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## Why Do Men Kill? The Construction of Masculinity on the Basis of Hunting Practices<sup>1</sup>

[...] I don't hunt secretly, I do it utterly officially. When somebody asks me, I always say that I go hunting with my friends, with my sons – because they do hunt, with my son-in-law, and with my dog. Sometimes my sons give me the lead to keep, sometimes they give me the rifle.

Bronisław Komorowski,  
President of the Republic of Poland, 6 August 2014

The meaning of hunting, as ascribed by its participants, is understood as a service to the nation or the society, or as a business. Hunters further understand it as a form of entertainment, sport, and a hobby. The objection against giving hunting a practical dimension and associating it with personal advantages is an element of the habitus of hunters – a commitment aimed at protecting this practice against social criticism. It is for this reason that the persuasive dimension of the concealment of the very killing of animals in the name of “higher” values and goals is so important in this group's narrations. The meanings around which the hunting culture is shaped are marked by a strong involvement of its participants and development of their subject positions, while in the interactive dimension they create a strong opposition between the exclusive world of hunters and the non-hunting part of society. Such a closing of the circle of those admitted to participation in hunting increases the system of the social intragroup control and develops strong bonds (Rancew-Sikora 2009, p. 47).

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<sup>1</sup> I am conscious that the practice extends beyond practices related to the killing of animals. Nevertheless, in the context of the construction of the identity of hunters I take the position that hunting and preparations to hunting are central representations for the construction of subject positions.

## Beginnings

In anthropological analyses of the development of human species identity, manners of food acquisition are a significant element of the evolutionary and cultural processes. Anthropogenesis indicates that the ability of group hunting was a trait marking our predecessors – hominids (Konarzewski 2005, p. 21). The consumption of meat had a decisive impact on the development of the brain, and this correlation promoted the development of predatory traits and the improvement of hunting techniques. The genetic memory about the fact that people are predators has survived until our own times, as best illustrated by an encounter, in non-in-vivo conditions, with a non-human animal, which, on seeing us, decides to run away, sensing a lethal threat (Konarzewski 2005, p. 68). A distinctive marker is the genderisation of relations between the primeval human communities. According to a hunting hypothesis, it consisted in the development of strong and long-lasting male groups. Gender-based division of labour was a decisive factor behind the negligible participation of the female population in hunts (Buss 1999).

We all know the famous scene from Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*, in which a primitive man while playing with a bone he had found discovers that it can be used as a tool to take other beings' life. This cultural myth very clearly reflects the spirit of Darwinism, fighting, and rivalry as the main elements of natural selection. For thousands of years, people have been shaping their symbolic and material world by creating a barrier between human and non-human, man and animal, and by developing two separate metaphysical orders, the transgression of which was reserved to a narrow elite. Hunts and religious rituals formed a bridge between the *sacred* and the *profane* and enabled a demonstration of one's ideological superiority. An anthropological hypothesis provides that anthropomorphic thinking was a significant condition of the development of the ability to hunt (Mithen 1996). Steven Mithen believes that anthropomorphism allowed people to be able to "feel" animals' behaviour and to understand them. This development of perception made it possible to devise technologies enabling an embodiment of anthropomorphic comparisons and the construction of tools facilitating the killing of animals. This mechanism has survived until today, becoming an invisible obviousness of perceiving animals as species having collective interests, and individual animals as ones gifted with psychism and human affections. Paradoxically, the same process has allowed us to develop mutual understanding and empathy. The reflexive consciousness developed in this way made it possible to attribute motives and strategy of action to animals, and, as a feedback, allowed a better insight into our own "selves" (Serpell 1996).

## The meaning of hunting

In her comparative analysis of a single act of killing placed in the context of structures of the modern world, Dorota Rancew-Sikora mentions the following meanings of hunting:

### Hunting as a pastime

In today's daily practices, in particular in those related to the reproduction of material commodities, the dimension of heroism has been lost for the benefit of assertiveness and passive work ethos. An expression of this longing is the hunting community's internal discussions concerning the definition of the real hunt. In this discourse, the hunting ethos comprises satisfaction, individualism of experience, and noble care for the preservation of the cultural heritage. Hunting is considered to be a collective and individual process of the development of one's virtues: patience, care, respect, strength, and courage. Understood in this way, hunting would be a practice compensating for the direct and comprehensive dimension of the action related to the acquisition of food and domination, which has been lost in consumerism (Rancew-Sikora 2009, pp. 61–63). Nevertheless, we shall not find in hunting a critique or a refusal of the organisation of the world based on the capitalist order. Rather, the difference is built as a part of the relation of superiority over non-hunters. In turn, Pierre Bourdieu stresses the material dimension of positioning the hunting community as a group attracting individuals, in which he observed the domination of economic capital over cultural capital, and for whom participation in the elite community gives the sense of social advancement (Bourdieu 2005, pp. 449–450).

### Individual emotions as a hunting trophy

As results from a review of sociological literature concerning the ways in which people experience an activity in which they are deeply involved, a considerable share of the interpretation of the ways in which such activities are experienced is shaped outside of one's consciousness, through a cultural training of how we should experience them. In the hunting discourse, ennobled norms of involvement in a hunt include the search for risk and adrenaline being a consequence of the effort made in their execution (Rancew-Sikora 2009, pp. 63–65). In their statements and recollections, hunters very often describe hunting as an internal emotional experience. The emotions mentioned in hunting stories most often concern the aestheticization of the hunting experience, and avoid the level of empathic compassion.

## Hunting as killing

Hunting as a practice aimed at the taking of an animal's life is maintained through the internalization of the act of domination over the prey through the readiness to use violence. Power is represented as one's readiness to use violence. Domination and its collective gratification in the hunting community are related to being granted access to weapons. The acquisition of weapons fosters the need to search for possibilities of their testing (Rancew-Sikora 2009, pp. 65–66). Weapons as tools designed to kill facilitate the adoption of an outlook that is mediated and delineates the border between the human and the animal worlds. The trajectory hunter-weapon-vision-object is subject to the embodiment and spatial setting of sensations and emotions related to the appearance of an animal on the horizon of events. The ownership of a weapon constructs the horizon of perceiving animals as bodies ready to submit to domination. In this approach, one's gaze via a hunting weapon becomes an instrument driving animals away from the observing object, and the very act of killing undergoes a cutting and defragmenting of the cause and effect relationship into separate segments of the cognitive, aesthetic, and moral order. The power of vision is strengthened by technology (regular binoculars, night vision binoculars, rifle scopes, rangefinders, observation telescopes, collimators) in the visual culture and the industrialization of the sense of vision. Hunting technologies allow one's vision to be single, neutral, isolated, and disembodied. The thus-created distance enables one to "freeze" the observed animals and to confirm the observer's separation from the observed. The thus-established distance and power are some of the elements of the vision of a voyeur, highlighting power, and the victimisation of the animal reduced to the role of an object. The subjugated animals become embodiments of the triumph of men's observation, as represented in the confirmation of the optical truth. John Urry and Phillip Macnaghten point out that for nature to become attractive to people, it needs to be subjugated, which in turn makes us turn attention to the "imperiousness" of the hunter's gaze (Macnaghten, Urry 1999). Therefore, the observing party's participation in the picture of the animal's "artefact" becomes possible when the experience is framed in the pleasure drawn from identifying oneself with the vision (the power of the look) and from the observation of subjugation. Jacques Derrida, referring to Lacan, calls this experience narcissism: man's subjectification takes place through the gazing into the mirror of one's own construction of nature.

In the hunting discourse, the border is strengthened through the shifting of the meanings of killing and the use of euphemisms such as "harvest", "punish", "account for", "bring to book", while the killed animals are called "quarry" or "game" (Macnaghten, Urry 1999). James Serpell calls this phenomenon detachment. It consists in the depersonalisation of the opponent and describing them as an artefact. Killing undergoes defragmentation and the meaning of taking a life of another being undergoes naturalisation. Animals' suffering becomes commercial (neutral from the moral point of view), indifferent and banal (Serpell 1996). This

process is an important area in the socialisation of hunting, and it is accompanied by initiation rituals aimed at transforming the experience of killing into an activity the sense of which is built by "higher" cultural values not simply related to taking a life. The very course of hunting does not include sense-creating elements that would allow an explanation of the meaning of hunting. The hunting culture prepares discursive meanings of hunting. Actors engaged in hunting bring along rather than actively give sense to killing, stepping beyond what actually takes place. Hunting culture is aimed at the socialisation of the hunter by identifying individuals with the goals and norms of the group that develops their own moral community. In some cases, such familiarisation with death leads to the drawing of satisfaction from killing and an addiction to experiencing the accompanying emotions, a hunger for them. The limitation of the rationality of the hunter's choice and activity in the situation of a hunt, which is to result in the killing of the prey, is an implication of the internalization of the internal group goals. Although not having to shoot, the hunters staying on the hunting grounds find themselves in a situation marked by a narrowed horizon of events. It includes their belonging to the group of hunters, preparations for the hunt, group pressure, possession of a weapon with live ammunition, hunting authorisation, a firearm's licence, and a meeting with the hunted animal (Serpell 1996). In this sense, being aware of the sense of hunting is of no importance for its efficient execution. In the cultural understanding of hunting, stark violence is not involved when a living being is killed, because the act is socially approved and accepted by the group. Violence addressed to animals does not break the moral order – rather, it expresses cultural values, and strengthens and implements them. In a sense, in the case of hunting and the accompanying culture and traditions, we can talk about the carnivalization of killing. Just like the current discussion on ritual slaughter and its defence in the name of tradition and religion, hunting follows the same paths while searching for its own explanation and justification.

### Love of animals and the execution of the masculine identity

How can we explain the combination of authentic love of animals declared by hunters and their killing – what is this ambivalence about? According to Brian Luke, in the hunting discourse the act of hunting and "winning" an animal is expressed in the narration called the erotics of rape, which consists in winning the object of sexual desire. Luke's research demonstrates that the most valuable animals for hunters are those which are considered to be exceptionally beautiful, which become symbols of prestige and satisfaction (Luke 1998, p. 627). During a hunt, the hunter comes in intimate contact with their prey, which is described by words such as admiration, fascination, veneration, and excitement. The motif of death and love strongly present in our culture through Christianity, Shakespeare and romanticism, boiled down to the phrase "I love you, I want to commit a suicide with you", while modernity – including psychoanalysis – allowed the

transformation of the phrase into “I love you – I want to kill you”. Luke describes hunting as a romance which can be fulfilled through a total act of domination and power over the body of the desired animal. Hunters’ descriptions of hunting are dominated by the need of experiencing strong emotions and excitement, and this is why the environment of hunters value so much the development of one’s individual and diverse forms of animal killing – they want to maintain the maximum level of emotions (which in the course of time become routine) for example by collecting different weapons and searching for various animal species to hunt. Hence, we are dealing with a quasi-erotic experience of love as possession and capture.

The very course of a hunt reproduces the dynamics of mating between the hunter and their prey. The careful preparation for hunting, the use of decoys designed to stir the animals’ sexuality, spraying scents, or the simulation of mating sounds, intensifies the development of an intimate relation between the hunter and the animal. Sometimes the emotions accompanying such a situation may lead to a hunter refraining from the killing of their prey. Nevertheless, such behaviour is often only tantamount to postponing the killing and saving the shot for later. In this way, one may prolong the satisfaction and pleasure drawn from hunting. What counts, is the pleasure of contemplating the forest and experiencing the non-human world. The beauty of animals is described through anthropomorphisms, in which animals take a feminised form. In this sense, metaphors of anthropomorphised animals can be interpreted both ways – as animals concealing women, or as women concealing animals. In hunters’ tales, the aesthetics of nature creates a tension between the stage of shooting at the animal, when sensations provide ambivalently experienced pleasure, and the stage following the taking of life, when the agony and the display of trophies are aesthetised by the turpistic<sup>2</sup> affirmation of the realism of the dead bodies. This attitude strongly manifests itself in the hunters’ tendency to photograph themselves next to the killed animals and in the display of trophies. This appropriation is tantamount to subjecting sensory experience to the hegemony of visibility, which transforms nature into a theatre performance. Camille Paglia wrote about it in the following way: “There is, I must insist, nothing beautiful in nature. Nature is a primal power, coarse and turbulent. Beauty is our weapon against nature... Beauty halts and freezes the melting flux of nature” (Macnaghten, Urry 1999). When adopting the habitus of the hunting culture, one acquires the ability to separate the act of killing an animal from the fabrication of corpses; this is achieved by including the nobility ethos in the discourse and comparing trophies to the tradition of the decoration of castle or hunting halls. The prey is described as beautiful, charming, delicate or innocent. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer described the process of the cultural distortion of the animal and the feminisation of its nature to beauty as follows: “Yet behind men’s admiration for beauty lurks always the ringing laughter, the boundless scorn, the barbaric obscenity vented by potency on impotence:, with which it

<sup>2</sup> The word “turpistic” refers to the trend in Polish poetry (in particular popular in the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century) focusing on ugliness, decay, and death.

numbs the secret fear that it is itself enslaved to impotence, to death, to nature" (Horkheimer, Adorno 2002, p. 207).

Hunters also enjoy talking about their hunts, and write and publish recollections in which they often describe the course of a hunt in great detail. In psychoanalysis, the very act of killing an animal to satisfy one's desire is referred to as necrophilia. Since only the killing of an animal allows one to come close to them, touch them, and feel their smell, hunters as a part of the hunting initiation ritual smear their forehead with the animal's blood. What is also important is the subsequent fetishisation of the animals' body through taxidermy and trophies. The preparation of dishes from the killed animals also steps a lot beyond the very process of eating meat and is treated as a feast and presentation of a carefully prepared body.

Additionally, Rancew-Sikora indicates that for men, hunting makes a great excuse for dates and being unfaithful to their partners as well as highlighting their masculinity, increasing their attractiveness through the use of weapons and participation in a successful hunt. "We hunt easy chicks by picking them up, stalking, approaching with a vehicle (best with a luxury car) and using decoys (expensive gifts). Members of our hunting club cannot afford the last two methods. However, they all talk about their broad range of female trophies. Some only talk about it, others actually do have it" (Czekała 1993, p. 5). In some statements, hunters refer to sex explicitly: "killing during hunting is like an orgasm during sex", "we may resign from hunting, but this is equally as unnatural, undesirable and absurd as a resignation from sex". Naturalisation of hunting as a symptom of our instincts and nature is aimed at crossing the moral space, just like naturalization of sex is sometimes used as a justification of acts of violence against women. Hunts very often take place in hermetic male groups isolated from their families and dear ones, and such a context fosters the atmosphere of breaking rules and norms. Nevertheless, it should be stressed that there are also women hunters: their share in the community of hunters amounts to 1% to 4%<sup>3</sup>.

In patriarchal cultures, the drive to satisfy all one's needs through domination and violence is characteristic of men. Often, acts of violence are accompanied by the strategy of placing responsibility on the victim. Similarly to hunts, although it is the hunter who initiates the violence, the emerging narration discusses threats from the animals as well as their blame, understood for example as damaging agricultural crops and causing losses in forests. Rancew-Sikora's analyses underline that sexual metaphors are so strong in the hunting discourse that they go far beyond the linguistic structure, merging with the hunting experience. In this approach, hunting is a strong factor for the construction of the masculine gender identity. This effect is also amplified by the very co-presence of hunters focused on rivalling each other for trophies in a strong masculine group. The group supports their mutual conviction of heroism, nobility and pride coming from the act of killing (Rancew-Sikora 2009, pp. 69–73).

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<sup>3</sup> Data concerning women's participation in hunting in Europe.



## Selected results of surveys concerning the attitudes of Polish hunters

It results from Rancew-Sikora's research that hunting is most often a tradition inherited within the family (52%). In terms of pleasure resulting from hunting, the majority of respondents declared visual pleasure connected with approaching and observing the prey (69%). In turn, 90% of respondents admitted a strong need of the reification of hunting and preserving dead animal bodies in the form of trophies (Rancew-Sikora 2009, p. 158). The social stratification of the group under study indicated that it was predominantly the elite of the *Polski Związek Łowiecki* (Polish Hunting Association) who decided to participate in the study. On the basis of the thus-identified population, the researcher adopted a hypothesis on the existence of "the highest degree of identification with the community norms and values" (Rancew-Sikora 2009, p. 157).

The correlation of many opinions concerning hunting with the belief that "only real men are able to hunt" indicates a strong identification of hunting with masculinity. The variable concerning the masculine nature of hunting emerged in cultural and biological explanations. Hunting is a masculine game. The belief that hunting is a masculine practice positively correlated with the cultural justification of hunting as a tradition and the deterministic explanation of hunting as an expression of the real nature of man as a predator. As a part of the historical policy of the Polish Hunting Association (PHA), the culture of nobility has been traditionally reinterpreted. The myth of the nobility ethos as nurturing the national spirit is constructed. The history of hunting becomes a tale about aristocracy, great Polish rulers and noblemen devoting themselves to heroic confrontations with nature. An important role in the recovery of traditions is played by nationalism – historical facts are combined to make a tale, which selects material in a grossly selective manner. "The renewal of the traditions of the Polish higher classes is often marked by attempts at a reconstruction [from nothing]" (Rancew-Sikora 2009, p. 168).

The gender of hunting emerged in practices labelling masculinity as a fighting instinct, rivalry, the stressing of the significance of the ownership of weapons, elite practice, and the attachment to responsibility and obedience to the rules. In their community, hunters also display a contemptuous attitude to those among them who see hunting as a means of the acquisition of food, calling them "meaters". Rivalry in hunting also excludes attempts at the professionalization of the practice – what counts is the development of individual, unique killing methods that may become the content for the building of one's own narrations and identities.

The map of meanings given to hunting, developed on the basis of the personal representations of the sense of hunting specified by the hunters, spreads between satisfaction, a pastime and a hobby, raising one's social status, and the implementation of the patriarchal model of masculinity. Nevertheless, the hunt-



ers' statements also express their strong need of highlighting the acceptance of the presence of women in this group, which is related to their desire to disenchant the belief about the elite masculine nature of hunting and to stress its egalitarianism. The presence of women positively correlated with the construction of the historical hunting policy.

Factor analysis considerably confirmed the reliability of the correlation of hunting with the masculine nature of the activity, as confirmed by the number of the animals killed in the hunter's career and the pleasure drawn from the risk and danger. An analysis of the cohesion of the ideology of the Polish hunting discourse confirmed its consistence with the adoption of the attitude of nature lovers by some of the hunters. Ideologically correct was also the stressing of the presence of women in hunting, although in this case the actual 3% share of women in hunts drastically falsified the above declaration. Cohesion with the ideology of the Polish Hunting Association was also manifested in the explanations concerning the satisfaction drawn from hunting as related to a close contact with the beauty of nature and observation of animals, and not the very effect of hunting. Inconsistence with PHA ideology was, however, discovered in the setting of the acknowledgement of the presence and importance of women in the group of hunters together with the valuation and acceptance of the statement that "my weapon is the most important thing that I own". In turn, the masculine nature of hunting revealed in the study displayed inconsistency with the PHA ideology of animal protection and hunt management. The respondents stressed the importance of the ownership of weapons and understood nature in the strongly masculinized perspective of fighting and rivalry. The responses of the 21% of respondents who agreed with the statement that nature was most important for them included a negative explanation of a disillusionment with society built on cultural justifications for the benefit of the understanding of the world as a brutal, masculine rivalry. In this group, as many as 25% of respondents chose the option "hard to say" when answering the question of what is more important in life: nature or people. The majority of subjects also declared a strong reluctance towards their possible resignation from hunting, stressing the importance of the practice for the construction of their identity.

The results of Rancew-Sikora's research confirmed the syndrome of masculine domination described by Bourdieu. The hunting discourse naturalises social inequalities and the gender-based division of labour, relating them to biological explanations of differences in body biology and the essentialisation of mental differences (Bourdieu 2004).

As for social stratification, Rancew-Sikora's research showed a relation between a high social position of older poorly educated male hunters and the identification of hunting with masculinity. The ideological linking of hunting with social advancement was related to historical politics. In this perspective, hunting as a practice is identified with the nobility culture. Such a narration was often found in nationalism-coloured attitudes.

## Summary

It results from the present review of hunting motivations that the strongest motives are social advancement and its confirmation by the participation in an elite community and the development of the traditionally understood masculine identity. In hunting, masculinity appears as an archetype of heroism and strength. Men are identified with a propensity to use violence – and it is them who are entitled to own and use weapons. Equally important in hunting is the development of the opposition of the meanings of animal-man, nature-culture. This takes place both via stepping beyond the oppositions in the act of killing, and in the consolidation of the oppositions at the subsequent stages of the symbolic and material transformation of the animal field. In turn, in the area of the sexual identity in hunting discourse, one may notice the heterosexual model of masculinity, in which nature takes a feminized and rather passive role. In this approach, hunting becomes an act of domination and the building of a patriarchal order. The killing of prey takes place despite a refusal and a life-and-death fight of the animal. Hunting has become synonymous with the patriarchal image of masculinity as stark violence, strength, power, and subjugation. In the current transformations of the perception of the relation between people and animals, and culture and nature, the maintained justification behind the existence of this practice takes the form of an ideological fight for the keeping of the imagined tradition and becomes a quasi-religious cult of patriarchy and masculinity; hence, there are so many references to history and the Roman Catholic religion in the hunting discourse. Anne McClintock (1995) describes this appropriation as the “erotics of ravishment”, as a part of which the white man conquered nature and constructed the conquered bodies in the category of the radical otherness of the animal. According to Rancew-Sikora, the pleasure experienced during hunting takes the form of the enjoyment of ignoring a refusal. The above conclusions are similar to analyses carried out by Donna Haraway (1991, pp. 183–201), according to whom nature and animals always appear as the primary matrix of locating a group of beings outside the limits of the social, political, and moral. The system of exclusions of nature-animal-species-race-gender disguised social constructs to appear as biological determinism, taking away the possibility of rebellion and language from the thus-cut social actors and transforming them into biological monades.

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### Summary

#### *Why Do Men Kill? The Construction of Masculinity on the Basis of Hunting Practices*

This article is an exploration of the ways in which discourses of hunting structure the norms of hegemonic masculinity: how these kinds of practices help shape, reinforce and validate the constructions of the dominant version of masculinity.

### Keywords

masculinity, hunting, identity, violence, aggression

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