



SUSTAINABILITY AND ECO-SOCIAL CHANGES

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Lesson 7 - Living with predators



Devils Tower: Why We Don't Climb in June

An iconic mountain, world-famous for its presence in 1977 film *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. But the mountain holds far greater importance for several groups beyond its cinematic history....

by MICHAEL LEVY



The image features a white background with a decorative border of red, grey, and black abstract brushstrokes. The strokes are thick and expressive, forming a frame around the central text. The top border is a horizontal strip, and the right border is a vertical strip that meets the top one at a right angle.

What Did Deborah Liggett Really Do?

The Final Climbing Management Plan (1995)

Liggett chose a structured middle path – not unlimited access, not closure.

Voluntary June closure

Climbers asked to stay away during the entire month of June (sacred solstice ceremonies). Mandatory closure if compliance insufficient.

Raptor protection

March–April climbing limits near raptor nest sites. Routes within 50m of nests closed each spring.

No new bolts

No new bolts or fixed pitons on the tower. Replacement of existing ones only, via a registration system.

Interpretive reframing

NPS staff to explain the cultural significance of the tower to ALL visitors – not just natural history and climbing.

Tribal consultation

A formal, ongoing process of consultation with American Indian groups written into the plan itself.



What Happened Next

85%

reduction in June
climbers (avg.)

193

climbers in June 1995
(vs 1,293 in 1994)

20+

tribes held ceremonies
for the first time
uninterrupted

1906

first time since
Monument's founding

The Legal Challenge (1996)

The lawsuit

Commercial guide Andy Petefish sued, claiming the June ban violated the First Amendment (separation of Church and State). Mountain States Legal Foundation represented him.

The outcome

The NPS revised the plan: closure became voluntary for all, including commercial guides. Judge Downes upheld the rest of the plan. Liggett said she was satisfied the core plan survived.



Lens 1 • Rational Action Theory

The core idea

Every actor has a logic of action. Conflict resolution means mapping those logics and finding a distribution of costs and benefits that each group can accept.

Liggett asked: what does each group want, and at what minimum cost?

Climbers lose 1 month of 12

A small cost for access to the other 11 months. Individual climbers can still climb even in June.

Tribes gain ceremonial space

High benefit: uninterrupted Sun Dance, vision quests — for the first time since 1906.

Voluntary = rational strategy

Avoids First Amendment challenge. Creates compliance through honor, not force. 85% compliance confirms it worked.



Lens 2 • Conflict Theory

The core idea

Conflicts are never just about resources — they are about power. Some groups are historically subordinated. Justice requires both recognition AND redistribution of power, not just a polite compromise.

The NPS is a colonial institution


National parks were created by expropriating Indigenous lands. Liggett operates inside this history — she cannot escape it by being 'fair'.

Recognition without sovereignty

Tribes get a courtesy gesture — one month, voluntary. They get no veto right, no land sovereignty, no formal co-management. The courtesy is revocable.

An ethnographer's recommendation was ignored

After the plan, NPS's own ethnographic study recommended a total climbing ban. No change was ever made.



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Lens 3 • Relational Theory

The core idea

Conflict is not just a clash of interests — it is a breakdown of relationships. The goal is not to redistribute resources but to build new, positive relations between groups who do not know each other.

The interpretive programme

All visitors now learn about the sacred meaning of Devils Tower for Indigenous peoples — not just geology and climbing routes. New knowledge creates new respect.

Voluntary as a code of honour

The tribes explicitly wanted climbers to choose not to climb. They wanted a relationship of mutual respect, not a rule. The voluntary form IS the message.

Institutionalising dialogue

The plan created a formal, ongoing consultation process with tribal groups. Not a one-time negotiation — a permanent relational structure.


Three Lenses, One Decision

Liggett's plan looks very different depending on the theory you use

Theory	Key question	How it reads Liggett's decision	What it misses
Rational Action	What does each actor want?	A clever cost-benefit distribution. Voluntary = rational. 85% compliance proves it.	Ignores historical injustice. Treats all actors as formally equal.
Conflict Theory	Who has the power?	Recognition without redistribution. A courtesy, not justice. The NPS remains in control.	May underestimate the real change produced. Practical progress matters.
Relational Theory	What relations exist or are missing?	New relations built between groups. The voluntary form IS the goal: respect freely chosen.	Does not address structural inequality. Good relations do not cancel colonial history.



Lesson 7 - Living with predators



A farmer in the Apennines wakes up one morning. He goes to his pasture. Three of his sheep are dead. There are wolf tracks in the mud. The shepherd is desperate; this isn't the first time this has happened, and he wants to be able to hunt the wolves.

Is this a conflict? If yes, who is in conflict with whom?



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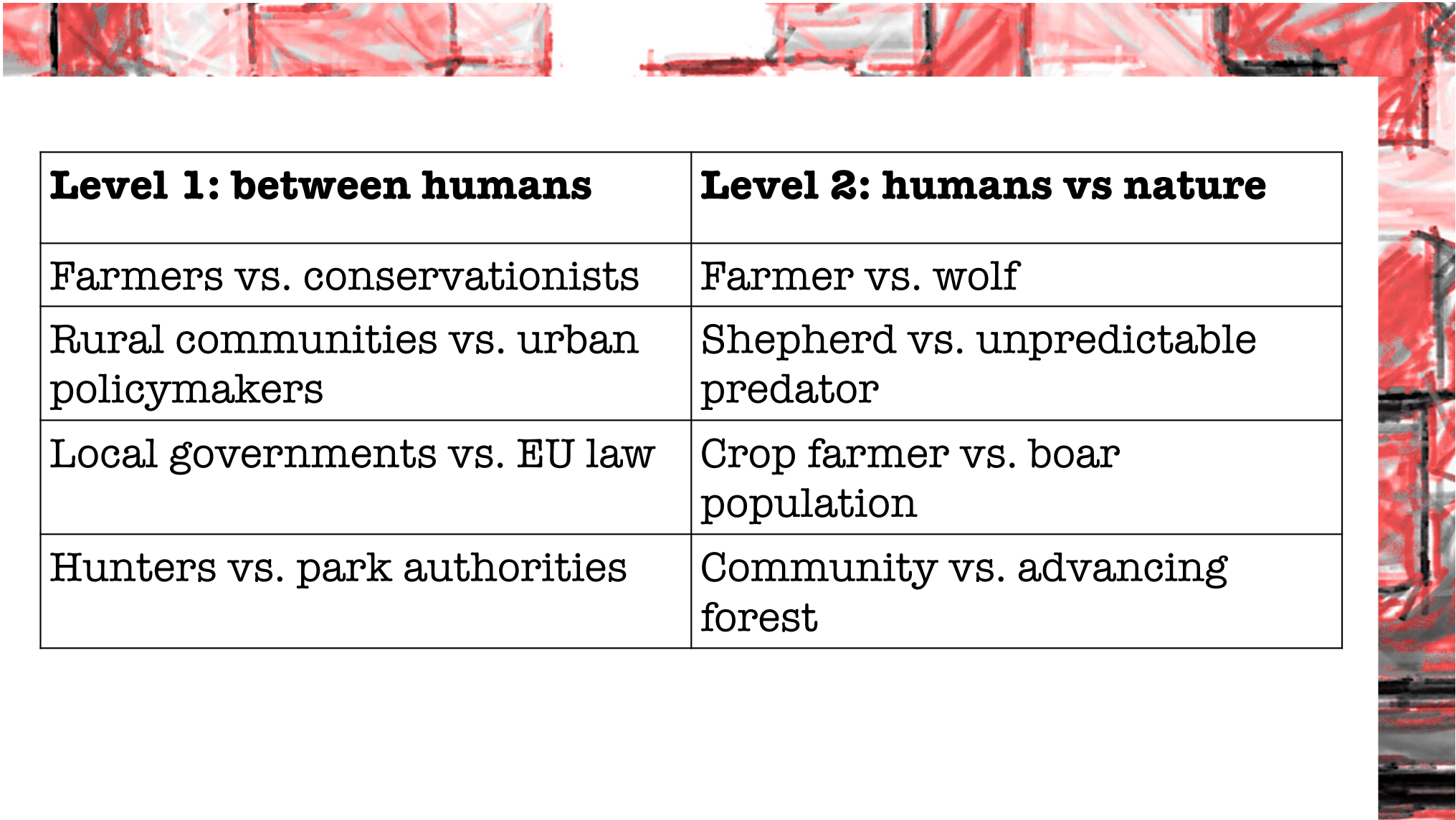
Possible conflicts

- farmer vs. wolf;
- farmer vs. the state / EU law;
- rural communities vs. urban conservationists


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Our definition of environmental conflict:

a social conflict over the use, meaning, or governance of a natural resource or environment, involving at least two groups of actors with incompatible goals, where the source of incompatibility is related to ecological conditions or natural processes.



Level 1: between humans	Level 2: humans vs nature
Farmers vs. conservationists	Farmer vs. wolf
Rural communities vs. urban policymakers	Shepherd vs. unpredictable predator
Local governments vs. EU law	Crop farmer vs. boar population
Hunters vs. park authorities	Community vs. advancing forest



Is wildlife conflict a conflict between humans about nature, or is it also a conflict between humans and nature?

the answer depends on the theoretical tool we use



Not all wildlife conflicts have the same structure

Large carnivore	Overabundant species
In Europe: grey wolf (<i>Canis lupus</i>), brown bear (<i>Ursus arctos</i>), Eurasian lynx (<i>Lynx lynx</i>), Iberian lynx (<i>Lynx pardinus</i>), wolverine (<i>Gulo gulo</i>)	wild boar (<i>Sus scrofa</i>), nutria/coypu (<i>Myocastor coypus</i> , introduced from South America, now widespread in European), American mink (<i>Neovison vison</i> , escaped from fur farms, present throughout Europe), roe deer (<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>)

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The Italian Wolf

- Approximately 3,300 wolves – population growing 5–10% per year
- Strictly protected by Italian law and the EU Habitats Directive
- Reported livestock losses have increased significantly over the last decade
- The compensation system: slow, bureaucratic, often partial
- Many farmers do not report all attacks – the process is too difficult



The Social Conflict Around the Wolf

Strong support for wolf protection

- Urban populations (esp. northern Italy)
- Conservation NGOs
- Ecotourism operators
- EU institutions and environmental agencies
- Scientists and university researchers

Strong opposition to wolf protection


- Mountain/rural communities
 - Shepherds and small livestock farmers
 - Hunters (competing for prey)
 - Local municipalities in affected areas
 - Regional politicians in rural areas
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**“The wolf was saved by people who have never
seen one.”**



The JJ4 Case – Trentino (2023)

- 1999: launch of Life Ursus – bear reintroduction in the eastern Alps (~ 100 bears today)
 - 5 April 2023: Andrea Papi, 26, killed by a bear in the Adamello-Brenta Natural Park
 - Responsible identified: JJ4 – already involved in two previous non-fatal attacks on humans
 - The regional president signs the order to kill her
 - An animal rights organisation obtains a court injunction
 - JJ4 captured and moved to a wildlife centre – never released
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What the JJ4 Case Reveals

- Legal architecture: EU protection law vs. regional management authority vs. individual rights
- Judicial arena: the conflict moved from the forest to the courtroom — the bear had, in effect, a legal representative
- Media construction: JJ4 became a named individual — 'murderer' or 'mother defending her cubs'
- Urban/rural fracture: surveys showed opposing views between urban and mountain residents
- The governance question: who decides in the territory — the EU, the state, the region, the local community?

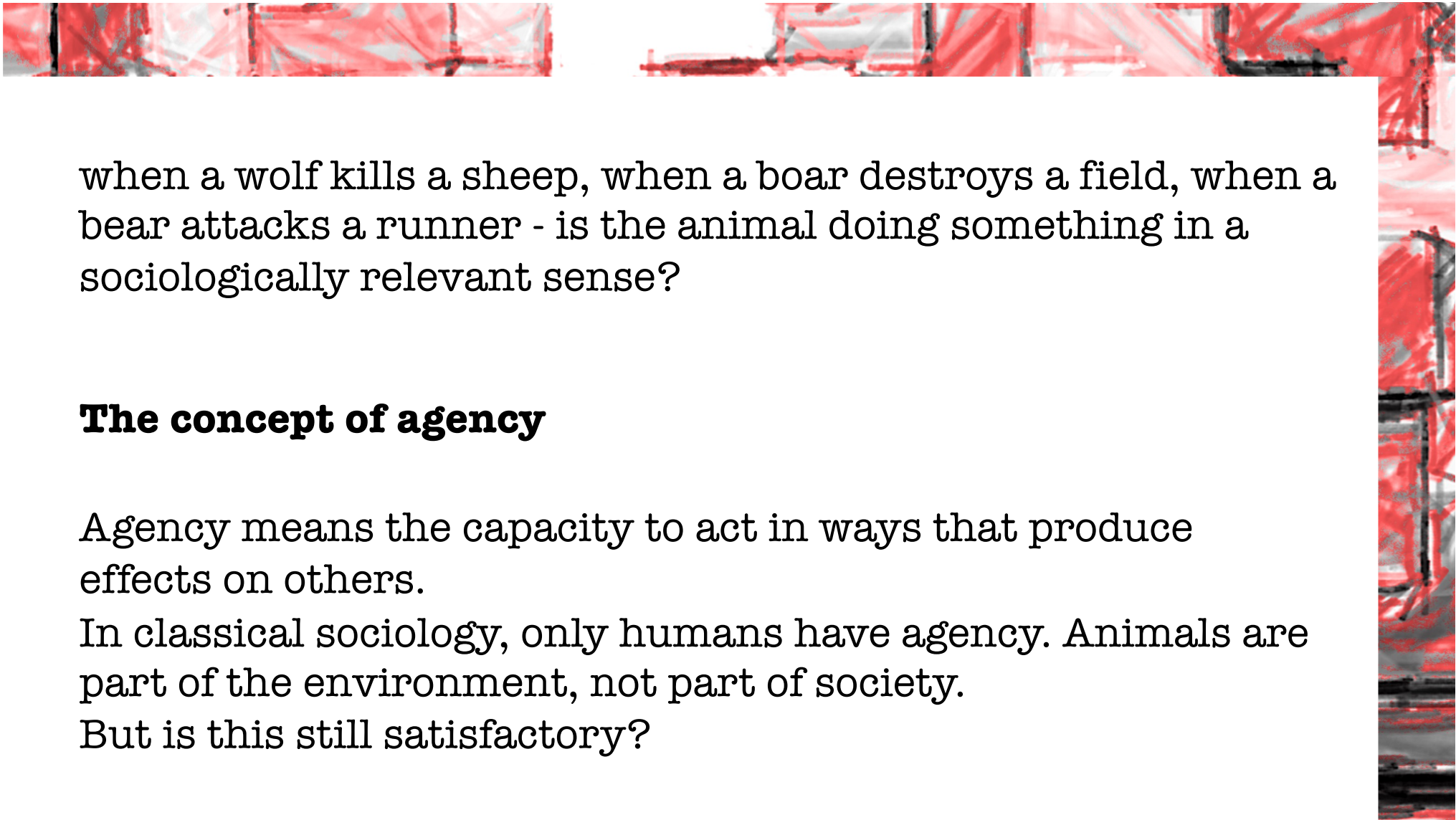


The Wild Boar – An Overabundant Species

- Italian population: from 500,000 in the 1990s to over 2 million today
- Crop damage, road accidents, destroyed agricultural land: hundreds of millions €/year across Europe
- Wild boar can be hunted – but the population keeps growing
- Three reasons the problem resists solution:
 1. Introduction: hunting associations imported boar from central Europe in the 1950s–70s
 2. Land abandonment: new habitat created, followed by boar
 3. Hunting incentive: hunters have no interest in reducing the population

A Structural Comparison

	Large carnivore	Overabundant species
Legal status	Strict protection (EU / national)	No protection; culling encouraged
Expansion	Natural / self-driven return	Partly human-caused
Urban-rural divide	Very strong	Weaker
Symbolic value	High (wolf, bear)	Low or negative (boar)
Dominant type	Distributive conflict	Resource-use conflict
Governance	Law limits action	Action does not work

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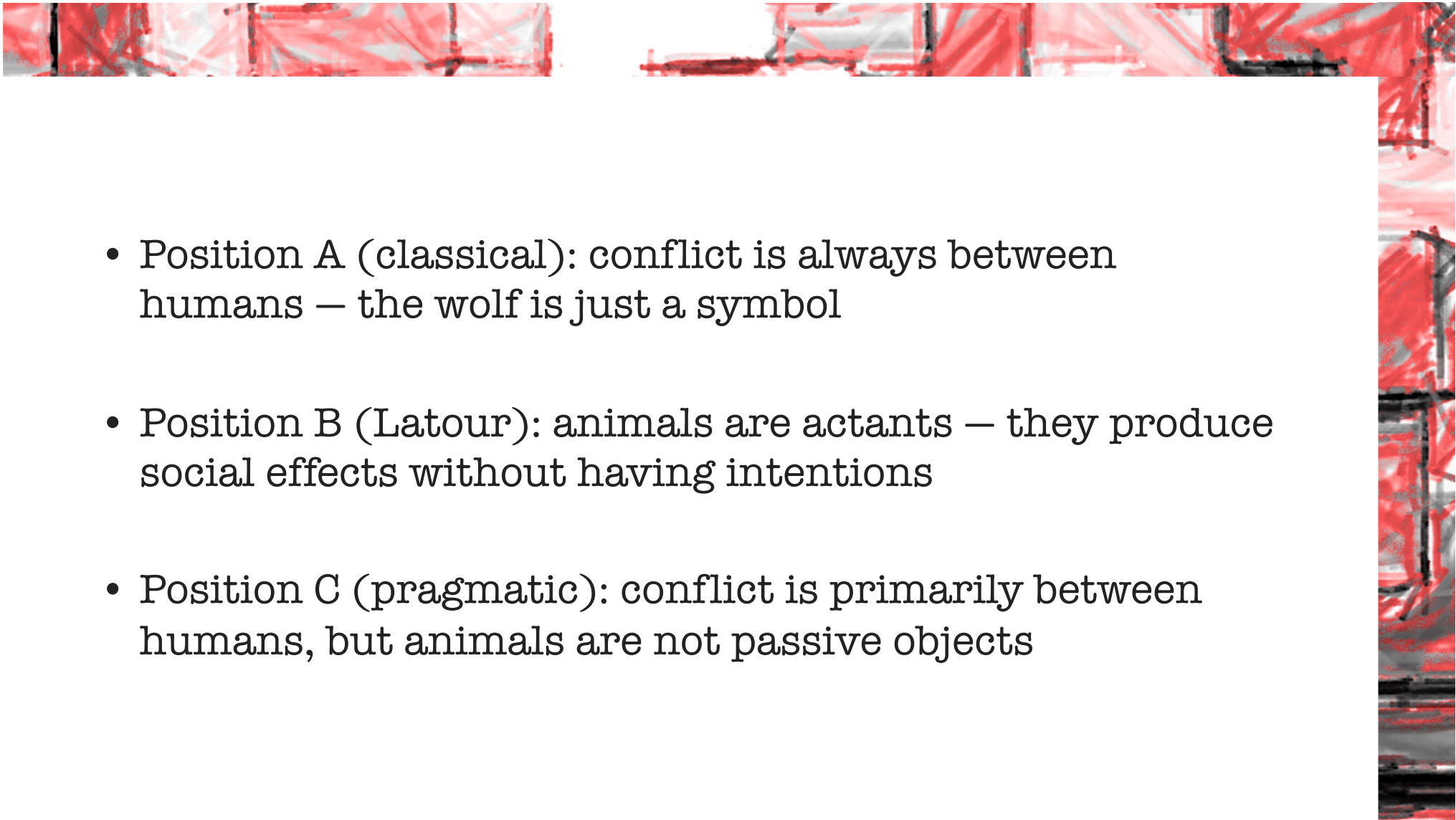
when a wolf kills a sheep, when a boar destroys a field, when a bear attacks a runner - is the animal doing something in a sociologically relevant sense?

The concept of agency

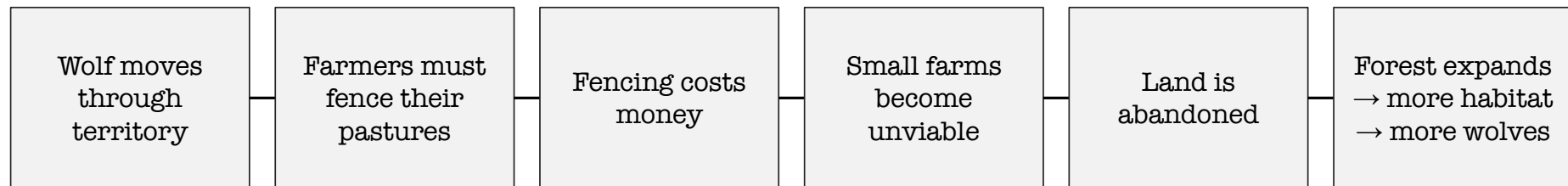
Agency means the capacity to act in ways that produce effects on others.

In classical sociology, only humans have agency. Animals are part of the environment, not part of society.

But is this still satisfactory?

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- A decorative graphic consisting of a horizontal bar at the top and a vertical bar on the right side, both filled with a dense, abstract pattern of red and black lines and shapes, resembling a stylized forest or a complex network.
- Position A (classical): conflict is always between humans – the wolf is just a symbol
 - Position B (Latour): animals are actants – they produce social effects without having intentions
 - Position C (pragmatic): conflict is primarily between humans, but animals are not passive objects

The Wolf as Actant (Latour)



At each step the wolf is not making decisions – but its presence is reorganising human action.

We cannot separate the ecological and the social.

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Five Things to Remember

1. Wildlife conflicts are always social conflicts – ecology becomes conflict through institutions, laws, and values
2. Two types, two structures: large carnivore conflicts are primarily distributive; overabundant species conflicts are primarily resource-use
3. Animals are not passive: they restructure human action without having intentions (Latour's actants)



**Is wildlife conflict a conflict between humans about nature,
or is it also a conflict between humans and nature?**

Both - at different levels.

The theoretical tool you choose determines which level you see.
A sociologist who forgets the ecological level will miss the real
material stakes.

A biologist who forgets the social level will miss the power
dynamics that determine what is possible.

