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Who let the wolves out? Narratives, rumors and social representations of the wolf in Greece

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As a way of coping with uncertainty and threats to their livelihoods following wolf reintroduction, livestock breeders in Greece deploy incriminating rumors about the wolf and the premises and actors around its reintroduction. In this paper, we identify the social representations with which livestock breeders make sense of and constitute the wolf as a social object. Through Moscovici's social representations framework, we show how enduring and contemporary (corresponding to core and peripheral) attributions formalize into coherent narratives and become designated as rumors by their unverified, third-party nature. To this end, the two rumors that dominate in Greece as well as the rest of Europe are that of wolves being secretly released by NGOs and wolves as genetically impure hybrids. These become counter-narratives to the dominant truth and function as the currency of the voiceless in wolf conservation. The paper situates these rumors in a global context of contemporary conspiracy theories on the wolf currently reproduced by disenfranchised hunters, breeders and rural residents. It suggests the affinities across these rumors point to generalizable drivers to rumor creation, including the perception of inaccessible official channels for communication.

Keywords: rumor; human–wildlife conflict; hidden transcripts; social psychology; wolves

Introduction

When it comes to human–wildlife conservation conflicts, it is difficult to overstate the degree to which the wolf (*Canis lupus*) is connected with evils across diverse historical and geographical contexts. Given the wolf often presents as a symptom of societal frictions, scholarship has recognized the importance of addressing public concerns toward restoring this historically feared animal to its former range (Chavez, Gese, and Krannich 2005; Bisi et al. 2007; Skogen, Mauz, and Krange 2008). Within this, the acceptance and success of wolf conservation schemes is contingent on whether policy sufficiently manages to accommodate the local community's culture, identity and relationship with the environment or species (Clayton and Opatow 2003; Marshall, White, and Fischer 2007). Oftentimes, this is done through giving the local community a 'voice' or say on contentious issues pertaining to wolf management.

Local communities of hunters, livestock breeders and rural residents cope with wolf conservation in different ways, and their cultural responses may be telling. In this study, we examine a response to wolf conservation under the EU Habitats Directive that may represent both political resistance and a communal discursive mechanism that entails sense-making and security (DiFonzo and Bordia 2007). This is that of circulating rumors and conspiracy theories pertaining to wolf presence. These rumors have a negative evaluative component (Foster 2004) to wolves, reflecting a counter-narrative to the perceived positive representation of wolves in media outlets. What is it that

underlies aversion to the wolf in such a way as to promote the creation of rumors that target and denigrate its presence? Certainly, the conservation of problematic large carnivores imposes significant costs on the people living alongside such species and deprives them of the ability to defend their property as before (Wilson 1997). Second, there may also be enduring sociocultural conceptions and hostile attitudes toward the particular species (Dickman 2010). We wish to add a third dimension to wolf aversion as expressed in rumors. Namely, that discontentment toward wolf conservation may potentially result from the marginalization of one's voice from its management, where policymaking is seen as removed from rural reality or having been arrived at without deliberation from all affected parties (Gezelius 2002; Bisi et al. 2010; Pohja-Mykrä and Kurki 2014).

We see that there is currently scope to reconcile these three perspectives on wolf aversion within a social constructivist framework that take rumors as a gateway to understanding the 'continuous interaction' of social, political and cultural forces in human–wildlife conflicts (Messmer 2000). On this view, narratives, myths and rumors of wolves can reveal much not just about cultural representations of the animal and of what belongs in conception of the countryside and what does not (e.g. see Woods 1998). But it can offer insight as to the broader premises of wildlife conservation and the societal predicament of the social group that reproduces these narratives. This is predicated on seeing rumors as the communicative resource of the voiceless and the disenfranchised (Scott

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1992). On this view, examining the anatomy of rumors can reveal the junctures at which livestock breeders experience particular injustices and lack of voice in official channels regarding management. This approach, straddled between the fields of environmental sociology and environmental communication, explains the rise and reproduction of myths that may otherwise be dismissed as nonsensical folk tales by the elite – and indeed faced skepticism from the authors before undertaking this study. In so doing, the findings of this study will close a gap heretofore unaddressed or not taken seriously by wildlife managers by showing the importance of providing communities with effective opportunities for participation in official channels, so as to curb the need for the weaponization of hidden transcripts.

To this end, the aims of following study are to (1) examine social representations of the wolf and their formalization into coherent narratives among a disenfranchised rural community in the form of livestock breeders, most commonly taken as a wolf skeptic social group in response to the Habitats Directive (Sjölander-Lindqvist 2009; Vitali 2014). And (2) to discuss what forces underlie prevailing narratives on the wolf in conflict-prone regions. This is done by placing identified representations into an analytical framework on rumors from sociological theory. To capture narratives on wolves by breeders, we use Moscovici's social representations framework. This provides a social psychological toolkit, with strong roots in 'soft' constructivism, with which to understand collective conceptions of an issue (Willig and Stainton-Rogers 2007). The analysis will be facilitated from the components of the social representation, the core and peripheral elements as introduced by Abric (1993), which for our purposes correspond broadly to enduring, historical and dynamic contemporary representations of the wolf in the region, respectively.

Wolf rumors

We begin by noting that Europe is presently a hotspot for contentious wolf conservation schemes following the Habitats Directive on reintroduced extirpated large carnivores (Bell, Hampshire, and Topalidou 2007; Bisi et al. 2010; Stohr and Coimbra 2013; Vitali 2014). Rumors of wolves that embody aversion to aspects to their presence, management, genetics or morphology are converging across member states, but have yet to receive attention in environmental sociology scholarship (see Figari and Skogen 2011, for one of the few). Indeed, rumor research as a whole remains marginalized outside of anthropology (Rosnow and Foster 2005); largely overlooked in social psychology (Foster 2004) and relegated to 'private communication' in the footnotes of published works in the environmental literature. This is remiss insofar as rumors constitute a meaningful coping strategy for social communities under duress (Bordia and DiFonzo 2002). They may appear, for example, when organized political resistance to policy is not a plausible option and may circulate

alongside of tacit accommodation of policy or outright resistance (von Essen 2015).

In the context of wolf conservation, two rumors feature prominently. The first claims wolves are secretly released from captivity and added on to wild populations (Gamborg, Vogdrup-Schmidt, and Thorsen 2013). In France and Scandinavia, in particular, versions of this story tend to circulate within hunting communities who routinely accuse the government of covering up releases of human-bred wolves into the wild (Peterson 1995; Skogen, Mauz, and Kränge 2008). Blame and resentment over secret wolf releases here is typically directed toward a nebulous regime comprising the government, politicians, public agencies, NGOs and the European Union (von Essen et al. 2015a).

Further south, German publics speculate wolves have been secretly relocated from more plentiful reserves in Poland. Wolves in Denmark, meanwhile, are alleged to have been smuggled across the German border in a van, or been otherwise secretly released, is a view held even by Danish public officials (Bresemann 2013; NetNatur 2015). Uncovering the geographical origin of this rumor of release is a challenge, but an expert interview with a Swiss wolf researcher revealed Switzerland saw the secret release of lynx were clandestinely released by state agencies in the Jura Mountains between 1972 and 1975 and proliferated in the wild into present sizeable populations (Breitenmoser and Baumgartner 2001). It took 10 years for the government to admit to this reintroduction, confessed at a time when the statute of limitations had expired on the legal penalties. Today, similar charges are leveled by Swiss publics toward Switzerland's wolf population, reinforced by the legacy of distrust created by the secret lynx operation 40 years ago. Similar happenings take place in Finland.

The second main rumor on the wolf is that which accuses wolves of being hybrids, that is, not genetically pure *C. lupus*. This narrative is often extensively intertwined with the secretly released rumor. The hybridity rumor of wolves is now becoming a storehouse argument among those traditionally lacking authority on ecological issues (von Essen 2015). On this reasoning, biomorphological criteria, including skull shape, coat color and texture, claw composition, paw size and unnatural behavior of predation, territoriality and unsuitability to the wild, provide important discursive resistance strategy against wolves (von Essen 2015). Swedish hunters in von Essen's study referred to the wolf as 'shepherd-wolf', 'wolf mutt', 'mid-Swedish forest dog' and 'doggy' so as to impugn wolf presence. Some counter-scientific representations are now formalizing this rumor in manifestos and speeches among hunting communities, including the work done by amateur scientists Eirik Grandlund (2013) and Magnus Hagelstam.

In the North American context, the wolf hybridity rumor is ubiquitous as the genetic purity of canid species (red wolves, grey wolves, dogs, Mexican wolves, coyotes and eastern timber wolves can all interbreed and create

hybrids) remains deeply contested. Neither policy nor public have taken well to hybrids in the wild (Haig and Allendorf 2006), which may help explain the readiness on the part of wolf skeptics to mobilize this rumor to effective action. The US Endangered Species Act, the Bern Convention and the EU Habitats Directive all exempt hybrids from the protection duties accorded to their endangered congeners and, in some cases, encourage active removal and euthanization of hybrids from the wild (Allendorf et al. 2004; Trouwborst 2014). In Europe, the genetic threat posed by domestic dogs to the reintroduced wolf has resulted in de facto sanctioning of the elimination of hybrids to safeguard the status of wolves in the Habitats Directive (Linnell, Salvatori, and Boitani 2008). Hybrids are taken to mean unpredictability and encroachment on human landscapes, which is seen as a grave infringement of the natural order (Kleese 2002; Benavides 2013). Latching on to the taxonomical controversy already apparent in the *Canis* genus, therefore, provides an intuitive pathway for rumors and may explain why rural groups find it a valuable currency in delegitimizing wolf validity across various publics.

In summary, narratives circulate among contentious factions of wolf skeptics and can take various configurations of blame, time horizon and scale. Their affinities, however, lay in shared semantics of tampered-with wolves out of place in the landscape because of its impurity and unnaturalness.

The Greek case study

In Greece, these rumors feature especially lucidly inasmuch as they form often unquestioned representations of contemporary wolves. It is worth noting that Greece does not have a national policy for the protection of the wolf, unlike other member states (Salvatory and Linnell 2005). Although rumors circulate in equal measures in states that operate with clear management plans (as in the Nordic countries), the Greek case of an arbitrary, opaque and largely NGO-led management may prove an especially easy target for rumors compared to robust centralized planning.

Inasmuch as rumors testify to an aversion and fear of wolves, this may in part be underwritten by the economic crisis that currently envelops Greece, raising livelihood stakes and heightening feelings of marginalization over mispent priorities. There is now a need for bringing back traditional as well as contemporary and intensive livestock protection methods, including the use of sheepdogs, enclosures and human surveillance, to counter the considerable damage done by wolves to livestock, especially in the summer and early autumn (Iliopoulos et al. 2009). Wolf populations now cover a majority of continental Greece, where livestock breeders locally report strong disenfranchisement. The wolf was delisted from the Greek Game List in 1991 and now enjoys full protection according to the E.C. Directive 92/43 (Salvatory and Linnell 2005). In the regions in Central Greece we visit for

our study, local residents suggest current wolf presence is considerably higher than historical precedents. This perception, combined with lack of appropriate game management and hunting regulation enforcement, and the illegal and indiscriminate use of poison baits, currently threatens the viability of the wolf population in Greece (Salvatory and Linnell 2005), as it does in other EU countries (Bisi et al. 2007; Mischi 2013; Lühtrath and Schraml 2015).

In what follows, we engage with the Greek context as one of the current hotspots for wolf rumors. We do so through uncovering the social representations that underpin these narratives on the wolf on a regional community level in Fthiotida and Thessaly. In the results, the core and peripheral representations as they constitute the wolf are presented. In the analysis that follows, these representations are framed within a theoretical understanding of rumors. In the final discussion, we dig deeper so as to explain the perseverance of specific rumors on the wolf, secret release and hybridity, and to uncover their dominant underlying drivers and potential correctives.

Social representations: a social psychological approach

The field of social psychology provides approaches commonly used by scholars within environmental management to acquire a more consistent understanding of, broadly called, environment related experiences (Stoll-Kleemann 2001; Castro 2006). Of its attendant theories, Serge Moscovici's social representations theory takes a social constructivist point of departure by positing that '...social psychological phenomena and processes can only be properly understood if they are seen as being embedded in historical, cultural and macrosocial conditions' (Wagner et al. 1999, 95). On this view, social representations are a communicative phenomenon that provide groups with means to understand, relate to and communicate a social object. Here, social object refers to any material or symbolic entity, which has certain characteristics ascribed and reproduced in communication praxis by people (Wagner 1998).

In the following study, the presence of wolves constitutes the *social object* while livestock breeders represent the *community*. Social representation scholarship aims to '...observe talk and action which is related to a social phenomenon or object' (Wagner et al. 1999, 96) and in so doing they can elucidate specific social characteristics that have been attributed to this object by the group. This framework ascribes importance to verbal accounts as means of understanding and transmitting cultural meanings and knowledge (Moscovici and Duveen 2000). Social representations theory has some precedent in scholarship on wolf conflicts, where Figari and Skogen (2011) identified ways of speaking about the Norwegian wolf that reproduced the wolf conflict in Norway. This study builds on the valuable findings of the Norwegian case. It does this, first, by positioning rumors in a larger network of discussants across the European Union. Second, by examining not just *which*

narratives feature, but also *why* they do so and *how* they might have originated. By using Greece as the primary case context, we also analyze these rumors more as a function of a case context where rapid socioeconomic change increases the vulnerability of the cultural community, and thus potentially imbues rumors with more potency and function as a social mechanism for coping in crisis (DiFonzo and Bordia 2007).

Within the theoretical framework of social representations, Abric (1993) makes a conceptual distinction between two constitutive elements to which we adhere: the central core and the peripheral elements. The central core elements of a social representation are characterized by their stability. They depict the most important and enduring attributes the group has ascribed to the social object. The peripheral elements have a complementary character to the central core insofar as they permit the integration of individual experiences and histories. Hence, they integrate heterogeneity within the group and dynamism within the social representations (Walchelke 2011; Buijs et al. 2012).

For the purposes of this research, capturing the central core elements of breeders' representations will give us an understanding of the stable and collective representations of the wolf as these have been inherited in folk knowledge, while the peripherals will provide further knowledge on how individuals of a social group may reproduce, change or contest the central core elements in light of everyday experiences and outside change. The central core and peripheral elements are '...dependent insofar as the peripheral elements connect the non-negotiable ideas of central core to the immediate situation in a dynamic response' (Figari and Skogen 2011, 318). Thus, we pay particular attention to the way that peripheral representations integrate new experiences in accordance with the collective memory and history of the group, including the role played by urban outsiders and NGOs. It is not surprising that the social constructivist foundation of social representations as a theory has made it amenable to analyses on rumors (Hogg and Tindale 2008). Hence, we wish to develop this as-yet underexplored direction by putting our social representation narratives into a framework of rumors in the latter part of the analysis.

Method

As part of a phenomenological approach that sought the respondents' worldviews, we conducted eight qualitative semi-structured interviews, four focus group interviews and several informal thematic conversations in our Greek case study area. The research is focused on perceptions of people related to animal husbandry; therefore, respondents were breeders and veterinarians. All interviews and conversations were conducted between 21 February and 10 March in 2014. The interviews were around 45 minutes long. The discussion was initiated with respondent's relation to the area and what kind of experiences they have related to wolf's presence. Rumors were not mentioned

from the researchers if the respondent had not brought it up first. The respondents were guaranteed anonymity, and they were asked their permission to be recorded. Focused observation was also practiced throughout the duration of the visits and combined with thematic conversations. The rationale for combining these qualitative methods was premised on the methodological point that a mix of meta-theoretically congruent methods provides in-depth access to the phenomenon studied in the field (Willig and Stainton-Rogers 2007). The total number of respondents, including the participants of the informal thematic conversations, cannot be estimated with precision since in some informal meetings people were leaving and new were getting into the conversation.

The settings for the study were the regions of Fthiotida and Thessaly in Central Greece, where we visited villages around the mountain Oiti and identified respondents with a snowball method. The snowball method of finding respondents was also practiced by visiting a monastery and a traditional cafeteria, 'kafenio', which constitutes traditional meeting point in every Greek village. The main source of data in the second region Thessaly, interestingly, were visits to veterinary clinics in villages and small towns. Using the clinic as base contributed two things: first, the visits offered the opportunity to talk with breeders that traveled from many places around the mountains. Second, the veterinarian, who was a locally respected and trusted person for livestock owners, acted as a proxy interviewer who engaged the breeders in dialogue about wolves on our behalf. This engendered a climate conducive to respondents' ventilating their thoughts and provided us with valuable observation of informal dialogue. In addition to the eight semi-structured interviews, complementary data through observation and thematic conversations targeted breeders traveling between villages, as well as an owner of traditional cafeteria in a village, a hotel owner, a monk from monastery in the area and various locals. Those complementary data functioned as additional information to get to know the locals and be able to elaborate on the respondents' perspective.

In the subsequent data presentation and analysis, we open-coded our findings into themes based on the frequency and salience with which narratives were relayed. These proto-themes were next arranged within the social representations framework, taking the form of the two constitutive elements of social representations specified by Abric (1993): *central core* and *peripheral elements*. In line with the theory, we identified the core elements in the form of words, metaphors, images and attitudes (Quenza 2005). The categorizing process was repeated for peripheral elements. In a pragmatic amelioration of the theory, we imparted a division of the peripheral social representations into first- and second-level representations. The first level pertained to direct representations on the wolf while the second level cast a broader net to capture representations related to aspects of wolf management and livelihoods. This enabled us to get to peripherals that were

located on conceptually different levels (i.e. attributes vs. societal tensions). The results are presented below.

Results

Perceptions on the presence of the wolf

Central core elements

Respondents attributed the wolf with the characteristics 'smart', 'artful', 'threat', 'problem', 'outlaw' and 'bloodthirsty'. They drew on narratives from personal experiences with the wolf or stories they had heard from the older people about the wolf in old times. These narratives frequently centered on the coping strategies of whole villages with wolf presence. Respondents employed metaphors, jokes and sayings about the wolf in the local dialect.

Elders' narratives depicted how the wolf was perceived 30+ years ago, when killing a wolf was not just a legal thing to do, but was even compensated from the state. Here, respondents painted a picture of the wolf as an outlaw. A veterinarian observed:

Many years ago, when a wolf appeared in the area, 20 to 30 people from the villages would go to the forest to find and kill him; they wouldn't let him in the area. (Veterinarian, P)

Some of them had personal experiences of hunting wolves before it was criminalized and others reminisced thusly:

In old times, when someone killed a wolf, he would bring it to the village to show around and he was given cheese, a lamp, money... as a reward for protecting them. Once I went with them. We killed the wolf and then burned him... that was the directive. (Veterinarian, P)

When I was a child wolves were hunted and they were brought to the village and people were giving money to the hunters. (Breeder, KS1)

When respondents relayed traits of the animal's character, the wolf was generally perceived as an 'artful', 'bloodthirsty', 'shy' and 'smart' predator. Within some narratives repeated by both breeders and veterinarians as the proxy interviewers, they connected to superstitious evils of wolf predation:

The wolf is a bloodthirsty animal. He eats meat rarely; he usually prefers to drink the blood. (Veterinarian, K1)

The wolf has this idiom that he doesn't want to eat, usually it's all about blood, he catches the animals and he sucks their blood. If it is possible, he will even catch 5, 10, 15 just to suck their blood, eating the flesh comes second. (Breeder, L01)

Furthermore, narratives made plain that the wolf was perceived as a problem and a threat as a function of its vehemence. All of the respondents interviewed expressed

the opinion that the presence of the wolf in the area is a major problem for and threat to the breeders, not just substantively but as a species that attracts attention from the younger generation, seemingly causing them to 'betray' the community. The dimension was relayed both in sayings and jokes used from the respondents as well as in discussion narratives:

The wolf has always been a problem! Don't you know the joke about the wolf? – A breeder has a son and sends him to study at the university! After a couple of years, he meets with a friend and his friend asks him 'How is your son doing? What is he studying?' and the breeder replies 'oh my son [...] is studying to be a wolf!' and his friend wonders... 'A wolf?' and the breeder reply 'Yes! When he left I had 400 sheep... now I have 200'. (Veterinarian, K01)

The wolf is a huge problem for us. It has always been and it will always be. There is no solution. (Breeder, L04)

Not surprisingly, the wolf was found to be associated with problematic situations because of frequent, unrelenting and large-scale attacks to the breeders' herds. The wolf in their narratives is directly connected to threat for their animals and loss of livelihood:

Wolf's job is to attack my herd, but my job is to kill him if he does so. (Breeder, L01)

[The wolf] can even kill 100 sheep; he might choke all of them. (Breeder, KS2)

Although respondents invariably construed the wolf as a threat, as a bloodthirsty animal and as a generally problematic presence in the area, nearly all of the respondents could be seen making a distinction between the 'old' and the 'current' wolf. Notably, the old wolf was described as 'wild', 'shy', 'very strong' and 'masculine'. Oppositely, the contemporary wolf was more strongly associated with human and NGO presence. Indeed, it was repeatedly described – in various ways – as not the *real* wolf, in part by being compromised or reliant on external factors:

Now the wolves are genetically modified, they are not as they were in the past. (Veterinarian, K02)

The old times the wolf fed in the woods. In order to come closer it should be foggy or the place should be controllable. These wolves now they go wherever... (Breeder, KS3)

Peripheral elements

The peripheral elements are presented in two levels. In the first level, peripheral representations that are directly related to the wolf as an animal are presented. In the second level, we present those representations that touch on the contemporary context of wolf management, including policy and compensations schemes. This division is for presentation and expedience and situates animal representations within sociopolitical context.

First-level peripheral elements. A prominent narrative that emerged in every discussion sooner or later was that of wolves being ‘secretly released’. Almost all respondents expressed the opinion that the present wolves are illegitimate because they are allegedly secretly released from the captivity of animal rights NGOs and not born in the wild. The discussion around this narrative often started with respondents expressing their frustration toward those whom they accused of releasing wolves, namely NGOs. The release narrative featured directly as having compromised the core wildness of the traditional wolf. A breeder expressed his suspiciousness about the release of wolves by wondering: ‘A wild wolf, how anyone can put a collar on him?’ (breeder, V01) while another breeder (L02) stated more explicitly how ‘[NGOs] release hybrids of wolf and not the real wolf’ and another one stated ‘Some have seen people on the mountain with a car and a cage, and most possibly they had released wolves because if it was any other animal, they wouldn’t have put it in a cage...’ (Breeder, V01)

While captive releases constituted a major narrative, two respondents did not share in this belief, a veterinarian (Veterinarian, P) and a former forest guard turned livestock breeder. The veterinarian (P) intimated the releases were a kind of urban legend, albeit a very rural and modern one: ‘anything related to releasing wolves is an urban myth. Nothing is true. They say that they release, wolves, snakes, bears...’ and he connected this with other dominant myths in the area that have nothing to do with wolves. Interestingly, the forest guard who expressed doubt toward the releases of wolves in the region spoke with great certainty about the releases of bears instead: ‘Come on now, they don’t release anything... if you want we can talk about bear releases, that I personally know that they do release... but wolves... no... they haven’t brought...’ (forest guard).

Within the secret release narrative, respondents appeared to fault NGOs and more the nebulous ‘ecologists’ working for them. All breeders interviewed accused NGOs of unduly protecting the wolf above other species and interests, albeit some more animatedly than others. Suspicions raised included NGOs taking money from the European Union and government for wolf conservation, which respondents claimed both involved keeping the money for themselves, and spending money on secret breeding and release programs. Further blame was laid on the NGOs, this time pertaining to the number of wolves. Many respondents contended that modest estimates made official by the NGOs are conservative if not outright falsehoods. In addition to these charges, however, respondents reflected on more explanations for the protection of wolves, which included ‘they are released so the species won’t be extinct’ and because the wolf belongs to what is called *wild nature*, newly popularized under Rewilding Europe: ‘they are releasing wolves to create wild nature. Wild nature is to have wolves, lions, bears...’ (Breeder, L04).

A second narrative went to great lengths to present wolf as an ‘unnatural’ presence in the area. As a breeder KS2 purported, ‘We wouldn’t mind if it was naturally in the mountain. What bothers us is that some people come in the area and they destroy our livelihood...’ A veterinarian (K01) similarly stated that ‘the last ten years, it is madness, there are too many, their population has become too big’ and later on continued with the assertion: ‘Me as a vet, I believe that the population of the wolf is bigger than it should, the area here has become a breeding ground for wolves’. This narrative on unnaturalness also comprised allegations of the wolf becoming increasingly tame in his present habitat, no longer fearing human presence, and displaying behavior that was uncharacteristic of the old – and allegedly ‘natural’ and wild – wolf, because of its protected status. Within this narrative, respondents put the value of this new unnatural wolf to question, stating it has no reason to be preserved or protected (Veterinarian, K02; Breeder, L01; Breeder, KS3).

The final narrative that materialized from the peripheral social representations was that, in many ways, and owing to the above ‘compromises’ made to the wolf’s wild nature, it was still in many ways partly an ‘outlaw’ in local culture. This appeared to ordain a series of practices onto the animal, which often had the trappings of duty. While more than half of the breeders, who referred to illegal actions toward the wolf, mainly hunting and killing no one, of course, admitted to any kind of personal involvement in an illegal act. However, many of them made clear that under specific circumstances they would kill the wolf, despite having to break the law. Illegal killings of the wolf were construed as something ‘people they know’ had done, and crimes for which some of them had allegedly been arrested. Being driven to illegal actions diverged somewhat among respondents, where some breeders confessed they would kill the wolf if they caught it prowling on their livestock, and others conjectured they would kill the wolf simply if they encountered one.

Second-level peripheral elements. For the second-level peripheral social representations, we cast a broader net by identifying narratives of the wolf that pertained to the broader context of its management. First, respondents voiced discontentment with the way in which compensations are issued as a cursory fix to a much greater problem. A breeder (V01) held that ‘What we want is them to stop releasing wolves, we don’t want compensations we want nothing, we are not interested in compensations. Compensation is nothing for us’, meaning that the damage they undergo after a wolf attack cannot be compensated. Another breeder (L04) argued that it is good that compensations are provided; however, the procedure is typically more time-consuming and bureaucratic than it is worth. A breeder specifically pointed to the inefficacious and insufficient nature of the compensation: ‘the breeders are not well protected from the state when it comes to wolf issues [...] if the compensation was better it would make it easier for the wolf to be protected’.

In this second level, representations are also centered on distrust of authorities and on disenfranchisement with lack of involvement in decision-making or lack of voice on management. Respondents questioned the trustworthiness of the state and NGOs, which were at times perceived as being in collusion against the countryside. Many experienced being on the outside of this alliance and that the state was using NGOs as channels for acquiring funds from the European Union at a time of financial crisis. This skepticism toward NGOs was made explicit particularly in respondents' recollection of a recent scandal about a fake/front NGO. In a broader sense, the state does not trust the breeders and breeders do not trust the state. Respondents drew this conclusion from the way things are working between them all these years, a breeder explains that he is not satisfied from ELGA¹ because even though he pays his fee he is not getting enough money back. Respondents suggested in matters of the wolf the state equally distrusts breeders because if they facilitate the procedure breeders may try to get compensated for damages that never happened. When discussing wolves, respondents reported experiencing distance to the decision-making process pertaining to regulations that concern them or conservation directives for the areas in which they live. Breeders additionally expressed that ecologists have their voices and perspectives disproportionately accommodated in the public debate.

Analysis

Our findings tapped into the collective memory of Greek breeders, which revealed enduring negative characteristics ascribed to the wolf in the region, including 'problem', 'threat', 'outlaw' and 'bloodthirsty'. In the peripheral elements analysis, we could more critically see how these core elements lent themselves to transformative peripheral representations on the wolf in the current sociopolitical context. Almost invariably, respondents associated the wolf with negative characteristics even within this tier. Here the wolf acquired two main attributes of being 'illegally released' and 'unnatural/tame'.

In Abric's approach, peripheral elements function like a car bumper to the core representations (Abric 1993). This explains the relative historical and cultural anchoring of the negative attributes, which simultaneously 'transfer' meanings into contemporary settings where they undergo transformation according to prevailing sociopolitical and economic predicaments. Consequently, representations of the wolf as an outlaw prevailed as peripherals. As illustrated by our findings, respondents harnessed new experiences like NGO releases to delegitimize the wolf, an adaptation that was in line with the central core element of the wolf.

The second level of peripheral elements pertained to the wolf as symptom of distrust between state agencies and NGOs and citizens, and the inefficacy of the compensation schemes set up to offset the cost of wolf attacks on

livestock. It is important to state that processes on this level were highly interrelated. To respondents, the wolf invoked and brought out all of the above narratives.

The anatomy of the rumors

The social representations relayed above collectively told stories of the wolf and constituted it as a social object in the community. Swidler (1986) understands such social representations of nature as a cultural resource that can be harnessed toward various discursive framing practices. To this end, the anatomy of these particular representations, by which we refer to their unsubstantiated nature, the lack of first-hand experience by authors, the absence of the third party (Foster 2004) and their low level of formalization (Shibutani 1966), gives latitude to analyzing representations of the wolf as 'released' and 'hybrid' as rumors.

What can we reasonably make of the main contemporary representation – that which characterized the wolf as 'unnatural'? For one, the latter characterization represents a familiar disassociation of an animal from a particular area, suggesting and constituting its out-of-placeness in the some conception of a natural order (Matless, Merchant, and Watkins 2005). In line with our functional-motivational understanding of social representations, the enrolment and expulsion of animals in configurations of the countryside reflects a way to socially construct rural identities in times of duress and uncertainty posed by conservation agendas (Woods 1998).

To our respondents, unnaturalness was imminently connected with human interferences with wolves, including captive breeding and secret releases by NGOs, following which wolves may display tame or unpredictable characteristics that are deemed unnatural to the wolf as a wild species (Linnell, Salvatori, and Boitani 2008; Dickens, Delehanty, and Michael Romero 2010). The 'released from captivity' rumor was substantiated by almost every respondent's willingness to tell a story about people driving cars with wolf cages in the mountains. Just as chips on killed wolves in France suggested government tampering to French hunters, so did collars on wolves suggest raise suspicion on foul play by NGOs from the perspective of Greek livestock breeders.

The narrative, interestingly, was also preamble to reflections on the corrupt practices of NGOs and neutralizations of (hypothetical) illegal kills. Here, the neutralization was in one 'not shooting a real wolf' or ridding the population of a hybrid (Pohja-Mykrä and Kurki 2014). After all, if wolves are illegitimate by being captive-bred, they cannot expect the same protected status as the wild wolf stipulated in the Habitats Directive. Released wolves were directly linked to the representation of wolves as tame and unnatural, which both serve as powerful counter-arguments to wildlife conservation in present environmentalist discourse where natural has profound normative value (Moriarty & Woods 1997).

Beyond mere discursive counterarguments, the unnatural representation reflects the community's fear of the wolf, apparent in attributions of its bloodthirsty, artful and smart attributions. There is no shortage of literature on attitudes of fear in relation to wolves (Bisi and Kurki 2008; Ordiz, Bischof, and Swenson 2013). In terms of large carnivore conservation, the wolf appears to have these species-specific characteristics that make adaptation particularly challenging for local communities, although, as one respondent insisted, bears are also thought to be secretly released in the mountains. Peltola and Heikkilä (2015) observe that fear, bitterness and hatred as socially contagious feelings toward the wolves in such communities. They are sustained, moreover, by what Thrift (2008) calls information sharing – including tales of observation of suspicious events – which are essential to social repair and maintenance. These practices were core to Greek breeders' sense-making of wolf conservation.

The Greek case study displays some points of contrast to the rumor situation in the countries where similar narratives prevail. First, its interlocutors are chiefly livestock breeders, and not hunters as in the Nordic countries. Second, breeders charged animal rights and environmentalist NGOs with the conspiracy of secretly releasing or breeding wolves. The European Union was, in this way, relatively blameless and may in some cases be said to have been 'duped' by NGOs that were funneling grant money through the mobilization of disingenuous conservation schemes. In the Nordic countries, as we recall, the European Union has tended to be presented as the bastion of injustice regarding wolf conservation and the level from which all lower-degree conspiracies emanate (von Essen 2015). Although there may be many reasons for this distinction, it may be owed to the fact that at the time of this study many Greeks held a more positive attitude toward EU as benefactor as a result of their financial aid in a time of economic crisis.

A third point of contrast in the context of this rumor between Greece and other member states where it circulates was that whereas the secret release rumor is often deployed alongside of explicit discourses and practices of political resistance toward conservation policy, Greek breeders were relatively silent politically. Political responses to wolf conservation are more common elsewhere in Europe, demonstrated by recent mobilization of rural populist movements and parties in France, the UK and the Nordic countries (Mischi 2008; Nurse 2013; von Essen et al. 2015a). This coheres with Scott's (1992) conception of rumors as a form of popular aggression. But in Greece, breeders saw themselves as being at a political disadvantage insofar as they deemed themselves to possess limited rhetorical and financial resources in a time when NGO were experts at funneling money from the European Union. Consequently, rather than the rumor constituting a discourse alongside of popular civic resistance, it accompanied the breeders' tacit accommodation or coping with the policy through their efforts to maintain some cultural continuity within the parameters permitted

by the premises of wolf conservation policy. In this way, the rumors lacked some aggression and instead had trapings of giving up.

The representation of wolves as unnatural and released was hand-in-hand with a charge of hybridity. It was tame not only because of alleged human handling in its breeding and release, but because of genetic modification. Whether this was suspected as hands-on human engineering of wolf-hybrids or the relatively 'natural' consequence of wolves and dogs hybridizing in the wild (following, perhaps, some fateful mistake on the part of wildlife managers) was at times difficult to ascertain and may ultimately depend on depth of the livestock breeders' perception of the conspiracy. The profound distrust and accusations leveled toward NGOs, however, may indicate breeders regarded the hybridization of wolves as a relatively pernicious ongoing enterprise.

What, then, can we reasonably make of the main rumors that prevailed among Greek breeders – that of secret releases from captivity and wolves being unnatural/tame hybrids? We contend they must not be categorically depoliticized as isolated folk tales in remote Greek rural regions, but critically situated in a broader context. In other words, we agree that rumors and discourses on the environment are embedded in social, political and economic factors (Milstein 2009). This demands we uncover the terrain of contestations of difficult conservation policy to see where and how rumors become preferred as a strategy for disenfranchised communities. In what follows, then, we take a final look at wolf rumors as the currency of the voiceless in their management, leading to recommendations for increased local community integration in wolf management projects.

The place of rumors in conservation conflicts

It seems clear that rumors on the wolf's tampered with nature – either through secret releases or through hybridization – cannot responsibly be dismissed as the isolate conspiracies of backward rural residents. First, we have argued the representations that underpin them are culturally resonant ways of understanding the wolf inasmuch as they are grounded in personal, everyday experiences and dominant storylines and myths (Buijs et al. 2011). They are, in this way, the production of a common sense or a repertoire of folk knowledge that attaches meanings to objects in their lifeworld (Moscovici and Duveen 2000). Second, they represent meaningful strategies of coping with uncertainty and risk from outside agendas. Third, the rumors share more than a passing resemblance to those narratives of wolves that circulate in other parts of the world, not least other European member states subject to the same wolf conservation. Indeed, the ubiquity of the secret release and hybrid rumors is considerable and merits a closer examination of the kernels of truth that might have generated them (such as the secret release of lynx in Switzerland). But they above all commit us to uncovering deficits and injustices in the democracy of conservation

policy. Here we understand rumors in Scott's perspective as the weapons of the weak.

Based on the social representations ascribed to the wolf, what were the main constituents of the weak predicament of livestock breeders that drove them to rumors as a coping strategy? Otherwise stated, what was it in the context of the conservation conflict as a whole that made rumors a viable alternative? We contend that in spite of the everyday sense-making component to social representations, the operationalization of such representations into rumors denotes a process whereby information has been arranged into coherent narratives, and these narratives have been dismissed by the elite as fiction. Rumors are, in this sense, less than truths and 'counter'-narratives by virtue of the lesser status to hegemonic accounts (Pelkmans and Machold 2011). Indeed, rumors arise in large part because access to participating in and shaping hegemonic narratives is limited (Bond 2011). With no voice in formal, official channels, therefore, rumors denote a necessary sidestepping of the public arena. From the representations given by Greek breeders, we can summarize three ways in which existing avenues for communication about wolf policy were perceived as impenetrable.

The first was the lack of public participation channels of wolf conservation, partly circumscribed by the economic crisis. This situation is extreme when compared to the predicament in the other rumor-infested European states (Papageorgiou and Vogiatzakis 2006; Apostolopoulou and Pantis 2009). However, even when such channels are institutionalized, they tend to face profound critique (Hallgren and Westberg 2015; Lundmark and Matti 2015). In the Greek case, it was thought that to have a shot at such formal channels for participation, one needed to be politically organized and rhetorically powerful; familiar with the proper institutional channels and the right people, in addition to securing funds to safeguard one's participation.

The second avenue of communication that appeared blocked to Greek breeders was that of national media. Indeed, to many it was controlled by elite interests in favor of wolf conservation who could present breeders as an uneducated minority, without giving them opportunities to contest this image. In fact, breeders saw their embodied knowledge of the local environment, and with it the authority to demarcate the natural from the man-made, as a point of pride and of value to the debate, purporting to be '*more ecologists than the ecologists*'. That wolf-skeptic rural residents are de facto silenced by being painted as backward is an occurrence reported throughout Europe (Ekengren 2012; Mischi 2013). That such unequal distribution of power and knowledge is conducive to rumors is affirmed by the literature (Bergmann 1993), but a contrast in this study to previous research is that it is the disenfranchised – and not the elite – who seize information spread in this way. At the same time as they were critical of national media, breeders recognized that public campaigns and media

presence were key to success. This may be somewhat counterintuitive, given the media's tendency for drama-turgy and sensationalism that would not likely serve the rumors of the wolf well. What may rather be needed is to sit down and resolve controversies in fora where rhetoric and dramaturgy take a backseat to the force of the better argument.

Lastly, legal channels of redress and public channels of debate were perceived to be guarded by an impenetrable coalition of NGOs and ecologists. Whether the exclusion of breeders was a real or imagined structural deficit, the perception of marginalization from the debate is significant. That environmentalist, animal rights and EU conservation rationalities colonize the debate at fairly subtle levels is reported also in the Nordic countries when it comes to wolf management issues (von Essen 2015). Indeed, premises for decision-making and public dialogue on wolf conservation are at presently inaccessible to any real involvement by rural residents.

We argue the above three blocked spheres of communication have been instrumental in sowing the seeds for alternative formulations of reality perpetuated by a marginalized social group. With no formal fora for contestation, the latter is made to proceed in alternative ways. Rumors thus emerge where 'routine channels of communication breakdown, do not exist, or cannot be trusted' (Miller 2005, 505). Here, we find rural communities act as protected enclaves for the discursive construction of narratives of the wolf that contest those of the official transcript. It is enclaved specifically in relation to urban outsiders, who become the subject of conspiracy theories. Indeed, in the wolf management context, urban conspiracies center on the allegedly 'purposive devastation of the countryside' (Bisi and Kurki 2008, 96). Such vulnerability is heightened with destocking and depopulation of the agricultural and rural landscapes in many EU states (von Essen et al. 2015b). There is hence solidarity to engaging in such collective-meaning making (Levi 1999) insofar as rumormongering functions to both include (interlocutors) and to exclude (outsiders and NGOs) (Foster 2004).

Although we are sympathetic toward the drivers that helped reproduce rumors, it is difficult to see the rumors of the wolf as particularly promising ways forward in the wolf conflict. While on one level they offer meaning and security for rural communities (McLaughlin 2007), and their occasional penetration into public accounts may galvanize debate, rumors are also a deeply problematic form of communication. For example, they merely displace hostility (Foster 2004) and they lack transparency due to the opaque climate in which they are produced (Scott 1992). They are also prone to distortions and miscommunication by proceeding in back-channels (von Essen et al. 2015b). With this is meant, like a game of *Chinese Whispers*, their content easily detaches from the original source and takes a life of its own through a *multiply interactive* effect (DiFonzo and Bordia 2007).

Lastly, rumors may become volatile if perpetuated to their extremes (Foster 2004). If now a hybrid wolf population were to be definitively discovered to be secretly released anywhere in Europe, the event would quite like spark riots or tip some people over the edge, threatening the legitimacy of the entire wolf project in Europe. The perhaps most significant problem with rumors as a form of communication is that by proceeding in private conduits they are not subject to deliberative scrutiny. That means their alternative truths are equally contestable and illegitimate as many of the public accounts because they have not been arrived at through deliberation or formulated in anticipation of critical responses.

In this study, we have delved into the social representations of the wolf to inform a desk study on rumors of the wolf. What is a particularly noteworthy conclusion, moreover, is the convergence and the political deployment of the hybrid and secret release rumors. It means, for one, that these narratives can no longer be dismissed as a benign pastime for informational flow and recreation in the discursive life of an isolated community (Foster 2004). Nor can we see rumors merely as ‘improvised news’ of sense-making (Shibutatni 1966). Indeed, rumors of the wolf have become – if not on the individual level then on the political arena – a powerful commodity in the wolf conservation debate. These counter-narratives now form part of a potentially massive network of rumor discussants (Coughlin 1999) in the form of the voiceless wolf-skeptic publics of the European Union.

Conclusion

In this study on social representations of wolf presence in Central Greece, we set out with the premise that social constructions, attributes and associations pertaining to animals cannot be divorced from their sociopolitical and economic contexts. By exploring wolf-skeptic livestock breeders’ communicative tracts on the wolf and categorizing these into Moscovici’s and Abric’s core and peripheral social representations, findings revealed a handful of prominent narratives reproduced on the wolf. We engaged with the narrative of wolves represented as ‘secretly released’, ‘unnatural’ and ‘outlaws’ by local discourse, where the ‘secret release’ rumor is curiously ubiquitous across Europe. These were shown to be interwoven in part in enduring core representations of the animal, part of the region’s cultural legacy, but more significantly as the result of problematic wildlife management marked by democracy deficits, distrust, lack of transparency and marginalization at a fundamental level of public debate. Hence, we inferred that these livestock breeders experienced failures of conventional channels of communication on the wolf or rural affairs and suggested that they had withdrawn communication from the public to reproducing narratives and rumors in the private sphere. The degree to which the narratives explored here served as rumors to make sense of uncertain and threatening

situation, but also to undercut the legitimacy of authorities that were perceived as unjust, was compelling in illustrating how these rumors have disseminated in a massive EU network of discussants.

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Note

1. Greek Organization of Agricultural Insurance.

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