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Logics of rurality: Political rhetoric about the Swedish North

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A B S T R A C T

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 Götaaland 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 fixedated 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
meaning and regulation of rurality itself (Woods, 2003: 312). According to this perspective, simply identifying different rural discourses is not ‘enough’ (Berg and Lysgård, 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

Fig. 1. Norrland and the counties (lan) within the region (from Eriksson, 2008).
be the most fruitful for analysis in the way they allowed an insight into how individual, or smaller groups of politicians interpreted and reacted on the politics and policies affecting Norrland. We therefore decided on a selection of non-government bills, henceforth also referred to as ‘bills’, using the single search word ‘Norrland’. We received 2585 hits of which a majority were written during the first decade of the search period (on average 158 bills per year between 1991 and 2001, and 70 per year between 2002 and 2013). Within these, the word ‘rural’ occurred only 311 times. Of the 2585 hits, we performed a strategic selection. The guiding principle behind the strategic selection was not to achieve representativeness in a general sense, but to require data that comprehended argumentative statements about Norrland. The most important selection criterion was that chosen texts should express descriptive opinions about and suggestions for Norrland, and not just mention the region in passing while focussing on something else. We thus excluded a large number of bills that offered only short descriptive explanations as to why a certain decision was proposed. The strategic selection resulted in 500 bills that were chosen for further analysis.

Important to note is that the search word ‘Norrland’ itself excluded bills that suggested changes in parts of the region, without mentioning Norrland as a unifying term. This may have emphasised the tendency that representations of Norrland are otherwise criticised for — that they ignore complexity in order to depict Norrland as a homogeneous area (Eriksson, 2010), and we will therefore not go into that critique although the chosen material certainly complies with previous findings.

The texts were chosen to represent all parliamentary parties and they vary in scope — ranging from 10 to 15 lines to about 30 pages — and form. Some of the texts had an open narrative character, while others were more formal in style. They typically start with a description of the perceived situation and conclude with a summary of the proposals that the bills suggest that the Swedish Riksdag takes into consideration. Despite the differences in scope and form, a significant part of the bills formed an opinion about Norrland as a rural area upon which they based their proposals for political decisions. All quotes were originally written in Swedish, and were translated to English by the authors.

The material represents the period 1991–2013, which was chosen because it reflects a gradual transition from traditional social democratic welfare politics to more neo-liberal politics with an extensive deregulation of state enterprises (Hudson and Ronnblohm, 2007). The old national regional policy, which focused on support areas, was gradually replaced by an ambitious policy of regional growth (Tillväxtanalys, 2012). Both political blocs wrote bills in opposition during the studied period. The Social Democrats were in government for approximately half of the studied time. A centre-right coalition (the moderate party, liberal party, centre party and christian democrats) was in power between 1991 and 1994, and from 2006 to the end of the search period, which has resulted in an accelerating deregulation process. On a general level however, the transition towards a policy of regional growth seems to have been supported regardless of who formed the government, which points, perhaps, at how the Swedish process was intimately tied up with a more general neoliberal tendency.

3. Theory and methods of analysis

Theoretically, the point of departure is discourse theory as it has been outlined by Laclau and Mouffe (1985). According to this theoretical view, discourse is defined as a particular and constitutive way of understanding and describing the world (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985), or the meaning-making strategies and resources people use to manage themselves and the world (cf. Gregory, 1994). The notions about Norrland that are studied in this article are typically understood, then, as discourses about Norrland — different ways of comprehending and ascribing meaning to the area.

Characterising a discourse — defining it and holding it together — are the privileged signs called ‘nodal points’. Winther Jørgensen and Phillips (2002: 26) point out that an important nodal point in political discourses is ‘democracy’. In the discourses studied here, ‘democracy’ was certainly important, but more so for our purposes was the sign ‘Norrland’ together with signs used to characterise Norrland. Nodal points are typically ‘floating signifiers’ that are open to different inscriptions of meaning (Laclau, 1990), but they can also — as in the example with ‘democracy’ — constitute ‘empty signifiers’ that are successful in uniting people under their flag despite their different interpretations of them. If and when an empty signifier manages to efficaciously reinscribe itself otherwise positioned as antagonistic, Laclau (2005) talks about populism. Populist politics may raise an issue that — according to the politicians — is of emergent importance. The populist politician typically argues that ‘all other politicians ignore this important issue, but if you vote for me, I will see to it’. In the material, such arguments could take the following expressions: ‘if anything should be done, it should be done now, and that is what the Liberal Party wants’ (2003/04:Ub397) or even more explicitly:

The Centre Party's voice has disappeared in the Moderate-controlled government. The Centre Party's ambitions for living, sparsely populated and rural areas in all essentials are now substantially empty of real political content. We in the red-green opposition now stand alone behind the slogan (2008/09:N12, Social Democrats).

According to Laclau, the populist aspect lies however in the way equivalences are created. A politician that takes advantage of the emerging empty signifier of ‘rurality’ may contribute to the populist reification of rurality with various people who consider rurality important and threatened by an absolute Other (typically ‘other politicians’ ignorance and indifference’ or other types of ‘threat’ to rurality).

Since discourse theory rests on an understanding of knowledge and identity as radically contingent, i.e. it assumes all knowledge and social identities to be temporary fixations of meaning, discourses are understood to always struggle to define what they aim to describe. In this sense, they constitute systems for the fixation of meaning, but where the fixation is never completed. Some discourses sometimes tend to surface as more dominant than others, more successful, as it were, in defining a phenomenon. As will be shown, the studied political discourses produced different, and sometimes antagonistic ideas about what Norrland is, and what it, as a consequence of this ascribed identity, needs.

‘Articulation’ is then the term that is usually used to understand how meaning is created. It can be viewed as an interconnection of signifying elements, but where this interconnection is neither necessary nor definitive. From the interconnection itself it follows that the meanings of the constituent elements change and that ‘new meanings are created (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985; see also Winther Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002). For example, the articulation of ‘Norrland’ with ‘victim’ implies a different understanding.
than an articulation of ‘Norrland’ together with the word ‘resource’. It may here be of importance to point at the fact that also the authors themselves are necessarily positioned within this power-struggle. The words used in our descriptions, and the choices of theoretical perspectives and methodologies, obviously assist in enacting what is studied (Law and Urry, 2005; Glynos and Howarth, 2007). Still, we want to note that our theoretical thinking certainly opened for more varied findings, but what struck us was the persistency of the found discourses.

In order to relate the identified discourses to each other and to overarching structures of power, we have also employed a perspective of ‘logics’ (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985; Glynos, 2008). Logics, in Laclau’s (2000) definition of the term, focus on the kind of relations that exist between identities. These relations are then central in Laclau’s theorisations of political processes. Laclau (2000) and Laclau and Mouffe (1985) identified two primary logics in political meaning making processes, logics of difference and logics of equivalence. While the former illustrate situations where there seems to be no, or weak, connections between identities, the latter describe how, in certain situations, such connections may structure the field in terms of ‘us’ and ‘them’. This kind of structuration necessarily narrows the political field, simplifies it and reduces its number of possible meanings and identifications.

In this paper we will concentrate on how a specific logic of equivalence organised the parliamentary discourses in ways that counteracted the possibly deliberating multiplicity that characterised the material as a whole, and that seemed to successfully fixate specific understandings of ‘Norrland’. We will argue that a logic of equivalence worked to connect all identities that gave voice to Norrland, regardless of their relative differences regarding reasons, goals and suggested measures, and we will argue that this effect was in fact simultaneously an important reason for the politicians’ engagement. In order to furnish a critical explanation of how the logic of equivalence worked, we turn to the development of the logics approach as it has been theorised by Glynos and Howarth (2007), and suggest two further logics, a logic of comparison and a logic of compensation. These equivalent logics were inherently political in that they pitted identities and places against each other and made visible the constructedness of these very identities and places by aiming at change by suggesting solutions. But the logics of comparison and compensation also had a fantastmatic dimension. They provided answers to why and how the logics of equivalence came forth as comprehensible. As a research tool, the logics approach has helped us in accounting for ‘the way subjects are gripped by a practice’ (Glynos, 2008: 278).

The material has undergone a qualitative content analysis in which recurring concepts, ideas and opinions about Norrland were inductively identified by repeated readings of the texts. The different ways of comprehending Norrland were viewed as discourses and organised in sub-themes (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005; Neendorf, 2002). The paper is organised around the four main discourses found in the material that each fixated different qualities as central to the Norrlandic identity: Norrland as a problem, Norrland as a resource, Norrland as a region of growth, and Norrland as a victim. Each of these is briefly described below in order to show the kinds of articulations that constituted them, the nodal points that organised them and the positions they offered. We will then go on to discuss how all discourses were permeated by specific logics of equivalence that not only organised the meaning-making processes but also worked to condition the different fixations of rural Norrland.

4. Results

As was clear from our initial searches, only 311 out of 2585 hits on ‘Norrland’ included explicit references to rurality. An important finding when engaging in the close reading of the selected non-governmental bills was however that Norrland was articulated as a rural – even anti-urban – area even when this was not explicated. The existence of a number of larger cities, specifically along the Norrlandic east coast, was usually ignored and excluded from the rhetoric. In this section, we explore this focus on rurality, while presenting the four dominant discourses that struggled to define Norrland in the material. It is important to note that these discourses were sometimes quite similar to each other. Even when contradictory, they could very well be found in one and the same non-government bill, seemingly without posing a problem. All four discourses were strong throughout the whole search-period, although the specific political questions that were dealt with could differ somewhat. In what follows, we will focus on the general features of the four discourses, in order to then shed light on the ways in which the discourses where organised.

4.1. Norrland as a problem

Within a majority of the studied bills from 1991 to 2013, Norrland was articulated together with concepts and ideas that indicated problems. As such, this may come as no surprise, given the character of the material. But what was special was the way Norrland was not only thought to harbour problems – it was itself constituted as one, and it was often its rurality that seemed to be the issue. Just like many rural areas (cf. Haugen and Villa, 2006a,b), Norrland was articulated as archaic, old-fashioned and with bleak prospects, and troubled concerns with ‘an ageing population’ and ‘out-migration’ were expressed. Specifically the inland of Norrland was repeatedly described in the same stereotypical ways found in popular culture and the media (cf. Eriksson, 2010; Lundgren and Ljuslander, 2011). Taken together the problem discourse was permeated by a ‘rhetoric of risk’ or ‘crisis’. The discourse repeatedly fixated Norrland as facing an untenable situation and that action must be taken immediately or there was the risk that the municipalities in Norrland’s inland would not survive (cf. Lundgren, 2013).

The problematic was described somewhat differently in different bills. Three different approaches dominated the problem discourse. The first had to do with the ‘geographical vulnerability’ of Norrland. It pointed out the long distances and subsequent high transport costs for both companies and individuals. According to a bill from the Liberals, this was expected to have severe consequences for the province:

If the cost of owning and driving a car is too high, this may in extreme cases mean that job-seekers are forced to turn down a job that is located too far from their home. [...] Motoring should not be taxed to death ... (2006/07: N202, Liberal Party).

As part of the geographic vulnerability, the harsh climate and subsequent higher heating costs were often mentioned. A representative of the right wing Moderate party wrote that this could ‘create a less positive image of Norrland’s inland among people from other parts of the country, which impedes and increases the cost of recruiting key people’ (1990/91:A492). Here it was not only the image that was at stake, but the stated consequences reveal a view of Norrland as itself lacking in competence. The politicians also referred to ‘special geographical circumstances’ that were considered to be especially problematic for businesses, such as a lack of premises, high maintenance costs in general and a small market. The articulation of Norrland with words like ‘remoteness’, ‘special circumstances’, ‘lack’, ‘harshness’ and ‘high costs’ contributed to the reproduction of Norrland and its inland as primarily problematic.

The second approach was partly articulated as a direct consequence of the first and it linked Norrland to notions of depopulation
and an ageing population in need of (extended) welfare services. Background descriptions often painted a picture of a troublesome development, not least when it came to the situation on the labour market and the effects on the welfare services.

Many smaller towns are close to such population figures that determine whether there is a sufficient base for certain welfare services (1991/92: A482, Social Democratic Party).

The demographic development in Norrland shows that the older population is increasing and is expected to become larger than the other age groups in this part of the country. This is going to require more physicians with expertise in dementia and elderly care (2013/14:Ub217, Social Democratic Party).

The bills often displayed the perceived risk that the service functions would be lost if population decreased any further. Depopulation and demographic ageing were described as crisis scenarios (cf. Lundgren and Ljuslinder, 2011), and population increase was often foregrounded as the unproblematised solver of problems and goal of suggested measures.

Thirdly, Norrland’s problems were attributed to a historical dimension and were related to overall social processes like urbanization and economic fluctuations. This historicizing of the problems made them stand out almost as givens (cf. Lundgren, 2011).

However, and running through all aspects of the problem discourse, the financial aspect recurred in the material, applying to the region’s problems in general. Lack of welfare services, geographical remoteness, unemployment and depopulation were almost always articulated with references to economy. In other words, it was against an economic backdrop that the crisis of Norrland was portrayed as a problem. Norrland lagged behind the urban areas with regard to a competitive business life and capacity for innovation (cf. Cruickshank et al., 2009). The economic perspective also formed the basis for a political message common to several of the political parties: if the responsible policymakers as well as the Norrlanders themselves had been more proactive and created better conditions for development, entrepreneurship and growth, Norrland would not have had to face its present problems.

4.2. Norrland as a resource

Quite different from the discourse of Norrland as a problem was a discourse that tried to fixate Norrland as a not yet fully utilised resource. Such efforts were found in the bills throughout the studied period. According to this discourse, Norrland was regarded as both an inherent resource and a productivity resource.

The first aspect worked to fixate Norrland as a place with inherent resources in terms of immanent values: cultural, historical, environmental and democratic. Such resources were not necessarily expected to have any immediate economic significance. The natural environment and the open landscape were examples of inherent resources. They were repeatedly linked to ideas of Norrland as something authentic and genuine (cf. Eriksson, 2010), and to expressions like recreation, quality of life, and attractive living environments (cf. Cruickshank et al., 2009) in a way that came close to what Frouws (1998) has called the ‘hedonist discourse’.

According to the Moderates, the healthy natural environment in northern Sweden was an important resource: ‘As awareness of environmental issues increases, those parts of our country that can offer a nice natural environment will certainly seem attractive to many more people’ (1990/91:A482). The emphasis on Norrland as an inherent resource often resulted in a (temporary) subordination of economic factors. For example, the value of an open landscape was not necessarily presented in economic terms. Instead, it was often attributed cultural and historical values by (nostalgic) associations with notions of a Swedish traditional rustic society and to ideas of a proud national identity. Norrland was thereby viewed as unspoiled by modernization processes and was thus considered to be a counterpoint to the modern society characterised by alienation and stress: ‘Västernorrland has had the motto “offers balm for the soul”, a concept that should be appealing in a world with an ever increasing tempo’ (2009/10:N319, the Liberal Party).

However, when approaching their proposed decisions, the politicians still often stressed the fact that inherent resources could have economic effects.

Northern Sweden is one of the most popular destinations for tourists in Sweden. Here is the opportunity for the outdoor experiences that many seek most, as well as the possibility of finding privacy and tranquility. […] Much of Sweden’s image abroad — unspoilt countryside, quiet lakes, mountains, space, solitude and silence — is associated with Northern Sweden (2005/06:N482, Centre Party).

The Swedish North is here articulated with nature and the inherent values it enables (‘privacy and tranquillity’), but also with the economic values that come with being available for consumption through tourism (cf. Woods, 1998a).

This brings us to the second aspect of the discourse of Norrland as a resource, which emphasised that not only was the region blessed with a plethora of cultural, historical and environmental advantages, the region also contributed to Swedish productivity because of these riches. This reinforcement of productivist rationality (Burton, 2004; Woods, 2011) framed Norrland primarily as a site for resource production and exploitation, and it had parallels to what Frouws (1998: 60) has called a ‘utilitarian discourse’. According to this, rural areas are assessed primarily on the basis of their ability to ‘take maximum advantage of [their] economic potential’. ‘Ideal rurality’ thereby comprised notions of economic independence and self-sufficiency, notions that bore associations to past times. In order to achieve such a notion of ideal rurality, the politicians argued that Norrland either already did, or must begin to, materialise its full economic potential and be integrated in a broader economic market. The discourse was visible when politicians argued that Norrland constitutes an industrial base in possession of natural resources such as forests, minerals and hydropower, from which the whole nation benefits:

Norrland has contributed greatly to Sweden’s prosperity through its natural resources — forests, ore and water. As one example, Västernorrland has for many years had Sweden’s third largest annual gross domestic product. Here one can find world-leading companies in the cellulose industry and the energy sector, and many examples of natural resources and renewable energy (2009/10:N319, Liberals).

Several writers of bills shared the idea of Norrland as a strong contributor to the nation’s good. While representatives of the Centre Party argued that ‘Norrland generates the highest export revenue in Sweden’ (1996/97:A407), the Liberals claimed that ‘The forest, ore and hydropower mean that Norrland contributes more to Sweden’s GDP than most regions in Sweden’ (2003/04:Ub397). The Social Democratic Party expressed similar thoughts when stating that the county of Västernorrland produces more electricity than it consumes (1996/97:N411).

The discourse on Norrland as a productivist resource did, however, also contain ideas about Norrland contributing too many resources, and that local resources should remain in the region to a
greater extent than today. The notion of Norrland as a productivist supplier of resources has been common in other contexts as well. In a study of the northern mining town of Kiruna, a common opinion uniting the residents was that the profits from the town’s iron ore mine had unfairly laid the foundation for the subway in capital Stockholm instead of contributing to the town’s own development (Nilsson, 2009).

The way the discourse of Norrland as a resource was organised around two different nodal points – inherent values and productivist contributions – meant that it also offered two sets of subject positions. When organised around productivism, the discourse offered positions like entrepreneurs, businessmen, innovators – and to some extent farmers and forest workers. When organised around ‘inherent values’, people were rather positioned as productive of other values, such as contributing to a democratic society. This was evident in the importance attributed to individuals who contributed to rural development or fought for local democracy with no personal gain. They were indefatigably described as important and committed enthusiasts, with fighting spirit and power of initiative, and they were considered to be invaluable resources for the future of Norrland. One example was a non-government bill (The Moderates) with the aim of preserving the northern pastures system as a cultural heritage. Here it was stated that the system would not survive without the enthusiasts, and the bill called for a simplification of the rules and conditions for small business owners (2001/02:MJ237). According to bills from Left Party members there is however a risk that enthusiasts in rural areas may take over responsibility for the welfare services that should ideally be provided by the state (2010/11: N323). The description of (and awe for) the enthusiasts was however the same within all bills.

A consequence of the discourse of Norrland as a resource, and specifically the way the discourse oscillated between the nodal points of intrinsic values and productivist contributions, was that Norrland continued to be assessed primarily in terms of rurality. Sometimes its attractiveness and aesthetic values – its ability to provide ‘idyllic rurality’ (cf. Baylina and Berg, 2010) – were brought to the fore. Other times the productivist contribution to the nation was foregrounded. Also then, it was however the exoticised forests, rivers and mountains that kept being articulated with Norrland.

4.3. Norrland as a region of growth

Discourses of ‘growth’ have long affected politics (Friman, 2002), claiming economic growth to be the ‘central factor for social, economic, political and environmental progress’ (Spangenberg, 2010: 561–2). Growth discourses often centre neo-liberal ideas, displaying an antagonism towards state involvement (see for example McCarthy and Prudham, 2004; Peck, 2004). They articulate market deregulation with individual freedom and often revolve around signs like ‘entrepreneurship’, ‘innovation’ and ‘enterprise’. Generally favouring dynamic urban areas (cf. Falkheimer, 2004), discourses of growth usually use cities to symbolize the necessity for and possibilities with growth. In accordance with the general shift towards growth also in regional policies in the 1990s (Hudson and Rönblom, 2007), the studied non-governmental bills recurrently took growth as the natural goal for granted when debating Norrland.

Just like the discourses on Norrland as a problem or a resource, the discourse on growth represented a primarily economic perspective on rural areas. But while the discourse on Norrland as a resource tended to focus on its potential to be self-sufficient, the discourse on growth was much more expansionary: there seemed to be no upper limit for how much surplus it was reasonable to produce. When fixated by a discourse of growth Norrland was however considered to exhibit some major deficiencies. Having growth as its nodal point and supposed goal, the region was not by far considered to fulfil its potential. Instead, as mentioned earlier, Norrland was defined on the basis of its lack of abilities and lack of achievements in comparison with urban centres. Norrland appeared to be less developed, not creative enough, and rural life seemed even to be ‘unsuitable’ (cf. Cruickshank et al., 2009; Frouws, 1998) since it was not economically expansive enough and did not by itself manage to create an impetus for in-migration.

Although primarily fixating Norrland as an area characterised by lack, the ‘growth’ discourse also offered some openings. Rather than focussing on traditional industrial production of goods or services, the discourse on growth comprised economic expansion in general, opening up for a more ‘multifunctional’ take on rural areas as producers of growth through industries like tourism (cf. Woods, 2011). ‘Growth’ could hereby — and in accordance with the discourse of Norrland as a resource — be articulated with an abundance of ‘resources’, thus describing Norrland as being under-used but with the possibility for growth, especially along the coast: ‘We must not forget that Norrland’s coastal area is the area that has the greatest potential for regional expansion in Sweden’ (2011/12:T258, Liberal Party). Numerous more or less concrete proposals for how to stimulate growth and development in Norrland were put forward:

The role of agriculture in keeping the landscape open is important, as it is the very foundation of attractive living environments and out-migration to the countryside. (2005/06:N482, Centre Party)

Let Norrland be a development area for limitless travel and procured services in the railway sector. Norrland is in need of constructive structure transformations, and a developed passen-gercar train system is a measure that can have concrete effects on growth, regional development and employment (2004/05:T436, Social Democrat Party).

In the first quote, rural qualities were pointed out as important drivers not only of productivity, but also as means to turn depopulation around by attracting non-rural in-migrants. Growth was often taken for granted as an important goal and one of the suggestions in the second quote was ‘that the state and the region of Norrland be given the possibility to procure train services in competition throughout Norrland’. Although the bills were directed at the Riksdag, pleading for changes, the direct involvement of the state or the municipality in the business sector was often depicted as a problem: ‘The local business community is caused great damage by municipal companies offering services that should be reserved for the private sector’ (2006/07:N202, Liberal Party).

One would think that a discourse of growth would perhaps be more debated in the beginning of the studied period and during that time reveal itself as emerging rather than dominant. While it is true that the exceedingly few bills that explicitly questioned the meaning and necessity of economic growth were written in the 1990s (primarily by the Lefts), the growth discourse seemed to be strong throughout the studied time-period, and also quite consistent. The similarities between different parties in relation to growth were greater than the differences. Almost all politicians agreed on, and were explicit about, the necessity for growth to the extent that they seldom had to give reasons as to why growth was necessary. However, when attacking their opponents’ politics regarding growth, differences between parties became more visible. The division of the country in growth and depopulation municipalities is a structural issue, and therefore the state must take overall responsibility for what is called regional policy’, one member of the Left cried out (2002/03:N329, Left Party).
Social Democrats and Lefts believed that the right wing emphasis on a ‘free’ market would favour the metropolitan areas at the expense of rural areas, the alliance parties (right wing and liberals) argued that social democratic homogenization, regulation and centralization were the biggest threats to growth also in rural areas. Instead, the Moderates stressed—besides deregulation and tax reduction—the individual entrepreneur to be the key figure within rural development:

A successful regional policy must be based on individual people’s inventiveness, entrepreneurial spirit and will to contribute to development. [...] The central steering of local development projects is impeding and should cease. The practical policy must be designed to take advantage of and encourage individual entrepreneurship and enterprise. All problems can not, as the Social Democrats seem to think, be resolved through political nit-picking. What is needed is rather more freedom for individuals (1990/91:A492, Moderates).

A central notion in the political rhetoric was that Norrland represented a region with great potential for growth, and that growth could be achieved with the right policy to support regional initiatives. The aiming for growth was never questioned. Despite the general emphasis on deregulation and reduction of state (and bureaucratic) meddling, the proponents of a discourse of growth presumed that it be the state that should lay the foundation for growth. In other words, despite the general emphasis on the nodal points of entrepreneurship, innovation, and individual freedom, the emphasis lay on how politics and policy programmes could accomplish growth.

4.4. Norrland as a victim

Norrland was recurrently, but perhaps not as frequently as the other discourses, portrayed as disadvantaged in comparison to regions in southern Sweden and the metropolitan areas. This positioning of Norrland as subjected to injustices made it possible to talk about a discourse of Norrland as a victim. According to this discourse, Norrland was underprivileged, had not accessed welfare services to the same extent that other regions had and was sometimes depicted as subjected to colonisation.

There were similarities between how Norrland was portrayed and what Best (1999) refers to as a widespread ‘ideology of victimization’, supported by, amongst others, the media, various institutions and stakeholders for victims (e.g. lawyers and therapists). According to this ideology, ‘victimization’ is described as a relatively unproblematic phenomenon. It concerns a powerful abuser that exploits a powerless and innocent victim, where the latter is morally irresponsible (cf. Christie, 1986; Nilsson, 2003; Markey et al., 2005). The ideology thus deprives victimization of complexity.

The discourse of Norrland as a victim recurred in the non-governmental bills almost regardless of their writers’ political identifications, although not as frequently in the bills proposed by the right-wing Moderate Party that was more prone to deploy discourses of growth. Below is a bill from the Centre Party regarding Norrland’s development conditions, where Norrland is described as a victim of historically rooted colonial structures:

The central power in Stockholm has for centuries looked upon the vast and sparsely populated northern part of Sweden as mainly an essential supplier of raw materials. [...] For a long time, the central power has had a colonial approach to the nearly two-thirds of the country’s land area that is called ‘Norrland’. This attitude must change (2006/07:N290, Centre Party).

Through the employment of this discourse, the government was held responsible for the unfair treatment of Norrland. For example, Norrland could be described as a victim for past governments’ centralisation policies (cf. 1999/2000: MJ5, Christian Democrats). In a similar vein, Norrland and the Norrlanders could be described as unfairly ‘forgotten’, and that Norrlanders also perceived themselves to be so due to politicians’ general focus on urban growth areas (2009/10:N319, Liberal Party).

The notion of Norrland as a victim was almost always articulated together with information about the large amount of natural resources that are transported out of Norrland without reasonable compensation. Bills that employed a discourse of Norrland as a victim unanimously demanded that Norrland should immediately be compensated for its contributions to the nation, for example by relocations of government agencies from Stockholm to Norrland (cf. 2005/06:N313, Centre Party), by increased grants to Norrländs industries (cf. 1992/93:Jo309, Social Democrats), or by returning a larger portion of the profits to the producing regions (cf. 1991/92:F11, Lefts).

The discourse of Norrland as a victim was deployed also when it was the image of Norrland that was debated. Some politicians argued that the dominant picture of the region as weak and a burden was unfair and that it ought to be revised to mirror the region’s ‘true’ characteristics:

Our region should no longer be regarded as debilitating and weak, dependent on artificial respiration through various support reforms, but it is time that Norrland is regarded as the region of opportunities that it is (2005/06:N304, Liberals).

The discourse of Norrland as a victim seemed to involve a transfer of (political) responsibility where Norrland was regarded as not being responsible for its current situation. Instead, it was some central power in terms of for example Stockholm or the government (or various political parties other than the writer’s own) that were said to have caused Norrland its troubles. Important, the transfer of responsibility that came with the discourse on Norrland as a victim was accomplished by politicians on both political wings. Although employed primarily to visualise injustices in order to overcome them, its main effect was the reproduction of a notion of Norrland as peripheral, vulnerable, subordinated and dependent on the metropolitan centres in the south of Sweden.

5. Discussion: logics of rurality

The parliamentary material was permeated by more or less obvious political ideologies, ranging from conservative to socialist. One ideological divide concerned sustained state-based welfare services contra deregulation of state enterprises, although this divide became less obvious in the more recent material. Regardless of ideological position, the political rhetoric seemed however to be structured by logics (Glynos, 2008; Laclau and Mouffe, 1985) that traversed the different discourses and affected the processes of meaning making. Two equivalent logics were identified that seemed to account for the ways in which the writers (and supposed

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4 An interesting ideological difference was that when the Moderates in 2011 proposed that parts of the hydropower surplus should stay in Norrland (2011/12: N341), the main argument was ‘commercial’ rather than compensatory.
5.1. A logic of comparison

Logics of equivalence are ontologically based on ever ongoing separations between what is included in the equivalence and what is not. Logics of equivalence therefore call for continuous comparisons with what is othered, and it is possible to say that they are, in fact, driven by an urge to monitor the borders between different chains of equivalences. It was clear that what may be called a ‘logic of comparison’ permeated all the identified discourses.

Comparisons were constantly made between Norrland and other places; between periphery and centre, Norrland and ‘the south of Sweden’, or Norrland and Stockholm or other large cities. These comparisons reinforced the division between Norrland as a geographically and developmentally remote region, and southern Sweden as a centre of progress (cf. Berger, 1995; Lundgren, 2011; Sjöstedt Landén, 2012). Norrland was thereby regarded to lack the benefits of southern Sweden, such as growth, development strategies and entrepreneurship, while southern Sweden could enjoy the benefits of lacking the disadvantages of Norrland, such as harsh climate, long transport distances, weak labour market and unfair treatment. But sometimes the opposite was true. Norrland was articulated as richer that other Swedish regions, but that this richness was either underutilised or poorly compensated.

Comparisons also permeated descriptions of Norrland itself. What emerged as the primary object of comparison was then not ‘Other places’, but rather a range of ideal images of what Norrland could be(come). Representatives of all political parties engaged in such comparisons, regardless of what discourse they employed. The comparisons usually resulted in simplifications, in the sense that some things were overlooked in order to make a case in point. As shown by Mol (2002), such simplifications are never innocent, but are decisive of what an object of discussion can become.

The political comparisons were sometimes a drawback for Norrland. For example, the problem discourse almost exclusively characterised Norrland by its difficulties and inabilities to live up to some more or less explicit expectations of an imaginary idyllic rurality. In light of the region’s resources and potentials, Norrland was constituted as an area that could, but did not, live up to expectations (cf. Frouws, 1998).

It was only within the discourse that fixed Norrland as a resource, that the region occasionally seemed to actually measure up to the politicians’ endeavours to constitute the ideal rural region. The region represented clean environment, quality of life, recreation and an economic surplus substantially contributing to Sweden’s GDP. Norrland could even ‘transcend’ an expected ideal rurality by producing more resources than it consumed, which was recurrently emphasised in the bills.

The logic of comparison constituted Norrland in relation to different kinds of ideals, either idealised urban centres, other parts of the country or ideal rurality. In that sense, it connected the discourses found in the material despite their ideological differences or differences from the point of view of content. Regardless of the result of the comparisons, the very comparing itself resulted in a view of Norrland as a region in opposition and almost always characterised by lack (cf. Eriksson, 2010; Sjöstedt Landén, 2012). This way of articulating Norrland paved the way for notions of support and compensation.

5.2. A logic of compensation

Logics of equivalence mark the boundaries of political identities by connecting certain signs together, while excluding others. As we have seen, an equivalential logic of comparison cut through the material, indicating the moments at which equivalential identities were explicitly measured in relation to their excluded others (other places, politicians who did not have rural agendas) or possible belongings (ideal notions of Norrland). Comparisons are however never neutral and visualise power-imbalances by falling out to either party’s advantage. This was certainly true in the studied non-government bills and constituted one of the main arguments for the recurring claims for compensation. Almost all claims made could be described as compensation claims where ‘Other’ areas were positioned as obliged to ‘give’ to Norrland (often by way of redistributive policies) and where ‘gifts’ were considered ‘fair’.

Also the logic of compensation organised the material in equivalences that transcended established political camps: Norrland was by representatives of all political parties understood as ‘innocent’ and deserving of sympathy. The power centres in the south – e.g. the government in Stockholm – were positioned as ‘Other’, being the simultaneous ‘enemy’ and ‘provider of compensation’. The discourses on Norrland were all structured by this thinking, whether arguing for compensation due to geographical specificities or compensations for injustices where Norrland’s poorly compensated contributions to the Swedish economy in the past rendered the region entitled to compensation in the present. Perhaps the logic of compensation was specifically evident in the victim discourse, which stated that Norrland had been exploited by colonial politics for too long, portraying the region as mistreated, exploited and ignored. Against that background, compensation in one form or another seemed to be morally and politically motivated.

Despite descriptions of Norrland’s advantages, the logic of compensation reinforced a view of the region as weak but rightfully entitled to support. The logic of compensation, most recently described by Nilsson (2011), supported meaning-making processes according to which Norrland was positioned as subjected to, and dependent on the power centre of national politics.

The logic of compensation contributed to a view of Norrland as worthy of empathy and support from the south, regardless of the suggested form for, or purpose of the requested support. However, the logic of compensation could also have a slightly opposite effect, where Norrland came to be understood as dependent on such compensations (cf. Frykman and Hansen, 2009). Implicit or explicit demands for compensation, whether they took ideas of victimhood, overproduction or special conditions as their point of departure, thus risked contributing to the view of Norrland as parasitizing on the nation, and itself becoming the nation’s Other (Eriksson, 2010).

5.3. Pro-Norrlandic alliances

The logics of comparison and compensation were both strong throughout the studied time-period. Their presence in the majority of bills meant that even though the proposed decisions varied and were written from within different political ideologies and discourses of Norrland, the ways in which the situation was described and decisions were proposed had similarities. This meant that despite the recurring references to the government’s or other parties’ deficiencies, the discursive struggle of how to define and solve any given situation in Norrland seemed strangely ancillary. The ideological positions taken by the writers of the bills clearly differed, but there always seemed to be something that united them; the representatives of the bill-writing parties all shared almost the same view of Norrland as being simultaneously a victim and an important contributor. Norrland was singled out, compared...
to other areas and ideals, and pointed out as (undeservedly) neglected and wronged.

The way the logics of comparison and compensation organised the material also had the effect that identities in favour of Norrland (typically the writers of the bills and their respective political parties) seemed oddly enchain without deliberately aiming to be so. The opponent of this pro-Norrland equivalence was most often the government, which came forth as a criticised ‘enemy’ regardless of which parties that were in power. But also an implicit ‘mass’ of politicians that did not recognise the importance of political action in favour of Norrland sometimes surfaced as a ‘threat’ to Norrland (cf. Laclau, 2005; Griggs and Howarth, 2008). Through this, political antagonisms between parties seemed to be (temporarily) replaced by (deceitful) political consensus. Paradoxically, then, the populist simplification of politics that is the effect of the workings of logics of equivalence (Winther and Svendsen, 2012), implied the possibility that political positions that were otherwise antagonistic ‘joined forces’ and became part of a common ‘pro-Norrland’ and/or ‘pro-rural’ identity.

In other words, the politicians used a powerful political rhetoric, informed by the logics of comparison and compensation to form pro-Norrlandic arguments in defence of Norrland. This pro-Norrland stance seemed partly to be used as a vote-catching strategy. The writers of the bills thereby supported their own elite positions as professional politicians. But their indirect message was not only that they acted in favour of and defended Norrland, or that a pro-Norrlandic stance would attract voters, but also that the Norrlanders needed professional leadership (sometimes positioned far from the geographical area of Norrland) to handle this defence (cf. Nilsson, 2011).

However, the populist defence of Norrland indirectly and paradoxically contributed to the image of the region as ‘problematic’. The mere facts that a defence was needed and that responsibility was taken by politicians sometimes located outside of the region, reproduced the idea that something was wrong with Norrland. The Norrlanders themselves were seldom ascribed any agency in the bills apart from on occasion being positioned as (important) ‘enthusiasts’ and (possible) ‘entrepreneurs’.

6. Conclusion

It was central to the antagonistic character of politics in general, and to the genre of non-governmental bills specifically, that bills first described a situation in Norrland in order to then propose a decision or suggest a solution. Four discourses dominated the material, fixating the essence of Norrland in relation to the respective signs of ‘problem’, ‘resource’, ‘growth’ and ‘victimhood’. Some of these emphasised what was perceived as ‘good’ things that could be put to work in Norrland’s favour. Others fixated Norrland as problematic more consistently. Although it has been stated that Swedish regional politics experienced a neoliberal shift in the 1990’s, the studied bills represented different but coexisting discourses that paradoxically fixated Norrland in similar ways.

Admittedly being partly an effect of the selection criteria, the combined effect of the identified discourses was that they underpinned very general characterisations of Norrland in a way that ignored the complexities of the vast land area (cf. Law and Urry, 2005). The discourses also primarily produced Norrland as a rural area that was intimately connected to nature. This was the case both when nature was constituted as a place for recreation and when it was constituted as a productivity resource. The presence of cities and knowledge-nodes in Norrland was clearly undercommunicated. The logics that were found to structure the discourses worked to emphasise the homogenising effect even further.

The construction of equivalences, moulded via the logics of comparison and compensation, positioned Norrland as something specific and different from other regions. Regardless of whether Norrland was characterised as a problem, a resource or described severally as in need of support, the constructed equivalences resulted in an implicit positioning of the region as a national ‘Other’. This Otherness was in turn described primarily by what it was — but ought not to be. On the symbolic level, this exceeded the layering process between the discourses and made it difficult to grasp.

Such Othering of rural Norrland has been identified elsewhere as central to representations in popular culture as well as in the media (Eriksson, 2010). It has also been identified as central to much academic thinking where the dualism between urbanity and rurality has been persistent (Cloke and Johnston, 2005). Its presence also in parliamentary material only emphasises further the significance of the identified logics. A press release from 2013 where the government proudly presented their new rural strategy makes a case in point:

The new rural strategy involves a clear value shift regarding the perception of the rural areas, they are neither museums nor a burdening sector of the Swedish economy. We see the rural areas’ possibilities for development, and to become an engine for job creation and growth, says Minister for Enterprise and Energy Maud Olofsson (www.jordbruksverket.se retrieved 2013-09-04).

With the ‘value shift’, rural areas will no longer represent ‘museums or a burdening sector’. Instead, they will ‘become an engine for job creation and growth’. This statement can be viewed literally as acknowledging the significance of discourse. It can also be interpreted as if rural areas actually are museums and burdening sectors that, given the ‘value shift’, have the possibility to become something else. Regardless of which, the promotion of what rural areas are (or should be) seems to need the description of what they are not (or should not be). Thus, a dilemma for Norrland (as well as other rural regions) is that it seems to be ‘trapped’ in a political context where, on the symbolic level, logics of meaning construction made pro-rural policies partly counterproductive by its (seemingly necessary) reproduction of stereotyped and ruralising images of Norrland.

The shift of focus from ‘rural politics’ to a ‘politics of the rural’, suggested by Woods (2003), was ambiguously present in the material. On the one hand, as present in the statement by the Minister for Enterprise and Energy above, quite a few bills explicitly engaged in the question of how Norrland was discursively constituted or understood, arguing that the stereotypical view of Norrland ought to be changed to better ‘mirror’ reality, as it were. On the other hand, the bills obviously constituted Norrland themselves in and through the ways in which they struggled to justify their proposed decisions. The style of rhetoric bound by the logics of comparison and compensation firmly worked to fixate an image of Norrland as typical of a negatively charged rurality. Here it is also important to stress how the position of non-government bills as proposed riksdag resolutions in themselves made such logics comprehensible.

Firmly grounded in a context of redistributive policy, logics of comparisons and compensations had historic roots and seemed almost to be given within the system. Fantastically, the employment of these logics therefore probably made a lot of sense to both writers and readers of the bills. Lastly, we argue that the very proposing of decisions in favour of Norrland, and the way the politicians capitalised on taking the populist position as responsible defenders of rural Norrland, must also be comprehended as political acts in both senses of the word. They paradoxically contributed to the highlighting of important political issues and they put into
words alternative ways of thinking rural Norrland. Simultaneously and stereotypically, they also constituted Norrland and rurality as deeply problematic.

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