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“For a living countryside”: Political rhetoric about Swedish rural areas

The expression ‘a living countryside’ is often used to characterise the goal of Swedish rural politics. In this article, the use of the expression in 170 non-government bills related to Swedish rural politics is analysed using discourse theory. On a general level, the expression was found to be empty of meaning and open for use by different and often opposing political parties proposing different and sometimes antagonistic measures. However, there were aspects of it that flirted with positively charged notions of Swedish national identity. It was also clear that the discursive struggle for a living countryside was also part of a party-political struggle. Further, the fantasy of a living countryside performed an ideological function in that it under-communicated how rural areas are generally and structurally subordinated to urban centres in ways that reach far beyond easily performed measures and political party quarrels.

Key words: rurality, rural politics, living countryside, discourse theory, logic of rurality, ideological fantasy

Introduction

Many of the arenas where the Swedish countryside is debated and fought for are united by the use of the expression ‘living countryside’ (Swedish: *levande landsbygd*). The expression is used when referring to geographic areas located outside of urban centres and their surrounding areas, primarily municipalities with populations fewer than 30,000 people,⁽¹⁾ and it is generally portrayed as something desirable and worth striving for. It is the positively charged opposite of the images of the problems that many rural areas face, especially in northern Sweden (Eriksson 2010).

Studying the discourse of Swedish rural politics, it soon becomes clear that the expression has no immediate political residence; instead, it is used by politicians representing all of the Swedish parliamentary parties, it figures in different political contexts, and it is used for sometimes antagonistic claims and purposes. A ‘living countryside’ might therefore best be understood in terms of a central but floating signifier,

the meaning of which is open for inscription and varies depending on the context in which it is used (Laclau, 1996).

While the Swedish expression may be specific for Sweden, the ideal of a living countryside is materialized generally in the EU (McDonagh, Valey and Shortall 2009). Its omnipresence within Swedish rural politics, however, makes it an interesting topic for study. In this article, we show how the expression is ascribed meaning within Swedish non-government bills – written proposals from Members of Parliament to the Swedish Riksdag (parliament) – where it works as the common and unquestioned goal for a variety of political demands and suggestions. We further argue that the expression serves as a fruitful entrance to the study of what has been referred to as ‘politics of the rural’ (Woods, 2003). The reason to talk about it in terms of ‘politics of the rural’ even though we confine ourselves to a quite traditional political forum, is that we want to emphasise the performative aspect of rural politics; how non-government bills not only comprise concrete suggestions to the Swedish Riksdag, but partake in a struggle over the meanings of rural space and identity.

Studying representations of the rural

Within the broad field of rural studies, studies based on constructivist perspectives have recurrently treated rurality as created, ambiguous, and ever changing (e.g. Cloke and Little, 1997; Halfacree, 1993, 1995; Jones, 1995; Murdoch and Pratt, 1993; Pratt, 1996). Rather than taking the content of rurality for granted as a specific place or a set of practises, rural spatiality is regarded to be the result of various relations and ongoing meaning-making processes (cp. Cruickshank, 2009; Massey, 1994). Studies have focused on a variety of fields, for example, the media (Bunce, 1994; Phillips, Fish and Agg, 2001), popular culture (Horton, 2008), destination images (Baylina and Berg, 2010; Eimermann, 2015), academic research, and people’s everyday perceptions (Cloke et al, 2000; Halfacree, 1995; Jones, 1995). Generally, studies in the field point at the dichotomous

representations and/or discourses of the rural, where rural areas are portrayed as either idyllic, traditional, and friendly or as backward and hostile (Yarwood, 2005).

According to this constructivist perspective, representations of rurality are seen as inherently political and as related to processes of power (Winther and Svendsen, 2012). Their performative capacities make them influential in the ongoing construction of rurality itself (Woods, 2007), and they also affect the conditions for people in rural areas, for example, through processes of inclusion and exclusion (Bell and Valentine, 1995; Halfacree, 1996; Juska, 2007).

Rurality is of course also political in the sense that rural politics is an established policy arena in which party politics is performed. But, as has been repeatedly argued, rural policy and policy debates are always already structured by rural discourse (Cruickshank, Lysgård and Magnussen, 2009; Woods, 2005) and urban normativity (Rönblom, 2014). Still, it is through such structured notions of rurality that the government, the parliament, and the political parties construct rural policies that affect and constitute rural areas both in the present and in the future.

In order to obtain legitimacy to partake in the construction of rural policy, political parties must submit to the rules of the political game in the sense that their demands and suggestions must come forth as both comprehensible and legitimate within the party-political arena. They have to act in ways that make them look credible and attractive for the public, signalling political capability (cf. Vaara et al, 2006). Political performances thus work as a kind of branding (cf. Iețcu-Fairclough, 2004). If one fails to acknowledge that strategies of political legitimisation and marketization are at play when rural politics and policy are debated, important dynamics will go unnoticed.

Discourse theory and the concept of fantasy

The constructivist stance taken in this article has already been made clear in the previous section. Here, we want to sketch out some further theoretical underpinnings and also

introduce one of the most central concepts, namely that of ‘ideological fantasy’, which is helpful in explaining the attraction that certain representations have.

Laclau and Mouffe (1985), representing the theoretical field often referred to as discourse theory, argue that the social world is radically contingent and produced in and through ongoing articulatory practices whereby otherwise different signs acquire new meanings (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). It is important, however, to not only focus on the articulation of practices or ideas as such, but also on the problematisations that constitute them (Howarth, 2000). In this study, we view the written bills as examples of the fact that rural space is discerned as an apt object for party politics and as a spatiality in need of specific measures, but also how rural areas are constituted as problematic and how suggestions are posed for how to solve their perceived problems. A critical question, then, is what the writers of the bills suggest the Riksdag consider in order for rural areas to become ‘living’.

A ‘living countryside’ is not only (if at all) constituted around some shared qualities that rural areas embody, but gets its meaning from the articulations that come to signify a desired and imaginary fullness as well as the boundary that defines the limits of this illusion. Such an imaginary fullness is sometimes referred to as ‘ideological fantasy’ (Žižek, 1998), not in the sense that it constitutes a false consciousness, but in the sense that it works as a shared narrative that structures the way people make sense of the world and their existence in it. Glynos (2011:79) argues that a key role of fantasy is to provide us with “a script with which to shuffle vulnerability and uncertainty to the margins”. Studying the logic of fantasy (Glynos and Howarth, 2007) thus becomes a way to get a deeper understanding of why subjects act the way they do – why they sometimes seem gripped by a discourse that they in some senses ‘know’ is problematic (Glynos, 2008).

Inherent in the idea of ideological fantasies is the notion that these can never be fully realised; something always *prevents* the fantasies from becoming realised (Žižek, 1998). Glynos (2008) points out how theoretically such obstacles are impossible to

overcome, but in reality they are often concretised into ‘difficulties’ that supposedly, and with the right procedures, *can* be managed. This conviction is, of course, central to policy work.

Just as with discourse generally, fantasy implies a subject that for different reasons wishes the fantasy to become realised. When investing in the fantasy, the subject becomes intertwined with that fantasy (Glynos, 2011), and, as we will show, will pursue the realisation of that fantasy, although, as mentioned, such realisation can never be fully accomplished.

While the concept of fantasy has guided analyses of various phenomena such as the politics of airport expansion (Griggs and Howarth, 2013) and the grip of personalisation in adult social care (West, 2013), only a few studies have made use of it in analyses of politics of the rural (e.g. Nilsson, 2010).

Material and method

This article sets out to study political discourse as it manifests itself in Swedish non-government bills written between 2010/11 and 2013/14 and archived on the Swedish Riksdag website riksdagen.se.⁽²⁾ The choice of non-government bills as the main material rests on the fact that they constitute varied examples of rural issues that the Riksdag representatives find important, including both their own suggestions and their responses to government bills. Non-government bills are written proposals to the Swedish Riksdag from one or a number of MPs representing the different political parties in the Swedish Riksdag. During the studied time period, these parties included the Green Party (Miljöpartiet), the Social Democratic Party (Socialdemokraterna), and the Left Party (Vänsterpartiet). These had campaigned together in 2008–2010 as a red-green coalition that was dissolved after they lost the election in 2010. There was also a coalition of the Moderate Party (Nya Moderaterna), the Liberal Party (Folkpartiet Liberalerna), the

Centre Party (Centerpartiet), and the Christian Democratic Party (Kristdemokraterna) that formed a centre-right coalition called the Alliance (Alliansen). The eighth party, the Sweden Democrats (Sverigedemokraterna), were part of neither coalition.

We decided to focus on the four years of the most recent term of office, which comprised the four Riksdag sessions of 2010/11, 2011/12, 2012/13, and 2013/14 (a session starts and ends in or around September in connection with the parliamentary election). During this period, the government was held by the centre-right Alliance. The time period was chosen because it mirrors an increase in political interest in the countryside.

A search within the archive (www.riksdagen.se) showed that among the total of 13,981 bills, there had been 770 bills containing the word 'countryside' during the search period. Of these, 102 contained the exact phrase 'living countryside' and were chosen for further analysis. In addition to these, another 68 bills were added. These contained the words 'living' and 'countryside' within five words' proximity to each other and described the gist of 'living countryside' but in a slightly different wording. The 170 bills varied in scope, from one page up to around 120 pages. The Alliance parties in office had written slightly more bills than the other parties together. The two largest parties, the Social Democratic Party and the Moderate Party, had written the largest number of bills.

Performing analyses of non-government bills informed by discourse theory means studying the way the bills are constructed; we noted what words that 'living countryside' was connected to and what the bills suggested that a 'living countryside' *was*. Through a close reading of the material, we then focused on the narrative that structured the bills' arguments: what was described as the goal, what was considered to be the main obstacles to reaching this goal, what were the suggested measures, and how the writers positioned themselves as political subjects within this narrative. Such narratives only become comprehensible if the writers of the bills are imagining and idealising rural areas in certain

ways. Describing the architecture of the ideological fantasy means giving an account of these ways.

Fantatising a living countryside

On a general note, we found that the non-government bills followed a narrative structure that looked like this – the Swedish countryside is threatened, but it is worth saving because it is immensely important and constitutes a central node in the Swedish self-image and contributes to national growth. Certain measures have to be taken in this pursuit, and the goal for these measures is a living countryside.

What was this goal? In what follows, we will first describe central themes in the articulations of a living countryside. We then move on to describe how the fantasy of a living countryside had two sides to it, a beatific and a horrific side.

Central themes in the fantasy

Jobs and citizens' rights

To have people inhabit the rural was central, but more than that, to have them earn their income locally, to have functioning infrastructure, including navigable roads and Internet access, and to have a certain amount of welfare and other services present – for example, emergency wards, an ambulance service, and schools for children – were central goals that the bills suggested could be reached, albeit in a variety of different ways. Special attention was paid to lines of business that are traditionally and/or symbolically connected to Swedish rural areas such as animal husbandry, agriculture, and the forest industry, sometimes repeated within naturalising claims such as “Swedish agriculture is the main economic engine of rural livelihoods (2010/11:U269, the Christian Democrats) or “Agriculture and forestry are important prerequisites for a living countryside” (2012/13:MJ397, the Centre Party; 2012/13:MJ261, the Liberals). In addition, tourism, renewable energy, and green industries were recurrent themes. In this sense, the

represented rurality was certainly one marked by what has been called multifunctionality, pointing at how rural survival rests on many different livelihoods (Feehan and O'Connor, 2009; Wilson, 2001; Woods, 2011).

The relative diversity in the ways in which a 'living countryside' was suggested could be achieved points at the sense in which 'living countryside' worked as a floating signifier. Because 'life' and 'to live' are such common metaphors, 'living countryside' was extremely open for interpretation as the above descriptions hint at. The associations put forth in the bills were certainly diverse and belonged to different spheres of rural policy. At the same time, they all pinpointed central and idealised values. These could be understood as common notions of minimum requirements for a decent life, which often coincided with notions of *citizen rights*. Articulating these values, or rights, with Swedish rural areas of course did something with the notion of Swedish rurality. Despite their differences, the bills all came to portray rurality and its needs in a way that concluded that it was somehow excluded from, and defined by a shortage of, these values and rights. In this sense, the disparate associations were held together by the image of Swedish rural residents as deprived of their citizen rights.

The major threats posed to the defended citizen rights were almost always portrayed as the politics of the opposite bloc, but also as demographic processes like population ageing and migration patterns. Concerns about demography were expressed in terms of accelerating population ageing and out-migration from rural areas, both of which led to depopulation (2013/14:N434, the Moderate Party; 2013/14:C210, the Sweden Democrats; 2013/14:N264, the Christian Democrats). As an effect of these processes, rural areas were described as being exposed to a decreasing labour market and escalating unemployment (2013/14:N434, the Moderate Party) and a declining public sector (2011/12:N331, the Social Democrats) and as being more dependent on a social economy based on voluntary work compared to urban areas (2013/14:So400, the Left Party).

Swedish rural specificity

‘Living countryside’ also had a specific affective charge. It connected not only to notions of deprived citizenship rights, but also to a generalised Swedish rural nature that was thought to safeguard a range of values that appeared important but uncertain, such as cultural environments, tourism, and improved integration of new Swedes. A living countryside was often articulated together with nature, Swedishness, domestically produced goods, Swedish animal rights legislation, and the potential loss of landscape and cultural values, thus hinting at ‘living countryside’ being possible to locate within an interpretation of historically moulded Swedishness and/or Swedish nationalism (cf. 2011/12:Fi242, the Sweden Democrats).

The notion of ‘Swedish nature’ was generally referred to as a cultivated ‘open landscape’ with fields and meadows that opened the sight lines through the woods. This interest in the landscape is usually described as typical of the construction of Swedish identity (Frykman and Löfgren, 1979; Löfgren, 1993). The examples below are both taken from bills named ‘Living countryside’ but written by representatives of opposing blocs.

A vibrant agriculture keeps the landscape open. Almost all Swedes think it would be a great loss if the farming landscape became overgrown. The open countryside is also of great importance for the tourist industry and other entrepreneurship in rural areas (2010/11:C311, the Christian Democrats).

Many international visitors are attracted by the possibilities of hiking in our pristine Swedish forests and taking part in nature experiences that are beyond the ordinary (2010/11:N224, the Social Democrats).

Although there was certainly both a sense of nostalgia and of pride inherent in the references to the cultivated Swedish open landscape, it was primarily legitimised by arguments that held that the open landscape was important for the tourist industry. While emotion seemed to be a central driving force, it was economic reasoning that was put forth as the explicit argument. Why was this so?

One interpretation is of course the impact of a discourse of growth. Another is that the nostalgic indications were not deemed politically viable to articulate either as goals or as arguments. Glynos (2011:71) has described how “the *logic* of fantasy is such that features of its narrative tend to *resist* public official disclosure because they are in some way socially prohibited or unsettling” (see also Connolly, 2008). Such denied intensities might well constitute a kernel of appeal in the sign ‘living countryside’, and thus work as a significant driver behind the suggested politics in the bills studied here. The expression might thus capture the essence of something (what Sweden is and should continue to be, to whom Sweden belongs, and so on) that cannot be explained, and using the expression somehow made the bills promise what they could not verbalise due to the associations to a politically problematic nationalism and the politically counter-productive associations to being reactionary that such arguments would entail (cf. Eriksson, 2010).

However, a ‘living countryside’ was also put forth as an asset in bills that argued in favour of change, for example, bills regarding immigration. Not only would Swedish rural areas benefit economically from immigration, but the Christian Democrats argued that “[a] living countryside with a vital labour market is one of the conditions for a better and faster integration process” (2013/14: N264). Similarly hinting at specific values residing in a living countryside, the Social Democrats stated that one of the effects of a living countryside is “a more inclusive society that guarantees civil rights” (2013/14:N248). The latter statement not only hints at values that are supposed to come with a living countryside, but also knits together the two themes of citizen rights and the Swedish rural landscape.

‘Living countryside’ was certainly a relatively flexible symbol. However, rather than just ‘floating alongside’ other important signs and signifiers, ‘living countryside’ seemed to play a more privileged role. Tying together pre-existing signifiers – including job opportunities and social welfare as well as core values, feelings, and hopes – the expression ‘living countryside’ managed to strike a chord that echoed through the bills and helped convince the reader of their good intentions and their indisputably positive goals without compromising the dominant discourse of growth.

Two sides of the fantasy

The fantasy of a living countryside had two sides to it. In reality, the two sides were points on a continuum, and most bills were positioned somewhere in between them, containing bits and pieces of both. Clearly, however, the two sides pursued politics of the rural in different ways.

The beatific side of the fantasy of a living countryside

One way in which suggestions for rural politics were put forth was to portray them as measures to reach a fullness to come. If only we do this, they argued, the countryside will – once again – come alive. Such narratives have been described in terms of *beatific* fantasies (e.g. Glynos, 2001; Glynos and Howarth, 2007; Stavrakakis, 1999; Žižek, 1998). Rather than warning against a potential disaster scenario (as *horrific* fantasies do), they typically portray the future as promising if only certain measures are taken. The bills that were invested in a beatific fantasy portrayed the rural as harbouring potential resources that the writers authoritatively acknowledged. Such proclamations worked to establish a visionary, constructive, and assuring tone of voice in a way that performatively portrayed rural areas as holding great potentials (cf. Nilsson and Lundgren, 2015), and the suggested politics was described as the pivotal means for these potentials to become realised and for the great challenges to be met. In this sense, the beatific fantasies had a

stabilizing dimension (Žižek, 1998). Whereas horrific fantasies needed to suggest measures that could change a trodden path, beatific fantasies suggested measures that support what is already (supposedly) there. The sometimes programmatic tone established the bill-writing parties as confident and pro-rural. “We believe in a strong and living countryside”, the Sweden Democrats declared (2013/14:Fi282), and the Green Party emphasised that their party “safeguards the entire country” (2011/12:N418). The expression ‘the entire country’ is interesting because it indirectly suggested an urban norm; unless it was pointed out that the suggested politics concerned the *whole* of Sweden, ‘Sweden’ would just comprise urban areas. Similarly, rural politics was repeatedly legitimised by the argument that a living countryside would benefit the whole country.

Often without specification of the exact areas, the beatific articulations of the living countryside as harbouring ‘potential resources’ often highlighted the Swedish countryside as a unique asset worth preserving, and a living countryside was projected as a goal that can be envisioned, believed in, and reached. Such resources tended, however, to be valued specifically for their ability to fulfil an economic potential (for example, within the tourist industry) so that rural areas could become economically independent and self-supporting. In this sense, the beatific side of the fantasy had similarities with neoliberal discourses according to which the conditions of existence coincide with the ability to create local growth (cf. Frouws, 1998), and this side of the fantasy has corresponded to Swedish regional politics since the 1990s (Hudson and Rönnblom, 2007; Tillväxtanalys, 2012).

The logic of a beatific fantasy also revealed itself in bills that made an effort to embed their suggestions in a description of positive tendencies in the present. Under the heading ‘Living countryside’, the Moderate Party writes:

In today’s Sweden, the smaller towns and the countryside have begun to attract an increasing number of people. Families with children and teenagers

are first and foremost looking at the services in a community: Are there pre-schools, schools, stores, post offices, gas stations, and a Systembolag(3) in the area? In this context, it is important that all kinds of foodstuffs, even alcohol, are available locally. Without shops and without services, there is no living community and then there is the risk that no one will settle there. (2010/11:So565)

Acknowledging the positive trend that people are in fact interested in living in rural areas, and then listing things that are important for their decision to do so, is something more than just speaking of rural areas' shortcomings. Such requirements do not primarily come forth as rescue operations, but as offensive initiatives and investments.

Overall, the bills present a picture of a living countryside as generally desirable and as a resource and a value not only for the people living there, but for the whole country, because it seems to be able to contribute with everything from growth and raw materials to the integration of new Swedes and to fulfil people's dreams about quality of life. The countryside is also considered by representatives of all parties to have a great future potential for development – to *really* come alive. Even if the bills written from within the beatific fantasy also mentioned processes that were portrayed as threats, their main way of dealing with those threats was to produce hope. The beatific side projected confidence that the full potential of the living countryside, with jobs and social services in place in rural areas, has the possibility to become realized.

The horrific side of the fantasy of a living countryside

Also present in the bills was a related but fundamentally different side of the fantasy that did not primarily project hope, but that took its point of departure in a rural imagery where the countryside was dying. Also in this take on the fantasy, a 'living countryside' was used as the goal, but there were no reassurances given that such a goal could be achieved.

A 'living countryside' was primarily represented as *missing* in today's Sweden due to long-term negative developments and associated structural processes and problems over the last several decades. The suggested measures put forth in the bills did not seek to achieve a vibrant fantasy of a living countryside, but were seen as necessary if the downward trend was to be halted and the countryside saved from extinction. This type of fantasy is sometimes referred to as 'horrific' (e.g. Glynos, 2001; Glynos and Howarth, 2007; Stavrakakis, 1999; Žižek, 1998) because it complies with a narrative structure that predicts disaster if certain actions are not taken. Contrary to the beatific fantasy that primarily acknowledged the potentials of rural areas, the horrific fantasy emphasised their problems.

The bills that posed their requests from this side of the fantasy not only regarded the countryside as being exposed to severe problems, but to escalating problems that were seen as fundamental threats to any prospect of a living countryside. These threats were in many cases described as broad and complex processes that were positioned as partly out of reach of party politics, for example, demographic processes like population ageing and migration patterns.

Thus, the bills that were invested in a horrific fantasy defined the meaning of a 'living countryside' primarily by describing its opposite. Rural areas as threatened, old fashioned, and with bleak prospects have been described many times before, especially when it comes to representations of rural areas in northern Sweden (cf. Eriksson, 2010; Nilsson and Lundgren, 2015). While putting into words everything that is problematic, the bills simultaneously evoked images of what an ideal 'living countryside' would look like. Just like within the beatific side of the fantasy, these ideals seemed primarily to be conditioned by a neoliberal discourse of growth in which growth was unproblematically presented as the necessary goal. Such a focus prioritises areas characterized by rapid development and expansion (Cruickshank et al, 2009). As a consequence, many rural areas came forth as 'failures' because they were evaluated from within an urban norm

and compared to urban areas characterized by competitive, vibrant, and innovative businesses (cf. Yarwood, 2005). Just as for the beatific side of the fantasy, politicians from all political parties were influenced by this neoliberal ideal. Even bills that suggested solutions to do with distribution policy supporting basic commercial services (e.g. 2009/10:Fi15, the Social Democrats, the Left-Wing Party, and the Green Party) still had as their goal that rural areas would create their own growth.

Adding to the pessimistic and critical tone of the horrific fantasy was the tendency to sometimes not only confirm that the situation for rural areas was difficult, but to also blame this situation on one's political opponents. In such cases, the 'Other' in the bills was not only the overarching and threatening demographic processes, but also the concrete policies of the other political bloc. "The Social Democratic government of 1994–2006 left behind neglected maintenance of the road and rail network", the Christian Democrats complained, before arguing that "[i]ncreased resources to the fine-meshed road network are essential for a living countryside" (2010/11:T441). Similarly, according to the Social Democrats, the threats against rural areas are the effect of the policies of the centre-right bloc (and incumbent government). They argued that the housing policy pursued by the government had led to a significant reduction in housing construction, and they declared in a manner typical of the horrific fantasy that "[i]f we want a living countryside, actions are needed that make it possible to build there" (2010/11:C368).

In this way, communication of general threats often occurred together with a communicated lack of efficiency in the politics of political opponents, and it became important for the politicians to persuade the Riksdag that *their* communication of risk was the more reliable (cf. Vaara et al, 2006).

Despite who was held responsible for the absence of a 'living countryside', the bills that were invested in the horrific side of the fantasy engaged in communicating risks and threats against the countryside and emphasized the importance of political action in dealing with these threats. In this sense, threats were used by politicians from all political

parties to authorize political action, for example, in terms of risk management (Dunmire, 2011). Communicating threats became a way to populistically assume the role of whistle blower, suggesting that the bill-writing party was the only one who had realised the acuteness of the situation and knew how to make it better. It also became a way to make the suggested measures come forth as both inevitable and urgent (cf. Lundgren and Ljuslinder, 2011; West, 2013).

Discussion

The two sides of the fantasy of a living countryside meant that the common goal of a living countryside was approached somewhat differently. Of course, these sides of the fantasy presupposed each other. The beatific narratives always and necessarily had a string of the horrific side, otherwise there would be no weight behind the proposed suggestions. Similarly, the narratives dominated by the horrific side of the fantasy always referred to some potential solution.

The two sides of the fantasy corresponded vaguely with the dualistic ways in which rurality has commonly been represented in terms of either rural idyll or backward area (Yarwood, 2005). In the case here, however, it is obvious that when conceptualised *as fantasies* both sides proved to offer some specific and desired promises. It became clear that they constituted different argumentative rhetoric, produced different ruralities, and also, as we will see, made different political positionings possible. One can, however, ask in what way fantasy sustains (or makes room for challenges of) rural politics.

Necessary obstacles and ideological perseverance

What united the representations of both sides of the fantasy was that they dealt with ‘obstacles’ that prevented their fantasmatic desires of a living countryside from becoming realised. This was of course partly at the core of *the genre* of non-government bills; being

proposed suggestions, the bills have to first describe the problem that the suggestion is then supposed to solve.

According to Glynos, obstacles are crucial to any fantasy. Turning to Lacanian psychoanalysis, he explains how any realisation of one's fantasy "is impossible because the subject (as a subject of desire) survives only insofar as its desire remains unsatisfied" (2008: 283). The creation of an obstacle is thus not only to neutrally point out objective hindrances to one's plans, but also to perform a much more profound function.

In the analysed non-government bills, the main obstacles that were put forth were either complex demographic processes linked to economic costs or the policies of other political parties.(4) Apart from being used as *explanans* for the present situation, these obstacles also conditioned and legitimated politics as such. Within each bill, the obstacle functioned as the object that compelled the bill-writing politicians to take action. Demographic processes, regional policies, and other political parties were easily made into an 'Other' that, within the logic of the bills, threatened the realisation of a living countryside. The complexity, global extension, and seeming relentlessness of some of the obstacles also lent the bills an air of acute necessity. Within the bills, the theoretical impossibility to ever realise an ideological fantasy was thus reinterpreted into a mere 'difficulty' to do so (Glynos, 2008), and contrary to impossibilities, difficulties can be overcome with the right measures. Consequently, the suggested measures were often on a much more detailed level than the struggle against the identified 'Others' would lead one to believe. Here, the need to concretise the elusiveness of the threatening 'Others' made common cause with the need for the political parties to be convincing that they were in control and could offer appealing solutions.

It was also interesting how the political parties that had been responsible for previous and now criticised policies kept defending them and/or proposing them again, even when confronted with supposedly new obstacles. From a perspective on ideology, this is interesting because it sheds light on how failed policies might well be a

precondition for the success of an ideology. Fotaki (2010) has suggested that when policies fail people often start to search for explanations for their failure rather than questioning the policy and its ideological underpinnings as such. In the highly antagonistic field of party-politics, this was not entirely the case; failures were customarily blamed on the other bloc's ideological thinking. Still, it was obvious that the parties kept defending their own suggestions regardless of how well these had worked in the past or how often they had been turned down in the past. In this sense, rural politics was structured by party-political identifications and investments as well as by rural discourse (see also Woods, 2005). Efforts to correct details rather than questioning the grounds for rural politics thus did not hold much promise for fundamental changes in the way rurality was viewed.

Political branding as motivator

Did the eagerness to accomplish a living countryside – and the investment in a fantasy of what this would imply – alone explain the writing of the bills? The full context of the bills suggested that it did not. Writing the bills was also a chance for the political parties to market themselves as respectable rural representatives. Writing them most probably also had to do with more general aspects of party-politics like doing well in the next election and perhaps, on a more individual level, to branding oneself and one's political career (Ieţcu-Fairclough, 2004; Nilsson, 2012).(5)

Ideological fantasies are commonly understood to explain why and how people become gripped by the practices and regimes they are involved in, and they might also explain "the force and passion of [their] identifications" (Howarth, 2009:324). Without diminishing politicians' sincere wishes to create decent rural policies, the way the bills were written suggests that this was not their only goal. The bills were also driven by what they allowed politicians and parties *to become*. The explicit declarations of one's own party as specifically pro rural were one example of how *the identity* of the bill-writing

parties was made important. The keenness to identify the opposite bloc as responsible for the identified problems further emphasised this effort.

Regardless of which side of the fantasy a bill was primarily invested in, the solution to the situation was always some sort of *action*. While the content of the suggested actions was of course central, action itself also figured as important political capital (cf. Wodak, 2011). It was by articulating one's political party with decisiveness and action that rural politics gained momentum. The suggested actions or measures signalled a vindicated capability to solve problems. They were either oriented towards a morally and emotionally charged *ideological* dimension or they consisted of concrete and often seemingly demarcated *instrumental* measures. We found no particular connections between these two types of actions and the two fantasies.

An ideological dimension was typically manifested through recurring and symbolically charged 'buzzwords'. Glynos and Howarth (2007) have described how such buzzwords can connect to a whole fantasmatic dimension that relentlessly tries to construct the world as comprehensible and seeks to either include its various manifestations into the fantasy or to exclude them through scapegoating or stigmatisation (see also Stavrakakis, 1999). Identifying in relation to such fantasmatic constructs grips subjects through emotional references and forms the basis for an emotion-based collective identity. It is thus likely that the uses of ideologically charged buzzwords not only worked to signal the political belonging of the bills or to lend the proposals an air of comprehensibility (Reyes, 2011), but they were likely to also resonate with the politicians' own desires to become recognised.

While references to ideologically charged symbols were clearly at work in all of the bills, some proposals gave the impression of offering concrete and energetic measures based on instrumental rationality according to which certain actions were expected to have specific and controllable effects. When the Left Party suggested that a living countryside would be accomplished by lowering the motor vehicle tax (2013/14:Ub396)

or when the Moderate Party suggested that better road signs are key to a living countryside (2013/14:T228), they both boil down complex processes to simple solutions. Rationality gains legitimacy by indirect allusions to common sense. The ‘reasonableness’ in such bills was due to a reductionism where the perceived problems associated with rural areas were reduced to specific and easily identified obstacles (high fuel costs and inadequate road signs). Through the correction of such specific faults, the countryside was expected to prosper. What this kind of reductionism does is to present simple solutions to complex problems (cf. Dennett, 1995) through a de-contextualization of rural space and by not focusing on the power relations between urban centres and rural areas that have long underpinned the situation.

Theoretically, this multitude of desires – to reach the goal of a living countryside, to become a respected politician, to win votes – safeguarded the engagement in rural politics as an arena for political becoming and identification. Because, according to Lacanian psychoanalysis, the subject “survives only insofar as its desire remains unsatisfied” (Glynos, 2008: 283), obstacles cannot be too easily defeated. Being driven by a multitude of different desires means that even if one specific demand is realised, there will still be plenty of unfulfilled desires remaining that political engagement for a living countryside can promise to fulfil.

Concluding remarks

This study of Swedish rural political discourse highlights the way the expression ‘living countryside’ worked as a common goal for much of rural politics by legitimising a range of different political suggestions. These were held together by an ideological fantasy that portrayed a living countryside that had resemblances with notions of a past Sweden. On the one hand, these notions were constituted by references to citizen rights: the need for job opportunities and infrastructure, and, primarily, the promised but denied rights to health care and social services. On the other hand, images of a past Sweden were

constituted by generalised references to nostalgically and emotionally charged notions of a ‘traditional’ Swedish landscape marked by agriculture and animal husbandry. These notions might be part of – or at least might go hand in hand with – the more general nationalist tendencies of the early 21st century, and thus connect the fantasies of the rural with processes that reach far beyond Swedish rural areas. In both cases, however, growth existed alongside as an equally, if not more important, goal. This goal supported a direction towards multifunctionality and partly opened up avenues for new interpretations of rural life, although the bills differed in how growth was to be accomplished. Interestingly, it was often emphasised that a realised living countryside would also benefit the nation as a whole, suggesting that benefitting rural areas was not always considered important enough.

The fantasy of a living countryside had two sides to it, one beatific and one horrific, that engaged in the politics of the rural in different ways. Two dominant images of rurality came forth. Rather than simply reflecting the well-known dichotomy of either idyllic or backward images, the two images in the bills were both about identifying the countryside as being in considerable need of help. Either it was ‘harbouring potentials’ (natural resources as well as competence and entrepreneurial skills) but needing help to realise them, or the countryside was ‘lacking resources’.

It was obvious that a strong driving force in the writing of the bills was not only the wish to improve life in rural areas, but to also take part in the party-political struggle. In this struggle, branding oneself as trustworthy, action-oriented, and indisputably representing one’s party’s ideological belongings were equally important. Interestingly, references to rural movements outside of the party-political arena, with their partly differing views on political action were clearly absent.

Overall, the fantasy that permeated and structured the bills promised a living countryside that was reachable if only the right measures were taken. This in turn revealed an ideological function to under-communicate perspectives that point to how rural areas

are generally and structurally subordinated to urban centres in ways that reach far beyond easily performed measures and petty political squabbles.

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Footnotes

- (1) The Swedish Board of Agriculture (Jordbruksverket) divides Sweden into four regional types: metropolitan areas, urban areas, rural areas, and sparsely populated areas. Municipalities defined as rural and sparsely populated have populations below 30,000, but they differ in that the former has to have at least 5 inhabitants/square kilometre.
- (2) The website comprises all written proposals to the Swedish Riksdag from around 1990 and onwards.
- (3) Systembolaget, The System Company, is a government-owned chain of stores with monopoly status on alcohol sales in Sweden.
- (4) Interestingly, the bills seldom went into the web of power-relations that had led to the present state. Not even bills that explicitly addressed the injustice of rural inhabitants not having immediate access to welfare services articulated this difficult situation with the way public discourse of equal rights incessantly takes urbanity as its point of departure (e.g. Rönnblom, 2014).
- (5) That writing non-government bills performed other functions than just proposing questions that one wanted the Riksdag to consider is perhaps best illustrated by the fact that most non-government bills are rejected.

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