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Wolves on the Bridlepath. On People and other Pack Animals.
(Wolven op het ruiterspad. Over mensen en andere roedeldieren.)

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[pp. 78-84 and pp.90-98).

Canis suburbiensis

In March 2015, a wild wolf was spotted in the northern Dutch provinces of Drenthe and later Groningen, for the first time in about 150 years. Since then, I have sighted wolves regularly. I'd never realized before, but apparently I'm so eager to see them return and settle in the Netherlands of their own free will that I now seem to find them everywhere, even in the city.

That first wandering wolf, which came from the Hamburg area, was not only spotted in the Dutch countryside but also showed up in a residential neighborhood in the Groningen town of Hoogezand. Ever since watching the incredible YouTube videos of this animal, I've been obsessed. I long to see wolves, hope ardently for an encounter, yearn to make contact. I've become a true believer in the second coming of the wolf and learned that many biologists and nature lovers share that feeling.

For the first time in years, I noticed Gerard Reve's book *Wolf* (1983) in my bookcase, went to see the film *The Wolfpack*, had lunch at an Amsterdam restaurant named Wolf, and—the high point so far—recently saw an adult wolf dash into the fitting room of a clothing store in De Negen Straatjes, one of Amsterdam's most popular shopping areas. Was Grandmother trying on dresses?

Wolves were traditionally venerated by the Kwakiutl, an indigenous North American people who saw them as powerful creatures with human-like traits, such as the ability to work together and sustain a complex social organization. They also recognized themselves in the wolves' endurance and intelligence as hunters. Dick Klees and his four co-authors describe the Kwakiutl in an informative book, *De wolf terug. Eng of enerverend?* ("Return of the Wolf: Chilling or Thrilling?").

Wolves, according to the Kwakiutl, were influential beings in contact with a supernatural realm. That made it vital to appease them at regular intervals by performing a wolf dance. The dancer wore a wolf mask and, as far as possible, assumed the form of the wolf, a perennially popular method of gaining a grip on forces beyond one's control.

The wolf dancer imitated the way wolves moved, walking on all fours, and mimicked the way they tore their prey to shreds, whimpering and howling. This was his way of establishing a connection to real wolves. In his rich book *Of Wolves and Men* (1995), Barry Holstun Lopez gives other examples of wolf veneration by Native Americans and the Nunamiut people of northern Alaska. It was a widespread phenomenon in the region.

In Europe, too, identification with wolves was commonplace. A wolf pack consists of two paired adults and their pups, often born in different years—a nuclear family. In areas with plenty of food, the size of the pack ranged up to twenty or thirty animals. Such packs are often a source of inspiration for young soldiers and men with high testosterone, such as gangsters. They probably picture the wolves as roaming free and rejecting social hierarchies, indifferent to rules and conventions. Wolves symbolize a life of adventure on the margins of society. These young men have probably never observed wolves for an extended period in the wild; if they had, they would know that a wolf pack is more like the ideal Christian household.

Young adult wolves leave their birth pack between the ages of one and three, in search of suitable places outside their parents' territory to start a new pack with a wolf of the opposite sex. They may well travel several hundred miles, depending on how much territory is controlled by the pack they leave behind. Young wolves begin practicing before they leave the pack, going on brief trips that take them farther and farther from home. These excursions appear to be random, the direction of travel determined more or less by chance. That's interesting, because it suggests that these young adults set out on their dangerous quest for new territory without having the slightest idea where to find it. Who would ever have thought that these careful, cunning predators, with their impressive social skills, would adopt a survival strategy of running around aimlessly like headless chickens? Since wolves tend to shy away from human beings, you might expect them to avoid overpopulated areas with dense road networks, like most of the Netherlands, instead heading for Poland, the east of Germany, or, most appealing of all, the Ardèche region of France. The haphazard nature of their search for new territory seems mystifying, but at least it explains why some wolves wander into my country. It also makes it

clear that the wolf's return to the Netherlands inevitable.

In April 2014, a few wolf sightings were reported on two nearly unmanned military training sites in Nordhorn and Meppen, German towns along the Dutch border. The wolves in question were also photographed. They were so close to the border that they could easily have gone to the Netherlands for a day trip—maybe some shopping?—or put down roots in that new promised land. Not such a far-fetched idea, it seems; according to ecologists at Alterra, an environmental research institute in Wageningen, the Netherlands certainly has room for a few wolf packs—in the Oostvaardersplassen nature reserve or the forested hills of the Veluwe, for instance.

For thousands of years, wolves roamed the territory now known as the Netherlands, until, after centuries of relentless hunting and persecution, the last one was shot dead in Limburg in 1869. And even if the fairy tale of Little Red Riding Hood and the Big Bad Wolf remained part of our collective memory, we had only the faintest recollection of real wolves until, a few years ago, media reports of the wolf's return skyrocketed. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, wolves from Poland and the former East Germany have migrated ever farther west. Nature reserves in the Netherlands, and elsewhere in Europe, offer wolves the best living conditions available to them in a long while, because ever since the Bern Convention of 1979, the wolf has been a protected species throughout Europe. Any wolves that “return” to the Netherlands will not be descendants of the historic Dutch wolves, but the genetic differences are likely to be slight, since they all belong to the same wolf species.

Many Dutch people hanker, as I do, for unspoiled nature where you don't have to take a number and wait in line for each blackberry you pick. It's exciting to think that, while out for a stroll, you could run into a white-tailed eagle, a peregrine falcon, or a wildcat. Even if it never really happens, it heightens the experience. The knowledge that the elusive animal is nearby creates suspense.

But where have they all gone? Despite the occasional sightings of wandering wolves, no pack has yet been established in this country. I suspect they have no interest in remaining here. That's because unlike the traditional animistic dances of Native American peoples, the Dutch wolf dance is a stiff, bureaucratic affair, employing words, letters, files, and folders to ward off the wild creatures. Such things don't hold much appeal for wolves, I fear, even though their forebears must have grown used to quite a bit of red tape in the former Eastern Bloc. Even before

a single wolf pack has settled here, regulators, conservationists, hunters, shepherds, nature lovers, farmers, and journalists are all bickering about what we should do when that time comes. Countless conservationists and ecologists are looking into the matter—reflecting, debating, lecturing, and writing about the wolf’s return and how to handle it. The Dutch love to get ahead of themselves—and I have to admit I’m no exception. It’s our way of coping with forces beyond our control. A land of red and yellow alerts. In the old days, when a storm hit, we would just wait for it to blow over. These days, we have reams of precautionary measures.

Alongside the enthusiasm about the wolf’s arrival, there is also pervasive fear, even though it’s a known fact that wolves hardly ever attack humans. “Grandmother, dear predator at the top of the food pyramid, so long absent from our ecosystems, do you solemnly swear never to use your sharp teeth?”

“That depends, sweet child, on whether I feel welcome.”

Our ambivalence about wolves is not unusual at all. We find the same attitude in Greek mythology. In the story of Artemis and Apollo, for instance, the wolf is the bringer of light, while in Aesop’s fables, the wolf is a sinister character. The Greeks had a degree of respect for the wolf, but refused to put up with wolves killing sheep. One influential fable, “The Wolf and the Lamb,” portrays the wolf as a sly, tyrannical tempter who outwits a lamb in a battle of words and then argues that this justifies eating the “stupid sheep.” This fable is probably the source of the expression *Homo homini lupus*, “A man is a wolf to his fellow man.”

In the Netherlands, too, there is ambivalence, but it’s part of a very peculiar cocktail of feelings. On the one hand, we long for the arrival of a wild, fearsome beast, but at the same time, there is fairly broad agreement that it will have to obey the rules. After all, the Dutch woods don’t amount to much compared to Canada’s vast forests, or Italy’s Apennines, where the wolf never left. We are not far from expecting wild wolves to conform to a series of lupine commandments, on pain of being captured and carried off to a shelter for “problem wolves”—yes, the term really exists. No doubt the future employees are already in training, even before one wolf has dared to settle here. A genuinely wild wolf? Many people in the Netherlands would prefer to deal with a sheep in wolf’s clothing, an assimilated wolf, softly humming the national anthem, scrupulously respecting the boundaries of the national parks, and never, ever popping up alongside a stroller in a shopping area or the waste containers outside a supermarket in Apeldoorn.

Some fear that wolves may follow the example of foxes, which are spending more and more time in urban environments. I think that's a real possibility. According to the anthropologist Jet Bakels, a specialist in human-animal relationships, such wolves could become intrusive, as bears often have in the United States. After all, dogs evolved directly from wolves more than 30,000 years ago by moving ever closer to the settlements of human hunter-gatherers and eating their trash, a form of self-domestication. Comparative genetic research has determined that all canine species, from Great Danes to Pekinese, descend from an extinct population of wolves. For generations, hunter-gatherers must have selected wolf puppies for traits such as friendliness to humans, lack of aggression, and a juvenile appearance. This type of artificial selection can breed dogs from wolves in ten generations, twenty at most. In theory, it should even be possible to repeat the process and breed dogs again, this time from present-day wolves, which are relatively friendly to humans and not very frightened of us. I dub this new species *Canis suburbiensis*.

To avoid being downgraded to "problem wolf," a wild wolf must catch its own prey within the boundaries of a nature reserve. Roe deer, fallow deer, wild boar, Heck cows (wherever this languishing breed can still be found), and perhaps an enfeebled red deer, but no trash or lamb chops swiped from the local Aldi. Domestic animals and human beings are also off limits, naturally—an appropriate word in this context. Wolf, thou shalt remain wild! Thou shalt eat wild prey, or mice if necessary, but thou shalt not gorge thyself on lambs, sheep, or calves, or else we'll call a meeting. In Germany and France, the responses to "problem wolves" include dogs that protect sheep. This is another instance of fighting "nature" with "culture"—or, to be precise, with domesticated nature. In the Middle Ages, wolves were not infrequently put on trial after killing sheep or lambs. Sometimes they were even dressed as humans and hanged on the gallows, in order to warn criminals and apostates what would become of them if their conduct was too frivolous or too free.

In recent years, the list of commandments has grown swiftly. For example, wolves will not be allowed to use public transport. This rule may seem pointless, or like a bad joke, but that's not how it's intended. A number of foxes have already taken the bus, or hopped into an empty bus for a nap after the driver stepped out for a cigarette.

The last commandment has sexual overtones. It has to do with your choice of partner; not only can you be a problem wolf, but you can also beget problem wolves. O wolf, thou shalt not covet

thy neighbor's dog, for that would likely lead to hybrid whelps. Wolfdogs could retain the dangerous characteristics of wolves, but without the fear of humans. In France, more than sixty fatal wolfdog attacks on humans have been reported, although that's not to say wolfdogs are always dangerous.

It would not surprise me if a registration procedure is already in the works, like the one for newly arrived asylum seekers. If I were a wild wolf who had carelessly crossed the border into the Netherlands, I would know what to do: finish my shopping fast and get out of here.

Empty Head

In 1981, Stephen Jay Gould published a revelatory book about the history of measuring intelligence: *The Mismeasure of Man*. By then Gould (1941–2002) had for some time been a professor of paleontology and evolutionary biology at Harvard and was known around the world for his essays. A few years after the book was published, I received it from a geneticist, one of Gould’s Ph.D. students, who was staying with me in Tanzania. There I was part of a team of biologists from Leiden and Africa doing ecological research. It wasn’t until the doctoral student had returned to Boston with a supply of frozen genetic material from Lake Victoria fish that I got around to the book. It shocked me, but strangely, I can’t remember whether I asked myself just why I found it so shocking. I suspect the main reason was Gould’s convincing demonstration that “scientific racism” was widely accepted in the colonial era, not only in Europe but also in the United States, and that Darwin’s subtle ideas about the evolution of modern humans from an ancestral primate were often misinterpreted, in the last thirty or forty years of the nineteenth century, as linear and hierarchical. According to this dangerous misrepresentation of Darwinian views, “black” Africans formed an intermediate stage between a distant, ape-like ancestor and the uncontested pinnacle of evolution: lily-white Caucasians (meaning Europeans and Americans).

In hindsight, I imagine I was also shocked that some scientific researchers had been less objective than you might hope, especially when it came to “measuring intelligence.” Gould describes how these researchers hunted for differences—not only in outward, anatomical features such as the shape of the skull, but also in cognitive capabilities—between the racial categories they had devised. Among these categories were Caucasians, Black Africans (including Americans whose ancestors had come from Africa), “Indians” (meaning the whole range of Native American peoples), Australian Aboriginals, and “Orientals” (Asians). It was also astonishing to read that “blacks” of both sexes, as well as “white” women, were often thought to be ruled by emotion rather than reason. In many respects, they were seen as children, while “white” men were said to be paragons of rationality—the ultimate adults.

When opportunities arose, scientists consciously or unconsciously manipulated data on race, sex, and social class in ways that were not inconvenient to them, to put it mildly. Time after time, they drew reassuring conclusions about cognitive abilities, finding that the category to which

they belonged was superior. The undeniably bright anatomists in question measured skulls from medical and natural history collections. Since there is little point in asking empty heads to solve linguistic or mathematical puzzles, they settled for what was then considered the best available measure of cognitive capacity: cranial volume. Unfortunately, they often failed to correct for body size, even though it seems fairly obvious that a larger person will have a larger head, without necessarily being more intelligent than a smaller person. That type of reasoning might wrongly lead you to conclude that men are more intelligent than women, when in fact they are merely larger and taller, or that Caucasians, who during their lifetimes were taller on average than undernourished Africans and African-Americans, were therefore also more intelligent.

During these experiments, which were not even close to being double blind, the skulls were turned upside down and filled with plant seeds or lead pellets (shot). Gould replicated a few of them and found strong evidence that, in at least one case, the original researcher had shaken the skulls in his own category more thoroughly and packed the seeds or shot into them more energetically, so that the gluttonous skulls of the empty white heads would be crammed with botanical or leaden “intelligence.” A little selective shaking and compacting, followed by additional pouring, could elevate the intelligence of the palefaces to astral heights. What further proof was necessary of white supremacy, the superior intelligence of the Caucasian with his rosy, white cheeks? You couldn’t make this stuff up if you tried.

Some researchers didn’t stop at manipulation. The anatomist Paul Pierre Broca (who still has an area of the brain named after him in today’s anatomy textbooks) was known for being meticulous. There is no doubt he had a brilliant mind. Yet it was Broca, of all people, who attacked the universally respected German anatomist Tiedemann for finding *no* differences between the skulls of what some present-day antiracist activists refer to in scare quotes as “whites” and “blacks.” To Broca, the absence of discernible differences was inconceivable. He felt certain that, from the very start, Tiedemann must have been out to prove that all human races had the same cranial volume and, instead of discovering anything of interest, had merely reaffirmed his own prejudices.

You may feel that a conclusion like Tiedemann’s is considerably easier for us to accept some 150 years later than it was for Broca in the thick of the dispute. But in any case, Broca’s criticism got the situation exactly the wrong way around. The research findings did not, in fact, point to substantial racial differences. To be sure, Broca may not have been practicing deliberate

deception; he may simply have had bigger blinders on than Tiedemann did. For anyone from any background in any historical period, breaking free of prejudice is extraordinarily difficult—perhaps even impossible.

In the early twentieth century, new methods were developed to measure the “intelligence” of living people; IQ tests came into widespread use. Intelligence is a complex of traits and skills that cannot easily be identified in any clear way, let alone captured in a single number. Nevertheless, from that time onward, the use of IQ measurement expanded, and that trend continues to this day. Employers, policymakers, and politicians are often attracted to the figure because it offers a more efficient basis for policy than nuanced individual stories (especially if you use average IQ values to compare groups). Just recently, Theo Hiddema of the Dutch political party Forum for Democracy (FvD) confidently claimed that the existence of IQ differences between peoples is a proven scientific fact.* Many of the Forum for Democracy’s supporters are dismayed to see the Netherlands being “flooded with immigrants,” as they put it. (To my mind, the Netherlands being flooded with seawater is a much more urgent problem.)

In February 2020, Paul Hekkens published an article about measuring intelligence in the digital newspaper *ThePostOnline*, suggesting that a degree of paternalism towards African countries might not be such a bad idea, because “a genetic explanation cannot be ruled out as a contributing factor in the intelligence differences between whites and blacks.” He was alluding to the fact that “blacks” generally perform worse than “whites” on IQ tests. But those tests were designed for “white” Europeans or Americans and are therefore biased. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that since the election of Trump in 2016 and the rise of the alt-right movement in the United States, racial prejudices from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries have rapidly found renewed social acceptance, and not only in the United States.

Gould’s book describes the nineteenth-century researcher Benjamin Kidd, who was concerned about the bumpy process of colonial expansion. In 1898, Kidd warned not to expect people in the tropics to develop independently, for “we are dealing with peoples who represent the same stage in the history of the development of the race that the child does in the history of the individual.”

According to sociologist Herman Vuijsje, who studied the phenomenon of racism in his book

* In 2021 Hiddema distanced himself from the Forum for Democracy. If even he thinks they’ve gone too far, the situation in the party must be very dire indeed.

Zwartkijkers (“Dark Views”), the situation in the Netherlands is not yet that bad. And it is true that, compared to Germany or the United States, the Netherlands has significantly fewer violent incidents related to racism. But of course, that does not mean there is no racism; there is certainly something going on. The negative experiences of “black” people in the Netherlands, as described by Gloria Wekker in her book *White Innocence*, are troubling. Unlike Vuijsje, I am grateful to be reminded by Wekker that my personal “blindness” has “lucky white guy” written all over them—which is awfully hard to see when you’ve been wearing them all your life.

The fact that some light-brown-skinned Africans discriminate against or demean darker-brown-skinned Africans because of their skin color, as I have unfortunately observed repeatedly in East Africa, does not lessen the problem of racism in my own country. Nor does the fact that Arab and African slave traders played an essential role in the smooth supply and export of slaves (see the autobiography of the African Arab slave trader Tippu Tip). But Vuijsje is right that anti-racism activists often present the opposition between white and black in a simplistic way.

Perhaps they see this as an unavoidable intermediate step in the service of their cause.

Nonetheless, I was surprised by Wekker’s frequent use of the word “race.” What does she hope that will achieve?

You see, according to the latest insights from geneticists, there is no basis for dividing humans into “races.” The genetic differences between some “black” Africans are greater than those between individuals who, in the manner of speaking that persists even today, are assigned to different “races”: for example, the genetic differences between Chinese and British people. Wekker’s main reason for talking in terms of “race” is probably that this is still a living concept in the minds of many people, and not only notorious racists. After all, why do some intelligence researchers pit “racial” groups against each other using IQ tests? The only possible motivation I can imagine is to emphasize the superior intelligence of their own group at every opportunity—just like the researchers who packed lead balls into skulls in the heyday of racial science—and, in the process, to provide pseudoscientific justification of the unequal social status of groups with lower scores on such tests.

IQ tests are probably most useful for advising young people on which forms of further education they may or may not wish to pursue. At eighteen, I was told I would never become a great mathematician, and I am grateful to the psychologist on duty for this prediction, which proved perfectly accurate (although to be honest I already knew it).

Another tried-and-true method of gathering evidence for one's own views, preconceptions, or ideals regarding race, gender, or social class is to seek examples from "nature." People often point to certain behaviors or social hierarchies found in nature to reassure themselves and others that such things are "natural."

I once attended a conference of behavioral biologists where Nick Davies, a keen observer, spoke about his finding that house sparrows, previously thought to be monogamous, frequently engage in sexual activity with partners other than their own—in other words, other than the bird with which they share a nest. A female house sparrow's eggs often turned out to have been fertilized by three or more different males, increasing the genetic variation of her offspring. As Davies illustrated his results with slides, a collective sigh of recognition filled the darkened room (I sighed too).

This reaction is easy to understand, yet how peculiar it is that a human can feel reassured by a house sparrow's behavior. And upon reflection, where do we draw the line? If you accept the principle that animal behavior can justify human behavior, you have to realize that human rapists might feel justified by the behavior of male orangutans, which frequently rape females. Personally, I'm not comfortable with that.

Rudy Kousbroek, in a slightly different context, once rightly warned against the misuse of the animal kingdom as a sort of grab bag, to lend a scientific veneer to one's own prejudices. This is exactly how I would describe the writings of clinical psychologist Jordan Peterson. Worse still, he seems to see the animal realm as a *God-given* grab bag.

Peterson used to work at Harvard, like Gould, only more recently. He moved to the University of Toronto, where he became a professor in 1998.[†] His book *12 Rules for Life*, which has been an international bestseller for years, is a strange amalgamation of psychology, evolutionary biology, religious studies, mythology, and the occasional touch of philosophy. It is stuffed with summaries of accepted scientific results, often interpreted in unorthodox ways or embedded in an extremely woolly context. For example, information on research into the importance of sexual selection, particularly the selectiveness of female animals in choosing a partner, is jumbled with ancient myths and Eastern wisdom. However profound this blend may seem to some non-experts, it has no real validity.

[†] Since then he has resigned.

Peterson points out that patriarchal social structures have been ubiquitous among primates for tens of millions of years, and that's probably true. He includes in this generalization the predominantly patriarchal structures of *Homo sapiens* societies, structures which emerged approximately 250,000 years ago. Peterson's misconception is that the stereotypical division of social roles between male and female primates, or social pyramid with males at the top, implies that such a division is justified, or even desirable, among humans.

The traditional family in many Christian and other cultures, with the father as the head, a father who takes responsibility and is both strict and just, is not made any more desirable by the mere discovery of a primate species that exhibits this "exemplary" behavior.

Peterson displays a new form of the old tendency to seek confirmation of one's own prejudices, even as he accuses the feminists in women's studies departments of that very mistake. It will come as no surprise that he rejects their work completely, arguing that they do not conduct objective research but merely seek to confirm their biased views in order to combat certain social injustices. This is powerfully reminiscent of Broca's unjustified criticism of his contemporary Tiedemann, which merely revealed Broca's own blinders.

Peterson's acolytes consider him a guru, a manly researcher, and a "self-help psychologist," because his writings go beyond popular science. He provides readers with guidance, with "rules for life," even acting as a moral compass: stand tall, take responsibility, stand your ground, and you'll be well on your way to success and happiness. You'll feel better and be treated with more respect than a "couch potato." None of that sounds too crazy, but again, as in the article in *ThePostOnline*, we hear a 19th-century echo: be a man, grow up, stay rational. Become your own superior self. However, this doesn't mean Peterson shies away from the public displays of emotion so popular on TV and YouTube. He was once moved to tears after a public appearance, when a young male fan told him that Peterson had saved him. Rest assured, those weren't superficial Marxist tears, but rather genuine, arch-conservative tears of joy squeezed by Peterson's own efforts from the oldest parts of his brain.

It cannot be denied that Peterson touches a sore spot, as he himself has observed, especially among young, "white" men who feel threatened. Many such men hold right-wing, sometimes extreme right-wing, views. They feel their position and opportunities are endangered by people of color, white women, and even Jews, who, as always, are allegedly behind the conspiracy against them. For instance, Jews are said to encourage women to pursue higher education so that

fewer “Christian whites” will be born, because highly educated women often want far fewer children than a priest would have deemed desirable just half a century ago.

Peterson claims to have no link whatsoever to the alt-right movement and other far-right groups, but he does speak at their gatherings. In any case, his message goes down well with them.

I am a great admirer of Darwin and, strongly influenced by him and neo-Darwinists, I look at the everyday world around me from an “evolutionary” perspective. At the same time, I realize that a distorted version of evolutionary theory has been wielded in harmful ways in the past, both by Social Darwinists such as Herbert Spencer and much later by the Nazis. Even the great animal observer Konrad Lorenz, an Austrian, contributed to the design of racial laws in Nazi Germany. Lorenz had made the original discovery that goslings, as soon as they hatch, follow the first moving thing they see, even if it’s the jackboot of a highly educated Nazi and not their mother. It is of the utmost importance to recognize the difference between a jackboot and your mother.