



# The importance of an old rural cottage: Media representation and the construction of a national idyll in post-war Sweden



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## A B S T R A C T

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Second-homes are vital parts of the encountering of the rural in the Western World. The way they are perceived in society is important to explore as it can influence how and by whom this part of the rural is used. This paper explores the media construction of a specific type of second-homes in Sweden; cottages that since the 1950s have transformed from poor smallholdings to beloved second-homes. Besides being lived spaces, these cottages have become well known features of rural Sweden, symbols of national identity and described by media as rural idylls. They can be seen as having a cultural centrality in the revaluation of rurality and the shift towards post-productivist countryside in Sweden. But how could this type of humble cottage become so significant and what does the image of it really imply? This is studied through a discourse analysis of the representation of these cottages in a monthly home magazine from 1956 to 2008 with a particular interest in the production and naturalisation of them as important rural artefacts and national symbols. The paper discusses how material and immaterial dimensions have interacted in this construction process as well as possible social implications of the representations. Conclusively, the representations construct a restricted image of cottages and their users and of why cottages are important and should be taken care of. These representations are building on values, ideas and norms embedded in a highlighted and particular materiality which makes these seem innocent, natural and common sense. By exploring this the paper contributes to the wider inquiry into the discursive construction of the rural where seemingly innocent and natural ways of representing places, people and artefacts can produce strong and excluding norms and values regarding the rural and its users and uses.

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## 1. Introduction

“In a way, these old cottages belong to us all. We don't have the rights to destroy them; they are parts of our landscapes and our culture.” (Allt i hemmet, 1971: 4, p.36).

Ahead lies an exploration of the media construction of a specific type of second-homes in Sweden, namely old cottages that have transformed from poor smallholdings to beloved second-homes since the 1950s. This is studied through an analysis of representations of these cottages in media with a particular interest in the production and naturalisation of them as important rural artefacts and national symbols.

Since the 20th century, particularly in the last sixty years, various economic, social, technological and political developments have caused changes in the European countryside (Woods, 2005). Due to changes in consumption and working and living patterns it

is no longer simply a place for traditional agriculture and industry. Rather, the demand for rural space and old agricultural structures for amenity, recreation, conservation and residential purposes is increasing continuously (Halfacree, 2006). This changing countryside with restructuring and post-agrarian land use can create conditions for rural in-migration and a revaluation of the rural (Stockdale, 2010), but also debates between rural development and protection (Woods, 2006). These changes simultaneously shape and get shaped by the way the rural is perceived and conceptualised. Thus, much research has been concerned with discussing issues regarding rural representations. This has often been put in connection to the emergence of new users, conflicts and processes of exclusion and gentrification (see Dirksmeier, 2008; Holloway, 2007; Phillips, 2005; Stockdale, 2010). Following Baylina and Berg (2010, p. 277) exploring the ways the rural is depicted in media is important; as representations can influence living and recreational preferences (Berg and Forsberg, 2003; van Dam et al., 2002). They can therefore also influence how, and by whom, rural space can be used and which changes that can occur

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there. However, representations of second-homes, in media or elsewhere, have not been paid much attention to (but see [Vespäläinen and Pitkänen, 2010](#)). In general, representations of rural areas often portray the rural as an idyllic, natural, innocent and timeless space where old-fashioned qualities and forms of life still exist ([Murdoch and Pratt, 1997](#); [Williams, 1973](#)). This idea of a rural idyll is essential in the representation and reproduction of the rural for recreational, residential and commercial purposes ([Bunce, 1994](#); [Hopkins, 1998](#); [Woods, 2005](#)), and [Bell \(2006\)](#) highlights the role of media in this. However, the rural idyll is exclusive, exclusionary and monocultural ([Bell, 2006](#), p. 151). Many studies have pointed to the exclusion of marginal groups, “the rural others”, in the changing countryside, in the rural idyll idea and in the new uses and values of the rural ([Clope and Little, 1997](#); [Holloway, 2007](#); [Milbourne, 1997](#); [Philo, 1992](#)). The countryside as an idyll in the Western world is, in generalised terms, a place for traditional gender and ethnic identities; a white, middle class, family oriented and unchanging space ([Baylina and Berg, 2010](#); [Bell, 2006](#); [Little and Austin, 1996](#); [Murdoch and Marsden, 1994](#); [Stenbacka, 2011](#)).

The notion of a rural idyll in the emergence of new ways of using old rural places and artefacts and new types of users is evident in the part of the changing countryside that this paper pays attention to. That is, the old cottages of tenant smallholdings, so-called *torp* in Swedish (similar to Scottish crofts, see [Willis, 2001](#)), which now function as second-homes in Sweden, see [Fig. 1](#). It is in this particular sense the term *cottage* is used here; as the dwelling house of a former *torp*. There is a significant interest in these cottages in various parts of contemporary Sweden. Portrayed as rural idylls, and as nostalgic remnants of past times, in media such as TV shows and glossy magazines, these cottages are promoted as the second-home that every Swede dreams of. By its strong symbolic value as a typical Swedish and highly cherished second-home, the cottage and its transformation during the post war period can be seen as having a cultural centrality in the revaluation of rurality and the shift towards a post-productivist countryside in Sweden. But how did this type of small and humble cottage become so seemingly significant and what does this recharged image of it really imply? The aim of this paper is to explore this construction by tracing the representation of cottages in the Swedish home magazine *Allt i Hemmet* (AiH) since the 1950s. How have these cottages, and their users, been represented and how has this changed over time? Which are the grounds for the representations? The paper will also discuss entanglements of material and

immaterial dimensions of the representation as well as possible implications of the representations on the uses and users of cottages.

### 1.1. From smallholdings to places of leisure

In contemporary Sweden, these cottages are associated with summertime idylls for overworked town dwellers, but they also carry an older, quite different significance. From the latter part of 17th century until the first half of the 20th century, these cottages were the dwelling houses of poor tenant smallholdings, *torp*, belonging to larger farms or estates. In general, a *torp* consisted of a small wooden cottage, a few buildings for animals and some arable land, and they were often located on marginal lands far away from the landowners' home. At their height, there were about 100,000 *torp* in Sweden and a substantial part of the rural population lived at *torp*. Due to industrialisation, urbanisation and changes in agriculture, as well as poor living and working conditions at the *torp*, the number of *torp*, and their users, *torpare*, declined from the latter part of the 19th century, and especially after 1900 ([Bäck, 1992](#)). As the number started to decline, and the number of various agricultural and industrial workers grew, idealised representations of *torp* became visible in novels and political debates. In these works, a *torp* was portrayed as an idyllic and good, yet poor, home that brought up decent, hardworking and un-socialistic rural Swedish citizens, as opposed to the revolting labourers in the industries. This positive view prevailed among many politicians and landowners while many of the *torpare* themselves left the *torp* for better conditions elsewhere if they had the opportunity ([Svensson, 2002](#)). However, in the 1930s and 1940s, the positive view of *torp* diminished due to economic and agricultural crisis. They became miserable remnants from a pre-modern society and the abandonment amplified. Yet, a new interest in their cottages emerged after the 1940s as a new usage of them as second-homes for the growing urban population commenced ([Lagerqvist, 2011](#)). A second-home can be defined as an “Occasional residence of a household that usually lives elsewhere and which is primarily used for recreation purposes” ([Shucksmith, 1983](#), p. 174). The number of second-homes in Sweden is large and with diverse standards and economic worth. Since the mid-1900s the second-home tradition has been widespread and a part of everyday life for a large part of the population, and not only an elite phenomenon. As vacation legislation and social welfare were strengthened, and urbanisation and the use of cars increased, individual mobility, prosperity and leisure time grew for large parts of the population. Consequently, the possibility to have a second-home also grew ([Löfgren, 1999](#)). The resurrection of *torp* cottages was part of this widespread boom of second-homes, and as such, influential in the emergence of what can be called a post-productivist countryside ([Hoogendoorn and Visser, 2012](#); [Ilbery and Bowler, 1998](#)).

## 2. Representation, media and materiality

The cottages are here approached as artefacts with spatial connections to the countryside and symbolical connections to the nation. Artefacts are man-made constructions, but much of their significance can be lost if they are only seen as material forms and not mental ([Tuan, 1980](#)). In the paper I seek to explore representations of cottages in media as a part of understanding the construction and naturalisation of them as important rural artefacts and national symbols in Sweden since the 1950s. National symbols are important to study as they, in Anthony Smith's words ([1991](#), p. 73), “give concrete meaning and visibility to the abstractions of nationalism”. More than that, the way national symbols are talked about in our everyday social life is part of how national identities



**Fig. 1.** A cottage in its present day use, as a second-home (photo by the author, 2009).

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