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# Forestry and the environment

## *Tensions in a transforming modernity*

### **Abstract**

Sweden is often described as an environmental forerunner and one of the most ecologically modernized countries in the world, one where social welfare, economic growth and environmental protection mutually support each other. Examining the case of Swedish forestry, we discuss a number of tensions in this sector that mirror some general tensions in Swedish society and explore how these tensions can be understood as part of a transforming modernity.

*Keywords:* ecological modernization; second modernity; Swedish forestry

SWEDEN IS WIDELY considered a forerunner in environmental policy and one of the most ecologically modernized countries in the world. It is also commonly described as the epitome of the Scandinavian welfare model, with a long tradition of cooperation between state and market. Swedish politics is also seen as dominated by consensus between different interests. However, whereas some scholars characterize Sweden as a society where economic growth, social welfare and environmental protection mutually support each other, others claim that this is a rosy picture that says more about national self-image than empirical realities (Lidskog and Elander 2012). Even if Sweden has contributed to and adopted the global discourse of sustainability it is a country with increasing economic cleavages, problems with social and economic exclusion, and an ecological footprint that is globally unsustainable. Drawing on the case of Swedish forestry, this paper discusses six tensions in the forest sector, which mirror some general tensions in Swedish society.

### **Trees and tensions**

Industrial forestry has been fundamental to the making of modern Sweden. About half of Sweden is covered with productive forest, and the forest sector is still important for employment and export (accounting for 11 percent of the total goods exported). It is likely that forestry's economic importance will increase in a future fossil-free society. In recent decades, environmental, social and cultural forest values have been subject to in-

creasing stress. The importance of the forest for reducing greenhouse gases and protecting biodiversity has been particularly emphasized. For these reasons, Swedish forest policy hosts multiple and often contradictory goals (cf. Beland Lindahl et al. 2016). The tensions that stem from this are many, and we will here broadly summarize six of them, namely tensions between (i) deregulation and reregulation; (ii) public and private interests; (iii) disembedding and local anchoring; (iv) economic growth and environmental protection; (v) short and long-term perspectives; and (vi) certainty and risk.

First, having originally been characterized by strong state involvement, the forest sector was deregulated in the early 1990s. The new policy is often summarized by the phrase "freedom with responsibility." Legislation has been made less strict and the responsibility for balancing production with environmental, social and other values has been shifted onto private actors (Löfmarck et al. 2017). Simultaneously, Sweden's membership in the European Union means increased mandatory environmental regulation. Two parallel regulatory frameworks now exist, and a number of controversies have emerged, e.g. concerning how to interpret and implement the EU's Birds and Habitats directives (Uggla et al. 2016).

The second tension – between forestry as a private and public interest – relates to the first. Half of the Swedish forest is owned by small-scale private owners, a quarter is owned by larger companies/corporations, and the rest is publicly owned. At the same time, the Swedish forests are seen as a national resource with multiple values of public interest. This means that, in accordance with the principle of "freedom with responsibility", forest owners are obligated to take measures to protect the forest's multiple values, circumscribing their right of ownership.

Third, the Swedish forest is simultaneously locally anchored and subject to disembedding processes such as globalization and urbanization. As a natural resource, the forest is place bound and still domestically owned. However, both the processing industry and the forest owners are increasingly mobile, the former looking for lower production costs overseas and the latter relocating from rural to urban areas, thereby losing their local connection and/or practice-based knowledge.

The fourth tension concerns environmental protection and economic growth. The current debate about the future role of Swedish forestry is increasingly polarized, particularly along the lines stated here. In particular, globally adopted sustainability goals, such as those established in the Paris agreement (2015) on climate change mitigation, and goals on biodiversity protection, heighten this tension. According to Swedish forest policy, equal priority should be given to production and environmental protection, but little guidance is given on how to accomplish this in practice.

Fifth, there is a general tension in forestry between short and long-term perspectives. One manifestation of this temporal aspect is the long rotation period of trees (in Sweden often 60 to 80 years), which does not sit well with a society characterized by both economic and social acceleration. Another manifestation is the mismatch between current conditions for replantation and the implications of future climate change; it is difficult to adapt to a predicted warmer climate because trees suited for such a climate might not grow well today (cf. Lidskog and Sjödin 2014).

Finally, there is a tension between certainty and risk. A risky future, both in terms of climate and economy, requires reflexivity and adjustment. At the same time, traditional ways of doing things generally seem to provide humans with a sense of security. New risks call for new approaches, but the forest sector is characterized by a considerable amount of inertia, with the standard forestry practices resting on historically accumulated experience and deeply rooted norms.

## A transforming modernity

Looking for a common denominator, we contend that the tensions discussed in this paper can partly be understood as an expression of a transforming modernity (Beck and Lau 2005). The first modernity that shaped Swedish forestry was characterized by a logic of dichotomous differentiation (either/or), which drew boundaries between groups (us *or* them), objects (nature *or* society, private *or* public) and activities (production *or* environmental protection). Within this logic, aspects such as power and responsibility were fairly easy to allocate. In contrast, second modernity is characterized by profound uncertainty and the insight that things often are ambiguous and multifaceted (both/and). At the same time as new ways have developed for dealing with ambiguity and uncertainty as permanent conditions, the institutions and logics of first modernity still exist and are continuously applied to new challenges. To conclude we discuss how two examples of the above-mentioned tensions in Swedish forestry can be understood as parts of a transforming modernity.

First, in the logic of first modernity, monopolization is a chief strategy for the state to counteract ambiguity and achieve standardization by legal means (Beck and Lau 2005). "Freedom with responsibility" clearly represents a different strategy (transferring responsibility from politics to private actors), but it coexists with monopolization in the form of mandatory EU environmental directives. These parallel regulatory systems based on different logics entail a situation in which forest consultants and forest owners alike are caught between "freedom with responsibility" and mandatory environmental legislation.

Second, in the logic of first modernity, marginalization means that deviations from the norm are treated as residuals that sooner or later will vanish and leave room for normality (Beck and Lau 2005). The standard practice of industrial forestry is still very uniform, with alternative management regimes at best being seen as interesting curiosities. At the same time, the giving of equal priority to production and environmental goals in forest policy can be seen as a "plural compromise", a strategy typical of second modernity, which consists of forming compromises between fundamentally contradictory principles.

As the case of Swedish forestry suggests, there is no clear break between the logics of first and second modernity. Instead policies and regulations based on different logics co-exist within this field. The tensions described above are not unique to the forest sector, even though their scope and magnitude may differ in other sectors. As societies try to respond to the various challenges, tensions will emerge not only between diverging values and interests, but also between the logics of either/or and both/and.

Sweden's ambition to be an ecological forerunner makes it of great interest to see how the country will handle these tensions in the future.

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