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*Spatial otherness and places of others –
Urban and rural imaginaries in Sweden
Altérité spatiale et lieux des Autres –
Les imaginaires urbains et ruraux en Suède*

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Modernity, as a part of western culture, can be seen as a system of differentiation and a system of social reproduction; traits that not fit into the discourse of a modern, liberal and progressive nation are positioned to a specific geographical space and a specific group of people. In this way can the rest of the nation be represented as modern, liberal and progressive and the problems within the nation can be represented as expressions of regional 'cultures' or 'spaces of exception'. At stake here are struggles over how and in what spaces representations are possible. We wish to critically address the politics of representation and the right to space within a discourse of Swedish (hyper)modernity.

This article takes its point of departure in the imaginary of an equal and modern Swedish society manufactured and employed by and through media, politics, research and popular culture. The purpose of this study is to explore the (re)production of a differentiated nation and a neglected and masked uneven contemporary socioeconomic climate in Sweden. The focus of the analysis is on popular representations of the capital Stockholm and Norrland, a region comprising the northernmost two-thirds of the nation. Norrland is characterized in the contemporary national discourse as a region in need of financial support and as a region incapable of managing on its own. These representations are resisted, reworked and, naturally, reproduced by the people living in the region. The question of regional redistribution has become an object for an extensive national debate on spatial and social justice that is constrained by ideas of singular identities which homogenizes and represses difference *within* groups. Furthermore, the institutional debate conceals what Derrida calls "the extra-legal moment of violence" of law-making and regulations aiming for justice. The former exceptionally strong social-democratic Swedish state is moving towards a more neo-liberal agenda, the priorities have shifted and the rights of the individual and 'weaker' regions are put at stake. The shifts in politics are justified in terms of increased international competitiveness and the 'threat of globalization'.

The discourse of Norrland as essentially 'different' and 'backward' has been (re)produced in literature, politics and science since the colonization of parts of the region. Stockholm on the other hand is represented by a 'modern' cosmopolitan population, solely a well-paid and educated middleclass. This logic of representation accentuates certain aspects and people and play down other. This article puts forward that representations of place cannot be distinguished from representations of the population since the representations rely on tricks of 'metonymical magic'. The characteristics of the place become the characteristics of the population and any woman or man belonging to the population becomes one with that entire population. Geography becomes here a practice of battles, over inclusion and exclusion, over the making of place and space, and over defining who constitutes a part of a group, a place, a region and a nation.