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Ethnography 2011 12: 466

DOI: 10.1177/1466138110397227

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When the lads go hunting: The ‘Hammertown mechanism’ and the conflict over wolves in Norway

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Ethnography

12(4) 466–489

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DOI: 10.1177/1466138110397227

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Abstract

Rural communities are changing. Depopulation and unemployment is accompanied by the advance of new perspectives on nature, where protection trumps resource extraction. These developments are perceived as threatening by rural working-class people with close ties to traditional land use – a situation they often meet with *cultural resistance*. Cultural resistance is not necessarily launched against institutionalized power, nor does it necessarily imply a desire for fundamental social change. It should rather be seen as a struggle for autonomy. However, autonomy does not entail influence outside the cultural realm. Struggles to uphold traditional rural lifestyles – for example by denouncing the current nature conservation regime – could be understood in much the same conceptual framework as Willis employed in ‘Learning to labour’. Based on an ethnographic study of the conflicts over wolf protection, we demonstrate that ‘the Hammertown mechanism’ is of a more general nature than often implied in the discussion of Willis’ work.

Keywords

cultural resistance, hunting, land use conflicts, rural lifestyle, ‘the Hammertown mechanism’, wolves, working-class culture

It was November, and a late rainy evening. Through an unusually dark landscape, we were driving along a steep and narrow forest road. There was no moonlight and no snow; the leaves had fallen from the trees. The car stopped by a stretch of marshland,

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covered by mist. In the distance the silhouette of a heavily forested hill was faintly visible. When the engine was turned off, a complete silence surrounded us. Our key informant, Frank, a young local woodsman, stepped out of the car. He waited a few seconds, listening, and then he began to howl like a wolf. The vigorous, spooky sound cut through the darkness. He waited, but there was no response, and we walked silently onto the marsh. A new howl from Frank, but no response to his second or third attempts either. Then suddenly, we heard something that moved in the bushes nearby. A rush of adrenaline, and we were running back to the safety of our car.

‘It was probably nothing, but I don’t trust those bastards’, Frank said, referring to the wolves. Perhaps the whole thing was a con. Nevertheless, he had made me, an intellectual city guy, feel the fear. By running with him, I accepted his interpretation of the situation and demonstrated my confidence in him. After the incident, he set the terms, and the conversation went easily. Frank, who knows the woods like the back of his hand, was pointing in all directions and telling stories about his life as a devoted hunter – from childhood to young adulthood. Then he spoke of the large carnivores, especially the wolves that had recently appeared in the area. He was demonstrating what seemed like fascination, fear to some extent, but primarily anger. So, I asked him if he were not a little bit fascinated, in spite of his reasons for hating the wolves. ‘We can accept a limited numbers of lynx, wolverines, and even bears,’ he responded, ‘but never wolves’. And as we talked about wolves, his story was transformed from pleasant memories into stories about poor prospects for the future.

Frank and his friends

Frank is a young man living in Stor-Elvdal, a forest community in south-eastern Norway. Now in his late 20s, he is in transition from youth to adulthood and has recently established himself with a wife, a baby, a dog, a house, and a car. Judging from his appearance, he is the stereotype of a young rural man. He usually greets us wearing well-worn boots and denims, an old baseball cap, green hunting jacket, short hair, narrow whiskers, and a firm handshake. He always carries a rifle when he walks in the woods, and as he walks a great deal, he is often armed. All his life he has lived in the same small community. He has a working-class background and never completed any education exceeding the compulsory nine years. Today he is employed in the public service sector as an unskilled assistant.

Over the years Frank has seen many of his childhood peers leave the area for education or work, and he has observed that a majority never return. Yet he has stayed behind. He is not alone in this, however, and he has daily contact with a fairly large network of like-minded ‘stayers’. They, too, are young working-class men who share Frank’s style, his passion for hunting, and his attitudes toward large carnivores. Some, like Frank, have just started families. Their greatest concern these days is the reappearance of wolves in their forests.

In the last half of the 1990s, the number of wolves increased in south-eastern Norway, and some of them settled in Stor-Elvdal. These were part of a slowly recovering Swedish-Norwegian wolf population. In some segments of the community, the arrival of wolves was perceived as no less than a threat to the rural way of life. Sheep farmers claimed that their livelihood was in jeopardy. Potentially declining moose stocks were seen as a threat to the availability of good moose hunting, and to the landowners' revenue from hunting leases. Shortly after the wolves appeared, there were several attacks on hunting dogs, and some were killed. And of course there was the age-old fear of wolves. Consequently, conflicts soon flourished. Frank and his friends saw this development not as a mere nuisance that affected their hunting, but as part of a development that threatened the totality of their lives.

Since they badly want to change this situation, Frank's network is united around a goal that is clearly political. They want to remove the wolves from their hunting grounds. This would not only require significant changes in Norwegian environmental policy and legislation, but also that Norway demands exceptions from international treaties like the Bern Convention. So far there has been little progress in this direction, to say the least.

In order to explain why our young men are unable to influence a political issue that strongly concerns them, we draw heavily on Paul Willis's seminal book *Learning to Labour* (1977). Willis's object of research, reproduction of class relations through the school system, was rather different from ours. Nevertheless, his informants, 'the lads', resemble our hunters in many ways. They were working-class youngsters who unintentionally determined their life trajectories through their own actions as agents of an oppositional counterculture. Although widely regarded a classic, Willis's study from the troubled industrial city 'Hammertown' in the 1970s has been the subject of debate ever since it was published, and many scholars have been critical of Willis's analysis. This critique has focused on issues such as the element of resistance in the lads' behaviour, the generalizability of Willis's findings, and the study's relevance in a 'post-industrial' society (for an overview, see Arnot, 2004). We will not engage in that debate here, but concentrate on elements in Willis's work that we have found extremely relevant in our studies of the rural working class, namely the concept of 'cultural resistance' and its counterpart 'the Hammertown mechanism', a term we have chosen in order to denote the marginalization that may result from 'victorious' cultural resistance.

In fact, we will argue that the theoretical scope of 'the Hammertown mechanism' is broader than reflected in the bulk of the literature. As far as we can see, this particular part of Willis's work has been tied almost exclusively to schooling and the reproduction of class relations across generations (see Dolby and Dimitriadis, 2004). However, our position is that this mechanism is of a very general nature: successful cultural resistance *generally* tends to perpetuate domination. Drawing on our data from rural Norway, we will try to demonstrate why this is so. Therefore, we think that our seemingly exotic wolf example can contribute to the broader theoretical discussion.

Cultural resistance

The term 'resistance' is frequently used in ethnographic studies of the working class. However, quite a few contributions rely on a rather intuitive understanding of the term, especially when the 'resistance' is of a somewhat subdued kind. For example, there might be mention of 'underlying elements of resistance' or 'undercurrents of resistance' (e.g. Evans, 2006; Lareau, 2003). This is not necessarily a problem in texts that do not have resistance as a main focus. However, as noted by Ortner (1995), studies that do focus on resistance have frequently been prone to a certain simplification of the element of opposition in the everyday practices of 'subalterns'. There has been a tendency to depict 'resistant' action as more coherent and directional than is justified, since people's practices are normally complex and marked by ambivalence and uncertainty (Ortner, 1995). In line with Ortner, we see a need to situate elements of resistance in the complicated web of everyday life, that is, accomplish a *thick description* of resistance in all its diversity – while also attempting to establish a criterion for what can meaningfully be covered by the term.

It is not reasonable to interpret as resistance all cultural expressions that are different from a dominant culture. One criterion could be that the resistance – at one level or another – must be *intentional*: resistance against some form of power must be part of the meaning that individuals attribute to their own actions (Fegan, 1986). That means that most cultural expressions *can* imply resistance, if only people see their practices and values as oppositional in the sense that they contain elements of conscious defiance against groups that claim superior knowledge and legitimate taste.

The concept of cultural resistance takes as its point of departure a relation of power, and it denotes a situation where those who are in a subordinate position make use of cultural means to challenge domination. Even if these conflicts are most visible at a cultural level, there is an underlying material basis in an uneven distribution of economic resources and power. Concrete cultural resistance springs from a social hierarchy, and thus entails a link between social positions and cultural forms. Cultural entities, symbols and signs, values and meanings are all socially embedded, and they vary among hierarchically ordered social positions.

Hegemonic cultural forms and a hegemonic 'world-view' are met with various counter-interpretations that thrive in the background, but which are also – to varying degrees – taken out into the open. Scott (1990) writes that subordinate groups create hidden discourses that represent a critique of power spoken behind the backs of the dominant. He terms these discourses 'hidden transcripts'. While generally 'hidden' from the powerful, they comprise interpretations that explicitly defy hegemonic discourses.

Cultural resistance is not necessarily launched against institutionalized power, and does not generally imply a desire for fundamental social change, but should be seen as a struggle for autonomy – as an attempt at clearing a space out of the reach of power, where one is the master of one's own life. This (potential) autonomy does

not in itself entail any corresponding influence outside the cultural realm. Indeed, the opposite may be more likely.

Working-class youngsters in cultural rebellion

During the 1970s and 1980s authors such as Hebdige, Cohen, Hall and Willis published several works that presented a perspective resembling the one we have suggested here. They described how different subcultures sustained core working-class values, but through styles and actions that provoked *all* levels in the class society (see Hebdige, 1979). Sub-cultural rebellion could affect the life-courses of young people, but it did certainly not affect the distribution of wealth and power in Britain. The structures of capitalist society remained unaffected by the cultural resistance of the Birmingham school's study objects. Indeed, this form of cultural resistance contributed to the reproduction of class relations.

Likewise, more recent contributions have described oppositional subcultures that succeed in creating a 'parallel universe' with its own codes and norms, but also contribute to the perpetuated marginalization of their members. Bourgois's (2003) study of Puerto Rican drug dealers in East Harlem is an oft-cited example, and a convincing one. However, in our view, Willis's work from 1977 represents a systematic approach to the *mechanism* of marginalization through 'successful' resistance that is less developed in other contributions. Therefore, we will take Willis's model of the Hammertown mechanism – as we understand it – as our point of departure.

'Hammertown'

The following is probably one of the most widely used quotations in modern social science:

The difficult thing to explain about how middle-class kids get middle-class jobs is why others let them. The difficult thing to explain about how working-class kids get working-class jobs is why they let themselves. (Willis, 1977: 1)

The quotation opens the now classic book *Learning to Labour: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs*. Willis addresses one of his main points in these first two sentences. People are not driven into manual labour through open coercion. When social reproduction still sorts working-class kids into working-class jobs, this must have something to do with their own actions. By means of a rich ethnography Willis reveals his core insight: a social mechanism that explains 'why they let themselves'. The study is based on a small sample of teenagers, a group of rebellious working-class boys ('the lads') and a smaller group of conformists ('the ear'oles' – *earholes* – pupils who always listen to the teachers). He observed them through their last years of school and as they made the

transition to the labour market, and he observed how they created a *counter-school culture* that gave them a specific form of autonomy. In terms of trouble-making the lads belonged to the absolute elite. They obviously did not value academic achievement. Instead they found meaning in disrupting classes, terrorizing teachers, drinking, stealing and fighting. In combination with a variety of counter-cultural elements, including outspoken racism and sexism, they cleared a space for themselves, in sharp contrast to core values of the school system. As a consequence they managed to establish an autonomous sphere where the lads were the rulers and where the teachers were off limits. Hence, compared to the ear'oles, the lads were powerful in a sense. Unlike young people who obey authority and absorb the knowledge and values of the school system, they were masters of their own lives. However, their oppositional actions forced them to face a boomerang effect. An unintended consequence of deliberately choosing to ignore school was that they effectively channelled themselves into the lowest strata of the working class. The lads opposed a school that serves the interests of capitalism. In doing so they achieved two things: they created autonomy for themselves in relation to the school system, but at the same time they perpetuated a fundamental mechanism that maintains the social reproduction of an unequal distribution of power and wealth.

The 'Hammertown mechanism' unfolds at the following three levels:

1) At the first level we meet young people who assign purpose and meaning to their oppositional actions. The lads are not blind victims of the forces of capitalism. The structural constraints of contemporary societies work in a more subtle manner, and the power structures of capitalism do not only act as forces from outside of the individual. Willis shows how people can confirm and reproduce structural constraints through active and deliberate everyday practices. The lads are losers within the school context, and the reason is their own interpretations and their own active actions. At this level Willis's book has its focus on individual motivations. The school heralds the message that a good performance will provide great career opportunities. The lads interpret this as a falsehood and a deception. For them it becomes important not to look for 'interesting' work. In their eyes it is not possible to gain real freedom, or autonomy, by adopting the perspective of the school and seeking a successful career. Instead they aim for 'generalized labour', and through that they challenge one of the core values of the school.

2) At the second level we meet the informal social group, where the individuals find resonance for their practices. The group is a necessary condition for cultural resistance. This is where peers associate, and where the deep scepticism to the school and its values is effectively formulated. The group's beliefs become core references for validation of knowledge, behaviour, values and morals. It is within a network of friends that the oppositional and aggressive patterns of action are developed. And indeed, the small informal social group as the place where cultures of resistance are produced is not unknown to social sciences. Such groups are described in the works of Bourgois (2003), Dunk (1991), Gullestad (1984), Lysgaard (1961) and Weis (1990).

3) The informal group operates within the broad context of class relations and unequal distribution of wealth and power. It is at this third level that the oppositional actions find their deepest meaning. Even if the motivational horizon for the lads' actions is local, it basically represents the general relations of domination and subordination that saturate capitalist society. Willis's theory will not hold water unless the lads themselves, on one level or another, recognize these power relations. But that is exactly what they do. The keyphrase is class culture – a class culture that contains many, albeit generally diffuse, insights into societal power structures and into the class relation itself. Willis uses the term *penetrations*. Through growing up in working-class families, the lads' thoughts and perspectives become heavily influenced by working-class culture – a culture that draws heavily upon on their parents' experiences with manual labour. And even if these insights must be quite vague to youngsters, they are distinct enough to evoke a strong sense of having exposed the hegemonic and repressive ideology of the school as an instrument for domination. Class culture helps the lads to see through the *ideological smokescreen* of the school system. Further, the values and morals that the lads subscribe to and which motivate and legitimize their actions are variations and recontextualized expressions of the culture that the boys absorbed at home. In this respect their fathers are particularly important, both as participants in and narrators of class culture and as objects of identification.

This is how power relations in school become variations of the power structures of capitalism, and the relationship between the lads and the school comes to resemble general relations of domination. The boys are faced with a patronizing, top-down attitude from the teachers, something which is reinforced by their own rebellious actions. This is exactly the same attitude their fathers face from the factory management. There is a direct line from the *shop floor culture* (Willis, 1979) to the boys' behaviour in school. The adult workers think of themselves as the real experts on how to maintain production. They feel that they possess the most relevant knowledge and that they hold the real power on the shop floor, where everything would collapse if the engineers and managers had their way. Both fathers and sons cultivate strong masculine comradeship. But while the oppositional strategies might function adequately for the fathers on the shop floor, it has negative consequences for their sons in the long run. By participating in the informal anti-school group, the lads do not only obtain autonomy but also experience marginalization. The concept of the 'Hammertown mechanism' suggests that a struggle for freedom within a context of domination and subordination may be successful at one level (in creating autonomy), while at another level it may lead to strong social reproduction (through the exclusion that the autonomy entails). As already indicated, we see this mechanism as operating at an even more general level, in that it may lead to political marginalization.

We hypothesize that this mechanism is also operative in Stor-Elvdal today, and that it can help us understand why the young hunters seem to be side-tracked and powerless in relation to the processes that shape the policies in a field that is vital to them – namely, large carnivore management.

Data and locality

Sample and methodological approach

The primary data source for this article is a network of young men in Stor-Elvdal. They were all in their late 20s and avid hunters. Data were collected by way of life history interviews and participatory field observation. The network members were mostly recruited as a sub-sample from a larger research project called 'Land Use Conflicts in Rural Areas'. Seven of the network members participated in full, recorded interviews, but in the course of the fieldwork we observed and talked to many others. By combining interviews and fieldwork observation we got detailed information about the young men's life histories as well as their everyday practices as hunters.

The larger 'Land Use Conflicts' project also included many other informant categories and Stor-Elvdal was only one of three study localities. The other two were Trysil and Elverum, municipalities located in the same part of south-eastern Norway. This strategy provided a further 41 interviews and it enabled us to validate the data collected in Stor-Elvdal, to an extent where we can be confident that further data collection would provide limited new insight (Bertaux and Thompson, 1997).

Our door opener to the network was Frank, who generously took us home to meet his family and who introduced us to his own and his friends' everyday practices as young outdoorsmen. During a period of three years, we took part in a series of different hunting and outdoor activities. Frank's house is a place where the men in his network regularly drop by, and we made a habit of visiting him as often as possible. Spending evenings with him, we met his friends, and participated in their conversations at his kitchen table. We spent time with them by their camp-fire in the forest, taking a break from the hunting. Between visits, we stayed in touch by phone and Frank reported on the general state of things at his end.

The young men did not form a social group in any strong sense. There were no distinct boundaries between them and the rest of the community. However, using snowballing as our sampling method, we always asked informants to supply us with new contacts, which usually resulted in the repetition of a limited number of names. This confirmed our impression of a tightly knit network which was nevertheless fully integrated in the larger community.

The locality

The 2650 inhabitants of Stor-Elvdal – which means 'Big River Valley' – share an area of no less than 2167 sq. km. Only 20 sq. km of this land is agricultural, and 1004 sq. km is productive forest. The rest is mostly mountain ranges, used extensively for rough grazing of livestock. About two-thirds of the population lives in or around the municipal centre, Koppang. Forestry and forest-related industry have always been the pillars of the local economy.

There are huge differences between the land-owning class and 'ordinary people' in Stor-Elvdal. The 12 largest properties cover about 56 percent of the productive forest acreage. This not only renders the small class of large landowners economically powerful; it also means that they control a large part of the most important leisure resource within the municipality – the land itself, as well as the game. The municipality is also a major landowner, owning about 90 sq. km of productive forest. In addition, national government owns 65 sq. km as Crown land. These public holdings ensure that the population is not totally dependent on the private landowners for access to hunting.¹

In 1950 the population of Stor-Elvdal reached its all-time high of 4570, and has been decreasing ever since (Statistics Norway, 2009). As in so many places around the world, modern agricultural and forestry methods have led to declining employment, a loss that has not been fully compensated for by an increase in public and private service jobs.

What Stor-Elvdal has in full measure is nature. During recent decades, the economic importance of natural resources has declined. However, the forests and mountains provide excellent opportunities for many kinds of outdoor recreation. 'If you can't enjoy nature you have no reason to live here', one informant told us, expressing a common view. Hunting is an important form of outdoor recreation, and there is a large variety of game. In addition to attractive game species such as moose, reindeer, hare, and various birds, Stor-Elvdal is one of the few municipalities that host the four large carnivore species that are native to Norway: wolverines, brown bears, lynx and, quite recently, wolves.

For a long period during the 20th century, all large carnivore species except lynx were practically absent from Norway. In the same period the populations of wild ungulates increased dramatically. With this growth came an increase in the importance of hunting as an economic as well as a recreational activity. For example, moose hunting as a mass phenomenon is relatively new, but nevertheless well established in most rural communities, and generally constructed as an old tradition. To participate in moose hunting is a prominent sign of belonging to the local community (Brotveit and Aagedal, 1999). This is very much so in Stor-Elvdal.

Ethnography

Re-contextualized working-class culture in the forest

The network was defined by the fact that all the participants were in the process of choosing their life track, and that they all knew each other and appreciated each other's friendship. In addition, they were all dedicated hunters, and none of them owned enough land to have private hunting grounds. They all had to buy hunting permits or rely on the goodwill of landowners. Most had fathers who were formerly employed in the local timber industry or as craftsmen. Manual jobs are now far less available than they were when their fathers entered the workforce, yet the men had jobs that did not require an education above the mandatory nine years.

Most of them were employed in the public or private service sector. Several, including Frank, had found work in social services or health care. However, some held traditional men's jobs, for instance, as taxi driver or truck driver.²

Hunting is a typical male activity. The network members had learned their hunting skills from fathers and grandfathers, and they saw their outdoor practices as a continuation of a masculine culture. The visible expression of their identities can easily be portrayed as stereotypical male rural working class. In many ways they shared the ways and values of their fathers, but unlike the older men, most of them maintained traditional masculine working-class identities without traditional male working-class jobs to support them.

One of the core qualities of the young men in Frank's network is to be a traditional rural man and a modern man simultaneously. Lars, for example, who works as a truck driver for a timber mill, served us homemade cookies when we interviewed him. He proudly announced that he had baked the cookies himself, using a traditional recipe from the area. Baking, of course, is a traditionally female activity, and Lars's cookie baking suggests that he was not afraid to disregard the expectations that young men of his type have traditionally met.

Other leisure activities were often ingrained in local tradition as well. Some of the men made knives, one made traditional wooden furniture, and one was a competent folk musician. They met to hunt and sometimes to spend the night in hunting cabins. On such trips, we have been served beer, homemade spirits, half-fermented trout (typical of the Norwegian inland), salted pork belly, and fatty sausage. When not together in the woods, they met elsewhere or they talked on their mobile phones about hunting, weapons, dogs and wolves. The friendship and sense of community that the hunting provided seemed to be important to every member of the network. They lived this significant part of their lives in accordance with what they perceived to be the traditional ways of men in the area.

Nevertheless, those who had started families were modern fathers who assumed considerable domestic responsibility. Frank seemed to be aware of the potential contrast between his life as a rough outdoorsman and his life as a family man. He often made jokes about gender and domestic labour, saying things like, 'Well, women, you wash the dishes' or 'We are going to watch some TV; serve us coffee', but it was always followed by laughter. In fact, his family life was conducted in accordance with modern standards: he changed diapers, fed the baby, washed dishes, and scrubbed floors. There were definitely limits to his traditionalism. In his home we were never served the fatty food we ate on the hunting trips. Instead Frank and his wife served Italian-, Indian- and Chinese-inspired dishes and 'Cajun-crossover-fusion' courses, with chilli sauces and garlic. 'Do you like garlic?' they asked us more than once. 'We love it!'

A wolf in the garden

From building tree houses as children to hunting as adults, the woods constituted the most central arena for recreation for the young men in our study. But it was

always on people's terms. Nature was never really wild, although it contained some wild animals. Nature was always a safe playground, a place to roam freely, providing pleasant surroundings for the local community. There is no room for large carnivores in such park-like surroundings.

When asked if they meant that usefulness to humans is the only valid reason for a species to exist, all the men stated that every species has a right to live in its natural habitat. Most of them believed that wolves should not be an exception, but they did not believe that wolves belonged in Stor-Elvdal. Besides, they pointed out, wolves are not an endangered species globally. Wolves simply did not fit their image of nature in their own immediate surroundings. Wolves threatened to break down the whole concept of what nature in Stor-Elvdal is meant to be: a safe playground for people and dogs and a place where wild game has nothing to fear from species other than humans.

The young hunters interpreted the wolves' presence as a threat to their life projects. On another level, they seemed to be fascinated by the animal itself. When they talked about wolves, they revealed an interest and a level of knowledge that went far beyond simple hate. Frank had often borrowed DVDs about wolves, and he put considerable effort into imitating their howls. The wolf has skills that the hunters value and admire; skills they themselves would like to possess and to observe in their own dogs. The wolves are wild dogs. They are also great hunters. No animal, or human being for that matter, could receive a better testimony. Their rage was not directed at the wolf itself, which they saw as an animal that merely follows its instincts, but at the human agents of wolf protection.

The city and the enemies: Two sides to the same coin

In the introduction to a textbook used in the mandatory hunting course, the historical relationship between hunter and nature is explained to the novice: 'Through hunting, modern man forms an alliance with nature and his past'. And further: 'The ancient Nordic hunting and trapping culture is still alive in our country' (Gjems and Reimers, 1999: 14). Several members of the network kept their course diplomas framed on their living room walls. They spoke of hunting with dogs as an 'old culture' that they feared would disappear. In Norway, hunting is culturally constructed as a very old tradition, and hunting is seen as a way to withdraw from the stress of modern life (Brotveit and Aagedal, 1999).

The young men justified their choice of place to live not only by praising the good life in the small forest community, but also by denigrating the city. When asked to describe the city as a place to live, they all came up with horror stories about crime, drugs, and traffic. Large cities are unsafe, chaotic, noisy, and packed with social misery. They also emphasized the negative aspects of the city as a physical structure – big ugly houses, crowded streets, and, most importantly, the absence of nature.

Frank and the others saw the qualities of the rural community and its natural surroundings as being diametrically opposed to the chaotic and unpleasant nature

of the city, and their life as outdoorsmen as a negation of city life. They were not revolutionaries, but it seems appropriate to understand their love of the countryside and their scepticism toward urbanity not as mere preferences, but as a critical attitude toward the general development of modern society. It is not that their love of rural life expressed a longing for a better past. They saw their life as outdoorsmen as being a present possibility. In this sense, they could be seen as opposing urbanity and even modernity itself.

'They don't understand how it is', the hunters said, when asked to talk about the pro-wolf lobby. 'You should have brought them here, and then I would show them what it's all about', was also a common saying. A core element in the young hunters' interpretation was that they were up against a powerful enemy that did not understand the consequences of current policies. Describing this enemy, they referred to an alliance of politicians, resource managers, scientists, and environmentalists. The young hunters described them as 'city people' and 'extremists'. Consequently, the appearance of wolves was associated with urban life and city people, and an urban concept of nature. In the hunters' minds, that is a romantic view, based on a dream-like glorification of untouched nature. Through this construction, the wolf becomes an icon of urbanity. In the young hunters' world, this is the ultimate antagonism to the nature they love. The wolf is not a part of real nature; it is an urban implant. With the reappearance of wolves, modern urban life suddenly caught up with the hunters. And this is exactly what they had sought to dissociate themselves from by living in Stor-Elvdal.

Powerlessness, stigmatization and class relations

The network members talk about an antagonistic relationship between powerful circles with an urban basis and a powerless group living in rural areas. The urban–rural dichotomy is experienced as a deep and many-faceted conflict. At the core is an uneven relation of power. The hunters feel that their rural 'view of life' has no impact whatsoever on political institutions. They are the underdogs in a relationship where the dominant are perceived as having power in almost all areas of life.

We present a longish excerpt from an interview with Kjell Vidar (who is working in the private service sector), where he expounds on the power that others have to stigmatize, on how distressing this can be, and on how it limits the hunters' ability to get their message across.

Kjell Vidar: We are often looked upon as a group apart. We really are. Not that I see us that way, but people who have these views that I have, we are seen as a different kind of people, quite simply. You can see that from the way they treat us on TV when we try to say what we mean. We *are* seen as a strange breed.

Interviewer: Now that I have become acquainted with a number of people up here, I think the picture that is presented in [a national tabloid] and other city papers is quite far from the mark, really.

Kjell Vidar: That is so true. And most of [the journalists] have never been up here. They have never talked to us. But it is obvious that they are only interested in writing about the most extreme people in our community. And we do have some extreme individuals who are willing to break the law to get rid of the wolves and that kind of thing. And that is something they like to write about. But that is only a tiny, tiny group. And it's a tragic situation now. The daughter of a workmate goes to [the university] and she doesn't dare to admit that she comes from Koppang. She really can't do that. (...) She was really shocked when these newspaper pieces about Koppang [and a wolf culling] appeared. When it finally came out that she was from Koppang, she was harassed [by the other students]. And now she was relieved because she was going to do fieldwork and could escape from the university for a period. It's a tragedy. Because it's clear that most of the students are people from urban areas. And it can tell you a good deal about their attitudes towards us. (...) It's the media that have painted this picture of us, which makes them develop these attitudes.

Interviewer: But it has got to be this recent conflict that has emerged that lies behind...

Kjell Vidar: Yes, absolutely, it's the conflict that has happened now. Because we are some barbaric morons up here who take our rifles to bed and such things.

Interviewer: Do you feel bitter about it?

Kjell Vidar: Yes, very bitter. Because we have no chance to come forward with what we mean and what we stand for. Because nobody will listen to us; it's not interesting. Because we aren't as bad as they make us out. But then we aren't interesting to talk about anymore.

The hunters frequently use the terms 'we' and 'them'. They allude to some vague others, usually some kind of enemy that is not identified in specific terms. At a general level we can say that 'the others' are perceived as different in a broad cultural sense, but they are also the ones that have power. In the citation above, the terms 'they' and 'them' are used primarily with reference to people in the media, but this may be more ambiguous than it seems. Kjell Vidar says: 'We are often looked upon as a group apart', but who it is that sees them that way remains implicit. The point is, however, that the media has the power to define them, and that the hunters themselves have no means to break down this image. That the media picture is biased or simply wrong is irrelevant, it is this picture that seems to inform the public opinion. Kjell Vidar's despair is rooted in a strong sense of powerlessness. It is impossible for him to get a message across. If he doesn't want to present himself as a barbaric moron, then they don't want him. The story about the girl who is harassed at the university serves the purpose of illustrating how the stigmatization works. That this happens at a university is hardly coincidental. 'The university' is a strong symbol of abstract and useless knowledge as well as

a symbol of the expansion of urban culture. We can discern a line here, from the national media to the university. The people there have the same patronizing view of rural people. It becomes clearer who the others are – a highly educated urban middle class.

But the hunters don't just sit there and take it. They hit back and do not hesitate to make definitions themselves. The hunters describe wolf lovers as ignorant city people who are out of touch with the real world and who don't know how nature works, without any insight into the harm caused by carnivores and totally lacking an understanding of rural life and the meaning of hunting. Here is what Erik thinks typical wolf lovers look like, and what really motivates them:

Interviewer: [...] do you have any idea about what a typical wolf proponent looks like...?

Erik: Yes, they usually have rather long hair and a beard. And they often actually wear lilac scarves as well [lilac scarves being an icon of seventies radicalism in Norway].

Interviewer: Yes?

Erik: ... drives an old car. And are very much engaged in social and political issues, in a way. But...

Interviewer: Do you mean that they are active in left-wing politics...?

Erik: Yes, sort of... It is difficult to describe what I mean, but...

Interviewer: Well, part of my reason for asking is that – like you said yourself – there is this very common view that all people who are against wolves are backward 'peasants', you know...

Erik: Yes, well, I generally see them as organization activists, who are... well, not exactly [anarchists – mentioning a nationally well known group of activists from Oslo], but there are many who join organizations just to take part in demonstrations, whatever the issue...

Interviewer: Yes?

Erik: You've got Greenpeace and all that, they get kids to join, and the people at the top don't give a shit, they just think about getting rich.

Erik describes a style, a cultural expression that must be interpreted as the exact opposite of their own 'hunter's look'. It is also evident that Erik thinks the typical wolf lover has his focus somewhere else: he is mostly interested in demonstrations.

And behind him are people who only think about money. Thus, the hunters also create a stigmatizing image of another group. Their cultural antipode, intellectual city people, is often ridiculed. But there is a significant difference: the hunters are underdogs. The stigma they construct is not effective.

A sense of crisis: Cultural resistance

We have seen that the young men interpret the wolves' presence as a serious threat to the totality of their life projects. The resistance they launch therefore involves a sense of crisis at an individual, even a deeply personal, level. It is what they want to be – their identity – that is under attack (see Krange and Skogen, 2007). Their problems are hardly caused by the return of the wolves alone. We have seen that the area is plagued by depopulation and a dramatic drop in employment in resource industries. The wolves cannot be the most important factor that makes it difficult for our boys to live the life they have chosen. But then their resistance against the animal is closely tied to a more general scepticism. Their love for nature and the rural landscape, their rugged style and traditionalism should be seen as opposing urbanity and even modernity itself. Indeed the totality of their lifestyle conveys a form of resistance, but an in a sense understated, quiet and mild form that rarely confronts power head-on. Even so, it has significant social consequences, as we shall see.

Analysis

'The lads' and the hunters: Similarities

There are several similarities between the hunters and 'the lads'. They are boys or young men from the working class. Against a shifting background, where many core elements in the class culture apparently have a weakened basis, they still reproduce working-class culture. Even if the labour market in Koppang is in transition, as it was in Hammertown, and grown men thus may seem less useful as role models, we can see that the heritage from the fathers is crucial. The culture of the fathers is founded in their subordinate position within the production system. Even if the lives of the younger generation are lived out in a different context in both places, the young men in many ways adopt their traditions. But it is not a 'blind' inheritance. Rather, they adopt a perspective – a motivational horizon – which is one of the preconditions for their own development of a resistance culture. Historically, the Stor-Elvdal community has been shaped by logging and the forest industry, and a large working class that derived its income from a physical transformation of the forest and the timber resources. This material basis for the local working-class culture, and the relationship to nature that followed from it, live on in the young hunters' knowledge of nature and attitudes towards it. But the hunters develop a version of their fathers' culture that does not entail opposition against the big forest owners or the bosses at the sawmill. Instead their rage is

directed against a general development which they identify with the city and the dominance of the educated middle class.

Like the lads, the hunters do not choose occupation according to interests. They do not buy the 'self-realization-through-work' idea. That is exactly the type of modern nonsense they denounce. Career considerations do not guide the choices they make. Work is a necessary evil. They opt for 'generalized labour'. The point is to find a livelihood in the region so they can go on hunting. And it is in this arena, outside of their working life, that they find a collective foundation for their identity – their self-perception as stubborn and free. For the hunters as well as for the lads, the small group constitutes the framework for meaningful oppositional action. The possibility of autonomy and freedom lies in the informal relationships the young hunters enjoy. Willis's lads find this among like-minded schoolmates and the hunters find such companionship in their free time, as hunters in the woods. None of them pay attention to the school's propaganda about working hard to get an interesting job later in life. Such a strategy would mean that they subordinate themselves to a strong authority and therefore lose autonomy. Like the lads, the hunters end up with unskilled and poorly paid jobs, but denouncing hegemonic understanding of careers helps them achieve the freedom they long for.

Contradictory cultures and competing forms of knowledge

Stor-Elvdal is marked by considerable class differences. A small group of large landowners has derived great wealth from their properties. At the same time, they control the resource that provides the hunters with a meaningful life – nature itself and the huntable game it holds. Nevertheless, to the young men this is not conceived of as an important class divide. The economic upper class is described by words they mostly use for people like themselves, like 'down to earth' and 'buddy'. According to the hunters there is another axis of differentiation that is more important. In the following quote Kjell Vidar talks first of a large landowner and then about the group that he really feels a great distance from:

Kjell Vidar: He has a really huge property. But I just sit down by his kitchen table, drink coffee, smoke cigarettes and talk about my hunting licence for the next season. So there are no class differences to speak of. We are all the same I think. Well there might be some small class differences, but the worst class divide is between people like me and the academics that are newcomers in our community. If you know what I mean?

Interviewer: Yes?

Kjell Vidar: Yes, I don't think that they necessarily are conscious about it, that they want to keep a distance, it's not that, but there is something about them. They are in the habit of keeping a distance from people like us. So, the class differences in our community go between people like me and the highly educated people.

In this popular sense class is no longer an economic category. Instead it denotes cultural differences that are closely related to education. And this is why it is important to our understanding of the wolf conflict. Kjell Vidar's version of the concept of class denotes a situation where people with academic education stand against everybody else. And he has a point. People who have academic education do have influence – not least when it comes to policy-making and management of large carnivores. Science and technological advances are tightly integrated in the development of capitalism. According to Martin (1998), this has laid a basis for the tremendous expansion of the middle class throughout the era of industrial capitalism, and has contributed to establishing scientific insights as dominant in relation to everyday, practical knowledge.

Scientists are a group the hunters look upon with great scepticism:

Frank: No, I think that these researchers [wildlife biologists] talk more or less rubbish – that's what I think. That's my own impression at least. They say that there are so many wolves, but they only sit and push their computer keys and look at some maps, and they forget to take a trip outside to see how many there really can be. At least I think so, but then again I'm sure they know a lot too, I don't mean to say anything else, but I don't think they have a basis for all their claims, I really don't.

There are other people the hunters trust much more:

Erik: Actually, I have most confidence in people from my own group, hunters and the like, observations that local people make. Obviously there will always be some who tell tall tales and exaggerate, we know them up here. We know who are trustworthy and who tends to...

Interviewer: ... brag a bit?

Erik: ... brag a bit. Exactly. So, in sum, you can always work out a conclusion. You trust your own observations, you know. We spend a lot of time in the forest and see many tracks, tracks from predators and other game; we can see how the game move at all times.

There is little doubt as to what type of knowledge has most authority when insights that are established through the network members' direct interaction with nature come into conflict with 'scientific truth'. And they doubt that scientists reach conclusions only through scientific method:

Erik: I have never heard of a wildlife biologist who is against predators. So naturally you think of them as champions of the wolves and bears. It's their profession, so I can understand that they need to protect their livelihood. If there aren't any wolves here they are out of a job.

In addition to the more general cultural antagonisms, this type of suspicion leads the hunters to think that biologists are firmly situated in the centre of the pro-carnivore lobby. Scientists are not neutral observers of the development of the wolf population. It seems to be in their interest that there are wolves in the forest. Seen in this light, no wonder that Kjell Vidar feels that the in-migrant academics represent the greatest contrast to himself and his friends. In his experience the wolf-lovers belong on the other side of this tangible class divide.

Two distinctly different cultures are pitted against each other in the carnivore conflict, and confidence in different forms of knowledge is a crucial element in this. Due to the dominant position of scientific knowledge, a hierarchical relationship between the two cultures is established. But seen from a slightly different angle, the relationship appears to be more equal. Mistrust in the knowledge of the opponent is just as strong in both camps. The hunters will not let 'the powerful' dictate their views on the enemy and the cause.

Celebration of the informal and cultural autonomy

We followed Frank for a long time and everywhere his behaviour was thoroughly informal. In the shop, the post office or on a landowner's front lawn, even talking to strangers on the phone, it was never 'strictly business' for Frank. He wanted everybody to be acquaintances and demanded of all relationships that they should have an informal level. According to Willis, the working-class culture is fundamentally informal (Willis, 1979). He saw the oppositional activity of 'the lads' as a typical example of an antagonism between the formal and the informal. The school is part of a formal structure, and exerts a power that is derived from the state apparatus itself. Its pedagogic principles and sanctions are thus instruments that serve the interests of dominant groups in the general power structure. Cultural resistance, on the other hand, belongs in the informal zone. In the informal social group lies the opportunity to withdraw from hegemony, through practices that defy the dominant cultural forms (Scott, 1990).

We have already seen examples of this: rejection of scientific knowledge and confidence in practical lay knowledge follows the same pattern. Lay knowledge about wolves is spread precisely in informal relations and is rarely infected by the truths that apply in the circles that form the dominant carnivore discourse. There are traces of the same cultural impulse in Kjell Vidar's account of how he deals with the hunting permit at the big landowner's kitchen table. And formal channels are not seen as either relevant or accessible by the hunters when they discuss how to reach their goal: to get rid of the wolves. Lars carefully hinted that he already attempted some wolf hunting. He continued:

Lars: I never walk unarmed in the forest. (...) No, and I am in the forest a lot.

Interviewer: Yes. I get the picture. Well, maybe it is the only way. I can't see that I see many other options for people like you, I have to admit. (...)

Lars: Frank and me and some other boys have talked about it, that we should try to do something. Letters to the editor or something like that. But we don't know how to do it. We are a big circle of hunters, and not only here in Stor-Elval, so I don't think it will be a problem if we really want to do something, and if we have the guts. We can have the whole bunch up here and hunt wolves on our own.

Interviewer: So you think that...?

Lars: I think it can be done. But really doing it is something else. Because personally I am so interested in hunting and I would really like to be involved in something like that professionally. I want to take courses to become a hunting inspector [in Norway often employed by private landowner associations] so then I can't get involved in anything illegal.

Interviewer: No, if you did...

Lars: No, then I would really ruin my own opportunities!

Several things here need a comment. The informal group is the structure where the hunters can find the means to reach their goals. But they would have to act outside of formal channels, through secret and illegal hunting. This would be a felony that could lead to a prison sentence. Still, Lars can't see any other options within his reach. Frank and Lars had considered entering the formal zone and writing to a newspaper. But they don't feel at home there, and they lack the resources that are required of actors in that arena. They simply don't know how to do it.

We see here how culture may improve as well as limit people's influence in areas that are important to them. Lars describes a concrete example of how symbols and language can have an impact on people's access to political processes. Seen in this perspective, the hunters are victims of a cultural hegemony. We must assume that this is not the intention of those who shape Norwegian carnivore management strategies. Attempts at conflict mitigation and public involvement in various processes point in a different direction (Skogen, 2003). But the fact remains that the cultural resources or *symbolic capital* that is needed to have influence in formal arenas does not exist in the culture that the hunters master. Kjell Vidar told us about a tangible class divide between himself and the in-migrant academics, but he also emphasized that the academics hardly created this divide on purpose. And thus it is still another example of *unintended consequences* of class-cultural differences. But the example also shows that this is not something that simply happens; that the hunters learn to love their destiny. They are actors who fight back – however inadequate the means – for their culture and their alternative view of large carnivores.

Furthermore, we see that Lars for his part dismisses the possibility of illegal hunting in the end. His ambition is to turn hunting into an even more important element in his own life, and this makes him extra vulnerable to the sanctions of the formal power structures. In a sense Lars and the others have broken loose from the hegemony of the dominant culture. But their cultural resistance is always launched inside a larger context, where the informal resistance efforts are in a subordinate position in the end. This is an important point for Willis as well. The lads don't always get away with it when they breach the rules. In *Learning to Labour* we encounter this in an example where two of the boys have stolen car radios. They get caught, and something that was initially an exciting act of toughness and independence is turned into something horrible. The meaning that was originally attached to the thefts and which had developed in the informal group did not survive the confrontation with strong, formal power structures. In the same way Lars's joy over having shot a wolf would soon turn to grief if he was caught. This tells us something general about such power relations, because the opposite mechanism is not conceivable. Even if the informal resistance culture penetrates and challenges dominant culture forms, it will never be in a position to break up the hegemony. One reason for this is that the form of rebellion that the lads and our hunters are involved in does not represent a planned strategy for change or a coherent political alternative. Erik expressed it like this: 'we can't do anything about it really. The authorities have the power to decide things. But I am quite certain that quite a few predators are shot when people are out hunting for legal game'. He may be right in that some animals are shot illegally, and he is most certainly right in that this doesn't help them solve their problem, because the authorities *do* make the decisions and this is a form of exertion of power that hunters' resistance strategies will never come to grips with. They may shoot some wolves, but that will not in any way change the official goal of ensuring a viable wolf population.

In the informal zone a distance to power is created, and the creation of such a distance is an important function of the cultivation of the informal. This way the hunters, like the lads, achieve autonomy. They create a perimeter inside which power cannot reach them. But this happens at a cost: the hunters' autonomy – their informal ways to handle everything, the knowledge they rely on, their style and defiant perspectives on life – also prevents them from engaging with the dominant forces in the field of large carnivore management. And this is analogous to the boomerang effect – the marginalization – that the lads experienced. In a sense the hunters cut themselves off from any influence they might have had concerning a political issue they consider as extremely important, the management of the wolf population in Norway.

'The lads' and the hunters: Dissimilarities

Our ambition was to explain why the hunters are unable to influence a political process that strongly concerns them. We have answered by referring to

Willis (1977); they are trapped by ‘the Hammertown mechanism’. But does the comparison really hold water? Are there not too many dissimilarities between ‘the lads’ and the hunters? The hunters’ situation is indeed different from ‘the lads’.

While ‘the lads’ were schoolboys, the hunters live their lives as young adults in an environment that is by no means as deprived as Hammertown in the 1970s. While the lads were heading for low paying jobs or even unemployment and general marginalization, Frank and most of his friends keep jobs they are relatively content with and that enable them to live ‘rich’ lives with spouses, kids, houses and cars. And they manage to keep up a quite expensive and highly time consuming leisure activity, hunting. Hence, compared to ‘the lads’ the hunters are not marginalized in a strong sense of the term.

The hunters share domestic responsibilities with their spouses, and some of them have female bosses. This does not seem to be a problem for them. They are not nearly as sexist as ‘the lads’. Furthermore, none of them ever spoke of workplace conflicts or frustrations related to power relations at work. This does not seem in line with the lads’ experience either.

Hunting skills are highly regarded among many of Stor-Elvdal’s inhabitants. This provides our boys with a certain kind of respectability and a source of self-esteem and even identity – they *are* hunters. ‘The lads’, on the other hand, were to some extent marginalized even in their own community.

Finally, there is of course the question of resistant actions. One significant difference between the lads and the hunters is that the lads more frequently met their enemy face to face. Examples of manifest head-on conflicts with agents of power are few in the hunters’ case. However, we do not see such direct confrontation as a prerequisite for actions to be understood as resistance. We have argued that *intentionality* should be the base requirement. This is in essence a subjectivist understanding of resistance, which – in our view – ties the concept to the production of meaning in a way that has considerable analytical potential. Accordingly, whether an action should be regarded as an act of resistance is up to the hunters themselves and the meanings they ascribe to their practices. And, as we have seen, the cultural contrast their lifestyle constitutes vis-à-vis dominant middle-class culture – with its clearly visible ties to political power – in itself has meaning to them. It gives them a sense of freedom from domination, that is, a sense of *autonomy*. This would not have been possible if they did not recognize and appreciate this cultural contrast as something more than diverging preferences. At this level of meaning the way they perform everyday life is a way of resisting domination. It does not matter that the ‘oppressive urban elites’ do not really pay attention. Defending a meaningful and coherent life-world and establishing what is deeply sensed as cultural autonomy is clearly interpreted as a form of opposition.

To conclude: the lads and the hunters are both similar and dissimilar in many ways. However, it is similarities on a deeper structural level that justifies and substantiates the comparison. Let us recall the general pattern of the ‘Hammertown mechanism’: within an informal group, actors deliberately develop a counterculture, through re-contextualization of cultural impulses that they have

known since childhood. A practice in opposition to a dominant culture is developed. The informal group operates in a larger field of conflict between domination and subordination. In this larger context a boomerang effect appears: through their oppositional practice, the group members place themselves on the sidelines in several respects.

The hunters follow a parallel trajectory: a group of young men put up resistance against several aspects of contemporary social change. For them the reappearance of wolves has become the most prominent symbol of a development they see as entirely negative. With a basis in local hunting traditions that they have known since childhood, they develop a counterculture. In its form and style their cultural identity represents the opposite of the cultural forms that dominate within the circles of power. They have obtained cultural autonomy. They are ‘the rulers of their own lives’ and they don’t succumb to cultural hegemony. But this freedom comes at a cost. By defining themselves and their practices explicitly in contrast to the dominant culture, they block their own access to the political processes that determine land use policy, and therefore the conditions that frame the lives they want to live. This is the Hammertown mechanism in its most general form: even understated and mild forms of resistance – also at the level of Scott’s hidden transcripts – have social costs. In the hunters’ case they contribute to political marginalization.

Damned if you do, damned if you don’t

Through entering the formal political arenas, if they could enable themselves, they would have to accept and even adopt values and modes of understanding that are characteristic of dominant social groups. They would then contribute to still another victory of the formal over the informal and lose the precious autonomy they have achieved. Furthermore, a sizeable majority of the Norwegian population wants wolves in Norway (see Bjerke et al., 2002), and the framework for modern large carnivore management is set through international conventions. The logical consequence of the hunters’ desire to remove the wolves from their own forests must be to eliminate wolves from Norway altogether; otherwise they would only shift the burden to people like themselves in other areas. Such a goal is in reality impossible to accomplish. And since the actors who have power in the field of large carnivore management endorse the conventions and would like to see viable carnivore populations, those who seek influence must accept this premise. For the hunters it would mean giving up their goal and losing their autonomy at the same time. And then what would they gain?

Notes

1. In Norway there is a general right of access on private land (‘right to roam’), but hunting and fishing rights belong to the landowners who control the public’s access to those activities.

2. It should be noted that even the unskilled segment of the Norwegian working class is relatively affluent, compared to many other countries, and that the public sector continues to absorb many people who can no longer find jobs in manufacturing, agriculture, etc. Yet, unskilled workers are usually at the bottom of the wage ladder, even here. But the low cost of housing in declining rural areas gives our boys a 'home advantage' they would lose if they moved to an urban area.

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