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Youthful struggles and time lags in the forested Belarusian/Polish borderland

The Bialowieza Forest's most frequently associated trait is its primeval character. Roots of alders reach their way out of rust colored bogs. Towering spruce grow to their upper height limit to create perches for eagle owls or three-toed woodpeckers, or splay as huge root plates next to majestic oaks. The preeminent symbol of the forest, the European bison, belongs to this portrait of ancient woodland. Its restitution from near extinction after WWI created a reverential status for the relict ungulate and its original forest dwelling in the Bialowieza Forest. Imagining this forest as a historic, human collaboration with "primeval" nature is part of the attraction in the present cultural climate where the forest, partially protected as a national park in northeastern Poland, draws up to 200,000 tourists per year and has three scientific research institutions studying its functions.

The primeval past may dominate the public image of the forest, but another more recent past figures prominently in the everyday life of the forests' human communities, the communist past. Biologists and nature activists complain about the time-lag, as if the democratic reforms of 1989 had not occurred in this part of Poland, in the northeastern corner of the country on the border with Belarus. This paper explores how the forest serves as a boundary object for competing claims about freedom and democracy. I look at how pristine nature came to symbolize anti-regime organizing prior to 1989 and how the use of the forest today creates a space of gravity and play when biologists and forest activists relate to the forest. Discourses about Belarus and the forest shape the contours

on which reform is talked about. If the Polish side of the forest resembles the pre-1989 past and Belarus even more so, then this border and the materiality of the forest become critical nodes for re-imagining the pre-reform era of 1989 as a current fight with “communist-like” foresters who are destroying pristine nature.

Reform and the Primeval Forest

Although institutional reforms have enabled the growth of internationally recognized scientific research stations, the expansion of the Bialowieza National Park, with an accompanying booming ecotourist industry, biologists and nature activists point to the ways that the regional culture resembles the pre-reform era. This claim is wrapped up in associations with neighboring dictatorial Belarus, a country containing the other half of the ancient woodland, as well as what many west European governments have claimed is the last dictatorship in Europe. Scientists and nature activists speak of local culture not as customs and language, but rather point to cronyism, a passive acceptance of regional local authorities, and a blind eye to corruption. In Belarus all of the forest is protected as a national park and yet sawmills operate within the park boundaries. The Belarusian government under third term President, Alexander Lukashenko, frequently jailed and beat opposition journalists and candidates during his reelection bids.

For Polish biologists and nature activists communist-like Belarus seeps across the forested border. Local residents watch Belarusian TV, boast about Belarus’ great motorways, and will tell you that all governments are hungry for power, Lukashenko no more so. Local people’s embrace of things Belarusian and their approval of logging in the Polish forest, where only 18% of the forest is protected as a national park free from logging (39 sq miles), enables biologists and nature activists to relive their youthful

struggles of the 1980s when they fought against the Polish communist system.

Throughout the socialist era in Poland, biologists found a way to critique the regime and act with a degree of independence through their activities cataloguing nature. Cataloguing populations of birds or plants, for instance, did not require expensive equipment or research stations, but would lead to the establishment of a national biology, outside the reach of communist authorities. Many young biologists and amateur naturalists at that time viewed themselves as altruists for the nation, seeking not their own careers or glory, but rather the kind of mass social responsibility that Solidarity advocated. Independent biology could be accomplished by escaping urban centers of learning in Poznan, Wroclaw, Krakow and Warsaw and heading to the Polish “wild east.”

The eastern part of post war Poland contained nature no longer found in much of Europe and populations of people who once composed a multi-ethnic pre-war Poland, but were now tiny minorities, such as Belarusians, Ukrainians, Tartar Muslims and Lithuanians. The Polish socialist state neglected to develop these borderlands regions with infrastructure and factories and officially ignored ethnic differences, stating that people who felt closer to an ‘eastern’ kin could immigrate to the Soviet Union if they did not want to be Polish. For biologists this mix of ‘wild nature’ and ‘relic peoples’ of the former Poland enticed them to protect nature and enjoy the cultural differences of the internal borders of Poland at the Soviet Union.

In Bialowieza this took on a specific valence. For hundreds of years the forest had been protected by Lithuanian Dukes, Polish Kings and Russian Czars as a hunting preserve, sparing the forest from clearing and timbering. In the nineteenth century the Czars established a bureaucratic center and a 120 room palace in the village of

Bialowieza. Over the nineteenth century and into the twentieth Czarist culture influenced the local climate, much to the resentment of Polish elites who had been banned from the forest. German occupying forces began logging the forest for the first time in the forest's history, laying the infrastructure for further commercial logging. When Poland regained its independence in 1918 Polish foresters spared no efforts in symbolically claiming Bialowieza. They set up headquarters for Polish State Forestry (Lasy Panstwowe) to log the forest and hired ethnic Poles from outside the region, due to a mistrust of the local Russified population and Boleshevik agitators recruiting timber workers. Polish biologists first appeared at that time. Moved by the unprecedented damage of WWI, biologists set up The Bialowieza National Park, a small reserve in a forest that measured 19 square miles. Following WWII the forest was divided between the Soviet Union and Poland, today Belarus and Poland with logging intensifying after 1989.

Due to a build-up of institutional interest over the course of the twentieth century scientists have had a long presence in Bialowieza.¹ In the early 1980s however many young scientists arrived freshly minted from the struggles in the cities, when Solidarity was at its peak and martial law shut down much of that organization's activities. What these scientists shared was an opposition to the gross pollution of Communist modernity and the hope that they could guide society towards a democratic and ecological future (Hicks 1996, Wilson 2005).² Pristine nature, and the scientific study of it, symbolized a source of independence from the Communist State (Tickle and Welsh 1998). Generally

¹ Foresters and timber workers far outnumber scientists in the region. State forestry though has downsized, mechanized and privatized many of its operations that kept so many people employed during the socialist period. Ethnic Polish foresters dominate the forestry elite, but claim to speak in the name of a downtrodden Belarusian minority population.

² For anti-communist environmental organizing in Lithuania, Ukraine and Russia see Dawson (1996), for Hungary and Russia, Pickvance (1998), for independent activism in the wake of the Chernobyl incident, see Nahaylo (1999). Steve Yearley writes that environmental movements in late state socialist societies were associated with the oppositionist movements of the 1980s (1991:1).

speaking, these biologists thought they could continue the strengths of anti-communist organizing, which in Poland, brought together workers and intellectuals. Thus, these scientists viewed nature in the Polish east as something that Communist modernity had not destroyed nor contaminated. And when the democratic changes of 1989 swept the nation in exciting and dramatic reforms, scientists and nature lovers spared no time in garnering the support to double the size of the national park, which they successfully accomplished in 1996. Throughout the early 1990s They formed local democratic presses, wrote to then President Lech Walesa deriding the severity of the local democratic situation, and insisted that forest protection against logging was equal to enlightening the local population about democracy. These activist/scientists claimed that the region's ethnic Belarusian minority overidentified with the former Communist system.

Biologists drew attention to local people's refusal to dismantle a monument to the heroes of socialism, which stood in front of the Orthodox Church. Locals also declined suggestions by biologists to change the name of their main street, named after a local general who fought with the Bolsheviks in the Russian revolution. Most locals resented the idea of an expanded national park that would cover the entire forest. Scientists and a newly arrived, yet small, group of nature activists, drew an association between logging the forest and communist-style authoritarian tactics of foresters. Foresters (most of who were Polish Catholic professionals who moved to Bialowieza for jobs) kept the forest and its 'downtrodden, passive Belarusian minority' in a retarded stage of history, or so scientists and nature activists claimed.

The local minority population was seen by biologists as historically conditioned to accept authoritarian power and thus forester's control over the forest (i.e. logging).

Such attitudes emphasized the moral superiority of biologists as they connected themselves with science and forest protection, with democracy and pristine nature. What they were fighting was a black and white idea of corruption, rather than the new capitalism, which was responsible for the intensification of logging. For scientists and nature activists communist-style corruption continues to be particularly severe in the Bialowieza region. The combination of a Russified minority culture in combination with the communist-like institutional practices of foresters (identified as selling timber illegally, manipulating locals with propaganda against the nature conservationists, and giving favors to politicians for voting against nature protection measures) prevents the forest from being adequately protected.

Foresters see themselves as serving an important social role and believe that their position of power helps the minority population build a strong democratic base that can successfully resist the international bullying that occurs by nature conservation forces. Foresters' accuse nature activists and biologists of being undemocratic and use the fact that all of the Belarusian forest is a national park as evidence of forces that are opposed to the people's will.

What is significant about the history of biologists in this case is that ecological consciousness arose not as an anti-capitalist movement, as it did in many other parts of Europe, the U.S., Canada and elsewhere, but as an anti-communist movement. Biologists and activists placed great faith in the power of the moral individual to advance Polish society against the polluting and corrupting excesses of the communist system. Well into the twentieth anniversary of free elections in Poland, many biologists and nature activists felt that they were still fighting communism.

Time Lags

For a number of reasons the trope of backwardness has troubled post-socialist scholars (Kaneff 1996, Hann 1998, 2006, Rausing 2004, Berdahl, Bunzl and Lampland 2003). They caution that reifying the concept of backwardness gives way to a civilizational hierarchy where the west dominates (Hann 1998). And yet many of these scholars have written about how informants complain about backwardness; that the long transition with its ensuing hardships for the average citizen of the post-socialist world is more the norm than a point towards which citizens believe they will ever attain. The cultural behaviors and patterns of people who are now a generation out of the socialist world continue to thwart the intended logic of legislative or economic changes so that progress looks slow. Maria Todorova (2005) focuses on lag and lack in the Balkans going back centuries, especially in regards to nationalism. Halpern and Kideckel's now classic 1983 article have pointed out that the past in the present is the slowness of development. The absence of a middle class, a large rural population, and corrupt political institutions formed the basis for Eastern and Central Europe's peripheral status. Their survey of the literature viewed time lags as something frustrating and even depressing.

Svetlana Boym (2001) has created groundbreaking scholarship that most illuminates how the time lag occurring in the Bialowieza forest might generate a new reality vis-à-vis her work on nostalgia in East Central Europe. Boym has positioned herself to think from the geography of Eastern and Central Europe outward toward an imagined Europe. In her exploration of nostalgia, "marginal" Europeans, meaning the citizens of East-Central Europe, are obsessed with borders. A Europe without borders

threatens their old-fashioned fantasies about an ideal and unobtainable future in the West.³ The proverbial iron curtain that separated East and West served a melancholic romance. “The border does not have to be merely a marker of division,” she writes; “The border is a site of encounter” (2001:241). And as such, people from “East” and “West” formerly found themselves in their alter egos. The imagined Western “rational” man needed the soulful feminized East with her suffering intact. An important part of the love affair for those trapped in the East was the power and freedom they dreamed about if they could only acquire the means to purchase more items signifying comfort and status. Obtaining material comfort would not diminish their souls as it had in the West.⁴

I would take this one step further to argue that Polish biologists and nature activists view themselves as the rational half of the geographic pair sharing the forest, saving their Belarusian neighbors (as well as the local inhabitants of Bialowieza) from outdated authoritarianism. But as they do so they also know that shadow of the west hangs over them and that they are not yet western in terms of material wealth and democratic institutions. For intellectuals, Boym further argues, the desire for the socialist past lies in the purity of their youthful struggles when the border was guarded by Soviet tanks.⁵ This has its own cultural variant in Bialowieza. The result of border nostalgia in

³ Chakrabarty (2000) similarly has called for the need to provincialize Europe and decenter its logic by producing more narratives of center and periphery from the locus of other centers in the world.

⁴ These statements echo nineteenth century Slavophile writers, who proposed the notion that Russia was spiritually superior to a tired, decadent Europe. Slavophiles on both the right and left were determined to protect what they believed were intrinsic Russian culture characteristics. The Orthodox Church was of much more importance to them than the state, and peasants served as agents of spiritual redemption and a bulwark against Europeanization. The Slavophiles virulently attacked Poles. According to Iurii F. Samarin, Poland was transformed into a "sharp wedge driven by Latinism" into the very heart of the Slavonic soul with the aim of "splitting it into fragments." Nikolai Ia. Danilevsky, the late Slavophile, dubbed Poland the "Jesuitical gentry state of Poland" and the "Judas of Slavdom." Reassessment of the Relationship: Polish History and the Polish Question in the Imperial Duma Journal article by Dmitry Shlapentokh; East European Quarterly, Vol. 33, 1999

⁵ In another body of literature dealing with borders of the former Soviet-sphere countries, borders have been experienced as acutely repressive (Skultans 1998, Smith 1998)

the Bialowieza Forest is a type of border confusion, where the forest serves as a boundary object (Bowker and Star 2000) mediating historic social and class relations.

When I say that the forest is a boundary object mediating nostalgia, I mean that biologists might argue with foresters over what kind of forest this (Europe's last old growth forest, or a well managed commercial forest) and how it should be cared for. Yet, the forest in the general sense is consciously and unconsciously juggled by these groups who weld the forest together in an association with things Belarusian.⁶

As far as the forest can "act" to produce this confusion, I go only so far as saying that the forest has a shape and form that is unlike a border at a river crossing, where you can see the other side, or a mountain pass with its "demarcated" ridge.⁷ The Bialowieza Forest is a tangled, overgrown barrier and enabler between Poland and Belarus, a space of dense cover where a two-meter high fence, erected in 1981 during the height of Solidarity and the Cold War, blocks the movement of people and large mammals. The shape and form of the forest is never outside of deeply held cultural imaginings about the forest, many of them nationalist in origin (Schama 1995, Franklin 2001), and many of them shared with other cultural traditions in Europe (Harrison 1992). Bialowieza is Europe's "last lowland old growth forest" situated next to "Europe's last dictator," and although the forest does not act, actors use the forest to play out the past.

A space of gravity and play.

Pawel, a 46 year old forest ecologist, has been trying to convince me for years that conservation politics in Poland are not like those in other parts of the world. For Pawel,

⁶ For a more detailed description of Polish foresters' associations of the forest with Belarus see Blavascunas (2008).

⁷ Non-human nature as an actor co-producing our cultural worlds has been a new and growing theme amongst scholars discussing the ontology of nature and the accuracy of science in describing reality. See Callon (1986), Haraway (1991), Latour (2004), Wolfe (2003), Derrida (2003).

American scholarly debates about conservation, political-economy and stakeholders are familiar. When I met him he had already spent time in academic communities in up-state New York during a post-doctoral exchange, and after participating in conservation dialogues with colleagues from many natural and social science disciplines he had little tolerance for what he called “Marxist” narratives that privileged poor uneducated stakeholders over educated conservationists. Society, especially Polish society, needed elites formed through Polish historical experience and yet these elites were more qualified if they gained an “independent” perspective through contact with the West, as he did. Additionally, Bialowieza, was not the third-world, or an American context. There were no “tribals” who traditionally used land and Poland didn’t have the resources or the expertise of the US National Park system. Americans and Western scholars in general, he argued, had no room for attentiveness to this East European specificity in their academic analyses. His involvement in the campaign for an expanded Bialowieza National Park only galvanized his approach to fighting communist-like foresters through democratic approaches. He told me:

“My hypothesis is that our campaign has disturbed the comfort of the last totalitarian organization in this country. We dared to question the appropriateness of their (foresters’) approach in the most important forest. We hit the nerve that had never been hit so far. Of course, they could deal with this much more wisely, just to give up in an elegant way or to take over the conservation initiative, applying for the park extension and to win a great public support and admiration. But as other totalitarian organizations not used to dealing with criticism, they went on the total defensive: denial of any mistake, questioning competence and professionalism of the opponents, ridiculing them. When you take for instance “Echa Lesne”, (Forest Echoes) the LP (*Lasy Państwowe*) official voice, you will find a striking similarity of the offensive language, rhetoric to those that you could ‘enjoy’ on the daily basis, reading the official newspapers 20 years ago about Solidarity.”

Pawel's reflections touched on a tinder box of sensitive issues in the Bialowieza forest region. Clearly what was important to Pawel was not just that the forest be protected, or that the forest was *primeval*, but that I set my analysis of forest protection in factual historical perspective where democracy could lead to accurate history and thus an accurate assessment on the uniqueness of the forest. A logged and managed forest was not a primeval forest, but the remnants of old-growth within the commercially managed forest were immeasurably valuable for the ecosystem of the Bialowieza Forest.

In my write-up, Pawel wanted me to discuss the pathologies of what he and other conservationists referred to as "psychological post-communist syndrome." That "syndrome" resounded with what might be occurring in other post-socialist countries, but more specific to this Polish and Bialowieza context, its roots lay in centuries of interactions between Poles and Russians. Foresters appeared as an absolute power for Pawel that succeeded because the "Russified" local population possessed a cultural weakness for authoritarianism. Local people supported foresters, elected them to local councils, and even though most locals no longer worked for State Forestry due to downsizing and the growth of an ecotourist economy, locals still backed foresters as a native element of their minority region. For Pawel, the Bialowieza forest region, with its prominent Orthodox population, frequently appeared more severe in this "syndrome."

Syndrome suggests a behavior that is doomed to repeat itself, implying that Bialowieza needed much stronger measures for disrupting communist-like behaviors, which Pawel's colleague Marysia agreed to in this interview:

Eunice: Do you have any vision for what Bialowieza should be like, how it should be governed to make nature protection work?

Marysia: In a bag and to the moon.

Eunice: Excuse me?

Marysia: In a bag and to the moon. Two generations must die in order to let the third generation live. This generation must be trained in the Western university to rule the country. That's the way it was in every revolution. That's the way it was for the French Revolution, in the American Revolution. The revolution will die if you don't kill the previous generations. There's a saying that God exists until the last believer lives. When you kill the last one then a new God arrives. And it's the same with the political system. If you don't teach the young how to act, how are they going to change? There's no way to do this. Die and to the moon.

There's no other solution. Afterward a new society, a democratic one will rise out of the ruins.Communism, was such that you take a folder cause your children need it in school, and you steal from the country that's stealing from you. It is normal. That's how people still act. People steal, cheat people, and nothing has changed. It started from people on the top and this is how it is today because nothing here is transparent. There's nothing like, 'you should live for the future generation'-nothing like that It was destroyed by years of communism, and before that the partitions (*referring to the Polish partitions of the late eighteenth century when Russia, Prussia, and Austro-Hungary took parts of Poland under their empires*).

Solidarity just cannot win. Solidarity completely failed. We have the Soviet Union amongst us.

For Pawel, Marysia and other biologists there was a gravity to the situation in Bialowieza. The biology of the forest mattered and due to the local political situation these scientists could not protect the forest from logging. In 2001 a law was passed in Poland (due to the agitation of State Forestry) stating that no new nature protection measures could occur on public lands unless local municipal councils agreed to them, effectively shutting down any further park expansion activities.

Unlike the communist-era, biologists and nature activists did not have to work underground to publish and organize. Western organizations and governments supported

their activities. One research institute, The Mammal's Research Institute of the Polish Academy of Sciences, received millions of Euros in grants to expand their facilities, hire foreign postdoctoral researchers, and attend conferences. World Wildlife Fund, Greenpeace, Birdlife International and other groups supplied lobbying resources to aid local nature activists. But all of these international networks only further entrenched the local political alliances. Conservation money flowed into the Bialowieza region over a twenty year period so that ecotourism took replaced the logging economy in terms of number of jobs and revenues. More than half of the locals in the Bialowieza village (population 1200) owned bed and breakfasts by 2009 and the village/town looked much more middle class than ever. Yet a core group of locals (many of whom owned and operated ecotourist businesses) were still strongly against nature conservation and the national park expansion. Biologists and nature activists watched the rise of many tourist enterprises that ironically played upon local people's association with Belarus and Russia.

For several years a themed train ride for tourists ran through the commercial forest. The tour featured a scenario where the train stops dead. "Soviets" dressed in historical costumes hijack the train and rough arm ticket holders into joining the Party, supplying membership cards with an early Soviet-era style painting of the operation's owner patting Lukashenko on the back. Nature activists deplored the train ride for emphasizing 'kitsch' in the forest rather than ecological values. Yet, nature activists also utilized and mocked Belarus in association with the forest. One forest activist joked with me that he should used move to Belarus for things were really no different there, only the prices were cheaper.

Additionally, several hotels (backed and owned by Warsaw investors) opened restaurants themed around the Russian influence, such as the ‘Czar’s Boudoir’ a night club opened from 10 pm to 4 am, and the ‘Czar’s Restaurant’, both of which catered to an elite group of urban Polish tourists. In Belarus, the situation was not much different, Belarusians also erected luxury hotels in the forest glades and brought tourists to the residence of Father Frost (Dzed Mroz).

Not only was the dire situation of real forest protection overshadowed by a cheap commercialism of the area, biologists felt that this commercialism erased attention to local democratic development. Biologists and activists, who did not always see eye to eye, spoke as though they were part of a movement. Publicly they behaved cordially with foresters and local people who continued to run local councils. Privately they spoke in a coded language, such as referring to Bialowieza as ‘little Belarus in a pill,’ and that no outsider could possibly understand what it was they were fighting.

Belarus and communism also could become vehicles for a serious kind of play where biologists and activists relived the past. When Belarusians from Belarus did come to the Polish side of the border, Polish nature activists teased but also seriously thought they might be spies. In this example, Vassilii, a forest activist from Belarus, wrote to Polish forest activist Rafal asking for a meeting on his visit to Poland. I was with Rafal in his house for several hours waiting for Vassilii to arrive, but he never showed up. Activist friends from Hajnowka, the nearby logging town, called to report that they had led Vassilii to main street and pointed him to the bus station hours ago. Finally three hours after our scheduled meeting, Vassilii rang Rafal and said he got lost in Hajnowka (a very tiny town with two main streets). “Could we come to Hajnowka for the meeting?,”

Vassilii inquired. We agreed and hopped in Rafal's Opel to drive the twenty kilometers to town. On the way Rafal lay bare his suspicions. Vassilii must have been a spy, why else would he have gotten lost for hours without calling? Perhaps he was setting something up in Hajnowka.

We met at a restaurant beneath the Belarusian cultural center and museum, where two other Polish activists waited. We found Vassilii and compared the political situation in Belarus and Poland.

Vassilii: I have not been allowed to go to the Puszcz (Russian and Polish word referring to Belaveskaya Forest here) for two years. Lukashenko owns the forest and told me it is forbidden to go (because of Vassilii's activist work against current management of the Belarusian forest). But the forest is big and there are other ways to access it. (He grins with a sly satisfaction). After this ban, I organized a press journey of both the legal and underground press. We were all organized and planning to leave. At 6:00 am they (KGB) called me and told me: 'You have seen enough of that forest!' They didn't allow me to go and took the press on their own tour of the forest. You are lucky to have a better situation on the Polish side.

Rafal: I'm not so optimistic.

Vassilii: If we change the democratic situation in Belarus we can change the situation in the Puszcz. Most of our problems with vanish with democracy.

Polish Forest Activist: Don't you understand! The Bialowieza Forest region is little Belarus in a pill. The Director here can do whatever he wants. Bialowieza Forest received the European Diploma (a designation from the European council of Protected Areas). Instead of this they should have given Poland a sawmill diploma.

(Rafal chimed in that he no longer feels welcome in the local library because of his activist writings.)

Vassilii: Oh that's bad bureaucracy.

Rafal: No, that's politics. But it's specific to this region. The rest of Poland is not this bad.

Forest Activist: It's a Belarusian trait.

Rafal: It's not Belarusian. It's local!

In this conversation Rafal wanted to divide things Belarusian from the corrupt local politics, but he struggled with what was locally bad and what was locally good; what was Belarusian; and what was undemocratic. Clearly, these discourses are not easily separable. Homi Bhaba would remind us that “the borderline engagements of cultural difference may as often be consensual as conflictual; they may confound our definitions of tradition and modernity; realign the customary boundaries between the private and the public, high and low; and challenge normative expectations of development and progress” (1994:2). Following Homi Bhaba's cue then is to see cultural differences, such as what is Polish and what is Belarusian, what is democratic and what is communistic, as a dialectic in the making, one that creates a new way of living the time lag of the communist past..

Conclusion:

The immediate danger of the geographical communist past in the present ruled the desires and identities of biologists and nature activists. They wanted the forest to be a kind of free space, free for democracy and nature. They also needed corrupt politics in the forest and the dictatorship in Belarus to sustain their identities and causes in the present. The confluence of interactions, like the one between Vassilii and the forest activists, as well as the train ride and the comments made by Marysia and Pawel hardened the categories that created conditions for an imaginary world the past in the present in Bialowieza.

Clearly there was much more than nostalgia at play, but Boym's work on

nostalgia suggests a pervasive cultural current throughout postsocialist Europe: Intellectuals identify more positively when they can fight an authoritarian system. I would not second guess the sincerity of biologists and nature activists who want to see the Bialowieza Forest protected from logging and commercial exploitation. But if these actors did not have “The Soviet Union amongst them”, as Marysia said, might Polish biologists and activists lose their identities that sustain the seriousness of the fight. From discussion with nature conservation colleagues I learned that nature protection programs in other parts of Poland also confront problems of local opposition, as they do in many parts of the developing world. The border with Belarus and working in Europe’s last old-growth forest heightens the stakes and enables the perpetuation of a time-lag with the pre-1989 culture, which much more about finding meaning and purpose in the present for a group of biologist and nature activists than the slowness of development.

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