

# Objects of affection and competing images of the Swedish North: movements for and against 'green' investments and reindustrialization

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We are witnessing the mobilization of geographical and social peripheries as sites for change in the current industrialization and 'green' development of the sparsely populated Swedish North (Norrland). In this article, we aim to explore how objects of affection and images of the Swedish North are framed in movements both for and against the establishment of a new so-called green industry in the northern Swedish countryside. This prospect has been hotly debated in the local community, which has seen both struggles for it (because of job opportunities) and against it (because of the destruction of nature and livelihood opportunities). Combining selective digital archiving with Sara Ahmed's concept of affective economies and its application to images of place and belonging, we analyze how the region's re-industrialization both draws upon and contests traditional images of the northern countryside. Our analysis shows that the resistance to and mobilization of such ideas of renewal and escape are rooted both in nostalgia for a pre-industrial past and a desire for the prosperity brought by industrial investments. It also shows how different development goals are invoking different ideas of what is best for the local community, making visible the rural as a conflicted space.

Keywords: green industrialization, northern Sweden, rural imageries, nationalism, affective economies

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## Introduction

In 2020, the Swedish government launched coordinated efforts to bring about the new industrialization of northern Sweden, aiming to catalyze economic and environmental transformation through investments in non-fossil industries. In 2022, this drive led to the merging of the Ministry of the Environment and the Ministry of Economy into the Ministry of Climate and Enterprise, consolidating the policy focus on sustainable growth. In 2024, the new strategy was launched (Regeringskansliet 2024). A significant target of this agenda is northern Sweden, a region that intersects with Indigenous Sámi lands (Sápmi) and is positioned as a frontier for the 'green' transition and thus 'ripe' for economic renewal through 'green' investments.

From a political standpoint, the new wave of green industrial projects is touted as a path to economic revitalization, with promises of job creation, population growth, and infrastructure development. Yet, critics caution that these investments may not fulfill the long-term promises of social transformation. History has shown that the infrastructure and housing developed around such industries can be left under-resourced or even abandoned once industrial ventures withdraw. Many northern municipalities, grappling with the effects of deindustrialization and depopulation, are drawn into this resource-based development model as a perceived means of survival (e.g. Eriksson *et al.* 2024). Thus, the discourse of green industrialization often frames these communities as beneficiaries of the green transition while also referencing local industrial heritage as a point of continuity and cultural preservation.

However, northern Sweden's strategic role in Sweden's modernization and national image-building is not new. Approximately 150 years ago, during the first waves of industrialization, the region's rich natural resources were mobilized as key assets in constructing Sweden as a modern nation. This developmental narrative rationalized extensive resource extraction, often to the detriment of Indigenous communities, whose displacement and marginalization were a cost incurred by Sweden's modernization (e.g. Sörlin 1988/2023; Össbo 2023). As economic conditions changed, so did the region's image. In the 20th century, northern Sweden came to be depicted as a struggling rural landscape characterized by out-migration and economic stagnation — a 'dying countryside' narrative that further shaped public policy and regional identity (Öhman & Nilsson 2018).

While the green transition offers a 'new' framework for policy and development, old traditions of extractivism in northern Sweden persist. The naturalization of the 'green' transition as the only viable path forward has led to the legitimization of visionary discourses, where planned developments are often de-politicized despite the concerns raised (cf. Eriksson *et al.* 2024). Persson and Dymitrow (2024) argue that it is therefore now time to critically examine how the narrative of the green transition affects the current understanding and representations of northern Sweden.

'Green' investments are unevenly distributed across the northern parts of the country, with some areas excluded from the official governmental strategy for re-industrialization and transformation. An example is the county of Västernorrland, located in the southern part of northern Sweden. Despite not being part of the official strategy, municipalities in this county are independently creating 'green' industrial hubs. Within these local contexts, however, 'green' industrial projects remain contentious. While proponents, stakeholders, and some of the locals emphasize future growth and job security, other residents express concerns over potential impacts on landscapes, nature, and wildlife and question who truly stands to benefit from these developments.

In this article, we aim to explore how objects of affection and images of the Swedish North are framed in movements both for and against the establishment of a new so-called 'green' industry in the northern Swedish countryside. To do so we will unpack the contrasting visions at play in these new 'green' industrial sites and their complex associations with local communities in northern Sweden by focusing on two industrial sites in Västernorrland, namely, Ånge and Timrå. By exploring the mobilization of geographic and social peripheries as places of change in the national 'green' transition, we analyze how the region's re-industrialization both draws upon and contests traditional images of the northern countryside.

## Re-industrialization, national identity, and rural imaginaries in northern Sweden

The Swedish North has long been constructed as both a resource-rich frontier and a symbol of the nation's natural heritage. This region, often referred to by the colonial term *Norrland* rather than as a part of *Sápmi* (the Indigenous Sámi name for the land), is central to Sweden's recent efforts to undertake a 'green transition.' However, rather than forming a homogenous and interconnected socio-economic unit, Norrland is a result of a peripheralizing, colonial process (cf. Wallerstein 1974; Eriksson 2010). Despite the appearance of unity in popular imagery, the region is marked by significant internal disparities in economic development and resource allocation (Persson & Dymitrow 2024). This layered history complicates the uniform image of northern Sweden that is often promoted by the 'green' industrial agenda.

Research on land conflicts and Indigenous rights highlights how contemporary greening initiatives contribute to a new wave of state-led exploitation of the Swedish North. This is sometimes described by the Sámi and other Indigenous groups as green colonialism, revealing that these industries are embedded in a Western imperial framework that reconfigures place-making and territorial control (e.g. Safransky 2014). The narratives of today echo those of 150 years ago when northern Sweden was portrayed as a beacon of national development. At that time, the region's vast natural resources were tapped as a way to modernize Sweden, framing the North as a reservoir of wealth that could drive national progress (Sörilin 1988/2023). This early industrial push justified rapid natural resource extraction, resulting in the marginalization and displacement of the indigenous Sámi population as well as other minority groups, such as the Tornedalians, Laintalaiset, and Kvens (Labba 2020; SOU 2023). Moreover, scholars such as Nilsson and Lundgren (2018) suggest that narratives of rurality, including the valorization of the North as a site of industrial progress, have become a positively charged symbol of the Swedish national identity. The narratives represent a selective heritage that intertwines the construction of the welfare state with colonial expansion and industrial exploitation (Sörilin 1988/2023; Össbo 2023).

As the industrial economy shifted, so did the narrative surrounding northern Sweden. The late 20th century saw the first wave of industrial decline in the 1970s followed by a second decline due to globalization and neoliberal governance in the 1990s. During this period, the region was reimagined as a struggling periphery marked by depopulation and economic decline (Eriksson 2010; Tidholm 2014; Öhman & Nilsson 2018). Areas such as Ånge and Timrå, which were initially key sites for forestry, sawmills, and early industrial efforts, became symbols of stagnation as industries and associated welfare structures receded. This history gave rise to a stereotype of northern Sweden as a homogeneous rural landscape, continuously marginalized by shifting government policies and the disbandment of industry and services (Nilsson & Lundgren 2015; Öhman & Nilsson 2018; Carson *et al.* 2023).

Besides the images of industrialization and decline, there is a third image: one of what can be called empty authenticity. This image celebrates the region's scenic landscapes — wild forests, mountains, lakes, and snowy winters — portrayed as a site of spiritual renewal and escape from urban life. Often mobilized to attract tourists and new settlers, this romanticized portrayal reflects a nostalgic desire for a simpler, more virtuous past, free from the complexities of modern industrial society (Larsson & Ingridsdotter 2023). This aesthetic image of northern Sweden, often portrayed through pictures of empty nature and the Northern Lights (aurora borealis), gives the area a strong cultural entanglement with nature, especially in the context of any imagined urban dystopia and back-to-nature mobilizations (Ekberg 2016). Such images are also often produced from a view entangled with a settler heritage (Pushaw 2019; Mrozewicz 2020) where the idea that nature is 'true' also connects to a view of nature as untouched by humans. In reality, much of this idealized 'wilderness' is crisscrossed by extractive industries, and most forests are planted and subjected to continuous exploitation and deforestation. Such ideas of the 'empty wilderness' in Western societies is deeply rooted in colonial ideologies, particularly the notion of terra nullius, which framed unoccupied or indigenous lands as void and available for exploitation (Wolfe 2006).

These different imageries — an industrial frontier, a dying countryside, and an untouched wilderness — underscore a complex, often contradictory vision of the Swedish North as both a driver

of modernity and a preserver of authenticity. The industrial history portrays the North as a site of progress and productivity, while the image of decline frames it as a place of stagnation and loss. Meanwhile, the scenic portrayal of empty authenticity presents the North as a timeless, pristine wilderness, detached from both industrial modernity and rural decay. These images are not isolated; rather, they interact in intricate ways, shaping perceptions of the region's past, present, and future.

The nostalgic pull of authenticity, rooted in its perceived timelessness, contrasts sharply with the forward-looking narrative of green industrialization. Yet, these images are not entirely oppositional. The push for 'green' industry draws upon the North's industrial legacy, repurposing its history of extraction and production to imagine a sustainable future. This contrasts with the emptiness of authenticity, which remains malleable and adaptable, capable of being projected onto diverse people and objects depending on the context. While the industrial image bridges past achievements with future aspirations, the image of empty authenticity evokes a static past, unlinked to the future yet versatile in its symbolism. Together, these imageries highlight the North as a contested space where nostalgia, potential, and transformation intersect, offering profound insights into ongoing debates on green transitions, national identity, and rural reinvention.

### **Attending to objects of affection**

In examining the affective dimensions of national identity and rurality in Northern Sweden, we draw on Ahmed's (2004) concept of affective economies and its application to images of place and belonging. Ahmed's poststructuralist analysis emphasizes how emotions are not inherent in objects but instead accumulate and circulate through repeated discourses that allow them to 'stick' to particular symbols or spaces. She describes how objects and signs accumulate affective value as they circulate socially, generating associations that range from positive aspirations to existential threats. This circulation shapes objects of affection by attaching them with emotions such as hope, nostalgia, or threat. Sejersen's (2019) interpretation of Ahmed further shows how these affective mobilizations, especially when linked to imagined futures, can open up political possibilities in the present by anchoring certain objects or places within a web of emotional resonance (also Sejersen & Thisted 2021).

Objects, in Ahmed's framework, are not static things but dynamic sites where emotions are deposited and contested. Signs, meanwhile, function as representations or symbols that carry these affective charges, shaping collective interpretations and actions. For example, objects tied to collective futures, such as the Swedish North as a green industrial frontier, are used (by some) as what Ahmed calls 'happy objects,' circulating with promises of opportunity, growth, and collective well-being. These objects acquire positive affective value as they are passed around in public discourse, depicted as sites of prosperity and progress (Sejersen & Thisted 2021). In contrast, the same objects can simultaneously be framed as 'hateful objects' when portrayed as vulnerable to exploitation or as targets of extractive projects, which might evoke fear, anger, or a sense of loss among local communities.

Applying Ahmed's concept of affective economies to the analysis of the debates around two new 'green' industrial sites and their complex associations with local communities in northern parts of Sweden can help us illuminate how conflicting emotions 'stick' to this region, influencing both its image and its role within different narratives. The affective dimension of these images also shapes people's sense of belonging and denial. Positive emotions tied to the Swedish North — embodying the promise of revitalization through 'green' industry — present it as a 'happy object' within a national imaginary, accumulating value as it symbolizes an environmentally conscious, progressive future for Sweden. Simultaneously, signs associated with industrialization and 'green' energy — such as 'climate neutrality' or 'innovation hubs' — function as affect-laden representations that reinforce these positive narratives. However, this affective framing also risks overshadowing or delegitimizing local concerns about ecological degradation, cultural displacement, and uneven development, which attach negative emotions to the same objects and signs (cf. Eriksson *et al.* 2024).

The Swedish North — particularly encapsulated in the term Norrland — is deeply intertwined with complex place-making processes, where diverse perceptions of rurality, heritage, and progress converge and evolve. Thus, through circulating images: the industrial frontier, the image of decline,

and the scenic image of empty authenticity, the Swedish North emerges as a contested affective site where competing visions of hope and threat collide, shaping the socio-political and emotional landscape of 'green' industrialization. It becomes both a site of nostalgic connection to an 'authentic' Sweden and a space targeted for future-oriented industrial development. Each of these imaginaries not only mobilizes different emotions but also raises critical questions: Who is included or excluded in these visions of development? Whose interests does this projected future serve?

In our analysis, we focus on the 'objects of affection' circulating in the movements for and against 'green' industrialization in northern Sweden. By attending to the affective dimensions of these imaginaries, we can better understand how the Swedish North is conceptualized as both a hope-filled prospect for national growth and a contested terrain of cultural and environmental significance.

## Ånge and Torsboda as industrial sites — case description

As mentioned above, our study focuses on two cases within Västernorrland County: Timrå, located on the coast, and the inland settlement of Ånge. Both municipalities, historically linked to industrial activities, now invest substantial hope in the promise of 'new industrialization' to reverse decades of population decline and economic downturn. Each case represents a distinct approach within northern Sweden's landscape where the past and future intertwine, creating sites of both potential renewal and active resistance.

Ånge, situated inland, is notable as one of Sweden's top wind-producing regions. Despite its sparse population, Ånge has become a prime location for wind power and hydrogen production due to its infrastructure assets: established railways, forest road networks, access to process water, and available company land. However, these expansions have sparked local opposition, particularly around wind farms. Recently, the municipal commissioner likened the rapid pace of development to the 'wild west' of wind power, indicating a chaotic growth process that some local authorities threaten to halt unless communities receive financial benefits (Swedish Television 2023).

Timrå, positioned along Sweden's central coast, has branded itself a "safe and attractive place for everyone" (Timra 2024). Torsboda, an area within Timrå, has been extensively prepared for future industrial establishments, a process culminating in a major development in 2023. The branding and development initiatives in Timrå underscore the municipality's aspirations for growth. This paper explores the local reactions surrounding the industrial transformation of Torsboda, particularly the tension between optimistic forecasts and the resistance from some community members. Timrå has, as we have mentioned, already undergone industrialization and decline. Agnidakis (2014) sheds light on the social and cultural aspects of community building during the previous industrial transformation in Timrå. Using the concept of the *right to the place*, Agnidakis (2014) explores how people experience and navigate their lives and identities while society is undergoing change and how economic restructuring, such as factory closures, creates feelings of insecurity and loss, sparking conflicts about who has the right to a place. It is interesting to follow in these tracks to see what arguments are made for and against the new 'green' industrialization at places such as Torsboda in Timrå, that is, places that have already undergone similar processes.

The two selected cases provide slightly different yet interlinked perspectives on new 'green' industrial investments. While local authorities and investors cast these projects as salvation for the communities, promising growth and sustainability, these futuristic visions face notable pushback. Residents raise concerns over landscape changes, environmental impact, and the long-term viability of jobs and infrastructure. Both Ånge and Timrå, with their historical ties to industrialization and existing resources — land, railways, locally produced electricity, and water — are, by the new industrialization logic, expected to become strategic 'industrial hubs.' Yet, this renewed shaping of the places is deeply contested, with emotional investments coloring discussions on whose vision of the future should prevail. The affective landscape in these areas is marked by a struggle over place, where conflicting feelings of hope, nostalgia, and resistance circulate and accumulate, attaching symbolic value to these sites and shaping their roles in the evolving narrative of 'green' industrialization.

The difference between the two places is that the investments in wind power in Ånge are not as contested as the battery factory in Torsboda, as the wind power plants are framed in the public

discourse as less environmentally dangerous. Moreover, there is already a battery factory in Skellefteå in northern Sweden that has been the subject of much debate, and references to the Skellefteå site are frequently made in discussions about Torsboda. Media analysis of the establishment of the battery factory in Skellefteå shows that the media portrayed the project as crucial for local development, for Sweden's national ambition to lead in 'green' technology, and for a neoliberal agenda for regional economic growth (Eriksson *et al.* 2024). The situation in Torsboda resembles the Skellefteå case in that in both cases, the process was intensively covered by local media discussions about the competitive advantages and disadvantages of the 'bidding' municipalities striving to meet the company's extensive list of requirements. 'Competing' is an essential element in reports about both Torsboda, and Skellefteå. Many references were also made to Skellefteå in the articles by those in favor of the establishment: Skellefteå was framed as a success story, and choosing the site for the next battery factory was depicted as a battle with one winner (e.g. Sundsvalls Tidning 2021).

### *Material and analytical strategy*

Methodologically, our approach is informed by a multi-sited ethnographic strategy (Marcus 1995), which enables us to follow the circulation of cultural meanings, objects, and identities across both physical and digital sites. By positioning ourselves as outside observers, we aim to capture the dynamics of these local narratives from a perspective that critically engages with but does not inhabit the lived reality of the 'green' industrial transformations in these areas. The primary sources for our analysis are newspapers, digital social media content, municipality websites, and public project materials. These sources include political visions, comprehensive plans, and project web pages as well as opinion pieces from local newspapers such as Sundsvalls Tidning and Tidningen Ångermanland. Articles were collected in August 2024 through a search in Mediearkivet ('Retriever'), Scandinavia's largest digital archive, spanning the period from January 2022 to July 2024. Our keywords included '[municipality name]' in combination with 'wind power' and 'Torsboda Industrial Park\*.'

Our first search resulted in 501 articles. After eliminating reprints and articles that focused on other topics but mentioned the words searched for in some form, the number was reduced to 306 articles. The large number of articles can be explained by the fact that many of them addressed topics such as reporting on and discussing a new decision being made on investments in Torsboda or Ånge or visits by international investors to one of the sites; that is, these articles concerned the sites in Ånge and Torsboda in general. These articles could be set aside without deeper analysis to enable a focus on the articles that deepened the arguments and opinions about the sites. Articles about Torsboda accounted for around two-thirds of the material.

Our analysis centers on how public discourse, particularly in local media, frames the issues at play in Ånge and Timrå. This focus on media enables us to examine the ways in which state, municipal, and citizen narratives converge and contest each other, especially regarding themes such as greening, welfare nostalgia, and settler colonialism. Importantly, we are not using these media representations as direct reflections of lived experiences in the 'green industrialization.' Rather, we approach them as expressions of a public discourse that shapes how these sites are imagined and understood, particularly in relation to longstanding imageries of the Swedish North.

In addition, we conducted selective digital archiving inspired by Lomborg's (2012) work on archiving research. We focus on social media posts related to these local media publications, including posts from activist groups both for and against the new industrial developments. In our search for the media constructions of the sites, we spent hours screening local media, the comments left on these local media reports, and diverse social media sites. Since social groups exist within and between multiple platforms and groups simultaneously (cf. Cera 2023), we started by following discussions on social media related to the media publications. This pursuit led us to different activist groups that both supported and opposed the industrial establishments. As described by Lomborg (2012), we followed the groups and hashtags for the same period as for the media articles. Digital fieldwork involves a relatively new set of methods within the social sciences. Although it typically adapts offline methods, such as participant observation and interviews, to the online space, methodological and ethical challenges are nevertheless raised (cf. Cera 2023). In this research, we follow the Swedish law

of good research practice (Svensk Författningssamling 2019:504), and the research team discussed ethics throughout the research process.

For example, we followed posts from *Ånge Wind Power*, an interest organization formed in 2020 to halt wind power projects in Ånge, and the Facebook group *Counterwind* (Motvind), which opposes perceived wind power exploitation in Ånge. These sources offer valuable insights into how different groups assign emotional value to these industrial projects. Consequently, it is the content, rather than the different posts and individual statements, that is the principal subject of analysis here. To maintain anonymity, we use very few exemplifying quotes and do not refer to any specific accounts or posts. Instead, we focus on describing the content, looking for the specific meanings that emerge and how hashtags are used as ways of communicating among different accounts and within different positions.

Our analysis identifies and traces the 'sticky objects' of public discourse — those elements around which emotions of hope, fear, and nostalgia circulate (Ahmed 2004). Through these objects, the narratives and imaginaries of the North are refracted, capturing the complex affective economies in Ånge and Timrå as stakeholders negotiate what the future holds for these historically industrial but now reimagined spaces.

### **Affective economies, place-making, and 'sticky' imagery of the Swedish North**

The discourse around the Torsboda site and Ånge wind projects brings into focus several elements that become 'sticky objects' in the public narrative, drawing on Ahmed's (2004) concept of affective economies. These sites and projects accumulate conflicting emotions as they are circulated within public discourse, shaping how both the local and national communities imagine the future of northern Sweden. By tracing these objects, we can observe how the emotions of hope, risk, and resentment cluster around themes such as economic revitalization, environmental identity, and the tension between heritage and modernity.

The image of northern Sweden as a place of struggle — marked by depopulation and economic decline — is evident in how proponents frame the Torsboda Industrial Park. For example, the official website describes the site as a solution to "regional challenges," (Torsboda 2024) highlighting the potential for new jobs and increased tax revenues, which are essential to sustaining local services such as schools, healthcare, and social services.

For many years, Västernorrland [the county] has been struggling with a declining population and an increasing proportion of older people in relation to younger people of working age. To reverse this, we need more jobs and more residents who pay taxes so that our welfare can be maintained and developed. In other places, the electricity-intensive battery industry has been shown to create increased regional attractiveness and growth. We want to see this happen here. This investment is being made for schools, healthcare, social services, leisure facilities and everything else people should expect in a good society. (Torsboda 2024)

This representation of green industrialization as a savior for the struggling North transforms it into a 'happy object': one that promises prosperity and renewal for a region depicted as otherwise in decline (Torsboda 2024). This optimistic framing aligns with Nilsson and Lundgren's (2018) argument that industrial progression in the North has become a positively charged imagery — a happy object — supporting the vision of a thriving welfare state sustained by 'green' industries. Here, the affective signs of 'green' industrialization as a happy object are linked to securing jobs, welfare, and local prosperity and detached from its implications for colonial relations (see also Andreucci *et al.* 2023).

Northern Sweden, with its industrial experience, expertise, and abundant access to green energy, has a unique opportunity to enable the transformation of industry [...]. We want to seize the opportunities presented by the climate transition and create new jobs. Now we are in the game. (Sundsvalls Tidning 2024b)

As the quote above exemplifies, an overarching logic in the material creating the investments as happy objects relates to the often taken-for-granted notion of competition as an organizing principle inherent in neoliberal policy. Here, the municipalities must act to create growth by attracting industries, tourists, and residents to future local developments (cf. Eriksson *et al.* 2024). In this way, the

establishment of a new industry concerns the need to secure local services at a time when it is increasingly threatened and centralized (cf. Lundgren & Nilsson 2023).

The Ånge wind farms are similarly tied to an aspirational narrative, where the 'green' nature of the project enhances its value in the national imaginary. By linking locally produced 'green' energy to industrial growth, wind power becomes part of the overarching vision of 'green industrialization,' imbued with positive attributes of growth, creativity, and progress. Yet, this positive affect is largely tied to national interests, as the quotes from the Ånge municipality's website emphasize how the wind farms will strengthen Sweden's energy supply, competitive advantage, and capacity for renewable energy export. These representations position Ånge as an object within the national project of climate innovation rather than as an active subject whose interests are considered on its own terms. This confirms findings from previous studies, where the local perspectives on wind power projects are consistently overshadowed by the perspective of Sweden as a whole (Persson & Dymitrow 2024). The wind power industry is depicted (by the municipality) as a transformative opportunity for Ånge, and local actors are invited to partake in shaping an 'attractive offer' for this industry, framing residents as agents of change responsible for ensuring the region's benefits from new industries. This inclusionary narrative emphasizes community participation, suggesting that each resident is a critical 'piece of the puzzle' to maintain local value — an affectively charged call for belonging and contribution:

Do you have the opportunity to create an attractive offer for the wind power industry together? Together with a friend or neighbor? Or together with non-profit associations or the local community? You are an important piece of the puzzle in creating the commitment that takes advantage of the opportunities of wind power development locally. (Ånge 2024a)

The description of Torsboda (2024) as "industrial land ready to be exploited," for instance, conceals the forested nature of the site and overlooks its local significance as a recreational space. The language of development here creates a decontextualized image of the land, divorced from its relationship to the local community and natural environment. This framing reflects a capitalist environmental logic that recasts unindustrialized land as 'underutilized' and thus open to transformation and control (Heynen *et al.* 2006; Franz & McNelly 2024). By presenting the land as 'awaiting' industrialization, this rhetoric resonates with Safransky's (2014) critique of cartographic power, where mapping practices serve to produce new frontiers for exploitation. For some locals, therefore, this productive land narrative may shift Torsboda from a happy object to a threatening object, as it risks erasing existing ways of life and reinforces a colonial approach to land use.

The promotion of Torsboda as an ideal industrial location due to its proximity to renewable energy sources such as wind power further links these two industrial projects. The Torsboda (2024) website's claim that "our part of the world has plenty of land and good access to 100% renewable energy" underscores how the land itself is framed as abundant and underutilized. By treating forested land primarily as a resource for industrial development, this framing departs from traditional views of the forest as a valuable commodity and reframes it as a passive substrate for industry, in line with Safransky's (2014) observation on the persistent rationality of productive property.

### *Economic nationalism and national localism*

The historical framing of green industrialization as a continuation of the North's proud industrial heritage reinforces the emotional weight attached to both Torsboda and Ånge. Torsboda, for example, builds on the legacy of the forest industry, presenting itself as a modern extension of the "age of the forest barons" (Torsboda 2024). This mirrors Sörlin's (1988/2023) analysis of how the industrialization of northern Sweden has historically prioritized resource exploitation as a cornerstone of national prosperity, framing critics of 'green' industrial projects as barriers to progress. Similarly, Ånge's industrial achievements are reimagined as a foundation for its active participation in the 'green' transition, transforming historical pride into forward-looking potential. In contrast to the stigmatization of the industrial frontier during the 1990s (cf. Vallström 2014), this demonstrates how images can shift their emotional resonance over time, evolving from hateful symbols of marginalization to happy sources of pride and optimism.



The counter-narratives surrounding the Ånge wind power projects provide a strikingly different affective engagement with the region's industrial heritage and prospects, drawing from a more skeptical and critical set of emotions. Whereas proponents of wind power frame these projects as an extension of Ånge's proud industrial past, opponents invoke a vision of decline and exploitation, presenting industrialization as a cycle of disinvestment, abandonment, and disregard for local communities:

where my house stands, there are no large industries that require a lot of new 'green' electricity, there are only 200 years of ruins after industrial development, disused farms where the forest was sold for wood cartridges, regulated rivers with houses abandoned by the hydropower rallies, stations where the trains do not stop anymore, schools that have become antique stores or summer entertainment, sawmill after sawmill that gape empty in the backwaters of the rationalization and consolidation of the sawmill industry. (A post on one of the Facebook groups)

This alternate narrative emphasizes how past projects have left the landscape scattered with the *ruins* of failed industrial initiatives, empty schools, depopulated areas, and disused farms (cf. Agnidakis 2014), marking the North as a place where industry has often extracted resources without benefiting local people. In Ahmed's terms, this narrative 'sticks' negative emotions such as resentment, loss, and distrust to both the region's industrial past and its future with wind power projects. The view of Ånge as a 'wind power reserve' in the opposition discourse underscores a sense of detachment from decision-making, attributing these developments to permissive and incompetent management by politicians' who are seen as overlooking residents interests. These voices frame Ånge's history not as one of proud industrial heritage but as one of exploitation, where state-sanctioned projects have continuously prioritized extraction over local welfare, echoing critiques by Persson and Dymitrow (2024) that portray the rural space as exploited under the guise of national interests.

By framing the past as an unhealed scar and wind power as a renewed form of colonial-like extraction, these counter-narratives highlight a rift between different imaginaries. While the official storyline promotes Ånge (2024b) as an exemplar of Sweden's green transformation and national competitiveness, the opposition casts it as a remote and exploited region that is continually subjected to industrial imposition without local consent. This discord is connected with the broader discourse on the North as a space of 'otherness' within Sweden: one where political and economic decisions often prioritize national or corporate interests over local voices (cf. Eriksson 2010).

Furthermore, an emotional resistance to perceived cultural encroachment accompanies this debate, seen explicitly in reactions to a Chinese company's involvement in a local battery factory. Non-positive comments about an increase of people from China in the town together with suspicions of favoring foreign investors over Swedish interests feed into nationalist and xenophobic sentiments.

Social democrats are selling Swedish assets to China. Disaster! And this is also connected to a broader pattern where Social Democrats are seen as corrupt: 'In the same way the Social Democrats promised cheap electricity to Amazon, Facebook, Google'. (Comment on one of the news articles)

The quote above, together with the political sympathies that become visible when the threads are followed, exemplifies what we, drawing on Kalb (2019), understand as a critical junction, linking a global process to a particular local context. These responses could be understood as a form of a popular politics of fear that should not be seen as immediately oriented toward or caused directly by global actors but, rather, as actual outcomes on local grounds based on local history and previous discontents and injustices. These industrial projects thus become 'hateful objects' within this affective economy, marked by a legacy of broken promises and perceived disregard. Here, the sticky affect of other hateful objects is attached to the Chinese influence, sparking fears of 'communist investments' and cultural dilution. In the posts where critical voices are raised, they are often stuck to the rhetoric of the Sweden Democrats' populist politics, contempt for the left and political elites, and fear of immigration. In the quote below, suspicion and distrust of the 'secret club' of Torsboda is raised.

Stop using job opportunities as a justification for the generous attitude, because it is completely impossible to employ 1,900 people in three shifts in a closed production. I claim that this is a bluff! With this approach initiated by the Torsboda company, where the secret club operates, it will, of course, continue with future establishments as well unless someone puts a stop to it. (Sundsvalls Tidning 2024a)

The right-wing nationalist Sweden Democrats capitalize on these tensions, drawing parallels between opposition to wind power and anti-immigration stances and framing them as two facets of a single narrative where the 'will of the people' is disregarded by elites. The image of decline becomes tied to the image of industrial history as objects of hate, while the image of empty authenticity becomes an object of love easily attached to nationalistic politics. In this sense, images of the Swedish North become a powerful 'sticky object,' infused by affective ties to both heritage and progress with dual sentiments of nostalgia and ambition (Persson & Dymitrow 2024). This 'local energy protectionism' promotes the idea that Swedish energy should serve Sweden first. This framing connects with the broader phenomenon that, following Ahmed (2004), could be described as an emotional investment in local spaces seen as 'authentic' and in need of protection from perceived external threats, whether industrial or cultural.

## Concluding remarks

In this article, we have aimed to explore how objects of affection and images of the Swedish North are framed in movements both for and against 'green' industries in northern Sweden, using the examples of two different sites in the county of Västernorrland. By examining how geographic and social peripheries such as the Torsboda Industrial Park and Ånge Industrial Hub act as affective signs in the national green transition, we have analyzed the region's re-industrialization and its relationship to traditional representations of the northern countryside and nationalist agendas. Through this lens, we have sought to unpack the contrasting visions of rurality and national identity present in these different mobilizations.

Integrating Ahmed's (2004) concept of affective economies underscores how emotions 'stick' to northern Sweden in the national discourse, marking it as a contested affective site. This affective economy — where local communities experience resentment and disillusionment — connects to a broader sense of betrayal rooted in northern Sweden's history of extractive exploitation, which has disproportionately impacted marginalized communities. The findings reveal how competing future visions for northern Sweden's development are framed through affective economies where emotions of hope, fear, and nostalgia circulate symbols of industrialization. Proponents of projects such as Torsboda and Ånge present these sites as 'happy objects,' emblematic of national progress and sustainability. These narratives repurpose extractive activities as pathways to Sweden's economic and environmental leadership, framing industrial growth as a win-win for both the nation and local development.

These affective investments split between hopes for renewal and fears of exploitation, constructing an emotionally charged landscape where the interests of local communities appear sidelined in favor of corporate or national gains. Disillusionment with political actors, especially left-leaning parties such as the Social Democrats and Green Party, reinforces a sense of betrayal, with these actors perceived as prioritizing corporate interests over the local 'people's will.' This type of resistance to these projects is often co-articulated within the frame of right-wing rhetoric, particularly from the Sweden Democrats, rather than as eco-critical or anti-capitalist alternatives. The opposition thus critiques foreign ownership and perceived cultural erosion rather than challenging the underlying capitalist transition framework. The resistance movements cast these industrial sites as 'threatening objects,' associating them with cultural and environmental loss and reflecting fears of local marginalization within national development agendas.

This affective landscape further reveals deeper tensions in Sweden's national identity, illustrating how northern Sweden is becoming an affective battleground where economic nationalism and localism converge. The charged emotional responses to these projects expose the emotive and political complexity of rural development in Sweden, making the region's future a contested terrain in the nation's environmental and cultural debates. Through the lens of affective economies, our study expands existing research on the emotional and cultural entanglements of resource exploitation (e.g., Safransky 2014) illuminates how 'green' investments not only continue historical narratives of extraction but also mobilize emotional economies that attach hope, fear, and nostalgia to specific places. Building on work by Persson & Dymitrow (2024) and Eriksson (2010), our study contributes to

the understanding of how the Swedish North is continuously constructed as a peripheral space within Swedish national development strategies. While previous research has examined the socio-economic disparities of the region, we add an analysis of how affective investments in the North reflect broader anxieties about national progress, economic sovereignty, and cultural loss.

Furthermore, our findings extend historical perspectives on industrialization in northern Sweden (Sörlin 1988/2023) by illustrating how contemporary green re-industrialization mirrors earlier waves of economic expansion. The industrial frontier narrative, which historically justified rapid natural resource extraction and the marginalization of Indigenous Sámi and other local populations (Labba 2020; SOU 2023), is now repurposed under the guise of sustainable development. However, this vision of progress is rooted in a historical narrative that has long portrayed the North as a resource-rich frontier — a narrative that has historically marginalized local and Indigenous communities, framing northern Sweden as a national asset rather than a complex, culturally distinct region. Our work thus contributes to Nilsson & Lundgren's (2018) discussion on the role of rural imaginaries in Swedish national identity by demonstrating how these imaginaries are reactivated in contemporary policy discourses.

The findings intersect with previous historical and cultural frameworks by illustrating how contemporary 'green' industrialization initiatives in northern Sweden echo the region's dual legacy as both a national resource reservoir and a symbol of an untouched wilderness (e.g., Komu 2019). Advocates of green re-industrialization cast projects such as Torsboda and Ånge as continuations of colonial progress, embodying a win-win future that positions northern Sweden as integral to Sweden's green transition and global role.

This research thus illuminates how contrasting imaginaries of northern Sweden circulate within the sticky affective economy that reflects deep-seated cultural tensions around northern Sweden's role in Sweden's green transition. Just as 19th- and 20th-century industrial expansion narratives cultivated a myth of northern Sweden as both an economic driver and a 'pure' wilderness (cf. Mrozewich 2020). This contested vision of the North underscores the ways in which nationalist and environmental discourses coalesce, making northern Sweden an affective battleground within Sweden's evolving national identity and environmental aspirations, showing how competing emotions shape the political legitimacy of industrial expansion in rural and Indigenous lands. By emphasizing the role of emotional investments in shaping resistance and support for green industries, we offer a novel perspective on how affective economies influence contemporary environmental and regional policies.

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