



A reluctant right-wing social movement: On the ‘good sense’ of Swedish hunters



Erica von Essen ^{a,*}, Michael Allen ^b

^a Environmental Communication, Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, Inst för Stad Och Land, Miljökommunikation, Box 7012, 75007 Uppsala, Sweden

^b Philosophy Department, East Tennessee State University, Box 70656, Johnson City, TN 37614-0651, United States

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, hunting and agrarian communities have increasingly risen in opposition to nature conservation policy that is perceived to infringe on their traditional ways of life. They charge ‘conservationists’ with having a disproportionate influence on policy and maintain that the state system now disenfranchises their needs and interests. In this paper, we suggest this particular brand of resistance can be illuminated by neo-Marxist social movement framework (Cox and Nilsen, 2014) on the dialectic of movements-from-below and movements-from-above, competing for hegemony in the context of an organic crisis of the system.

Our paper examines the role of Swedish hunters’ activation of a counter-hegemonic ‘good sense’ to oppose the hegemonic common sense established by wolf conservationists in the state system. The case of Swedish hunters rising in resistance toward the newfound hegemony of wolf conservation is hence resolved as the rise of a right-wing movement from below, mobilized on the basis of defensive, conservative and agrarian values. The novel contribution of this paper lies in its examination of the (often) self-professed limits of hunters’ distinctively agrarian good sense, in light of their own reluctance as an oppositional social movement from below.

Not only do hunters exhibit considerable reluctance in regard to their own ‘movement’ identity and ambivalence in regard to hegemony. But we argue that from a conceptual perspective the empowerment of a counter-hegemonic good sense as in traditional resistance studies can, at best, result in a dialectical reversal of movement positions with conservationists, without appropriate mediation or compromise. This leads us to some brief recommendations from democratic theory to mediate between the below and above movements of hunters and conservationists.

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1. Introduction

In the context of contemporary large carnivore conservation policies, several hunting communities can now be seen to resist what they perceive is a state system now co-opted by an urban-based elite of nature conservationists and animal rights activists (Bisi and Kurki, 2008; Mischi, 2013; von Essen et al., 2015; Pohja-Mykrä, 2016). To hunters, a perceived stacking of the decision-making system against their community and the countryside more broadly has sobered them to the realization that this policy and decision-making “system does not work as it claims to, and

that it will simply not stand aside and let [them] develop their needs and capacities freely” (Nilsen, 2009, p. 88). Such a predicament may be described as an *organic crisis* of the system (Gramsci, 1998); a failure of the system to deliver on its promise to recognize and take seriously the autonomy of rural communities.

Nordic hunters, in particular, present themselves as deeply disenfranchised in this organic crisis where recent years’ wolf conservation is concerned. They now reject the *common sense* of the system, which they take to comprise a largely technical-ecological driven discourse of experts and an academic middle class of urban conservationists (Skogen et al., 2008; von Essen, 2015). Far from being grounded in common or shared *experience*, ‘common sense’ is used here to refer to the network of environmental discourses sponsored or empowered by the state, which is believed by hunters to have been coopted by environmental and

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: erica.von.essen@slu.se (E. von Essen), allenmp@mail.etsu.edu (M. Allen).

conservationist elites. Here, common sense is ‘common’ to the extent it is the dominant or hegemonic point of view of the state (Gramsci, 1998). In response to this hegemony of the common sense, hunters activate their own oppositional *good sense* that serves as simultaneous negation of the encroachment of urban values into their domain and an alternative expression of experience-based agrarian values (Skogen and Thrane, 2007). Here, the ‘good sense’ of hunters refers to their experience of exclusion and oppression by the state motivating their rejections or contestations of such encroachments and the articulation of an alternative order.

This is a negation of urban values, which are understood as alienated, vicarious and irresponsible when it comes to nature, and an affirmation of competing values of self-reliance, experience, and rural autonomy (Skogen and Thrane, 2007). To be sure, the hunters themselves do not employ the language of common sense and good sense, hegemony and counter-hegemony. Nonetheless, it is evident from their criticisms of media as denying them a voice unless they speak the ‘common sense’ language of conservationism that these concepts substantially align with their experience of discursive subordination. When viewed within a neo-Marxist social movements interpretative framework, then, Nordic hunters rise as a movement-from-below in response to conservationists as the movement-from-above (Cox and Nilsen, 2014), whom they see as having a directive position in the decision-making system over wolf conservation.

In this paper, we demonstrate that Swedish hunters’ good sense – deployed in response to a hegemonic common sense of the system and the movement from above – has the hallmarks of regressivism, reactance, defensiveness and conservatism not altogether dissimilar to populist rural right-wing movements (Peluso, 1992; Harvey, 2000; Gorlach et al., 2008; Cox, 2009; Davidson, 2013). Indeed, some disenfranchised rural Swedish hunters show political tendencies of voting for the extremist right-wing party in Sweden “in protest”, the Swedish Democrats (von Essen, 2016, p. 263). Hunters’ good sense becomes an operating principle for the movement, seen here to be crystallized in the old hunters’ credo of *freedom with responsibility* (von Essen and Allen, 2016b). As a movement credo, freedom with responsibility is an assertion of hunters’ autonomy from the state system they feel has betrayed them. Crucially, we contend, it is more as assertion of autonomy from the state than it is any push for social transformation instigated by hunters for themselves *within* this system. This positions Swedish hunters as a unique case study of a disengaged and reluctant movement-from-below. As disengaged and reluctant, asserting their own hegemony over the system is not necessarily their objective (Reed, 2004).

In this way, while appealing to the terminology of Gramsci and neo-Marxism, we also take a decidedly critical perspective on the latter. In particular, we show that Gramscians and neo-Marxists are narrowly preoccupied with competition for hegemony. But this obscures some of the ambivalence and reluctance among hunters over wanting power in the first place. As empirical findings will testify, hunters seek to place a defensive shield around their domain (Ojalampi and Blomley, 2015; Gorlach et al., 2008; Reed, 2008), rather than replace the hegemonic common sense of the system. This withdrawal rather than confrontation inevitably challenges the key neo-Marxist conception of “a dialectic between reactionary and progressive forces in search of a solution, a new order” (Gill, 2000, p. 33, cited in Nilsen, 2013). Indeed, while we agree that the notion of such a dialectic between movements from below and above (Cox and Nilsen, 2014) has descriptive and analytical value for the case at hand, we show that hunters’ good sense of freedom with responsibility is predicated on autonomy rather than new systems hegemony. We also contend this is

problematic inasmuch as hunters demand decision-making autonomy over a shared, public resource—wildlife and protected species (Nurse, 2016).

The novel contributions of this case study are as follows. First, we show that a counter-hegemonic good sense of hunters is indeed more complex than a mechanical reaction on the part of a movement from below against a movement-from-above, aimed at replacing their hegemony with its own set of central idioms and norms (Nilsen, 2009). Second, we show that deeper analysis of the phenomenological views of movement participants can sometimes reveal that the movement is deeply ambivalent or “self-contradictory” (see Woods, 2003, p. 318) about the desired social transformation in the polity, oscillating between goals of disengagement and reconciliation. Consequently, the paper critically examines the character of the organic crisis of systems legitimacy, as it is perceived by Swedish hunters. Building on our analysis of hunters’ reluctance and ambivalence, we contend that the system requires procedural reform, and *not* revolution as the dialectical reversal of below and above positions as follows a neo-Marxist analysis. Such reform rather than revolution points the way ambitiously toward the necessity of hunters’ renewed engagement in mainstream public deliberative processes.

In what follows, we first present hunters’ phenomenological reconstructions of the systems crisis and the depths of their disenfranchisement, along with a backdrop of acts of resistance by hunters in Sweden. We then offer our reflections on these findings in which we explore the possibility of engaging less with the political will and more with the ambivalence and the reluctance of the hunters’ in resisting this supposed elite. Here, we argue that there is scope for a democratic mediation of hunters and conservationists. The scope for such mediation can, however, easily be missed if analysis of the hunters cleaves too closely to the idea of resistance as opposed to reluctance and of desire for disengagement rather than re-engagement with the polity.

2. Method

A three-year qualitative study of hunters’ relationship with the Swedish state was conducted as part of the FORMAS research project *Confronting challenges to political legitimacy of the natural resource management regulatory regime in Sweden – The case of illegal hunting*. A total of thirty-nine semi-structured interviews lasting between 1.5 up to 2.5 h were conducted with Swedish hunters, across several demographic axes and geographical locations in 2014–2016. A snowballing process produced a respondent sample ranging from age 21 to age 90. Consistent with the increasing demographic diversity of Nordic hunting communities (Hansen et al., 2012), all types of hunters were interviewed – including those who held traditional industry sector jobs in small towns, those of countryside origin and residence, and urban hunters who had been introduced to hunting later in life. It can be noted that unlike the situation with wolves in many other places of the world, including North America (Bell, 2015), it is hunters rather than livestock owners who undertake illegal hunting and are the most vocal critics of wolf conservation, making them the intuitive respondents for this study (Hagstedt and Korsell, 2012). Apart from competition over game species, wolves also pose a threat to a hunting tradition with loose dogs that is integral to Scandinavia, “comprising some 90% of hunting” (according to our respondents) as wolves kill domestic dogs in high numbers (Peltola and Heikkilä, 2015). Hunters strongly sympathize with rural neighbors’ predicament of livestock loss due to wolf predation and more broadly experience wolf conservation as a symbol of restrictions on the freedoms of hunting, a traditional rural way of life and the survival of the countryside at large (Krange and Skogen, 2011).

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