

# Chapter 13

## Spatial Justice and Social Reproduction in the Nordic Periphery



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### Introduction

Our reflection on socio-spatial theory in Nordic geography locates the case of the Nordic periphery in a wider context of scholarly work on social reproduction and processes of geographical uneven development. Our understanding of social reproduction is that paid work and the rest of life are impossible to separate, and that it may be understood in both individual and collective terms (Bhattacharya, 2017). Social reproduction has become privatized as states withdraw from social provisions, also increasingly the Nordic welfare states (e.g., Listerborn, 2020). The consequences have been that some households and places become more vulnerable than others, as government investments in public social reproductive capacity through welfare provision, health care, education, public space, and the environment are differently eroded in different places.

In this chapter we identify a tradition of empirically based geographical research on material conditions and changing socio-spatial forms of production and consumption, which suggests a socio-spatial theory useful in an era of crisis and increased privatization of nature and social reproduction in welfare societies. Feminist scholars have argued that Nordic peripheries offer a powerful lens on “peripherality” in a globalizing world economy, given the perception of the region as affluent, stable and with high levels of social equality (Thidemann Faber & Priested Nielsen, 2015). The Nordic welfare state has been celebrated as a model for targeting uneven social and geographical development produced by economic modernization (Knudsen, 2020). Regional policies have to different degrees compensated people and places “left behind” in national peripheries with transfers, state investments and/or promoted/subsidized capital investments to mediate spatial divisions. The extent to which this has been effective at all varies between the Nordic

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countries, with the Swedish case often seen as the “extreme” in terms of rapid rural depopulation, post-war industrialization, urbanization, and modernization of the economy (Buttimer & Mels, 2006; Knudsen, 2020). This while at the same time much empirical and theoretical work testifies to the Nordic countries’ built-in “blind spots” of nationalism and ethnic, race, class, and gender differences (Thidemann Faber & Priested Nielsen, 2015). The ways these differences play out spatially within the nations, especially during welfare state retrenchment, have received less scholarly attention (but see Forsberg & Stenbacka, 2017; Eriksson et al., 2015; Andersen et al., 2017; Baeten et al., 2015; Dahlgren, 2018; Enlund, 2020).

Rather than accepting the consequences of modernization and economic growth as inevitable, Nordic politicians, local activists and scholars have contested centralizing forces, but to very different degrees and with varying outcomes. For instance, the political and intellectual influence of Norwegian academics such as Brox (1966, 1984) and Galtung (1971) fundamentally contested the modernization project. This stands in contrast to many Swedish researchers’, including geographers, compliance with the modernization project. Even though the modernization project was pursued on the premises of its combination with a strong welfare state and functional regional policy during the 1950s and 1960s, which aimed to secure rights to social reproduction and to cushion centralizing forces (Löfgren, 2017). Yet, subsequent welfare state crises and neoliberalisation policies from the 1980s and onwards point perhaps to the end of the “exceptionalism” of the Nordic welfare state models (Schierup & Ålund, 2011; OECD, 2017).

Nonetheless the situated knowledge production of early Nordic geographical research has left an important legacy to build on in order to make sense of contemporary uneven geographies, and the exploitation of natural resources, workers, and local communities today. It may also contribute to analyses of Nordic peripheries as part of a more politically charged regional history, in which battles around social reproduction are articulated. Our research on the (re)production of a Northern periphery (Eriksson, 2010), the production of Northern rural landscapes, and on the labor producing these landscapes (Eriksson & Tollefsen, 2018), extends earlier theorizing by integrating critical socio-spatial theory (Massey, 2005; Lefebvre, 1991; Smith, 2010; Tsing, 2009) to analyze uneven geographical developments and the production of “peripherality” in a Nordic context.

The next few pages discuss theoretical considerations regarding the uneven geographical developments and the production of “peripherality” in a Nordic context, we thereafter move on to show examples of enduring mobilization around social reproduction in the Swedish north. We conclude by addressing the significance of battles around social reproduction and spatial justice.

## **(Re)Producing the Nordic Periphery**

The earliest geographical imaginations of the North were those of peripheries. Imaginations of the North and Scandinavia in science and fiction have been traced from the end of the 1000's and were commonly made up of extraordinary nature, and imaginary animals, but also speculation over what natural resources might be hidden in this terra incognita (see e.g., Olaus Magnus' *Carta Marina* a sixteenth century map over the Nordic countries; Loeffler, 2005).

To be 'far away North', became important for the Nordic self-image at the beginning of the nineteenth century and forward, as it came to contrast the colonial representation of people in the tropics (in the very South). The nature, and the virtues of the people, were constructed as superior to other people and other parts of the world (Loftsdóttir & Jensen, 2016).

Characteristic for the Nordic countries is their sparsely populated areas (except for Denmark) with a relative population density that roughly amounts to one tenth of the core West European countries (Gløersen, 2013). But this sparsity is not uniform, in general the population density increases southwards, with proximity to the coast and major cities. A small and relatively declining part of the population inhabits vast areas that tend to be northern inland, peripheral to major urban centers. Nevertheless, this settlement pattern bears immense symbolic importance for the national identity in all the Nordic countries, for instance, large areas of nature in the rural North were set aside to become national parks, symbolizing the bonds between the people and the homeland (Mels, 1999; Knudsen, 2018). The sparse distribution of population is hence a source of political attention and measures, but also of controversies and conflicts (Lorentzen, 2012; Winther & Svendsen, 2012).

Earlier geographical research on the Nordic periphery went at great length to empirically document spatial changes over time in northern resource exploitation, population patterns and economic and business structures. Detailing forms of adaptations by local populations, including the Sami, to new industries and demands on land and resources (Gren et al., 2003). Geographers based at universities founded outside the metropolitan areas in the north established a materially oriented school of research focusing on the sparsely populated Nordic landscape (Bylund, 1956, 1962, 1969; Arell, 1977; Layton, 1981). However, much of this geographical research never critically analyzed the workings of uneven geographical development and its wider implications for social reproduction and spatial justice. Also, the Nordic geographical tradition of empirically based research developed in a different way from what was seen during the Anglo-American linguistic/cultural turn in academia from the 1990s (see Simonsen, 2003).

During the 1960s and 70s, scholars and debaters inspired by the core-periphery theory, drew parallels between the exploitation of the North's natural resources and the exploitation of other colonies around the world, for example Balgård (1970), Bäärnhielm (1976) and Lundmark (1971) on Sweden, Brox (1966) on Norway, Granö (1951) on Finland, and Viemose (1977) on Denmark and Greenland. The core-periphery theory was initially a way to analyze the uneven development

between nations and was theorized by Marxist-inspired scholars such as Frank (1967), Amin (1974) and Wallerstein (1974). Drawing from these researchers, as well as from Karl Polanyi's (1944) critique of the market economic system, the Norwegian scholar Brox's (1966) research addressed how the uneven rural-urban development was produced by the Norwegian postwar public planning regimes. Johan Galtung (1971) lifted Brox's critique on a global scale and addressed early on the simultaneous processes of uneven development within nations and beyond (see Knudsen, 2020). While many theorists maintained that these occurrences of degradation will be overcome by spread effects or "trickle down effects" (Gaile, 1980). The backdrop to Galtung's *structural theory of imperialism* has recently become reformulated by Thomas Piketty (2013), who argues that while the international inequalities in economic distribution have decreased substantially over the last decades, the opposite has been the case for the development within the nations of the OECD realm (Knudsen, 2020).

As documented in much Nordic and international geographical research, economic restructuring, which has led to migration to urban areas, has produced a transfer of social capital from rural areas to urban areas, where rural and small municipalities pay for much of the social wage of people who then gravitate towards urban areas with better possible futures (e.g., Mattsson, 2011; Karlsdóttir & Ingólfssdóttir, 2011; Bærenholdt, 2018). The contemporary legacies of work and mobility in the peripheral North are linked to these historical patterns of dis/investment and dispossession. With new rounds of investments and disinvestments, new patterns of mobility and work emerge, which have changed the social fabric of many local communities. Recent studies show how labor migrations to Nordic rural areas are increasing taking place under harsh conditions, often to low-paid and manual work tasks in the green industries (Rye & Scott, 2018; Tollefsen et al., 2020; Eriksson et al., 2019; O'Reilly & Rye, 2020). Working for low wages and long hours in peripheral areas, undermines battles around social reproduction. Ultimately, people's life situation, health, education, and broader social contexts are neglected and their lives both at work and beyond the workplace made invisible.

In the European Union (EU), regional divergence between metropolitan regions and the rest, in terms of incomes and employment, has been increasing over the last 20 years (Iammarino et al., 2019). Sparsely populated areas have steadily been lagging due to the fact that new service activities have not replaced manufacturing as has been the case in the larger city-regions (Eriksson & Hane-Weijman, 2017). As such, the sparsity phenomenon merits its own classification in the EU structural policy system. This was one of the claims made by Finland, Norway, and Sweden in their negotiations with the EU prior to the 1995 access of Finland and Sweden (Méndez et al. 2006). It was also the negative response towards the solidity of these measures, alongside other periphery-driven arguments, that made the Norwegian referendum turn out to reject EU membership in 1994 (Sejerstad, 2014).

In the contemporary public debate, these lagging-behind Nordic regions, the northern areas, are often characterized as places in need of financial support and incapable of managing on their own (in contrast to developing and thus capable regions). But also, in some national contexts, as deprived of its assets by way of

neocolonial strategies, by way of resource extraction and/or state-led centralization (e.g., the current debate on the increased interest for natural resources due to mega-investments in northern Scandinavia Steinvall, 2021; Eriksson, 2010; Knudsen, 2020). Issues of regional income distribution, regional subsidies and dependency on allowances are frequently raised among debaters and policy makers (Müller, 2020). The representations of northern areas in media and popular culture also contribute to this picture. Eriksson (2008, 2017), Paulgaard (2008) and Ridanpää (2007) have for example argued that representations of northern Sweden, Denmark, Norway, and Finland in popular culture become enmeshed with representations in the news media and politics, which conflates geography and class by way of positioning representations of the modern middle class in urban spaces and the obsolete white working class in rural spaces. Something that, Rodríguez-Pose (2018) argues, produces a new geography of discontent in the wake of the urban bias in last decades theorizing on regional development. Despite institutional differences, certain geographical configurations contribute to the exploitation, as shown in research on peripheral landscapes elsewhere (Mitchell, 2002). Peripheral regions all over Europe struggle to become attractive in the eyes of investors and companies and to keep what is left of job opportunities, this particular strategy is theorized by Florida et al. (2017), also in the Swedish context. Knudsen (2020) shows how the Nordic regional policies since the 1990's have turned away from the theories of Polanyi, Brox and Galtung, resulting in regional policies not apt to deal with unequal conditions, such as the regional policies of smart specialization, which favors already successful places (see also Rodríguez-Pose, 2018).

Nordic researchers have criticized the regional policies and tax system's structure, for systemically rendering rural areas' contributions to the national economy invisible. Instead, these areas have been represented among politicians, in media, and popular culture, as drawing from the reserves and as an "internal spatial other", not really part of the modern nation (Eriksson, 2010; Nilsson & Lundgren, 2015; Thidemann Faber & Priested Nielsen, 2015). Contemporary representations of the Nordic peripheries thus tend to obscure and hide economic conflicts and power relations connected to resource exploitation and corporate concentration, neglecting workers and local communities. However, these developments have been contested over time and met with resistance in various forms, most recently as opposition to austerity policies and welfare state retrenchment and with demands for spatial justice.

## **Resistance in the Swedish Northern Periphery – Mobilizing Around Social Reproduction**

In the 1960s and 1970s, a movement mushroomed in the spirit of non-capitalism and non-rationalism, its campaigners opposed to the industries' demand for a mobile workforce, which left people no choice but to move to urban areas and

rejected the strict economic rationality articulated by politicians and businesspeople. Some of these ideas were articulated by Nordic debaters both within the realms of academia (Brox, 1966; Galtung, 1971) and among cultural workers, writers and grassroots organizations.

The work of Swedish author Sara Lidman deserves to be looked at a little closer. Some of her most famous books, *Tjärdalen* (The Tar Valley) from 1953 and *Hjortronlandet* (The Land of Cloudberries) from 1955, made visible the poor and hard-working farmers in Norrland during the nineteenth century. She also examined the effects of modernization and industrialization on the lives of people in the county of Västerbotten. Moreover, Lidman became engaged early-on in the criticism of colonialism and the Vietnam War. Her work on Vietnam's behalf influenced public opinion both in Sweden and abroad. Like scholars employing the core-periphery theory at home, Lidman realized that oppression was not merely something that happened in other countries. She brought the treatment of the miners of Svappavaara and Kiruna to light in *Gruva* (Mine) from 1968. According to Holm (1998), Lidman's book contributed to one of Sweden's most famous twentieth century's strikes, the wildcat 1969 Kiruna miners' strike, and concrete improvements of the protection of workers.

In the 1970s and onward, criticism of the Swedish government came to concern its inability to stop the out-migration from rural north. This criticism materialized in campaigns such as 'Hela Sverige ska leva' (The whole of Sweden shall live) in the 1980s and 'Vi flytt int' (We're not movin') in the 1960s, but also by way of organizations promoting Norrland such as the Glesbygdsdelegationen in 1977 and Norrlandsförbundet in 1952. Norrlandsförbundet is known for initiating the 'Vi flytt int' campaign, which was a protest to the political current toward urbanization and a mobile labor force.

The above mentioned are protests over the expropriation of natural resources, marketization of social reproduction, and the growing gap between wealthy and poor regions and people. The analyses of Marxist geographers such as Harvey have influenced Nordic researchers in studies of the workings of dispossession, alienation and, thus, opposition. However, the close readings of Harvey and the legitimate call for the "right to the city" may also have obscured the conceptualizing of rural areas and the disregard of rural resistance and opposition among critical Nordic geographers. Likewise, Neil Smith's (1984, 2010) concept of uneven geographical development when translated to Nordic welfare state building must take into consideration the specific institutional conditions of political ambitions of earlier social democratic governments. Recently many scholars have argued that rural areas are important fields of study as they still are significant arenas for dispossession, alienation and, hence, opposition.

Over the last decade, several conflicts have flared up in places outside urban areas. Local people, including Sámi people, have marched together, and protested against mining exploration, deforestation, expansions of hydropower, as well as the closure of hospitals and health care centers. But these conflicts have also divided communities as the preservation of nature may come to pass at the expense of job opportunities. There have also been more general protests where the life outside

major urban centers ultimately unite many protesters. Many of the protesters narrate how they have been abandoned both by capital and institutions and the state, and that they now are left to fend for themselves (Lundgren, 2020; Lundgren & Sjöstedt, 2020). Disinvestments in typical rural industries, such as forestry and food industries, are understood in relation to all the investments targeting urban areas and industries (Eriksson & Tollefsen, 2018). Hence, the arena for resistance in the Nordic “peripheries” is in different ways construing an urban-rural binary conflict and is sparked by specific disinvestments in people’s livelihoods and, thus, their chances for social reproduction.

Our previous research analyzed the difficulty of resistance in the wild berry industry during a strike among migrant berry-pickers in Northern Sweden in 2013, a struggle that was lost by the migrant workers and had high costs (Eriksson & Tollefsen, 2018). The strike illustrated the potentials and limitations with mobilizing around the work contract under current neoliberalized labor market policies. Migrant workers were not seen as part of Swedish labor history and did not get sufficient support from neither trade unions nor the municipality. Local people, however, showed support, an example of the need to align with struggles around social reproduction in place, access to a living wage and access to health.

Rural protesters may be framed, for example based on a position as a farmer, rural resident, indigenous population, or citizen. In line with that, much of the resistance in rural areas, like urban areas, build on the assertion of individual rights or identity politics. Nordic geographers make a case about the development of ‘alternative rural lifestyles’, suggesting that the ongoing rural crisis may open up the potential for new ways of organizing everyday life (Carson, 2018). Nevertheless, Patrik Cras (2017), Anna Sofia Lundgren (2020) and Desirée Enlund (2020) have written about the development where civil society is taking over more and more of rural services and infrastructure. Cras argues that rural policy includes a norm which implies that people in rural areas should “fend for themselves by acting for others in their immediate environment”. This norm rewards a specific form of communal citizenship, and opposition in which people are made dependent of each other, and “it will be difficult to opt out of the interests of the collective” (Cras, 2017, p. 207).

## **The Centrality of Battles Around Social Reproduction and Spatial Justice**

These collective protests in Nordic contexts are often based on demands for *more* government involvement, not less. This seems to differ from urban oppositional movements of the United States and the United Kingdom, which often are described by urban geographers as more or less buying into the neoliberal ideas animated by a deep distrust of the state (e.g., Harvey, 2005, 2012; Barker & Lavalette, 2015). Swedish research on social movements around social reproduction shows how the specific institutional conditions of earlier welfare state policies are not articulated as

a distrust of the state, rather, Swedish rural social movements articulate a discontent regarding state retrenchment and the lack of government involvement, as well as a distrust towards urban elites (Lundgren, 2020). Rodriguez-Pose argues that this mistrust paves the way for populism. With evidence from EU-countries, populism is according to Dijkstra et al. (2020) unmistakably linked to spatial inequalities. However, mistaking the Nordic EU-resistance of the leftist party and the Swedish feminist party in northern rural regions for nationalism and political populism, Rodriguez-Pose neglects the political mobilization brought about by the threat of austerity politics and the welfare retrenchment EU represented (Eriksson, 2010). Like many mainstream Nordic economic geographers, Rodriguez-Pose simplifies the complex topography of dispossession and opposition by dividing space into dynamic metropolitan areas, and the dispossessed rest (places that don't matter) (Dijkstra et al., 2020). By doing this we may risk simplifying spatial relations to an urban-rural divide, disregarding the grave poverty in many wealthy cities and the relative well-being in many poor rural areas. But also disregarding the dispossession that takes place all over the world for a few people and places to thrive.

Demands for “more state intervention” and spatial justice are articulated in struggles around social reproduction in Nordic welfare states, stressing the potential – and previously stronger – role of the state and municipalities in providing protection and securing welfare rights. This both in urban areas and with regards to migrants and local populations in peripheral areas. Local municipality politicians across the political spectrum, and leftist politicians nationally, join in progressive demands for state intervention, redistribution, and rights to housing, health, education, and social security in local municipalities, regardless of migrant status (Hansen, 2021).

As shown by Nordic geographers on segregation and racism (Molina, 1997; Listerborn, 2020) and regional development (Faber & Nielsen, 2015; Eriksson & Tollefsen, 2018), dispossession is happening everywhere. And this is primarily targeting groups most vulnerable to disinvestment in social reproduction such as unemployed, women, children, immigrants and racialized groups, no matter where they live. Hence, by way of recognizing the materiality of both economic, cultural, and social difference we may theorize the unfolding of geographies of connection to help mobilize solidarities across space. This means a socio-spatial theory that is not homogenizing or dichotomizing but accounts for how resources and profits are extracted in, and between, different geographies, and how costs for social reproduction are allocated.

## **Conclusions: A Socio-Spatial Theory in an Era of Crisis**

Recent research highlights how resistance today mobilizes around spatial justice and social reproduction as articulated in demands for service, education and health provisions and just access to, and protection, of natural resources across Nordic peripheries. Contemporary Nordic geographical research has contributed with studies on both urban and rural contexts, while generally rewarding the modern urban

context as a specific place of growth, meaning making and hub for democracy and resistance and thus contributed to reproducing the urban/rural dichotomy.

The dispossession of rural populations, and disinvestments in previous social formations in peripheral parts of the countries have taken place in all Nordic welfare states, but in different ways and with different speed and consequences. Nevertheless, in all Nordic countries the sparsely populated areas and their populations matter in discourses on national identity, regardless of how they are neglected materially and politically. The way these processes are politicized also differ between the countries, with a general upsurge in political debates around uneven development and spatial divisions and deprivation during the 2010s.

The Nordic geographical tradition of empirically based research on material conditions and changing socio-spatial forms of production and consumption in Nordic peripheries developed differently from what was seen during the Anglo-American linguistic/cultural turn in academia since the 1990s (see Simonsen, 2003). Key theoretical frameworks for critical spatial analyses on the northern periphery were rather interconnected with literatures on the material and discursive neoliberal processes of labor, growth, and mobility, and on the ideologies of class, race, and gender. In this, influence came both from critical geographers such as David Harvey, Neil Smith, Doreen Massey, and Cindi Katz, but importantly also from the legacy of earlier geographical research on material conditions in Northern peripheries; research being sensitive to the specific institutional conditions of political ambitions of earlier welfare state policies. Hence, battles around social reproduction concern people's possibilities to live dignified lives, something which is increasingly difficult for low-income households everywhere. By not ignoring the presence and importance of social reproduction, in its broadest sense, we may depict future social movements that unite through shared experiences of dispossession making up new geographies of connection that could open for struggle and change. Critical scholars and social movements argue for spatial justice in taking responsibility for social reproduction – that is, the right to environmental security, work, food, housing, healthcare, education, a meaningful and dignified life in both urban deprived areas and in the peripheries, also stressing the significance of collective action and resistance in the Nordic peripheries.

Challenges in the 2020s of climate change, increased inequalities and segregation, and pandemics, together with recent initiatives by politicians to renationalize food production, pursue national natural energy and resource exploitation, as well as promote regional development in peripheries through facilitating global capital investments in energy-intensive lines of businesses, are new trends affecting conditions for social reproduction in Nordic peripheries. Hence, there is an urgent need for Nordic geographical scholars to conduct material, historical and scalarly analyses of processes of uneven development. This research must necessarily continue unfolding new geographies of connection and its social movements.

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