez, 2004; Lynn, 2010), there have been few attempts at looking more deeply into the locally constructed content of such representations and their possible impact on current conflicts over carnivore conservation.

This is not to say that wolf representations have not been an issue as such. Interpretations of wolves across time and space occupy a prominent place in the literature on large carnivores, not least in North America. A comprehensive overview of these interpretations has never been assembled (Lynn, 2010:

82), but attention has typically been drawn to how the wolf has been represented as a varmint and a pest (e.g. Kleese, 2002); an animal 'out of place' (e.g. Brownlow, 2000); a master of the hunt (e.g. Lynn, 2010); or a potent symbol of the wild (Emel, 1998). The lion's share of this work relates to the fast growing study area of animal geographies, and important findings concern how human understanding of a species is bound in time and space (see Rothfels, 2002) and how cultures conceptually assign different types of animals to different worldly environments (e.g. Philo and Wilbert, 2000). Particular attention has been paid to the change in the cultural imagination of large predators that has taken place over the past few decades, transforming wolves 'from varmint to useful members of the biological community' (Kleese, 2002: 316).

While it seems obvious that such a change in hegemonic representations has taken place, the above-mentioned findings do not constitute a sufficient basis for an enquiry into the relationship between perceptions and wolf conflicts. In the first place, research on representations has a logical focus on *shared* meaning, and when meanings become largely shared in time and space their connection with social conflicts is not self-evident. A second challenge relates to the fact that research on carnivore representations has tended to focus precisely on hegemonic and, to a large extent, scientifically informed understandings, with less attention being paid to 'lay' interpretations. At the risk of oversimplifying, this is probably related to the fact that scholars within the field of animal representations commonly construct these representations by analysing cultural expressions such as art and literature (see, e.g., Baker, 2001; Rothfels, 2002).

The content of scientific and hegemonic understandings of wolves has also been the subject of anthropological and ethnological enquiries in Europe (e.g. Dalla Bernardina, 2002), and although this has not been an issue *per se* in Norway, such understandings play a prominent role in the public discourse. As for the local, non-scientific perceptions, both policymakers and scientists have more than once made the error of deducing from 'pro' or 'anti' wolf *attitudes* to positive or negative *understandings* of the animal (see Figari and Skogen, 2008). Thus a shift in focus from more or less consensual, cultural representations to local conflicts and diverging viewpoints seems to coincide with a shift in focus from wolf representations to quantitatively measurable attitudes to carnivores, allowing for research into the socio-economic tensions fuelling the collision of such attitudes.

The point we wish to make here is that a good deal is known about how wolves have been pictured in literature, art and the media, and how conflicts over large predators are embedded in socio-economic structures. Yet little is known about local conceptions and understandings of the phenomenon 'wolf' itself. Hence our focus of interest here is *both* representation and conflicting opinions. But rather than to presuppose conflicting attitudes, we start by asking which associations, ideas and images wolves evoke. Conducted within the framework of a larger project entitled 'Large carnivores and human communities II: Conserving interacting species in the trans-boundary south-central Scandinavian ecosystem', the study is driven by two principal questions. First, how is the wolf perceived by rural residents? Second, do people who express conflicting attitudes regarding the presence of wolves also have different representations of the animal?

## Social representations

Investigating people's understanding of wolves, rather than just the opinions they express, requires suitable tools. To this end, our study utilizes the framework of *social representations* as developed by the French social psychologist, Serge Moscovici. First introduced in his thesis on the social representation of psychoanalysis in 1961 (1976), this 'theory of social representations' has had a considerable impact on research in Europe, Canada and Latin America. Inspired by Moscovici, social scientists from diverse fields have studied, for example, social representations of illness (Herzlich, 1973), the human body (Jodelet, 1984b), cities (Milgram, 1984), biotechnology (Gaskell and Bauer, 1998) and the environment (Félonneau, 2003).

The concept of social representations is currently presented as an alternative and a complement to the concept of 'attitudes'. Even though attitudes tell us something about people's views on specific matters,

they remain mere fragments within a larger context of meaning and interpretation of the world (Wagner and Hayes, 2005: 116). In line with this argument, Moscovici (1973: xiii) describes social representations as complex 'cognitive systems with a proper logic and language of their own'.

By applying the concept of social representations one seeks to take this context of meaning and interpretation into account by focusing on shared, collective ideas and assumptions about the social and physical environment. At a basic level, all communication and coexistence presuppose a common understanding of the world. These shared implicit meanings constitute the foundation upon which our representations and our knowledge rest (Moscovici, 1984; Wagner and Hayes, 2005). Hence, knowledge cannot be separated from representations. Moscovici and his associates therefore also frequently refer to social representations as *common sense* (Moscovici, 1973; 1993) or *lay knowledge* (Herzlich, 1973; Jodelet, 1984a).

Another way to put it is that the concept of social representations addresses *social thought* (Jodelet, 1984a). In this, the Moscovici school relies, in turn, on Durkheim's sociology of knowledge and notion of *collective representations* (Durkheim, 1898, 1912). The emphasis on intersubjectivity as the source and defining characteristic of representations sharply distinguishes it from the classic psychological interpretation of representations as internal mental processes, understood as being more or less isolated from the wider social environment. Like Durkheim, Moscovici believes that the content and categories of human thought remain rooted in historical and cultural structures.

However, Moscovici's approach represents a break from Durkheim's understanding of representations as being pre-established and static – almost a-historical. When transferred from the context of traditional societies to modern ones, Moscovici (1993) contends, representations can no longer be viewed as *collective* in the Durkheimian sense, but should instead be seen as *social*. Indeed, representations are necessarily shared to an extent that will allow objects and phenomena to achieve a basic meaning within the broader frame of social structures. Importantly, however, not all conceptions of the world are shared by all people; representations are social because they are common to a *group* of people. But social groups can vary in size. Thus, by employing the term 'social' rather than 'collective', Moscovici attempts to adapt Durkheim's early sociology of knowledge, predominantly based on studies of 'collective consciousness' among aboriginals (Durkheim, 1912; Durkheim and Mauss, 1903), to contemporary social science and the postmodern focus on fragmented, diverse, rapidly changing societies (Farr and Marková, 1995).

Inasmuch as the boundaries between social groups remain flexible, and since one person is usually a part of many groups – smaller groups, larger groups, societies – the degree of consensus about the interpretations of the world must also be flexible and varying. Hence, Moscovici (1988: 219) emphasizes that it would be an aberration 'to consider representations as homogeneous and shared as such by a whole society. What we wished to emphasise by giving up the world "collective" was this plurality of representations and their diversity within a group'.

The description of representations as socially shared, on the one hand, and as multiple and diverse, on the other, might lead to confusion. But this apparent contradictory coexistence of representational homogeneity and diversity, of consensus and inter-individual differences, has been explained in terms of the structure and dynamics of social representations. Far from being rigid, one-dimensional constructs, social representations are understood to comprise the totality of information, beliefs, attitudes and opinions (Abric, 1984:180).

These elements of social thought are of unequal significance, yet inter-dependent. Some are fundamental and appear to be at the centre of the representation. Others play a more secondary role. Abric (1993) thus proposes an analytical distinction between the *central core* and the *peripheral elements* of a social representation. While the central core of the representation is stable and consensual – marked by the collective memory of a group and the system of norms to which the group refers – the peripheral elements are flexible and sensitive to changing and immediate contexts, supporting the heterogeneity of the group. Thus new ideas may vanish just as soon as they turn up, or they may eventually become part of the representational core. The two components are mutually dependent insofar as the peripheral

elements connect the *non-negotiable* ideas of the central core to the immediate situation in a dynamic response. As we will see, attitudes to wolf recovery can be understood as *one* such response, connecting core ideas about the nature of the animals to other aspects of the social and physical environments in which large carnivore conflicts takes place.

To summarize, it is helpful to think of social representations as being organized hierarchically – from the most implicit and underlying ideas and interpretations of a phenomenon, a core of common understanding, shared by many, completely taken for granted – to, on the other extreme, totally antagonistic points of view, dividing social groups or individuals.

## A representational approach to wolves

In our study, we conducted a series of twenty focus group sessions. During the winter of 2007 and the spring of 2008, group sessions were arranged with farmers, sheep breeders, landowners, hunters, conservationists, hikers, dog sledders, local tourist operators, teachers, architects, nurses, saw-mill workers and neighbourhood groups.

Nine focus group interviews (45 informants) were selected for a qualitative content analysis of wolf representations. Two of these groups were with hunters, two with farmers, one with conservationists, one with dog sledders, one with hikers, and two with members of local neighbourhood groups. Some of these groups were clearly biased towards one side of the conflict (e.g. hunters and farmers were predominantly sceptical of wolf presence and conservationists the opposite). Others, such as the neighbourhood groups and those composed of hikers and dog sledders, were more mixed in terms of expressed attitudes to the presence of large carnivores. The informants were aged from 18 to 79, and 15 of them were women. Each focus group consisted of two interviewers and between three and nine informants. The interview sessions lasted between one and three hours, with most lasting around two hours.

Social representations may emerge as lay theories, causal explanations, specific vocabularies, cognitive frames or prototypical examples (Moscovici, 1984). In other words, we are dealing with qualitative entities; generated, expressed and negotiated through everyday conversations. Lunt and Livingstone (1996) argue that the focus group method, seen as a simulation of the everyday production and communication of social representations, is well adapted to researching such issues.

Morgan (1997) observes that focus group sessions differ from individual interviews in that, within groups, the data are to a large extent the result of *interaction* between informants. The focus group method, therefore, provides not only accounts *of* action, but also accounts *in* action (Halkier, 2002: 11). For the purpose of identifying and interpreting social representations, group discussions may give direct access to shared understanding as well as different interpretations of particular issues (Morgan, 1997: 10). By watching and listening to interactions between group members we were able to distinguish areas of consensus or, in other words, to identify common assumptions about wolves that transcended particular topics of disagreement, both within groups and between the different groups of informants.

Given that representations of phenomena consist of iconic or descriptive elements of social thought (Moscovici, 1993), our key objective was to draw out, in particular, *descriptions* of wolves: we wanted to know how the informants interpreted the animal, how they described its nature and its behaviour. Encouraging them to recount stories about their observations of wolves in the study areas turned out to be an especially productive way to bring about these kinds of descriptions.

Quite a few of the informants had seen wolves, some several times. Others gave second-hand accounts about encounters with wolves. Some of the informants drew upon their observation of tracks in the snow when describing the nature and behaviour of the animals. In addition, comparisons that were made between wolves and other animals, such as other large carnivores, dogs or wolf hybrids (i.e. the offspring of a wolf and a domestic dog, born in the wild) were an important source of information about the informants' representations of the wolf. In most of the group discussions we also addressed the issue of wolf representations directly by asking the informants at the end of the sessions to tell us what they spontaneously associated with the animal.

The informants selected were from two municipalities, Trysil and Halden, both in southeastern Norway. These two communities differ in a number of ways. Trysil is a typical Norwegian rural district, with vast forests and mountains, and is a popular destination for skiers and nature tourists. Despite its size (3,014 km<sup>2</sup>), the population is modest (6,741 in 2008) and has declined in recent decades. In addition to a sizeable tourist industry, centred on a ski resort, Trysil's economy also contains traditional sectors, predominantly forestry and wood processing, but also some livestock farming.

In contrast, Halden is smaller in size (642 km<sup>2</sup>), but has a population more than four times greater than Trysil (28,092 in 2008). Due, among other things, to a long industrial history (lately dominated by wood processing) 85 percent of the population live in urban or semi-urban areas. Halden is thus largely characterized by an urban mode of life. There are, nevertheless, a number of smaller communities in Halden that are distinctly rural, and which have retained close ties to traditional land use, such as forestry.

Despite their notable differences, both municipalities are affected by the presence of large carnivores: bears, lynx, wolverines and wolves in Trysil, and wolves and lynx in Halden. Both are economically diverse, which means that the conflicts over large carnivores are not driven primarily by loss of livestock. Sheep farming has a very modest role in Trysil and is practically absent in Halden. Although there has been very little loss of livestock due to wolves in either area (bears and lynx have caused some losses in Trysil), the presence of wolves seems to be the main issue in local debates on large carnivores. Without doubting the actual threat presented by the presence of wolves, including the potential loss of livestock and dogs, one might ask what it is about this particular animal that attracts so much attention. The question requires an enquiry into the field of representations.

## Shared representations of the wolf

Even though there have been strong antagonisms between Norwegian wolf supporters and wolf adversaries, our interview data show that people with opposing views on carnivore protection also seem to share a basic understanding of wolves as superior, social, wild and pure. There was a strong consensus about these ideas, accentuated by their very tacit and implicit nature. They featured commonly as pre-suppositions or underlying arguments. According to social representation theory, such common and implicit ideas – also described as non-negotiable elements of social thought – are part of the central core of a representation. Following Abric's (1993) line of thought, these ideas constituted the core of consensus in the groups' social representation of the wolf.

The informants portrayed a species that is superior in several ways. They frequently used words and expressions such as 'genuine', 'pure', 'unpolluted', 'smart', 'socially intelligent', 'strategic', 'dominating' and 'beautiful' to describe the wolves and their behaviour, and this was done independently of their position in the debate. Even those who classified themselves as 'anti-wolf' were openly impressed by the large carnivore. One hunter, talking about why he would like to hunt the predators, said: 'You'd have to search a long time to find a more fascinating animal!'

The informants described the wolf as highly ranked among animals – at the top of the animal hierarchy, at least within the Nordic fauna. Generally regarded as strong, powerful, graceful and dignified, the local residents' interpretations echoed popular scientific depictions of an 'aristocratic' animal, as described so vividly by Dalla Bernardina (2002). Our informants' construction of the 'noble wolf' was deeply embedded in ideas about the predator's intelligence and strategic capacity, making it an excellent and unrivalled hunter. Many of them told stories about how the predators strategically use human-made structures in the landscape, such as dog-sled tracks and the wooden boards placed in bogs to aid hikers. They were even more impressed by the wolves' habit of following each other's tracks perfectly in the snow, as a way of saving energy:

Indeed, we've seen how fine hunters they are... and how rational they are, actually. We don't often have deep snow here, but it sure happens. And then we can see that four of them have been following each other, or

five... but it's totally impossible to decide how many there are, because they're treading exactly... [in each other's footprints], saving their strength, you know. It's just incredible! (Farmers)

As mentioned earlier, a number of the informants had seen wolves in their immediate surroundings. These first-hand experiences, as well as stories told by their friends, colleagues, neighbours or family members, constituted the basis of the ideas about the nature and behaviour of the species. Furthermore, observations of tracks represented an important source of knowledge, and led to the construction of scenarios that highlighted the wolves' intelligence, their hunting talent and physical strength:

Once, we were tracking two wolves (. . .). And then, apparently, one of them had stopped, standing still on his post. We could see that he had been standing there for quite some time, waiting, while the other one kept on, and then chased a roe deer right up to where the first one was waiting. Then [the first wolf] brought down the roe deer, and they ate every little bit, except the antlers and the skull. That's all that was left. (. . .) I was so impressed when I saw how they had been working. This was really someone who knew how things should be done! (Neighbour group)

These notions of the wolf's intelligence, strength and hunting talent were closely connected to another image: that of an animal with a strong instinct for self-preservation. As a species it was described as extremely powerful and robust, and possessing a strong instinct for survival. The picture of superiority and strategic capacity seemed to be informed by the notion of the wolf as a social animal – by the idea of the *wolf pack*:

Interviewer 1: If you were to describe the wolf, how would you characterize that animal?

A: Social.

B: Intelligent.

Interviewer 2: How . . . can you expand on that?

B: Intelligent? Well, at least it has a social intelligence. It's a very social animal, and it's capable of making . . . well, strategies while hunting. (Conservationists)

While other large carnivore species were described as loners, the wolves were noted for their sociability. It is by virtue of belonging to a larger group and possessing the ability to cooperate with other individuals that the wolves appear as superior, strong and intelligent. Indeed, this group attachment seems to make them stand out as unique animals:

Interviewer: You said something about the wolf being a special animal, or quite unique. Do you remember – a little while ago?

A: Yes, it is special – the way it behaves. It's a very social animal, you know. The lynx, for instance, is more of a loner . . . or a part of a family, as long as there *is* a family. Then they separate gradually, I guess. The bear too, is mostly living by itself. (Farmers)

Above all, the wolf appeared to the informants as a *wild* animal: natural, authentic and not humanised in any way. The essence of the wolf was seen to be its wild nature. It was supposed to inhabit wild areas and perceived as extremely shy. Even though the majority of the informants in this study lived within or close to wolf territory, and several had had encounters with wolves, such encounters were generally presented as extraordinary events or as rare, fleeting glimpses; extraordinary because wolves, as incarnations of the wild, become strangers when in socialized human territory:

I have seen [wolves] three times. The first time, a wolf crossed the field, and then it ran up the slope. ( ) I went after it, and when I reached the slope, it was just gone, completely disappeared. The second time I was on my way out the front door. At that time we had a lodger who had a cat, and the cat was out in the yard. Then I saw the wolf, standing there, in the gate. ( . . . ) But when it discovered me in the doorway, it was just gone . . . vanished! When I went to take a look at the tracks, it was obvious that it had just rushed off. I saw one another time. I was out walking, and then it was just as if it evaporated from the road in front of me. So, when you ask what I associate with the wolf, I think about being shy, *incredibly* shy! [Affirmative exclamations from the other group members] (Neighbour group)

Thus, the social representation of the wolf is inextricably tied to the idea of wilderness. Whenever wolves approached human communities, this seemed to be interpreted as a transgression of the symbolic boundary between the wild and the socialized. The distinction between the two categories is so powerful that the informants persistently expected wolves to shun all human contact, regardless of the predators' conspicuous presence in the neighbourhood.

According to Mary Douglas (2002), all human societies have an inclination to organize their social and physical environments into clear-cut categories or dichotomies. Things that clearly belong to a specific category are perceived as pure. In contrast, whatever falls in-between is typically classified as cultural dirt or symbolic pollution, and is commonly understood as dangerous. In terms of the contrast between the wild and the socialized, the wolves were seen by the informants as pure in their wildness. They were classified as wild by everybody: by those who were pro-wolf and those who did not want large predators in Norway.

This became even clearer when discussing the topic of wolf hybrids.<sup>2</sup> There was complete consensus among the informants that the offspring of wild wolves and domestic dogs are unwanted, dangerous, and should be eliminated. They were classified neither as wild nor tame. Consequently, they were seen as not belonging anywhere. As one hunter said:

That's the most dangerous wolf of all, if there's a dog mixed in it! It will have both the properties of a wild animal, plus it lacks its natural fear of people. That's definitely the most dangerous sort. (Hunters)

The question whether wolf hybrids ought to be tolerated or considered as part of nature was raised to provoke reflections and discussions concerning the character of wolves. The response was unanimous, with all the respondents disliking wolf hybrids, irrespective of their position in debates on large carnivores. Inevitably, terms like 'bastard', 'pollution', 'impure' and 'dangerous' were provided each time the subject came up, and left no doubt that wolf hybrids, in contrast to the genuinely wild and 'pure' wolves, are regarded as what Douglas (2002) terms 'cultural dirt':

Interviewer: What do you think of that [culling of wolf hybrids]?

A: As I see it, that's no problem.

Interviewer: Why is that so?

A: Well, to keep it [the wolf] pure.

B: It must be pure bred.

C: The gene material should be proper, you know.  
(Conservationists)

Despite the genetic connection between wolves and dogs, which was well known among the informants, they were commonly seen as two distinct breeds. Clearly, the distinction between 'wild' and 'domesticated' represents a basic criterion in the human classification of animals. Besides challenging the boundaries between the wild and the humanized – between wildlife and domestic animals – it is

likely that the mere existence of wolf hybrids creates confusion, reminding us of the socially constructed nature of the concept of 'species'.

## Representations in conflict

So far we have concentrated on some fundamental assumptions about wolves. These in turn form the basis for other ideas. It is these 'other' ideas that we now turn our attention to: the *peripheral elements* of a social representation. In terms of the structure of a social representation, such secondary ideas are hooked to the basic assumptions. At the level of communication, they appear as thoughts that are subjected to negotiation between individuals or groups (Abric, 1993).

There were indeed questions to which the informants from Trysil and Halden responded differently. Issues such as the extent to which the wolves naturally belong in the forests of eastern Norway, whether they are threatened or represent a threat to rural life, and if they are dangerous to people, were all matters of negotiation – dividing groups with divergent opinions about the presence of the predators. Yet the very same questions were also negotiated *within* these factions. This suggests that what is most frequently presented as radically polarized attitudes towards wolves are rather nuanced viewpoints and ambivalent feelings towards their reappearance. One significant example is that both wolf supporters and wolf adversaries spent much more time discussing *how many* individuals they could tolerate than whether or not they wanted wolves in Norway at all.

But let us turn to the elements of wolf perceptions that we have classified as peripheral. Among the wolf adversaries, dominated by hunters and farmers, the large predators were understood to be a *threat* to livestock, to huntable game, to hunting dogs, and consequently to the rural way of life.

Even if there are not many sheep farmers in the study areas, the leasing of hunting rights is a form of supplementary income for many landowners. Seeing wolves as the most efficient of Nordic predators – as brilliant hunters, significant consumers of moose and roe deer and a threat to free-ranging dogs – hunters typically shun the affected areas, and landowners therefore can potentially lose income. Interestingly though, at the level of conception the sense of threat was obviously also connected to the basic notion of the social wolf, to the idea of the *wolfpack*:

[Farmers in this area] live from their grass and from letting the animals graze in the forest. Without that, no money in the purse! We can tolerate a bear passing through from time to time, killing a moose or two. That doesn't take the livelihood away from anybody. That's ok. But a *wolf pack* that regularly passes through . . . causing damage . . . (Farmers)

Even if wolf adversaries frequently spoke of the large carnivores as a serious menace to traditional livestock husbandry, the image of the wolf as the rival of the hunter was even stronger. Both hunter and wolf are predators, hunting the same prey. As a matter of fact, this conflict was the most frequently discussed argument against wolves in *all* of the focus groups. Even those who were strongly supportive of their presence expressed some sympathy, or at least understanding, for the hunters' loss of game and hunting dogs to the predators.

A: I know for sure that many hunters believe the [wolf] has nothing to do here.

B: It's a rival!

A: Yes, it's a rival.

B: As simple as that. (Conservationists)

But, as many wolf adversaries emphasized, it is not just the hunters' dogs and the prey which are threatened, but an entire lifestyle. One of the hunters expressed his frustration in this way: 'My opinion is

that forcing predators upon people, that's wrong, no matter what! (...) Not allowing people to pursue their [dearest leisure activities], can you imagine such a thing?'

Even if hunting was indeed seen as a leisure activity without any important outcome in terms of subsistence, it seems as if, more than any other activity, it has become the symbol of rural identity and the rural way of living in Eastern Norway. In communities where resource extraction and agriculture are in decline, the practice of hunting represents an important link to the toil of earlier generations. Besides representing a threat to huntable game, dogs, livestock and the grazed open land, large carnivores are perceived as a symbolic threat to the farmer's and the hunter's image of themselves as 'stewards of nature' (see also Boglioli, 2009: 40). As local people with practical knowledge derived from using the forest actively, they see themselves as crucial players in the game of 'natural balance'. For example, several hunters used the term 'predator control' in order to describe how they care for the local fauna:

We don't hunt only for food, we practice predator control. It has always been very important for hunters to kill predators, just as much as the game that gives us meat. (...) I actually see it as a duty to kill some of the large carnivores in order to maintain the balance of nature. It wouldn't be right to hunt only the animals we can eat. (Hunters)

Another important question that was systematically brought up in all the focus group discussion was whether wolves are dangerous to people or not. The predominant view among wolf adversaries and supporters alike was that the local wolves did not represent any physical menace to humans. Except for one person, all of the informants denied that they feared the large predators. The idea of danger was most actively rejected by informants who lived *within* a wolf territory; the very same informants who reported frequent encounters with wolves:

Interviewer 1: But don't people fear for their children, or... have you heard anything about that?

A: I can't say I've heard anything about that.

B: Around here, the kids are waiting along the road for the bus.

C: ... waiting for the school bus. Nobody has ever been afraid of wolves.

B: No, they really haven't.

A: I've had wolves on my farm road, you know, and [my children] go there to take the bus.

(...)

Interviewer 2: Do you really never hear about people who are afraid of wolves?

A: Yes [Affirmative exclamations from the other group members].

B: But then that's the media's fault. Whenever there has been an episode... somebody has seen a wolf in a built-up area (...) it attracts a lot of publicity in the newspapers. And then people who don't have any relation to wolves (...) and who aren't very interested; they only read the headlines and conclude that wolves are dangerous. (Neighbour group)

Those who declared themselves as wolf adversaries also acknowledged that the probability of being attacked by a wolf remains minuscule. But they were all the more preoccupied by the supposedly negative impact of fear on *other people's* quality of life. Some claimed that older people did not dare to pick berries anymore. Children had allegedly been seriously affected too, by being robbed of a safe playground and safe walking routes to school. Regardless of their own lack of fear, they maintained that fear should be taken seriously as an argument against the protection of predators.

The informants' ideas about fright and danger seem, above all, to be claims and arguments in an ongoing struggle over the right to define reality. Farmer A in the following quotation was settled in the

same area as the informants in the neighbour groups, yet described a quite different situation from the one depicted above:

Interviewer: Do you think a [harmonious] coexistence with the wolves is possible?

A: Well, it's something you just have to cope with. As long as they're out there, you just have to . . .

B: You can get used to anything.

A: Yes, but I know that there are many people who . . . maybe don't go out in the forest. You know, I'm lucky not to have that fear in me, but there is a group of cabins where I live and [the cabin owners] (. . .) just don't go into the forest, because there are wolves there. And then of course you have to drive the kids to the school bus. You get used to that too [said with an air of resignation].

If wolf adversaries mainly considered the carnivores a menace, informants with a pro-wolf stance most commonly talked of them as *endangered animals* – endangered by people in general and by the human urge to dominate and socialize both wildlife and wilderness. For them, it was humans rather than wolves who were the intruders, penetrating into the domain of wildlife:

I claim that it's all the development and construction (. . .) that have made the conflict so . . . [intense]. When we start to take away their territories . . . well it's obvious that we're building on their domain. (Conservationists)

The quotation brings us to another important matter of negotiation in the large carnivore debate: Whose territory are we dealing with? What kind of nature are we talking about, and is that nature in harmony with the wildness of the wolf? During the focus group sessions, it became clear that the groups that disagreed on these issues had diametrically opposed representations of their own natural environment, accompanied by conflicting views as to whether wolves belong there or not. While farmers and hunters saw the natural physical environment as a landscape for sustainable *use*, as productive areas for logging, grazing, hunting and berry picking, the informants who expressed positive views on the presence of wolves saw this same environment as untouched nature, or *wilderness*. To them, the forests of Trysil and Halden evoked associations of something authentic and original – something that was there before them, and something that provided a reason for human existence as well as a sense of continuity. Wilderness was thus represented both as an actual place and as essence. It stood in sharp contrast to the modern, overcrowded and noisy civilization in which human bonds with nature are lost, and became the scene of potential reunion between human beings and their origins:

To experience something so authentic, in this [modern] society of ours – to me, that's incredible . . . but also a vital necessity! Everything is becoming so artificial. Things keep disappearing and disappearing. So, to be able to (. . .) be in touch with something so . . . it must have been like that for an eternity! (Neighbour group)

Embodying the essence of the wild, what areas would be better suited to wolves than the wilderness described by these informants? The mere presence of the animals contributes to the experience of authentic, true nature. The wolf becomes living evidence of the existence of places that have escaped the insatiable human desire to socialize the wild and transform nature into something artificial – the symbol of the survival of nature against all odds.

The wolf supporters' interpretations of the surrounding landscape as wilderness were distinctly different from the wolf adversaries' representations of the same physical environment as productive land. According to the latter, the nature in these areas is a place for human activities, and ought to be maintained as such. This can only be ensured through responsible resource utilization. Otherwise, rural communities will be left with impenetrable forests and a landscape stripped of cultural meaning:

What scares me about the large carnivores is that the land will not be used. Then it will just become overgrown, and we will have the forest right up to [our doorstep]. That's exactly what we don't want! We want it to be an open landscape (...) that is used. (Farmers)

In the same way as the image of wilderness is closely tied to the idea of what once used to be, the notion of productive nature is associated with continuity and the heritage of earlier generations. The traces of ancestors' hard work and efforts to tame the wilderness bestow meaning upon the physical environment, and must therefore be preserved through continuation of traditional practices. The cultural landscape must be saved from reforestation; and domestic animals, as well as moose and other huntable game, must be protected from predators.

Here the shared understanding of the wolf comes into conflict with the meanings associated with productive land, and the presence of wolves comes to represent a form of 'cultural dirt' (Douglas, 2002). There is a symbolic mismatch between (the wild) predators and the (humanized) local landscape. Consequently, the animals living in the forests of eastern Norway must be something other than *real* wolves. Some of the informants were even convinced they were hybrids, or 'bastards' as most of them said. The wolf as such may stand out as fascinating, intelligent and dignified. Yet, these ideas are tied to assumptions about the animal's natural environment – the wilderness. Local wolves, when observed in the neighbourhood approaching buildings and people, come far too close and are far from shy enough to be real wolves. Instead, they are perceived as unnatural animals with unnatural behaviour, showing all the signs of being polluted by humans.

## Concluding discussion

It seems, then, that the overt conflicts concerning wolves cannot be explained as the product of antagonistic conceptions of the animal. While the presence of wolves in Norwegian forests is constantly negotiated and contested, the basic character of the animal is taken for granted.

Some of our findings mirror results from research in other places and other contexts. The entangling of animal representations in negotiations over wilderness and the classification of animals crossing the 'wilderness border' as transgressive, is one example (see Philo and Wolch, 1998); the political nature of attitudes to danger is another (see Douglas, 1992: 44–8). Yet the question we posed initially concerns whether an analysis of such representations can contribute to a better understanding of the severe conflicts accompanying wolf recovery in Norway and elsewhere. In this study we have used the concept of social representations as an analytical approach, with an emphasis on the distinction between core and peripheral elements of a representation. In doing so, our aim has been to capture both the unifying and the divisive dimensions of social thought.

One way to interpret the results would be to conclude that what is here analytically treated as peripheral – and thus conflictual – elements, concerns in reality representations of *other things* (landscape, threat, danger); and that the social representation of the wolf plays no part in the current conflict. Indeed, the interviews with affected residents in Trysil and Halden suggest that the dispute should be understood not as the result of a clash between negative and positive images of the wolf, but as the result of a conflict between the social representations of the wolf and representations of other phenomena.

This could in turn be held as a critique of Moscovici-inspired scholars' tendency to treat social representations as isolated units, and to confuse analytical models with social reality. In a sociological perspective, representations are necessarily bound not only to socio-economic contexts, but also to the representational context in which the boundaries between culturally constructed objects are sometimes blurred.

On the other hand, the core-periphery aspect of the theory of social representations appears to be precisely an attempt at linking *one* analytically abstracted social representation of a given phenomenon to representations in plural, by linking broad, consensual beliefs to socially negotiable arguments. Metaphorically, the peripheral elements should then be understood as the overlapping zone between representations.

The distinction and reciprocity between core and periphery, beliefs and arguments, bring to mind Alexander and Smelser's (1999: 11) claim that 'much social conflict (. . .) is characterized by reference to the *same* set of values', and that '[i]n many cases it is norms, not values that are addressed'. Their point is that a full apprehension of contemporary conflicts must include both. In our view, the theory of social representations offers some interesting analytical approaches to the relationship between the two levels of social meaning.

Transferred to the wolf case the analysis of peripheral elements, in addition to the consensual core, serves two main purposes: It points to adjacent representations that come into play in debates over carnivores, that may or may not clash with basic ideas about wolves; and it permits us to distinguish between cultural beliefs and rhetoric. As for the latter, our informants' discussions of danger provide a good example. On the one hand, it is rather obvious that fear might serve as an *argument* in local debates over carnivores, and that if the idea of dangerous wolves is omnipresent, this is not the same as to say that people necessarily *believe* in them. On the other hand, despite the self-declared lack of fear among the informants it was obvious that the basic idea of wolves operating in *packs* caused some unease and even anxiety.

Which brings us to the point to be made here: Representations matter because conflicts are necessarily framed by consensual cultural beliefs. Just as the topic of fear is easier to grasp in light of what appears to be basic beliefs or not, the entire wolf debate rests on a common understanding of the wolf as a fundamentally wild animal. It is against the undisputed background of the wolves' wild character that negotiations over their belonging to Norwegian nature make sense. The wolf's particular role as a symbol of the wild and the antithesis of the humanized, demonstrated in this study and elsewhere (e.g. Emel, 1998), contributes, furthermore, to explaining why conflicts over large carnivores tend to concentrate on wolves, whereas for instance wolverines and lynx, which are much worse villains in terms of livestock depredation, receive relatively little attention from the general public.<sup>3</sup>

Finally, on a slightly more speculative note, it could be argued that wolf representations matter because they point to a possible discrepancy between the carnivore's expected and actual behaviour which would be worthwhile exploring in future research. It seems, for instance, that *shyness* is a recurrent theme in the social imagination of the wolf (see also Mauz, 2005; Kleese 2002), even when experience proves otherwise, as was the case for several of our informants. In terms of human-animal relations, further enquiries into this domain would imply to consider not only people, but also wolves as actors, as has been suggested in recent publications in the field (e.g. Lescureux and Linnell, 2010; Lynn, 2010). But that's another debate.

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## Notes

1. During the winter of 2008/2009, biologists estimated the number of animals to be between 213 and 252 (Wabakken et al., 2010). Of these, approximately 35 were registered on the Norwegian side of the border.
2. In 2000, the Norwegian Directorate for Nature Management carried out the governmental decision to isolate and kill a litter of four hybrid cubs that had been discovered in the Moss area, close to Halden. One of the cubs managed to escape. The wolf-mother was spared.
3. See: <http://www.rovtiltportalen.no/content/500041279/Jerv-og-gaupe-tar-mest-sau>

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