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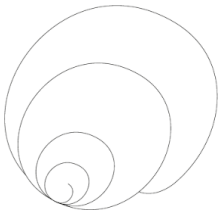

THESIS SUMMARY

Impeding what it aims to improve? A critical discourse analysis of the Swedish National Strategy for Regional Development

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1. Introduction

Arturo Escobar (2020) claims that seven decades of development have made society more unsustainable than ever, which is seen in the present systematic destruction of nature, the persistent and growing social inequality, the occupation of ethnic and peasant territories, the poverty, violence, femicides, and the European, white and male supremacy. These are all different global crises that cannot be fully separated but are fundamentally combined into one single *socio-ecological crisis*. Social and environmental problems are interrelated, since they are both caused by historical legacies of domination and social hierarchy. Thus, to address the root causes of the present crisis, it is crucial to link the fight for social justice to

the fight against environmental destruction, resulting in one combined socio-ecological struggle (Tokar, 2019; Grzybowski, 2019; Le Grange, 2019; Guerrero, 2018).

Drawing on Escobar's claim, there is a need to explore whether there are fundamental problems regarding the development framework, including the way institutions communicate about development and social change. This study focuses on the Swedish Government, an institution that is seen as one of the paragons of both equality (OECD, 2018) and sustainability (Skovgaard, Hildingsson & Johansson, 2018), to reveal, critically analyze and challenge the discourses in its current national strategy for regional development. This national strategy sits at the intersection of international and regional development discourses. Being the main document upon which the regional development strategies of all Swedish regions are drawn, it sets the tone of regional development in Sweden. Through confirming or challenging certain discourses, it has the power to construct a certain meaning and knowledge about regional development in all the 21 regions of Sweden. Through studying these discourses, it becomes clear how the government communicates development, what kind of future society it seeks to construct, what changes it aims to achieve and what the potential effects of these changes may be.

In this analysis, the term discourse is defined as an oral, written or nonverbal set of statements that produces meaning and creates a particular knowledge about the world. It constructs social reality and structures the way things are understood and acted upon in society (Rose, 2016). This analysis is not a complete examination of the purpose, initiatives, goals and results of the Swedish Government's regional development policy, but focuses on exploring the discourses in its most recent national strategy. It is important to question the role of Swedish institutions in the creation of structural discrimination and environmental destruction, both within Sweden and globally. The development discourses of the Swedish Government and other state institutions are powerful, but in proportion to their importance they are relatively under-researched.

These institutions are the keys to implementing and realizing goals through policy, since they define problems, suggest strategies, make policies and set targets. They have the power to either reinforce or challenge the power asymmetries in society, depending on what norms

and values they produce and what knowledge they choose to include or exclude in their policy documents (Singleton, Rask, Magnusdottir & Kronsell, 2021).

This study uses critical discourse analysis to answer the following research question: What ideologies and discourses underpin the Swedish Government's *National Strategy for Sustainable Regional Development Throughout the Country 2021-2030*, and how consistent are they to the purpose of the strategy? Following Norman Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional model for empirical research in communication, culture and society, this analysis describes the text, interprets the discursive practice, and explains the social practice. To widen the understanding of the discourses of regional development in Sweden, this study draws on theoretical and practical experiences from historical and contemporary global development. As a theoretical framework, it uses postdevelopment and postcolonial feminist theories, which reject the concept of development, criticize the concept of sustainable development, and question the notion of one universal, capitalistic, patriarchal, Western truth. They focus on different asymmetrical power relations and view development as discourses and techniques with power to intervene and rule over others (McEwan, 2019).

2. A regional development paradox

This analysis argues that the Swedish Government's *National Strategy for Sustainable Regional Development Throughout the Country 2021-2030* is underpinned by several development discourses that are problematizing and may even contradict the purpose of the document—to achieve social, economic and environmental sustainability throughout Sweden. Through describing and interpreting the main discourses in the national strategy, this study reveals a potential regional development discourse paradox: In order to solve the social and environmental problems defined in the document, it promotes economic and technological solutions that are based on the same logic of infinite growth, unidirectional progress and competitiveness that may have caused the problems in the first place.

This analysis shows that the document relies on four discursive themes that reinforce existing development discourses, which may contain key contradictory aspects:

- It relies on *sustainable development and growth* to contribute to social equality and sustainability, even though they may rather do the opposite.
- It relies on *innovation, digitalization and technologies* to solely solve socio- ecological problems, even though they may not have that potential.
- It relies on *capitalism and ecological modernization* to solve environmental problems, even though they may rather have caused them.
- It relies on *urbancentrism, unidirectional progress and politics of catching up* to close the gaps throughout the country**,** even though they instead tend to widen them.

The analysis further examines the discourses within a wider social context and argues that they may impede solutions to present challenges in regional development. The strategies that are proposed to solve the socio-ecological crisis use the same tools that may have caused them in the first place. While contributing to small improvements in the economic, environmental and social dimensions of sustainable development, these discourses may simultaneously impede genuine structural change in Sweden.

This can have negative effects on social and environmental relationships not only in Swedish regions, but also globally. The national strategy focuses on the nation-state and does not acknowledge how Swedish regional development initiatives may affect the rest of the world. The initiatives that seek to improve everyday lives for average Swedish citizens are most often made possible through unlimited exploitation of labor power and natural resources in other parts of the world. This exploitation is externalized and made “invisible” to the Swedish users or consumers. Ulrich Brand and Markus Wissen (2017/2021) call this phenomenon *the imperial mode of living* and claim that it exacerbates the worldwide crises of climate change, destruction of ecosystems, social polarization and widespread impoverishment.

The findings of this research are relevant to scholars, policy-makers and practitioners within regional development in Europe, those who seek to challenge the development discourses that are accepted within Swedish regional development and those who search for alternative ways of creating a more equal, just and ecological future. This study reveals that old development discourses are still present today. It aims to inspire the reimagining of these

discourses, and to help in realizing knowledge that goes beyond Eurocentric limitations of understanding the world. It is important to analyze discourses to reveal them and foster conscious and critical decision-making about whether to reinforce or challenge them. Revealing the discourses in the Swedish national strategy for regional development is a first step to foster socio-ecological change. This will hopefully contribute to the transition toward more just, equal and solidary regional development policies in Sweden, which may not only be beneficial to Swedish regions, but also to humans and nature globally.

3. Unsustainable wheel of sustaining development

The Swedish national strategy for regional development promotes economic and technological solutions that are based on the same logic of infinite growth, unidirectional progress and competitiveness that may have caused the socio-ecological problems in the first place. It may be seen as development recycling its own processes, achieving minor improvements instead of contributing to major social or environmental changes. As Audre Lorde (1983) points out, the master's tools will "never enable us to bring genuine change" (p.27). Drawing on Lorde, only the smallest change may be allowed and possible when examining the effects of development within the very same development framework, rather than genuine change.

Since the Swedish national strategy for regional development combines discourses of growth and sustainability, it may be a policy that merely focuses on conflict-free solutions and strategies. Such comfortable "win-win policies" do not seem to offend anyone and do not call for any major changes (Corvellec, Stowell & Johansson, 2021).

Figure 1: An Unsustainable Wheel of Sustaining Development.

Note: when socio-ecological problems are exacerbated, it is critical to find fast solutions, which are often found in economic and technological initiatives, which may lead to the exacerbation of socio-ecological problems.

Is the Swedish national strategy for regional development merely a "win-win" policy of timid measures, confined within the narrowest perimeters of change, impeding real structural change? Is it more focused on *sustaining* development, thus being quite unsustainable? Arturo Escobar (2018) states that development is "one of the main discourses and institutional apparatuses structuring unsustainability" (p.147). Gustavo Esteva (1992/2019) claims that sustainable development is not about supporting a sustainable diverse natural and social life, but a strategy to sustain development. Vishwas Satgar (2018) argues that technological solutions are prioritized over systemic change as the world runs out of time. Gérald Berthoud (1992/2019) writes that economic expansion based on constant technical innovation is widely believed to be the only way to solve the world's problems.

The four arguments above and the potential regional development paradox are visually summarized in an unsustainable wheel of *sustaining* development (see figure 1). The wheel helps to visualize how the Swedish national strategy, through its reinforcement of certain discourses, may be stuck in a loop that, instead of contributing to socio- ecological sustainability, does the opposite.

4. Impeding genuine change

This critical discourse analysis seeks to contribute to critical awareness of how the Swedish Government communicates development in the national strategy for regional development. To start challenging and changing the way institutions communicate for development, their current rhetoric must first be revealed. It is important to examine solutions proposed by the people in power and to display who gains from injustice. Discourses that rely on false assumptions, better technology and noble political statements must constantly be investigated to contribute to the redesigning of society into a solidary mode of living where everybody lives without being socially or ecologically destructive (Brand & Wissen, 2017/2021). That is the aim of this research—to investigate the discourses in the Swedish national strategy for regional development, and to encourage a redesigning of society.

Despite the limitations and concerns associated with the methodological choices in the research process, in particular that it is restricted to a subjective analysis of merely one document, the research completed what it set out to accomplish. It uncovers ideologies and discourses that underpin the Swedish national strategy for regional development, and investigates the degree of consistency between them and the purpose of the document. The research finds that the document is underpinned by several development discourses that are problematizing and may contradict the very purpose of achieving social, economic and environmental sustainability throughout Sweden. The analysis shows that to solve socio-ecological problems, the document relies on concepts of sustainable development, growth, innovation, digitalization, technologies, capitalism, ecological modernization, urbancentrism, unidirectional progress and politics of catching up.

Through discussing the discourses in a wider social context, this study suggests that the national strategy may affect social and environmental relationships negatively, both in Swedish regions and globally. It focuses on the nation-state and the well-being of Swedish citizens without addressing the effects on social and environmental sustainability globally. Also, the Swedish national strategy confirms mainstream development discourses as something permanent and fixed. They are displayed as the only, universal way forward, but may rather be going round in circles in an unsustainable wheel of *sustaining* development.

Even though mainstream discourses of sustainable development and ecological modernization strive to improve social and environmental sustainability, they tend to operate within power structures instead of challenging them. Since the Swedish national strategy favors comfortable economic and technological solutions without sacrifices, it may contribute to creating a vision that there are both fast and simple ways to solve the present crisis. By reinforcing such discourses, the Swedish Government may impede the challenging and restructuring of power structures and contribute to exacerbating the socio-ecological problems and further increase gaps, not only within Swedish regions and within the EU, but also globally.

The conclusion that these discourses may impede genuine structural change within regional development and have negative effects on social and environmental relationships, both in Sweden and globally, is more tentative and in need of further investigation. This can be achieved through at least two different areas of suggested future research. Firstly, to address the data collection limitations of this research, analyzing additional policy documents from Swedish institutions could expand the empirical grounds for further conclusions.
Secondly, constructing the same research in a different location would enable comparison of the Swedish regional development discourses with those of countries in Western, Southern and Eastern Europe. These suggestions both focus on the European politicians, decision-makers and public servants who produce these policy documents. To address the socio-ecological crisis more efficiently, the focus must shift to the root causes of the problem, and the political and economic elite may be a part of them. “No poverty” is the first goal of the SDGs, but when considering a shift in focus, the more appropriate formulation would be “no wealth”. Instead of seeking to eradicate poverty—eradicate wealth.

Researching the political and economic elite, and the organizational politics of powerful institutions, is an important way to gain insights that are closer to the root of the problem. The responsibility for the present global socio-ecological crisis lies nowhere in the world but with the elite of the Western, capitalist, patriarchal societies. Instead of a continuous focus on changing the lives of the poor and marginalized to achieve equality, it may be more effective to change the lives of the rich and privileged. The responsibility for the present crisis lies with the people in power, who exacerbate the social and ecological destruction through

their modes of living. They are also directly and indirectly making social, economic and political decisions for other people. Development research needs more investigations of privileged people in power, to understand how the elite determines social and economic outcomes, exacerbates marginalization and widens the gap between the elite and the non-elite in societies (Scheyvens, Scheyvens & Murray, 2014).

5. Toward more solidary and relational policies

Since mainstream beliefs and ideas about development are widely internalized, shape the minds of people and organize the economy and power in society, it is imperative to question and dismantle mainstream discourses (Escobar, 2018; Grzybowski, 2019). This study questions in particular the reliance on the logic of infinite growth, competitiveness and unidirectional progress within the discourses in the Swedish national strategy for regional development. It suggests that future policies should rely more on varieties of solidary and relational logic.

The focus on social and environmental sustainability in the national strategy may increase if Swedish regional development policy becomes less dependent on the Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth and more inspired by some of the many great transitional initiatives world-wide, for example ecofeminist discourses of caring for the diversity of all life forms and sharing solidarity economies. These discourses favor complexity over homogeneity, cooperation over competition, and commons over property (Terreblanche, 2019). To start including more of these discourses that are outside of the mainstream, many individual policy-makers must retrain themselves and begin to enter new paths. Not only to overcome the institutional path dependencies in their organizations, but also to overcome the expectations to “follow embedded rules and routines, according to what is appropriate for their social and professional role and individual identity” (Magnusdottir & Kronsell, 2021, p.6).

This study calls for greater integration of postdevelopment and postcolonial feminist thinking into Swedish regional development policy and practice. To begin to promote social and environmental sustainability, the concepts of free markets, sustainable development and

growth need to be questioned. In a future, speculative “National Strategy for Solidary and Relational Regional Development Throughout the Country”, humans and nature and other separated binaries would be reunified, and the strive for social and environmental well-being would be one.

Instead of implementing modernity in all the regions in the world, Escobar (2020) believes that it makes more sense to recreate traditional logics of community, cooperation and well-being, and to do this critically, beyond romanticism and idealization. Yet, modernity is still being implemented, as seen in the Swedish national strategy for regional development, though nowadays in the clothing of ecological modernization. For Sweden to contribute more effectively to social and environmental well-being, it is imperative to start highlighting the insight that one’s own privileges are based on exploitation and destruction, not only at home but also elsewhere. Norms and rules of living and consuming must be evaded and certain practices no longer accepted (Brand & Wissen, 2017/2021).

Here, the Swedish Government plays a key role. To improve social and environmental sustainability, the concern for humans and biodiversity must be at the very centre of its policies, prioritized over everything else. This is not the case with the present national strategy for regional development. Despite its aim to improve social and environmental sustainability in Sweden and globally, it may rely too much on economic and technological discourses based on an unsustainable logic of infinite growth, competitiveness and unidirectional progress—thus impeding what it aims to improve.

Conflict of interest

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