



Logics of rurality: Political rhetoric about the Swedish North



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ABSTRACT

A recurring question in regional and national politics in Sweden is how Norrland – a sparsely populated and partly declining region in the north of the country – will be able to survive in the long run. The answer to this question varies between different political parties. With Swedish parliamentary material (non-government bills) as the point of departure this paper examines how the region of Norrland is used and created in political rhetoric. Four discourses were identified that all tried to fixate Norrland in different ways. The paper argues that pro-Norrland arguments may be counterproductive on a discursive level due to how they are organised. By identifying two dominant logics that traversed the different discourses and affected the processes of meaning making, we describe how pro-Norrland arguments that differ ideologically and/or employ different discourses reproduced a common view of Norrland as an inherently rural, remote and problematic area.

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1. Introduction

The region of Norrland represents almost two thirds of Sweden's land area (see Fig. 1), but its 1.16 million inhabitants only constitute about 12% of the population (scb.se, 2013). Regardless of the differences within this vast land area, Norrland has often been generalizingly and problematically portrayed as 'the most rural, traditional and problematic region in Sweden', specifically within popular culture (Eriksson, 2008: 371), compared to the more densely populated regions of Götaland and Svealand with their larger urban centres.¹

In this article, we study notions of Norrland as they are constituted within political rhetoric. What discourses prevail when politicians make sense of, and suggest solutions for the Northern part of Sweden?² This issue is of relevance not least because of the problems of depopulation, out-migration and population ageing that the region is often said to be facing. Since political discourses take part in forming the basis for policy decisions, studying the way

they constitute Norrland is of great significance. The contribution we wish to make is not only to identify and deconstruct the discourses. By identifying two dominant logics that traversed the different discourses and affected the processes of meaning making, we describe how discourses on Norrland that differ ideologically reproduced a shared view of Norrland as an inherently rural, remote and problematic area.

Due to the forest industry, Norrland saw a significant population increase from the late 1800's, that lasted until the mid 1900's. After that population has decreased. One recurring question has been the 'survival', as it were, of the region of Norrland that is now facing ongoing processes of out-migration, population decline and cutbacks in social services. The answer varies between different political parties, but what unites them has been the presence of a few strong discourses that permeate demands and suggested solutions. Despite the medium-sized cities (up to around 80 000 inhabitants) along the Norrlandic coast, one of our first results was that the identified discourses were ruralizing in that they primarily fixated Norrland as rural and remote.

The presence and impact of discourses on rurality and the ways in which rurality is continuously ascribed meaning in and through such discourses, have long been a focus of interest within rural studies. The topic usually involves a view of rurality as an ambiguous and changing phenomenon, as demonstrated in studies that have charted shifting meanings of the term 'rurality' (cf. Pratt, 1996). Such studies often make visible how rurality is variously constructed in relation to context in people's own accounts of rural

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¹ The Swedish regions have no administrative functions as do counties (*län*) and municipalities (*kommuner*), but they are still frequently referred to, specifically Norrland.

² In this article, we use expressions like 'Norrland', 'Northern Sweden' and 'the Swedish North' interchangeably.



Fig. 1. Norrland and the counties (*län*) within the region (from Eriksson, 2008).

living (Halfacree, 1995), in research programmes (Hidle et al., 2006), media representations (Bunce, 1994) and popular culture (Horton, 2008), and how different notions of rurality may be at the fore in rural conflicts (cf. Woods, 1998b, 2003, 2008; Winther and Svendsen, 2012).

This constructivist perspective has sometimes been named the 'post-rural' (Murdoch and Pratt, 1993), reflexively emphasising the processes that shape 'the rural' rather than taking rurality as place and construct for granted. A shift of focus from 'rural politics' to the 'politics of the rural' (Woods, 2003, 2005) has redirected interest from the rural as a battleground for various discursive forces to 'the

meaning and regulation of rurality itself' (Woods, 2003: 312). According to this perspective, simply identifying different rural discourses is not 'enough' (Berg and Lysegård, 2004; Haugen and Villa, 2006a,b). In order to understand their impact and effect, rural discourses need to be understood in terms of power and competition, and for the ways they make identifications (im)possible. Within the framework of such an approach, studies have explored how representations of the countryside not only constitute rurality through stereotyping rural discourses, but as a consequence favour certain social groups and ideologies (Baylina and Berg, 2010) while excluding or stigmatising others (Cloke and Little, 1997; Ching and Creed, 1997; Phillips et al., 2001) on the basis of social categorisations such as social class (Juska, 2007), race (Holloway, 2007), and gender and sexuality (Massey, 2004; Valentine, 2004; Little, 2006).

It should be clear from the above that discourses on rurality are intrinsically political, forming not only imageries of rurality, but also the everyday material conditions under which rurality and rural inhabitants come into discursive existence. However, rurality is also produced and at stake in more explicit party political discourses (political rhetoric, proposals and debates). Woods (1998) has shown how rural local government has turned to discourses on rurality as important resources when contesting government proposals. Similarly, studying debates on rural development in Norway, Cruickshank et al. (2009) argue that parliamentary debates were implicitly structured by the presence of two partly antagonistic discourses on rurality, privileging 'growth' and 'rural intrinsic values' respectively. These competing discourses represented a variety of (political) interests, and should, according to the authors, be understood contextually.

Taking 'politics of the rural' as a point of departure, this study specifically investigates party political actors and their struggle to define what Norrland 'is' and 'should be'. We focus on 'the political' both in the sense that we study 'politics' – negotiations of rurality as they take place in the political arena, defined as politicians' written rhetoric – but also in the sense that the studied struggles 'reveal', as it were, the constructedness of rurality. The latter aspect points to 'the political' as the ontological understanding of meaning as constituted by antagonisms (Mouffe, 2005).

Based on this understanding of politics and the political, the overall aim has been to study Swedish politicians' notions of Norrland in political rhetoric that aims to improve conditions in Norrland. Rather than analysing the content of the politics, it is the politicization and (re)production of Norrland that has been at the fore. More specifically, the intention has been to identify the dominant discourses about Norrland in parliamentary material, to describe the ways in which these discourses were organised, and to analyse the overall effects of this organisation. We argue that the ways in which this is done form the basis of political decisions and that knowledge about this is therefore of immense significance.

2. Material and methods

The investigation is based on analyses of texts gathered from the open archive of the Swedish Riksdag (*Eng: parliament*) (www.riksdagen.se) between 1991 and 2013. To get an overview of the character of the parliamentary material, we began with open searches in all documentary types, using the search words 'rural*' and 'Norrland*'. The searches resulted in 9115 and 6867 hits respectively, and 1759 when searched together. The majority of these were non-government bills (*Swe: motioner*), but there were also interpellations, written questions, memoranda and reports. The character of the non-government bills as proposed decisions posed by party-bound members of the Swedish Riksdag proved to

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