


A world-leading periphery: exploring representations of Northern Sweden in view of its green transition

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 In pursuit of the EU's goal to become the world's first climate neutral region, Northern Sweden is positioned as a centrepiece to the green transition development. Its innovative industries are hailed as crucial, not only for Sweden but for the sustainable future of Europe. Yet, previous research depicts the cultural region of Norrland as an inner periphery of Sweden, subjected to colonization and marginalization. This article delves into this paradox by examining discursive representations of Norrland in light of the current green transition narratives. Utilizing a qualitative research approach, this study employs critical discourse analysis to systematically examine representations from news media, political opinion, and government institutions, uncovering tensions and contradictions within the discourse. The analysis suggests the prevalence of two main themes, construing Norrland simultaneously as the future and as a struggle. By contextualizing these discourses within the concept of peripheralization, this research suggests that the future-oriented representations dominate the current understanding of Norrland, potentially perpetuating patterns of spatial disparities within the region. Thus, this research contributes with an updated understanding of processes of peripheralization under the guise of a green discourse, suggesting that the development in Norrland seems part of a broader narrative aiming to frame Sweden as the world leader within green transition initiatives.

Keywords: green transition, peripheralization, development, Norrland, Northern Sweden, urban-rural

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Introduction

There is a golden opportunity for Northern Sweden to lead the new industrial revolution, and to become a driving force for green innovations that can benefit the northern regions of Sweden, the whole country and ultimately Europe as a whole.

(Busch *et al.* 2023)

As exemplified in the quote by Swedish ministers of government above, the interest for Northern Sweden (a cultural region called *Norrland*) is rapidly rising. Whilst worries of climate change increases, questions on how to successfully transform our economies into greener, more sustainable forms are becoming increasingly urgent. And here, suddenly, *Norrland* is portrayed as part of the solution, as a “golden opportunity” (Busch *et al.* 2023) of sorts. Through its prevalence of natural resources, *Norrland* is expected to bring green progress not only to the rest of Sweden, but to enable a green future for Europe as a whole (*ibid.*).

Notably, this is not the first time that the area is framed in such an enticing way. Around 150 years ago, *Norrland* was made out to be the future of Sweden – strikingly similarly to today’s discourse. Through industrialization, the vast natural resources of Northern Sweden would become a crucial contribution to the construction of the modern country, providing wealth for all of Sweden and thus rendering *Norrland* a ‘national Klondike’ (Sörlin 2023). This alluring narrative of development was however not without consequences. The future-oriented representations of the initial industrialization of Northern Sweden over a century ago legitimized a rapid exploitation of natural resources, contributing to marginalization and displacement of local peoples, including the Sami population, Tornedalians, Laintalaiset and Kvens (Lantto 2000, Labba 2020, SOU 2023, Sörlin 2023). Later, as the economy shifted, so did the narratives. During the 20th century, *Norrland* was instead increasingly described as a rural, peripheral region struggling with growth (Eriksson 2010a, Tidholm 2014, Öhman & Nilsson 2017).

With this historical context in mind, the time seems ripe for some reflection and a deeper understanding of the ‘new’ anticipated future of *Norrland*. Whilst previous research has extensively described earlier representations of *Norrland*, few, if any, attempts have yet been made to examine how the narrative of the green transition affects the current understanding and representations of Northern Sweden. Within the broader field of research related to *Norrland* and/or the green transition, indications of arising issues can be found. Generally, the literature on climate action and green innovation tends to be mainly related to cities, whereas conditions of more peripheral areas, such as *Norrland*, rarely receive attention (Vale *et al.* 2023) despite calls for contextualized regional analyses (Grillitsch & Hansen 2019). Some research examining future pathways and regional linkages or effects of initiatives linked to the current green transition has been conducted by several scholars (see Karakaya *et al.* 2018, Olofsson 2019, Andersen *et al.* 2022), mainly focusing on industry capacity and possibilities in Northern Sweden. Johansson and Kriström (2022), having examined the economics of the planned green steel initiatives, raise concerns of increased costs and electricity demands, suggesting that green steel is unlikely to be socially profitable. Indicating further concerns about the social effects of the green transition, Cambou (2020) and Össbo (2023) have studied Sami rights and participation in relation to Swedish policy processes about green energy establishments, highlighting risks of systematic injustices. Such policies and practice, Össbo argues, contribute to the upholding of ‘green sacrifice zones’ in Northern Sweden. Similarly, by examining dominant stakeholders within regional environmental governance, Garbis and others (2023) alert about the lack of involvement of local perspectives.

In sum, recent literature on the green transition in *Norrland* raises concerns regarding the feasibility of the planned trajectory of the green transition in general and its social consequences specifically. There is however a worrying research gap around how this sudden change of perspective on *Norrland* is rooted in a wider social, political, and cultural context, especially when prompted by economic stimuli vested in the new industrial processes in the north. Following this, we deem it important to gather a new, updated understanding of how the discourse of the green transition impacts the broader understanding of Northern Sweden, including the possible problems and benefits that may arise therefrom. Accordingly, by taking on a conceptual research approach, this paper sets out to explore how the understanding of *Norrland* as an inner periphery of Sweden is being re-imagined

discursively through the new green transition narrative. By utilising the perspective of peripheralization, the aim of this paper is to highlight and critically examine current representations of Norrland by news media and government institutions.

Norrland in relation to Sweden: past and current processes

Understanding 'Norrland': previous representations

To establish the socio-cultural context of Norrland, it is key to note that Sweden is a large country with long distances; it spans almost 1600 kilometres between its northernmost and southernmost point. The distance between Malmö in the south of Sweden and the northernmost city of Kiruna in Lapland is longer than the distance between Malmö and Bologna, Italy. Thus, west-east connections to the northern areas of Norway and Finland – as part of the transnational region of Lapland – can historically and culturally be noted as more prominent than the north-south connection between Norrland and the south of Sweden. Although Norrland covers about 60% of Sweden's total land area, it is sparsely populated, inhabiting only 11% of the Swedish population. Characterized by its natural resources and primary industries, the region has a central role for the Swedish economy, as the counties within Norrland gross the highest gross regional domestic product per capita besides Stockholm (SCB 2021).

Regardless of its strong industrial and economical role, Northern Sweden tends to be reproduced with less detail and interest than its southern counterpart. Norrland consists of vast and diverse lands, encompassing both bare mountainous areas and forests, bigger cities and smaller villages, inland areas as well as coastal sites. But this diversity is rarely acknowledged, as Norrland in media, common parlance and policy tends to be understood as one simplified entity (Eriksson 2010a, Landén 2017). Such reductive tendencies, and the resulting geographical vagueness, can for example be observed through the common use of Norrland as a broad term even when denoting something specifically local. Whilst it would be uncommon to see a mention of a specific incident happening *in Svealand* (where Stockholm is located), the same form of phrasing is commonly used in relation to Norrland¹. As Öhman (2016) notes, Norrland is further simplified linguistically through its naming; the other country region names were formed through possessive descriptors of their inhabitants – Svealand from *Svearnas land* (Land of the Swedes) and Götaland from *Goternas land* (Land of the Goths) – whilst Norrland means simply *Northern Land*, discerning it as linguistically passive, and thus without ownership.

Denoting Norrland as a passive area void of ownership can be understood as a reflection of its history of colonization. Most of Northern Sweden is part of Sápmi – land that has been inhabited by the Sami population² throughout history. Processes of Swedish colonization and settlement started in the 14th century but intensified in the 17th century when minerals and silver were discovered, resulting in Swedish rule becoming increasingly interested in gaining control over the region and its natural resources (Lantto 2000, Össbo 2020). Despite already being inhabited, the North was historically described within Sweden as unexploited, mystical, and suited for appropriation by pioneers (Schough 2008, Keskitalo & Carina 2009, Sörlin 2023). As a result, intensified colonization followed during the 19th and early 20th century, subjecting the Sami to invasive and paternalistic politics, including forced displacement and systematic marginalization – prompted by economical reasonings and attempts to use the land for the nation's 'greater good' (Lantto 2000, Labba 2020, Sörlin 2023).

Thus, the early exploitation and industrialization of Northern Sweden was legitimized by a dominating discourse proclaiming that the natural resources of the North would bring development, wealth, and modernity to the whole of Sweden (Sörlin 2023). Norrland was produced as *Framtidslandet* – the Land of the Future. Understood as a "promised land, where the slumbering millions were" that would "grant the motherland [Sweden] its second glory days" (Sörlin 2023, 90), this representation of Norrland became a central part of discourses describing the new, modern future for Sweden in the early 20th century.

At this time, Sweden was being rapidly reimagined ideologically. Moving away from historical narratives of a poor farmer society, emerging discourses instead framed Sweden as democratic, progressive, and culturally distinguished; as the 'world's most modern' country (Schough 2008, Bengtsson 2020, Sörlin 2023). This drastic, national re-conceptualization, enabled by the alluring

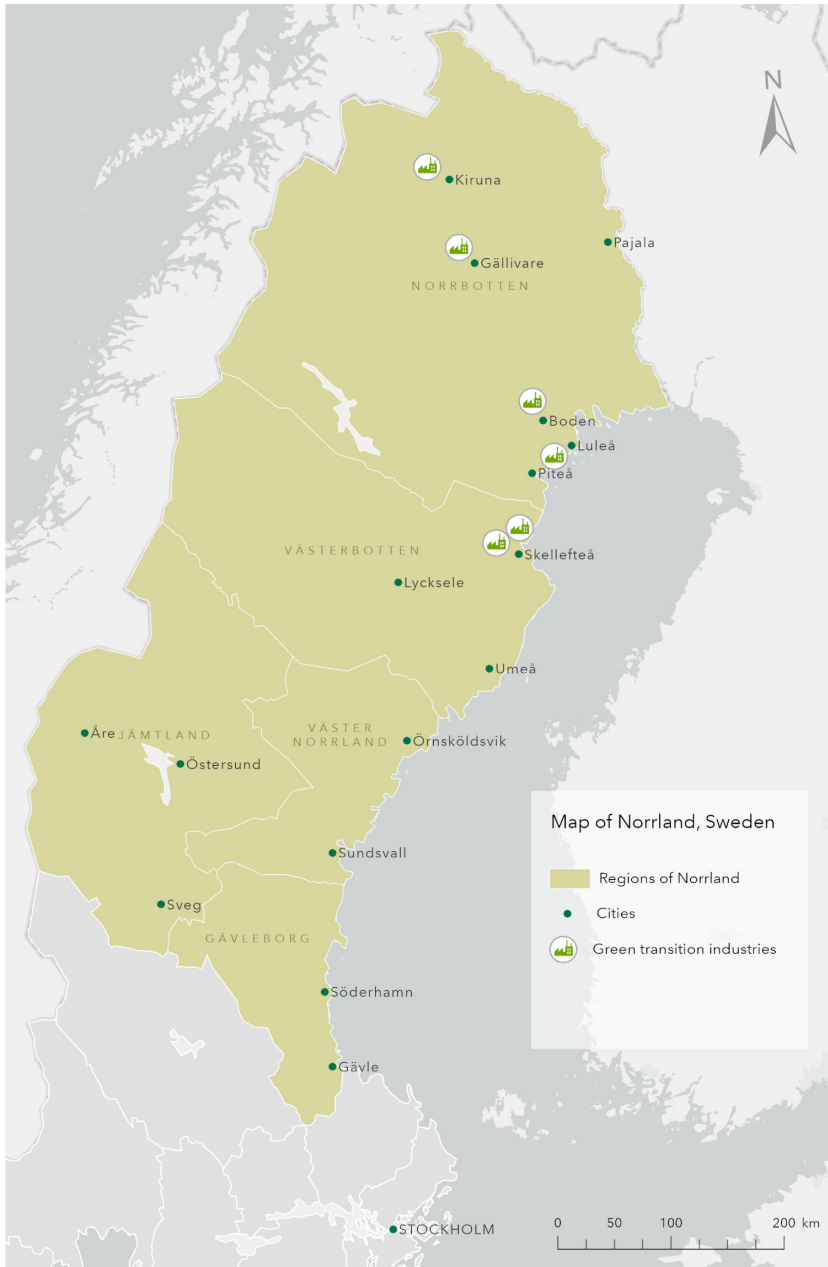


Fig. 1. Map of Norrland. Source: own work.

future of the North, meant that Norrland came to serve as “a beautifying gloss, rendering the specificity of past political, economic, and social experiences into far less complex whole than what socio-historical scrutiny would reveal” (Bendix 2000, 38).

The industrialization process changed Norrland hastily as primary industries, infrastructure and settlements were built across the region. Whole new cities, such as Kiruna, were constructed to support the mines and the growing population. However, the heavy reliance on primary industries made Norrland’s economy sensitive to fluctuations, with the Great Depression having taken a toll on

local industry and employment levels (Eriksson 2010b). In the following years the development of Northern Sweden came to a near halt as policies emphasising centralization and urbanization led to rapid out-migration from the rural inland, resulting in growing spatial disparities across Norrland during the 20th century (Eriksson 2010a).

The ceased development has set the frame for a narrative many might associate with Norrland today: a rural, homogeneous region marred by out-migration, relocation policies and the disbandment of industries, welfare, and services, resulting in 'resource deserts' (Tidholm 2014, Nilsson & Lundgren 2015, Landén 2017, Öhman & Nilsson 2017, Carson *et al.* 2023). For instance, research shows how the closures of healthcare facilities and maternity wards, and thus the experienced withdrawal of societal service, not only leads to an increased geographical distance between local citizens and societal institutions, but also to a perceived social and political distance to the rest of Sweden and its governance (Larsson 2020).

Northern Sweden has since then repeatedly been construed and represented as an issue, as something distant and 'Other' from the rest of the country (Vallström 2002, Eriksson 2010a, Nilsson & Lundgren 2015, Lundgren 2020). As Schough (2008) showcases, no other region in Sweden has been subject to similar levels of problematization and subsequent investigations. The recurring framing of Norrland as a problematic region, suffering from a lack of modernity and attractiveness, also contributes to upholding and reproducing dichotomies of the urban and rural (Eriksson 2010a). By using Norrland as the contrasting Other, positive attributes such as growth, creativity and progress become associated with Stockholm and Southern Sweden, whilst degrowth and stagnation are made synonymous with the 'subsidy-consuming' Northern inland. "Stockholmers are smarter than rednecks" (Alliansfritt Sverige 2010), a viral quote uttered by the right-wing politician Anna Kinberg Batra reverberates this recalcitrant sentiment.

Despite stale stereotypes, traditional attributes of the North are also used as symbols for the 'authentic, genuine Sweden', replete with its idyllic wilderness and unique nature (Schough 2008), rendering its peripheral attributes attractive for those seeking a 'calmer' lifestyle. This counternarrative construes Norrland as an important part of the international marketing of Sweden, playing right into foreign stereotypes of polar bears walking its icy streets (Eriksson 2010a, Kesitalo & Carina 2009), alongside notions of blue-eyed blondes, ABBA and IKEA.

New green beginnings?

Altogether, the complexity of past and present representations of Norrland highlights the importance of creating an understanding for the new narratives taking shape. The heightened interest in Northern Sweden can be discerned through a renewed focus from both public, political, and private interests. In January 2023, the Swedish government invited the European Commission to visit Kiruna, marking the start of Sweden's presidency in the commission. The choice of Kiruna as the destination – rather than Stockholm or any other major city in the south – was motivated by the will to highlight the *potential* of Northern Sweden for the EU (Busch *et al.* 2023).

The description of Northern Sweden as a space of potential can be understood through the concept of green innovation, a trajectory strongly encouraged by recent policy goals from the European Union (EU). EU's most recent growth policy, the 'European Green Deal', aims to make Europe carbon neutral by 2050 to become the world's first climate neutral continent (European Commission 2023a). Such vision includes the production of fossil-free materials and energy, where raw materials such as iron ore and minerals, prevalent in Norrland, become key components.

As a result, Norrland has become subject to a rapid rise in green innovation projects. Examples include Northvolt, currently building a lithium-ion battery factory in Skellefteå. In Kiruna, the Swedish state-owned mining company *Luossavaara-Kiirunavaara Aktiebolag* are striving to become the world's first fossil-free iron producer, whilst at the same time increasing their extraction of rare-earth minerals crucial for green-tech products. Similarly, fossil-free steel production initiatives have also been announced by projects such as H2 Green Steel in Boden, and Hybrit in Gällivare/Luleå.

These initiatives are not only seen as pivotal for the green development. They also mark a big financial presence in Northern Sweden, as current and planned investments are estimated to around

1070 billion Swedish Kronor, or 98 billion US Dollars (Phillips 2021). Additionally, the initiatives have made Norrland eligible for multiple EU projects and funds (Utveckla Norrbotten 2022, European Commission 2023b). The large investments by both private and public sector thus trailblaze the route for a speedy transition in Norrland, and it is estimated that 100,000 people will need to relocate to the regions of Norrbotten and Västerbotten within 10 years to satisfy expected work force needs (Larsson 2022). This would constitute a significant population growth, as the current population of the two regions is about 500,000 people.

The production of the periphery

The various notions and ideas associated with Norrland as a space necessitates an understanding of space as *socially produced*. Drawing on the work of Lefebvre (1991), this study acknowledges the inherent connection between social processes and their spatial outcomes. Space should simultaneously be seen as producing and being produced by social relations, as societies produce their own spaces shaped by their adjacent ideological, political, and social processes. Space, Lefebvre argues, plays a pivotal role in the making of capitalist societies, where space should not be seen as is, as neutral or passive, but rather as understood through the social and ideological processes that contribute to its production.

This process of production can be understood through dimensions which Lefebvre describes as perceived space, conceived space and lived space. Here, the abstract *representations of space* (i.e., the dimension of conceived space) tends to dominate most societies, as discourses, representations and knowledge-creation construed by decisionmakers tends to shape the material and social practices within the space (*ibid.*). From this perspective, examining representations of Norrland becomes central to understand the implications of the dominating discourses, to discern how Norrland as a social space is conceptually governed and understood through wider societal processes. In this vein, discourses frame the socio-spatial processes within Northern Sweden, whilst their political and ideological impact might go unnoticed. Additionally, such critical understanding of the ideological production of space in the vein of Lefebvre allows for a deeper understanding of uneven spatial development. As the social processes shaping the production of space might contribute to different outcomes for some spaces in relation to others, some researchers have argued that certain spaces – much alike Northern Sweden – seem to be reproduced as less favourable above others; a theory that can be conceptualized through the phenomenon of *peripheralization* (Kühn 2015).

The idea of a periphery itself is neither new, nor precise, as the term is riddled with historical ideations and unspoken nuances. Often, a periphery is associated with the outer edge of an area. From a socio-spatial perspective, understandings of 'cores' and 'peripheries' can be traced back to Marxist sociologists and economists of the 1970s (Amin 1974, Wallerstein 1974, Frank 1977). They argued for the existence of a hierarchy – or rather, a *dependency* – between countries, where economically advanced 'core' countries are dependent on exploiting resources and labour from less developed, 'peripheral' countries in order to sustain their own prominence and prosperity. Thus, the uneven development across nation-states should not be seen as coincidental or temporary, but rather as an intrinsic, polarising feature of the modern capitalist economy, where the development and progress of some countries take place at the expense of others (Wallerstein 1974).

Whilst dependency theory mainly addressed such power hierarchies on a fixed, national scale, more recent adaptations of the peripheral concept have shifted the focus away from assigned spatial categories to the *processes of peripheralization* of any given space (Kühn 2015, Agnew 2021). As a result, recent literature more often emphasizes the *relational* aspect of peripheries, where peripheries can be formed at any spatial scale or type (Kühn 2015, Stenbacka & Cassel 2020). In this sense, patterns of peripheralization are not only identified at the nation-state level but can also be attributed to smaller regions (Wójcik *et al.* 2018) or even to marginalized parts of a city (Dymitrow 2020). Such relational understanding of peripheries thereby allows for the acknowledgement of *inner peripheries*; the peripheralization of spaces contained within an area that is normally considered a centre (Kühn 2015, Copus *et al.* 2017, Wójcik *et al.* 2018, Stenbacka & Cassel 2020, Chodkowska-Miszczuk *et al.* 2021, De Toni *et al.* 2021). The EU funded research program for territorial planning, European Observation

Network for Territorial Development and Cohesion (ESPO), defines inner peripheries as either “(a) enclaves of low economic potential, (b) areas with poor access to services of general interest or (c) areas experiencing a lack of relational proximity” (ESPO 2018, 2). Thus, this concept emphasizes social distance rather than geographical distance. As emphasized by Vives-Miró (2022) through their research on unjust geographies, space needs to be understood as an active agent within such social processes, where the production of spatial poverty – or, peripheries, as in our case – is necessary for the survival of capitalism.

Consequently, peripheries – much akin to Lefebvre’s perspective – are increasingly understood as the result of socio-spatial processes, where broader economic, social, political, and cultural dimensions interplay and contribute to creating marginalized spaces (Naumann & Fischer-Tahir 2012, Kühn 2015). When seeing the social dimension as central for shaping the understanding of peripheries, it is also important to note the subjective perception of what is conceived as a ‘periphery’. Whilst a space might be perceived as peripheral by some in relation to one place, that same space might simultaneously be considered central in relation to others. In our case, whilst examining how Norrland has been produced as an inner periphery in relation to (southern) Sweden, it is also important to be aware of the prevalence of centres and peripheries *within* Norrland itself, where the seemingly more urban, coastal cities tend to be reproduced as central in relation to the peripheral rurality of inland Norrland.

The varied processes of peripheralization, rather than the categorization of peripheries as a fixed attribute, thereby becomes central. As different actors and processes interrelate in the continuous production of space, perceptions of a space as more or less peripheral may change. Ultimately, discourses and representations of space contribute to processes of peripheralization or de-peripheralization of spaces (Stenbacka & Cassel 2020). Acknowledging this possibility of change emphasizes the need to understand how the current initiatives of green transition in Norrland contributes to such processes.

Uncovering the discourses

Research design and data collection

This study takes on a conceptual approach, as it combines theoretical insights with empirical findings to further elaborate on how the concept of peripheralization relates to the current green development in Northern Sweden. By adopting a social constructionist perspective, this study holds a critical position towards taken-for-granted knowledge (Jørgensen & Phillips 2002). The focus on studying representations of Norrland, rather than its materialities, is thereby grounded in the understanding that the meanings and representations assigned to the spatial construct of Northern Sweden are discursively produced by society and its power relations.

To identify and critically analyse such discursive meanings, this research utilizes a qualitative research approach, with critical discourse analysis (CDA) as the method of choice. The data material is sampled from a diverse gamut of written materials published between 2022 and 2023 about the green transition in Norrland. A broad initial sampling was conducted, covering material from vastly different actors and institutions, to obtain a rich overview of the current discourses about the development. From this pool, a smaller sample of sources that highlight the prevalent themes has been selected to provide ample examples for the scale and format of this article. Thus, this article does not aim to cover all existing representations of Norrland, but rather a sample of dominant discourses found in a mix of political opinion, news media articles, as well as government materials at both national and regional level. The rationale behind these choices is explained next (see Table 1 for an overview). As most of the analysed materials were originally written in Swedish we have translated them to English.

Vinnova, the Swedish government office of innovation, was chosen to represent the government perspective on green development. Vinnova has an active role as a funder of projects in Norrland, as they aim to increase and support innovation in Sweden to achieve sustainable development in line with Agenda 2030. Materials from their platform titled *Hållbar expansion i Norr* (Sustainable expansion in the North) have been sampled.

Table 1. Overview of studied material and actors

Actor alias (used in article)	Reference to source	Type of actor	Type of text	Intended readership
<i>Vinnova</i>	Vinnova (2023)	Government office of innovation	Information on web platform, transcript of short film	Projects applying for funding, research, companies, others interested
<i>Social democratic politicians</i>	Thorwaldsson <i>et al.</i> (2022)	Ministers of previous government	Political opinion (column in Dagens Nyheter)	Readers of Dagens Nyheter, broader public, actors with interest in Norrland
<i>Liberal-conservative politicians</i>	Busch <i>et al.</i> (2023)	Ministers of current government	Political opinion (column in Dagens Nyheter)	Readers of Dagens Nyheter, broader public, actors with interest in Norrland
<i>Region Västerbotten</i>	Carstedt and Wikström (2023) Hultberg (2023)	Regional political governance	Marketing material (paper insert in Dagens Industri)	Readers of Dagens Industri, skilled/industry workers, potential in-migrants or investors
<i>Dagens Nyheter</i>	Derland (2022) Haltorp (2022) Isberg (2022) Kejerhag (2022) Kejerhag (2023)	Newspaper, liberal	News articles	Broader public (daily national newspaper)

The political opinion columns include materials both from the previous (2014–2021) social-democratic government, as well as from the current (2021–) liberal-conservative government, to make sure to reflect different political stances. In order to portray political visions regarding Norrland, we chose political columns in *Dagens Nyheter* (Daily News), Sweden's largest newspaper, which often covers development trajectories in Northern Sweden.

To represent the regional governance perspective, we have included materials from *Region Västerbotten*. This material consists of a newspaper supplement produced by the region of Västerbotten and published as an attachment to the liberal-conservative financial newspaper *Dagens Industri* (Industry of Today). It should thereby be understood predominantly as a marketing material aimed at the newspaper readers, rather than as a strict reflection of the regional development policy.

Finally, various articles from *Dagens Nyheter* (DN) – commonly referred to as Sweden's biggest, liberal daily paper – have been included. Here, DN's self-proclaimed 'new focus' on Northern Sweden is noteworthy. The paper has previously garnered criticism for its Stockholm-centeredness and was accused of reporting on Norrland in the newspaper's 'foreign coverage' part (Wolodarski 2021). The criticism led DN, by 2022, to employ designated journalists to cover Norrland only, including its emerging green industry initiatives (DN 2021).

Analysing the data material

The data material has been analysed by employing CDA in the vein of Fairclough and others (2010). Based on an understanding of discourse as both forming and being formed by social practice, this method of analysis underlines how discourses can be understood as efforts to frame a certain understanding of a given topic, thus contributing to shaping the understandings of social reality. Through this, Fairclough and others' CDA emphasizes how discourses should not be seen as neutral, and that they should be interpreted through their interrelations within broader social structures and practice (Jørgensen & Phillips 2002). From this insistence, CDA was found suitable for this study to interpret the role of the prevalent discourses – as well as the interplay of previous discourses – in their contribution to processes of peripheralization in Northern Sweden. Accordingly, the studied material has not been read *as is*, but rather systematically scrutinized to discern how Norrland is being produced discursively through linguistic elements and strategies in the texts.

As with any method, CDA comes with its own set of drawbacks, including lack of preciseness, being at risk of faulty or excessive interpretation of the material. To mitigate these drawbacks, this study has utilized a systematic approach to the analysis. Analytical units were strictly decided on beforehand, whereupon the texts were examined for their use of buzzwords, weasel words, vocabulary use, recurring chains of reasoning and narrative structures. The analysis focused on uncovering what was portrayed as 'natural' or presupposed in the material (*ibid.*). We also examined the prevalence of discursive themes that highlighted recurring topics. As a result, this study came to identify two broader themes repeatedly found within the studied material. These themes, we argue, can be understood as the discursive narratives competing for the new, hastily updated representation of Norrland: *Norrland as the future* and *Norrland as a struggle*. These discursive themes as well as their corresponding subthemes will be elaborated on next.

Norrland as the future

The discursive theme of Norrland as the future for green development was a prominent theme across the material, especially prevalent within the material from regional and national governance. This narrative produces Norrland as unique, progressive, and world-leading, at the same time normalising and legitimising the development by the notion of a 'greater good'. This discourse is reproduced through two subthemes: narratives of *breaking with the old Norrland*, and of *Norrland as world leading*.

Breaking with the old – a new, progressive, and modern region

Central to the discourse of Norrland as the future is the idea of the green transition as a 'fresh start' for the region. This discursive theme seems to diverge from the peripheral narratives construed about Norrland. As a result, this subtheme highlights the intertextuality of previous and current discourses, while reproducing narratives of the old and new Norrland in various ways. Such reasoning is reminiscent of Nora's (2001) ideas on the 'acceleration of history', where the shortage of environments of memory (*milieux de memoire*) is supplemented by artificially created sites of memory (*lieux de memoire*).

Throughout the material, Norrland is repeatedly framed as a place in transition, subtextually understood as a process of transformation from places of stagnancy to places of growth. For instance, whilst outlining an imagined future scenario of the regions of Norrbotten and Västerbotten in 2032, Vinnova describes how:

[a] society in rapid transformation brings new thoughts and ideas with it, and norms are being challenged, and that is perhaps why the entrepreneurship constantly reaches higher levels in Västerbotten and Norrbotten. (Vinnova 2023)

Here, the regions are anticipated to develop into forward-thinking, progressive, and entrepreneurial areas. By highlighting the expected positive influence of the 'new ideas' that the transition will encompass, and thus the challenging of old norms and patterns, Norrland is envisioned as increasingly entrepreneurial. Vinnova also suggests that the new innovative Norrland will attract global

entrepreneurs, enabling the development of a “digital start-up mecca” (Vinnova 2023). The importance of local and global collaboration is emphasized to challenge what is described as “entrenched systems” of society and industry; further framing the anticipated transition as a break with old ideas and systems.

Similarly, the debate article by politicians of the Swedish Social Democratic Party retells the industrial history of Northern Sweden as one fraught with industry closures, unemployment, out-migration, and despondence (Thorwaldsson *et al.* 2022). The green transition is framed as the solution to those challenges, as it will bring many new work opportunities, increased in-migration and growth, rendering Norrland progressive and modern.

Narratives of the old and the new future, of the outdated and the modern, are repeatedly contrasted throughout the discourse, rhetorically reproducing the narrative of how Norrland and its inhabitants, will get a fresh, new start. Articles from Region Västerbotten describe how the prejudice about Norrland has “never been true, and especially not now” (Hultberg 2023) whilst proclaiming that the region has the “highest rated levels of trust, equality and life quality” (Carstedt & Wikström 2023). Through this positive media coverage, the development is peddled as a “fantastic story that goes against what many had previously believed” (Hultberg 2023). Here, Northern Sweden is represented almost as an underdog, ready to prove the prejudices wrong. The transition, and its narrative of change, becomes a way to refute previous discourses about Norrland as obsolete or devoid of entrepreneurship and growth (cf. Eriksson 2010a, Nilsson & Lundgren 2015).

The transition is sometimes described as a challenge in itself, for example in the text by the leaders of the regional development board of Västerbotten:

If change is not uncomfortable, it probably is not much of a change. (...) There is a historical, green transition going on in Northern Sweden, from old ways of doing to new, sustainable alternatives – and it is of course not without controversies. But all this friction is actually good news, the fact that we have already started this progress of transition. (Carstedt & Wikström 2023)

Here, issues with the transition and the change are simply reduced to something ‘uncomfortable’. And, whilst the positive outcomes are repeated widely across the material, the controversies or issues are not further elaborated in the text. Thus, the briefly mentioned ‘friction’ is made inevitable, portrayed as minor obstacles to be overcome in order to achieve the expected change. As a result, the narrative of the green transition as the future for Norrland seems to become naturalized and legitimized, as it despite some issues is repeatedly proclaimed as the right way forward. Altogether, this subtheme suggests that Norrland is represented in an inevitable transition ‘for the better’ through a recurring chain of reasoning.

Norrland as world leading for the greater good

The narrative of the new progressive Norrland, with its unique traits, not only seems to legitimize the current trajectory and refute the peripheral associations of the region. The positive attributes also contribute to an understanding of Northern Sweden as a prominent actor for the green transition internationally. The investments in Northern Sweden are repeatedly described by Vinnova, politicians and regional governance as part of Swedish industries taking on a world leading role in the green transition (Thorwaldsson *et al.* 2022; Hultberg 2023, Vinnova 2023). This narrative renders Norrland as both a driving force for innovation and as Europe’s echelon of sustainability.

The large prevalence of important natural resources in Norrland is portrayed as fundamental for creating job opportunities, increasing competitiveness, and achieving climate targets. The access to mineral resources is repeatedly emphasized as unique to Norrland, denoted for instance by liberal-conservative politicians as something “other countries could only dream about” (Busch *et al.* 2023). In the same text, Sweden is described to have a unique position when it comes to Europe’s supply of raw materials inherent to the green transition, thus underlining the potential and importance of the plans. Similarly, Dagens Nyheter peddles the narrative of how “the world is yearning for minerals and metals which can be found in the Swedish bedrock”, describing Sweden as “Europe’s granary for minerals” (Derland 2022).

Despite being found in texts explicitly denoting the situation in Norrland, the described unique traits are repeatedly portrayed as assets of *Sweden*. Such access to mineral resources is coupled with

a described acute need of exploitation to manufacture green, fossil-free products (Derland 2022, Busch *et al.* 2023). By highlighting the importance of extracting the minerals, and simultaneously the rich prevalence of these in Sweden (or rather, Norrland), the material reproduces the inference of (Northern) Sweden's unique position as the best provider of such minerals – beneficial not only for Sweden itself but for the greater good of Europe and the sustainable future of the world. Effectively, the exploitation of resources in Northern Sweden is produced as the prominent – if not *only* – option for successfully achieving Europe's goal to become the first fossil-free region in the world.

This narrative, making Norrland the centrepiece for international development with entirely positive expectations, is effectively summarized within the following excerpt from the board of regional development in Västerbotten:

By investing in green technology and green growth we pursue a leading position in the world, making us useful, competitive, successful, and attractive, for decades ahead. If we can succeed in the role as a forerunner in transition, we will grant the success and welfare of the country for the future, at the same time as we are making progress for the whole world. (Carstedt & Wikström 2023)

The green transition development here becomes naturalized and legitimized on multiple scales, ascribed with positive outcomes locally, nationally, and internationally. Throughout this discourse, Norrland is inherently reconfigured as the future.

Norrland as a struggle

Contrasting the futuristic discourse, the discourse of *Norrland as a struggle* encompasses a more critical perspective of the transition – a narrative mainly recurring in the news media coverage. Here, this discourse is exemplified through the themes of *the conflicts of interest* and *the demographical struggle*.

The conflicts of interest

A key narrative recurrently reproduced within the news media is one of Norrland as a site for conflicts of interest. Here, the reported conflicts mainly concern land use issues, framed as a struggle between the interests of the reindeer husbandry and the mining industry. The issue tends to be represented in Dagens Nyheter as a conflict between the Sami people (and increasingly, environmental movements) on the one hand, and the state and industries on the other. The narrative of a conflict is further accentuated by rhetorical choices, including use of emotive language. For instance, Dagens Nyheter describes how “...the industry has *kidnapped* the words of ‘green transition’” (Derland 2022) and that “...in Vittangi [a settlement], the *battle* between minerals and reindeer husbandry is at its peak” (Isberg 2022).

In its reporting, Dagens Nyheter reproduce an industry-friendly narrative similar to the discourse of *Norrland as a future*, describing Northern Sweden as a key component of the green transition in need of further exploitation for the global benefit (Derland 2022, Isberg 2022). However, Dagens Nyheter sometimes includes local voices and their worry for the exploitation of land and the disturbances that would follow:

...if the planned industrialisation progresses, there is nothing left to do but to cancel the reindeer husbandry. New mines, industries, wind power and solar power have big consequences as the reindeers require large expanses of land (...) It would be more candid if the government said that they no longer care about the reindeer husbandry. (Derland 2022)

The interviewee further emphasizes how traditional Sami land use is not exploitative, but rather protects the natural ecosystems. Here, the national, if not international, extractivism in Northern Sweden is contrasted against the local, more traditional land use; put differently, ‘culture’ is discursively repackaged as ‘nature’ simply on account of its longevity (cf. Saltzman *et al.* 2011). Within these texts, Norrland's potential and the visions of the mining industry are countered by environmental activists and engaged locals who see the ‘green’ aspect of the planned mines as nothing but greenwashing (Derland 2022, Isberg 2022). As a result, this narrative frames Norrland as a site of struggle, at the point of intersection for local and transnational interests and different (un)sustainable discourses.

The demographical struggle

As Norrland is expected to transform from a space of 'stagnancy' to one of 'growth', the demographical struggle becomes a recurring theme. As the outlined initiatives in Norrland are estimated to require an in-migration of 100,000 people within the upcoming years, some of the articles from DN highlight the challenges and struggles of reaching such a goal. The lingering perception of Norrland as a periphery is seemingly framed as a contributing factor. One article states that the promise of high salaries from the new jobs is not enough of a pull factor, as Norrland is still lacking in attractiveness for families because of its depopulation and the resulting disbandment of societal services and schools (Haltorp 2022). Another article describes the acute lack of dentists and hospital beds in Norrland, pointing to the long distances and lack of available welfare services (Kejerhag 2022). Following this, experts are interviewed, suggesting that the goal of attracting 100,000 new inhabitants will be hard to achieve.

Notably, attempts to combat this demographical struggle – and the enduring notion of an 'unattractive periphery' – is done by shifting the recruitment of labour to an international scale, drawing on the popular image of Sweden abroad. To exemplify, DN describes how municipalities and industries participated at a career fair in the Netherlands, encouraging locals to move away from their high costs of living and cramped lifestyles by advertising the advantages and more favourable conditions up north (Kejerhag 2023).

In sum, this final narrative reproduces Northern Sweden as a site of demographical struggle, where the historical context and peripherality of local communities are rendered a challenge for attracting the desired growth for the future Norrland. Yet, it also pushes for the duality of the peripheral notion as outlined by Eriksson (2010a), where Norrland is construed as unattractive and unmodern in Sweden, yet exotic and alluring abroad.

The reimagined identity of Norrland: a discussion

Producing a 'new' Norrland

The aim of this paper was to explore how representations of Northern Sweden are being reproduced through discourses about the current green transition initiatives. These discourses can be seen as part of wider socio-spatial processes that contribute to the understanding – or the production – of Norrland as a social space in a Lefebvrian vein. As derived from the findings, this study suggests the prevalence of two main themes within the current discourses producing the 'new' Norrland: Norrland as a future and Norrland as a struggle. These themes fit Sörlin's (2023) description of the previous future-oriented narrative of Norrland construed over a century ago, as well as the narratives associating Northern Sweden with problems as found by Eriksson (2010a) and Nilsson and Lundgren (2015). However, whilst the main themes are similar, the way these discursive themes are now being simultaneously refuted and reproduced differ from previous narratives through their rootedness within the notion of a green sustainable transition.

Different to the idea of the future depicted 100 years ago – filled with descriptive attributions of the land of Norrland (Sörlin 2023) – the current discursive future seems more abstract. Here, on the one hand, the narratives reproduce Norrland as unique through its resource potential. On the other hand, the same representations of Norrland also mostly remove it from other local characteristics, symbols, and historical narratives, rendering it abstract and suitable for any form of (green) investment. And whilst some of the material did acknowledge worries and criticisms of the planned development, even the discourse of Norrland as a struggle seems to adhere to the naturalized notion that this form of green transition is the only way forward, despite the raised concerns. Such legitimization of visionary discourses, where the planned developments become naturalized and de-politicized, can be understood as part of capitalist processes of commodifying and governing space, where political representations of space dominate its practice to produce spaces for investment (Lefebvre 1991). Accordingly, Northern Sweden here becomes reproduced as a unique and enticing region, inhabiting those perfect qualities 'necessary' for start-ups and green innovation.

Through this, the ad hoc switch from 'rural' to 'urban' is also noteworthy (cf. Dymitrow 2018). If Norrland was previously reproduced as a rural space, with peripheral traits generalized for the whole area, it now appears to be rather the opposite. The expected urban development of a few industry-adjacent places in Norrbotten and Västerbotten seems to be repackaged and put forward as the ubiquitous future for the whole of Norrland. Throughout the future-centered discourse, there is no acknowledgement of other spaces across the vast lands of Norrland, as doing so would interfere with the image of Norrland as a homogenous, investment-friendly space. This reproduces what Lundmark and others (2023: 169) describe as a "sense of a-spatiality" where the narratives are disconnected from the existing spatialities, and instead contribute to an abstract, imagined a-spatiality. Once again, the emotionally laden rural-urban debate plays out through oscillating discourses of degradation and restitution spun around a familiar development-oriented axis (Dymitrow 2017).

Here, the pervasive focus on the industrial narrative and the imagined *potential* of Norrland poses the risk of exacerbating the social and political distance that locals in Norrland experience to the rest of Sweden, as described by Larsson (2020). Without a re-establishment and presence of societal institutions across the larger-scale Norrland – and not only adjacent to the places of anticipated green growth – it seems unlikely that such experiences of resource deserts, peripheralization and distancing will be mitigated.

A world-leading periphery? Norrland as a symbol of Sweden

The prevalent discourses about Norrland then seem to constitute somewhat of a paradox. Norrland, a place that has often been understood as an inner periphery of Sweden, devoid of modernity and growth, is now produced with an all-encompassing potential to become a world-leading region, crucial for implementing a successful green transition.

Arguably, the wide national and international interest in Norrland could be seen as part of a process of de-peripheralization (Kühn 2015). Here, however, the relational understanding of peripheries becomes key. To reiterate, inner peripheries are characterized by low economic potential, low access to service, or a lack of relational proximity (ESPON 2018). Whilst Norrland seemingly inhabits great economic potential, its relation to the rest of Sweden still seems to differ – despite the discourse of its enticing future.

Within the studied material, the perceived distance and impeded access to societal services are still framed as issues for the region, mainly in regard to achieving the desired regional in-migration. But such distance, the relational proximity, not only relates to physical distance but also the degree of socio-economic and political connections (or distance) to other spaces (ESPON 2018, Stenbacka & Cassel 2020). Inner peripheries, then, lack such political proximity, as they are always hierarchically related to its governing centre. Put differently, they are never seen as their own, as Stenbacka and Cassel (2020) emphasize.

The findings of this study indicate that Norrland is rarely made 'its own', but rather continuously reproduced through the 'perspective of Sweden' (whatever this may mean). Thus, Norrland is constantly rendered as the object, rather than subject, of outer politics. When ascribing positive attributes to Norrland, and the great potential of the planned green transition, the discursive material often couples these attributes to national interests, contributing to placing Sweden at the forefront of climate innovation in Europe.

On the one hand, this discursive strategy could be seen as an attempt to reduce the fragmentation and (imagined) distance between Norrland and the rest of Sweden – to increase the relational proximity of a previous periphery. By making the progress of Norrland synonymous with the progress of Sweden, it could arguably be seen as a way to produce Northern Sweden as more integrated with the rest of the country. On the other hand, expanding on the previous research on the imagery of Norrland in relation to the idea of 'Sweden' as a whole, the results of this study indicate a new way of framing Sweden through Norrland.

As noted in the beginning of this paper, the exploitation and colonization of Norrland during the first industrialization came to be an important symbol that contributed to the understanding of Sweden as the world's 'most modern country' (Sörlin 2023). Similarly, after the industrial decline,

Northern Sweden was instead utilized as an 'internal other' to contrast and reproduce the image of Southern Sweden and Stockholm as progressive, modern, creative, and expansive (Eriksson 2010a). Such discursive oscillations around modernity and backwardness are typical of reinventions of areas historically seen as 'problematic'. This is done by rewriting history through the imposition of values and foreclosures, often with disregard to identity, authenticity, and historical hybridity (cf. Klein 1997, Bendix 2000, Dymitrow 2013, Dragan *et al.* 2020).

Representations of Northern Sweden recurrently construe a form of symbolism that contributes to the narrative and idea of Sweden as one homogenous nation. Here, the portrayal of Sweden as a world-leader in green innovation can then yet again be understood as consolidated through the representation of Norrland. This implies that Northern Sweden is seldom produced or attributed on its own terms, but always as relational to the urban South. As Schough (2008, 79) argues, "colonisation creates areas characterized by colonisation". This means that such areas will always struggle to be incorporated alike the rest of the nation and instead will be reproduced interchangeably as different or as similar. Such oscillations are here exemplified by the discursive waves of Norrland – first as a potential, then as a problem, and today as a potential yet again – all depending on its current role within the grand narrative of Sweden. From this, the relationship between Sweden (as a whole) and Norrland can still be discerned as that of a centre and its (inner) periphery; characterized by how Sweden's urban centre is dependent on utilising the periphery to sustain and reproduce its own prominence and prosperity (cf. Wallerstein 1974). From an outside, international perspective, Sweden is construed as a progressive core entity, but on the inside, the inner periphery seems to linger on. In 2024, the United Nations have criticized Sweden for extensive land exploitation in Sápmi (SVT 2024a), while Amnesty International have alerted that the Sami's rights must be better protected legislatively against excavations (SVT 2024b). Whilst the green transition provides a 'new' concept for policy and development, old traditions of extractivism within Northern Sweden remain.

Norrland, the material suggests, thus finds itself in a constant process of reimagination and reproduction; and whilst the narratives and prevalent expressions of peripheralization seem to shift, the spatial hierarchies of power are held in place. The findings of this study suggest that while Norrland in general has (re)gained a more central role within the Swedish public debate owing to the spread of green initiatives, there are still experiences and places beyond the green industry narratives that remain unaddressed as they do not fit into the mould of the envisioned green growth. Thus, this development could exacerbate the already existing spatial disparities between the inland of Norrland and the more centralized mining towns and coastal cities, reproducing inner peripheries within the region. Whilst some places might become relationally more central due to their influx of investments, others are likely to remain unaffected by the alluring envisioned future.

Enabling a transition through discursive contradictions: an oxymoron in the making

Taking on a qualitative approach by critically analysing discursive material of Norrland, this article set out to provide insight into the current, hastily refurbished, representations of Northern Sweden in light of the ongoing green transition initiatives. As suggested through the examples within this paper, the findings indicate the prevalence of two main themes: the discourses of *Norrland as the future*, and *Norrland as a struggle*, where the latter is dominated by the first.

By highlighting how the vast area of Norrland is reproduced as a singular space of innovative industries and growth, suitable for capitalist growth through extractivism, this research suggests that the ubiquitous and dominating focus on the potential of Norrland's future might lead to the dismissal of issues of the present, by rendering the current route of development as naturalized and legitimized – seemingly detached from ideological and political processes. Enacted through the narrative of 'the greater good', the green exploitation of Norrland is represented as key for the future progress for the whole of Europe, rendering the transition as prominent and acute.

Following this, we suggest that such narratives of Norrland's prominent role within the green transition can be seen as a continuation of entertaining an inner periphery to contribute to broader narratives of Sweden. The initial colonization of Northern Sweden centuries ago contributed to the notion of Sweden as the world's most modern country – akin to how the current developments seem

to construe an image of Sweden as a world leader within climate neutral innovation and green progress. This narrative seems especially (politically) imminent, as the international image of Sweden has become increasingly tarnished by events such as multiple Quran burnings, false allegations of social welfare authorities kidnapping children, or the prolonged North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) accession debate. From this, the liberal-conservative government has instructed a special group at the Swedish institute to rectify the image and reputation of the country – suitably by highlighting the progression of the green transition (Olsson 2024).

Of course, it could be argued that the idea of developing a region characterized by structural marginalization and peripheralization is not inherently bad; perhaps this planned trajectory could be the opportunity for Norrland to shift from a socio-economic periphery to a frontier with a more positive future. Here, the possibilities of green innovation initiatives pose an attractive solution by addressing the future of a peripheral region rich in resources, whilst contributing to combatting the global climate crisis. However, the current abstract, futuristic, and homogenous representations of Norrland – seemingly detached from the complex reality – pose a warning sign as they risk intensifying local Norrlanders' experience of social and political distance to the rest of Sweden.

The alluring discourse of bright lights with expanding local industry and possibilities of employment could also make Norrland the target of a second wave of (neo)colonization through an influx of settlement from southern Sweden. We are already witnessing a chaotic 'wild west'-situation with the development of Northvolt's lithium-ion battery plant in Skellefteå, where settlers from the South are forced to dwell in minuscule temporary barracks due to lack of adequate housing and a near-complete construction halt brought on by the inflation (Kejerhag & Simander 2023). Even this imagery is difficult to reconcile with the unapologetic narrative of Norrland as the future.

Finally, it remains important to note that a green transition in general is well needed, and that the development in Northern Sweden is merely in its starting blocks. It is possible that the current trajectory might change as the planned development advances. From this, future research covering a larger timespan would be beneficial for further understanding of the complex and ever-changing peripheralization processes taking place in Northern Sweden. For now, its new identity as 'the world-leading periphery' remains an oxymoron that raises few brows.

Notes

¹ Whilst being critical of the geographical simplification the term constitutes, this paper utilizes 'Norrland' and 'Northern Sweden' as umbrella terms encompassing the different regions, as most of the material used for the study simply uses these terms and fails to distinguish between, or specify, particular regions or locations.

² The minority populations of Tornedalians, Laintalaiset and the Kvens were also inhabiting the areas of Tornedalen and Kiruna/Gällivare before Swedish settlement and have been subject to assimilation policies and marginalization. However, due to the lack of available research on these other groups specifically, this paper mainly mentions the Sami. A recent government inquiry has traced the erasure of these groups in Swedish history (SOU 2023), emphasizing the need for acknowledgement of their presence.

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