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Undoing the Regional Demos? Gender Equality and Economic Growth in Regional Development

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to contribute to the discussions about the relationship between feminism and neoliberalism and the status of feminist emancipatory claims in marketized policy fields. My approach has been to analyse gender equality work within the highly marketized field of regional development in Sweden with a specific interest for how the convergence of the policy goals of gender equality and economic growth is represented by gender equality workers and to discuss the status of feminist emancipatory claims in this policy field. The analysis consists of articulating three representations of the relationship between gender equality and economic growth, characterized by various degrees of conflict: reciprocity, co-optation and Trojan horses. However, none of the representations articulate open emancipatory claims as legitimate within the field of regional development. Thus, the study shows gender equality in its relationship to economic growths renders emancipatory claims illegitimate unless beneficial for economic growth or hidden through marketized language or logics.

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The relationship between feminism and neoliberalism has been a significant scholarly puzzle for the last decades. Why is state feminism consolidating at the same time as a marketized governmental regime is expanding? What are the effects of this simultaneous development for feminist agendas? These questions have occupied scholars from multiple approaches and theoretical frameworks (Brown, 2015; Fraser, 2012; Newman, 2013). Some have turned their attention to how neoliberal *political rationalities* “reinvent” feminism. They ask questions about what happens with feminist emancipatory agendas when gender equality work becomes increasingly intertwined with market mechanisms and the political primacy of productivity and economic growth (Fraser, 2012; Kantola & Squires, 2012; Prügl, 2015).

In Sweden, gender equality has been a prioritized and increasingly institutionalized policy goal within the field of regional development since the early 1990s (Lindberg, 2012). In the same period, the policy field of regional development has also undergone a distinctive shift towards a marketized understanding of development, elevating economic growth and competitiveness as transcendent policy objectives. Subsequently, regional development has been rendered as a policy field that scholars describe as permeated with a strong neoliberal political rationality (Loughlin, 2007; Mitander, 2015; Säll, 2014; Öjehag-Pettersson, 2015).

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The linkage between gender equality and the primacy of economic growth has gained much attention in both scholarly work and in policy formulation. Gender equality has been highlighted as a potential policy tool to facilitate economic growth as studies show a convincing correlation between the two variables (Kabeer & Natali, 2013). This policy alliance between gender equality and economic growth has also gained critical attention from feminist scholars who problematize the view of gender equality as a means to economic growth rather than an end in itself (Elomäki, 2015; Kantola & Squires, 2012; Prügl, 2015).

Nancy Fraser and Wendy Brown both bring attention to the legitimacy of formulating “emancipatory claims” under neoliberalism (Brown, 2015; Fraser, 2013). They point to the necessity to examine and understand the status of emancipation—the exposure and challenging of domination from a standpoint of justice—as a legitimate driver for reform and policy development within contemporary governing (Fraser, 2013). Wendy Brown makes the case that neoliberal political rationality is undermining *homo politicus* as a legitimate position from which to formulate claims of justice and emancipation—a stealth corroding process she refers to as the *undoing of the demos* (Brown, 2015). Thus, the complicated and sometimes seemingly paradoxical status of feminist work in an era of neoliberal rationality calls for continued critical and nuanced examination and theorization (Fraser, 2012 see also De Jong & Kimm, 2017).

In this article, my ambition is to explore the intersections between feminism and neoliberalism in the setting of regional development policy work in Sweden. I do this by studying how gender equality workers within the field represent the relationship between the policy goals of gender equality and economic growth. The empirical case of Sweden is in this article viewed as a “critical case” (Flyvbjerg, 2006) to study these intersections. Gender equality is a prioritized policy goal in a policy field that is highly marketized. This makes Swedish regional development a very suitable site to explore how feminism and neoliberal rationality interacts in concrete policy work. Analysing how gender equality workers make sense of the intersection between gender equality and economic growth in their concrete everyday work practice helps to bring understanding and nuance to this complex relationship. It becomes possible to explore representations of the policy field, contestations and compromises that are not necessarily expressed in official policy programs and documents (see for instance Kunz et al., 2019). The study contributes to the ongoing discussion of the legitimacy of feminist emancipatory claims in policy fields dominated by marketized discourses.

The study consists of interviews with gender equality workers from five Swedish regions and takes its point of departure in the Regional Women’s Resource Centers (RWRC:s), which work in different ways to advocate gender equality within Swedish regional development. The analysis of the interviews aims to explore how the relationship between gender equality and economic growth in the policy field is represented by the participants. By drawing from the literature of governmentality, the concept of political rationalities will be used to discuss the legitimacy of emancipatory feminist claims in light of the representations (Dean, 2010; Miller & Rose, 2008; Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016). Two research questions guide the analysis:

- How is the relationship between economic growth and gender equality represented by gender equality workers in Swedish regional development?
- To what extent are feminist emancipatory claims articulated as legitimate in the policy field?

The article is structured in five main sections. First, I conduct a literature review to contextualize the study in bodies of literature related to neoliberalism, feminism and regional development. I then introduce the case of gender equality work in Swedish regional development and elaborate on literature that displays how the policy field harbours both a goal- and a means-oriented rationality to legitimize work for gender equality. This is followed by a presentation of my theoretical and methodological approach for the analysis. In the following section I explore how the relationship between economic growth and gender equality is represented in three ways by regional gender

equality workers in Sweden. I conclude by discussing the legitimacy of emancipatory claims in market-oriented modes of governing in the light of this study's findings.

Neoliberalism, Feminism, and Regional Development

Neoliberalism is a complex concept that captures processes and practices of marketization and economization of the social, ranging from strategic ideological projects, hands-on policy programs to broad discursive imaginaries and political rationalities (Jessop, 2002; Larner, 2000). Peck and Tickell (2002) describe how neoliberalism has developed from a radical ideological critique of the welfare state, as articulated by Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, to a broad imaginary of development and progress that manifests itself on a global scale. Rather than viewing neoliberalism as a critique of the state, many scholars take an interest in how neoliberal rationalities and the state have integrated into complex patterns of interdependence and mutual reinforcement (Jessop, 2002; Ong, 2006, 2007; Peck & Tickell, 2002). Peck and Tickell (2002) describe this as a shift from *roll back neoliberalism* where state institutions and interventions are articulated as the core antagonists, to a *roll out neoliberalism* where the state institutionalizes a neoliberal political rationality. Marketization, individualization, and the primacy of economic growth are reinforced through the very same institutions that were criticized in earlier modes of neoliberalism. These dynamics of interdependence—or fusion—of neoliberal rationality and state institutions has led to a growing scholarly interest in understanding processes of state restructuring related to processes of economization and the notion of “competitive states” (Brown, 2015; Harvey, 2006; Jessop, 2002).

When turning to feminist literature, the rise of neoliberal rationality in state institutions has spurred debates about how feminist emancipatory ambitions are affected by this development. Kantola and Squires (2012) describe this development as a significant move *from state feminism to market feminism*, as neoliberal logics of competitiveness and productivity are increasingly used to legitimize and structure gender equality policy. Elisabeth Prügl (2015) writes about a *neoliberalization of feminism* to—among other things—describe how neoliberal rationalities and technologies re-shape gender equality work into means for economic growth and productivity. Such a development raises concerns about how feminist agendas will be affected. However, this development is also discussed in terms of potential openings and opportunities for emancipatory projects to intervene in and transform economic discourses. Co-optation and depoliticization are not viewed as the only possible outcomes when feminism and neoliberalism intersect in policy work (Kantola & Squires, 2012; Prügl, 2015, 2017). As Prügl (2017) puts it:

In the encounter between feminism and neoliberalism the latter may have the upper hand, but the wholesale defeat of feminist agendas should not be a foregone conclusion. A feminist politics inside hegemonic institutions should not underestimate the subversive potential of powerful ideas. (p. 48)

Brown (2015) however, raises deep concerns about the hopes of making radical changes from within neoliberal rationality. She views the adaptation to a language and logics that render the social in economic terms as undermining the very foundation of making political demands and pursuing emancipatory projects in legitimate ways. In Brown's view, neoliberal rationality undermines the possibilities for emancipatory political contestation. In this way, citizenship becomes reduced to a homo oeconomicus that “eliminates the very idea of a people, a demos asserting its collective political sovereignty” (Brown, 2015, p. 39).

The policy field of European regional development has undergone dramatic changes during the last 20 years that in many ways embodies the development of competitive states. This “new regionalism” emphasizes a structural development of stronger and fewer regions, equipped with the autonomy and capacity to compete for survival and development on global markets of capital (Keating, 1998; Loughlin & Keating, 2013; Loughlin, 2001). Regional competitiveness and the transcendence of economic growth as the primal source of development have emerged as a naturalized logic in policy making, replacing or marginalizing former logics of regional

redistribution or democratization (Bristow, 2005; Hörnström, 2010; Säll, 2014; Öjehag-Pettersson & Mitander, 2020).

The development is connected to a policy imaginary in which nation states' capacity to govern is eroding in an era of globalized capitalism. The notion of globalized, increasingly mobile, capital is perceived to strip states of their capacity to regulate and govern flows of capital and resources within their territories. Instead, in this imaginary, regions are perceived as forced to reshape themselves into globally competitive units to develop, or even survive. Regions as political entities find themselves thrown out from a centralistic state system of redistribution and into a global competitive terrain of flowing, capricious, yet vital capital and resources. In this sense, the imperatives of the market—competition as key interaction and the primacy of economic growth—are infused into the *raison d'être* of contemporary regional development (Mitander et al. 2017; Säll, 2014; Öjehag-Pettersson & Mitander, 2020; Öjehag-Pettersson, 2015).

In this article, the policy field of regional development is viewed as shaped by neoliberal rationalities in several ways. The deployment of regional innovation systems, programs to foster entrepreneurship, mapping and intervening to attract the well-educated creative class, place branding, cluster formation, developing public-private partnerships with the aim to enhance regional competitiveness are all activities performed against a discursive backdrop of competitive global markets of capital, with the overarching goal to generate economic growth. Scholars have criticized the policy strategies of regional development for their depoliticizing effects, in the sense that they push out previous objectives from the regional development agenda, such as increased democratic influence, redistribution of resources or emancipation of women (Hudson & Rönnblom, 2007; Säll, 2012, 2014). In this way, the policy field is also viewed as a site where neoliberal rationality and emancipatory projects intersects and where the relationship between feminism and neoliberalism can be studied in concrete ways.

Gender Equality in Swedish Regional Development

In Sweden, regional development as a policy field can be divided in two phases: establishment and regionalization (Johansson, 2019). The first phase, between the mid-sixties and the mid-nineties, the field was marked by a conflict between the centralized social democratic ambitions to promote industrial development and reforms and grassroots mobilization demanding more decentralized influence and measures to counter the effects of urbanization. The second phase, from the mid-nineties until present time, is characterized by increasing responsibility and autonomy of the regional level. But, perhaps surprisingly, this phase is also marked by increasing depoliticization of the policy field, the previous conflict between grassroots interests and state interests has been transformed into a greater consensus that regions must be competitive on global markets to attract capital and resources to develop (Johansson, 2019). The policy field of Swedish regional development has in this sense moved from a national terrain of political claims and reform to a global terrain of competing regions, with the main objective to stimulate economic growth (Säll, 2014; Öjehag-Pettersson & Mitander, 2020). The earlier regional development slogans of regional solidarity and community have been replaced by slogans and practices of competitiveness, innovation, attractiveness, place branding and entrepreneurship (Mitander, 2015; Syssner, 2006; Säll, 2014; Öjehag-Pettersson, 2015).

Within this context, however, gender equality has emerged and established itself as an important policy goal for Swedish regional development. During the 1980s and early 1990s, the Swedish women's movement mobilized an emancipatory agenda directed towards the policy field of regional development, problematizing the male dominance and the lack of gender considerations within the field. From total absence, gender equality became a prioritized issue in regional development policy in Sweden from the early 1990s into present time (Hudson & Rönnblom, 2007; Öjehag-Pettersson, 2017). This has manifested in a series of state and regional initiatives with the purpose to enhance gender equality in regional politics, such as state-funded programs for supporting women's

mobilization in regional development, and obligations for regional development agencies to both produce strategies and action plans for gender equality in deliberation with civil society and to implement gender mainstreaming in regional governing. This development has in different ways transformed the early grassroots mobilization of the women's movement into more institutionalized modes of regional policy formation connected to regional authorities (Lindberg, 2012; Rönnblom, 2002). Gender equality as a regional policy goal in Sweden has increasingly become more of a means for regional competitiveness and economic growth, and less of a goal for equal political rights and claims of justice. Previous document studies show how gender equality as a policy goal in regional development are construed in terms of business, innovation, and entrepreneurship (Hudson & Rönnblom, 2007).

In the early 1990s, the Swedish government launched a program to come to terms with gender discrimination in the policy field of regional development. The program consisted of state funding of RWRCs and aimed to reinforce and spread an already existing form of civil society organizations working to empower women in rural areas. Through networking, information campaigns, counseling activities and political mobilization, the RWRCs organized women at both a local and regional level. The policy goals of the program were to integrate women into regional development policy making, to empower women in political mobilization or business and to advocate women's interests in rural areas (Lindberg, 2012).

As the Swedish regional development regime from the 1990s and forward transformed into a more clearly growth-oriented mode of regional development, gender equality as a regional policy concern transformed as well (Säll, 2014). As the forms for regional politics centred regional development around attractively, creativity and regional competitiveness, gender equality became increasingly motivated through its possible benefits for economic growth rather than as a development goal in itself. The RWRC program tied the regional gender equality initiatives of civil society closer to the state and the regional authorities over time, both in terms of organization and through governing practices, such as evaluations, management by objectives, and competition for funding (Hudson & Rönnblom, 2007).

The issue of gender equality in Swedish regional development has over time in this sense moved closer to a neoliberal rationality. Earlier studies in the field emphasize how the issue of gender equality work in Swedish regional development has evolved from a women's rights perspective into technologies for gender mainstreaming of economic growth policies, where power relations and claims of justice have become increasingly obscured (Hudson & Rönnblom, 2007; Rönnblom, 2005). This development of gender equality work in the policy field resonates clearly with how Squire and Kantola and Squire (2012) describe a movement *from state feminism to market feminism*, or when Prügl (2015) talks of a *neoliberalization of feminism*. Rather than prioritizing development in terms of political and economic equality or protection from men's violence, gender equality has become another tool in the strive towards economic growth, mainly limited to issues of women entrepreneurship or participation in regional innovation systems.

Mapping Representations and Political Rationalities

In this section, I will present the theoretical and methodological framework for the empirical analysis of the interview study. The first step of analysis aims to emphasize *representations* of interactions between gender equality and economic growth as policy goals in regional development, and to complement previous research of policy documents with the perspective of the gender equality workers in the policy field (Hudson & Rönnblom, 2007). The analytical category of representations refers here to something beyond catching the personal view of actors. Drawing from the literature on governmentality, the concept of representation has a constitutive dimension for policy work and governing. Representations actively depict policy fields, articulate the mechanisms and relationships within them, and construe the way it makes sense to navigate, strategize or in other ways act in the field (Miller & Rose, 2008). It is through representations that a policy field

becomes rendered technical and governable (Bacchi, 2009; Li, 2007). From an analytical perspective, representations are viewed as the result of constitutive practices rather than a reference to an objective, natural, *actually existing* reality. The analysis of representations aims to capture the ways that the relationship between gender equality is constituted in different ways in the policy field of regional development in Sweden. To be precise, through approaching the material from this perspective, the analysis examines the relationship between gender equality and economic growth as *being made* in this specific policy field, rather than assuming that it is fixed and stable (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016).

In the second step of the analysis, these representations are discussed from the perspective of *political rationalities*. Political rationalities can be described as the distinct ways that specific representations within a policy field constitute and entail discursive connections between means and ends (Miller & Rose, 2008). If representations render fields of social reality as navigable and governable, political rationalities discursively specify the actions, directions and logics of such governing. The link between representations of a policy field and political rationalities can be viewed as a site to understand legitimization of political processes and claims.

Brown (2015) denotes that political rationalities cannot be reduced to specific discourses; rather, political rationalities must be viewed as constituting, crosscutting over vast discursive fields. Neither feminist emancipation nor neoliberalism as political rationalities can be reduced to the discourses of regional development, they cannot be studied in their entirety in materials such as this. They can however be used in an analysis of the representations of economic growth and gender equality to discuss the legitimacy of feminist emancipatory claims in this policy field. Fraser (2013) defines feminist emancipatory rationalities as the *goal of non-domination*, that is, a gender equality agenda that emphasizes power relations with the ambition to counter relationships of domination between men and women from a perspective of justice. In this analysis, the positions of gender equality and economic growth as means and ends will be used to discuss if feminist emancipatory claims can be openly articulated in the representations of the policy field.

To summarize, the framework for this analysis rests on *representations* of the relationship between gender equality and economic growth in how the policy field of Swedish regional development is articulated. By engaging with these representations from a perspective of *political rationalities*, the analysis will make contributions to a discussion about the status and legitimacy of feminist emancipatory claims in the intersection between feminism and neoliberalism.

The empirical analysis in this article is drawn from a study of gender equality work in regional development in Sweden conducted in 2016. In particular, the study took an interest in the status and the activities of RWRCs. Five regions with shifting institutional settings and experiences from RWRCs were included in the study. In Sweden there is a great variety in size and—at the time—organization of the policy field of regional development. The selection of regions in the study was made to include a variety in size (from the biggest third, middle sized, to the smallest third) and organization (from state agencies, municipal cooperations, to regional authorities) (Lidström, 2020). The selection was not motivated by being able to make strict comparisons between the regions or to be able to empirically generalize the findings, but rather to facilitate an openness and a capacity to capture a variety of experiences and perspectives in diverse settings (Flyvbjerg, 2006). The core material in this analysis is an interview study including seventeen key individuals with experience and insights in the work of RWRCs in the five regions; they represent civil society (8), public agencies (8) and in one case a private company working as a consultant. The participants' professional roles included agency directors, project managers, case workers, strategists, project assistants and consultants. All these roles have experience with the work conducted by RWRCs. Since the population of gender equality workers in Swedish regional development is rather small, the regions will not be named to ensure the confidentiality of the participants.

The interviews revolved around how gender equality work is conducted in the field of regional development, how Swedish regional development is perceived as a policy field and how the main challenges and possibilities for progress in gender equality is perceived. For this article, the parts

where the intersection between gender equality and economic growth was described has been more carefully analysed and coded to shed light on how the relationship between them is articulated. These codes were then grouped thematically according to how the relationship between economic growth and gender equality was characterized (such as hostility, harmony, domination, sequence, temporality etc.) The themes were then used to revisit the material to look for additional representations. The last step of the analysis was to articulate the representations of the relationship between gender equality and economic growth in terms of means and ends (Miller & Rose, 2008).

Representations of Gender Equality and Economic Growth

In the following, I turn the attention to the three representations that emerged from the analysis. These representations are characterized by varying degrees of separation, domination, and conflict in terms of means and ends. Inspired by governmentality studies, the analysis does not focus on individual actors; participants' voices help to illustrate discursive articulations.

Reciprocity

The first representation articulates gender equality and economic growth as mutually reinforcing policy goals. As more or less integrated, they are described as inseparable or at least unseparated dimensions of gender equality work in regional development. In studies of policy documents, this representation of the relationship between gender equality and economic growth has shown to be common (Husdon & Rönnblom, 2007; Öjehag-Pettersson & Mitander, 2020).

One reoccurring way that such reciprocity is described in the interviews regards the incentives for achieving change through expanding and, at least partly, merging concepts of both gender equality and economic growth. One of the participants describes the necessity to couple growth and equality to actually get anything done. The respondent describes that "it's a natural thing, if you try to motivate gender equality, there has to be economical incentives". Others describe the coupling of equality and growth as a way to expand the relevance of gender equality in regional development. One of the respondents expresses it like this: "When you start to look at gender equality as a tool for growth and innovation, then you get a new way in and the issue becomes important for more people, which it should". Another participant reasons about how the coupling of gender equality and economic growth also encourages expanding the concept of growth:

R: But, you know growth, if you put the terms next to each other and try to think about what does growth mean and what does gender equality mean, the concept of growth can be reasoned about a lot. Is it just about increased gross national product or what is it about? Is it about that people will be better off in society as I want to see it, that it is not about increasing inequality in society but that it is about that everybody should have significantly more of the welfare that we produce together.

The quotes describe a representation where the concepts of economic growth and gender equality is merging and expanding through regional development work, both in the sense that the concept of gender equality should broaden and be rendered as a tool for economic growth to secure resources and relevance, and in the sense that the concept of economic growth should broaden to be more relevant and effective by relating to gender equality. Reciprocal representations of the relationship, in this sense, denotes dynamics of mutual reinforcement, either as integrated policy goals or through mutuality boosting policy dynamics. As formulated by a participant when asked to reflect on any contradictions in advocating gender equality in a heavily marketized policy field:

R: I think very few outside the circuit of gender equality workers see gender equality as a tool. But we claim, or I claim firmly that it is a tool for regional development (. . .) I don't see any contradictions between the goals of gender equality and regional development, quite the opposite. Because it is about economic growth, and it is about democratic growth.

The representation of reciprocity is quite uncommon in the interviews. It is more common that participants problematize the interplay between economic growth and gender equality in different ways and degrees. One addressed explicitly how her reciprocal understanding of economic growth and gender equality is somewhat controversial among her colleagues within the field of regional gender equality work:

R: Well now, I am—or have been— a conservative politician, and maybe that effects my notion of it, so that I can see the growth potential in having a gender equal society. I know that I have colleagues from other parties on the left that don't want to have, or don't share my point of view. They don't think that [growth] is the relevant aspect.

The representation of reciprocity articulates how gender equality and economic growth operates as means to each other's end: a win-win dynamic. Gender equality is represented as a policy goal that can gain resources and relevance through merging with economic growth. Economic growth is represented as a policy goal that in return can gain competitiveness and relevance through merging with gender equality. This synergetic potential is not represented as threatening, but as mutually reinforcing.

Co-Optation

The second representation constructs a more conflictual or even threatening dynamic between gender equality and economic growth. In this representation, the claims of gender equality are described as undermined and challenged by the dominating goal of economic growth. The two policy goals are articulated as clearly separated and non-compliant in this sense. They are also understood as divided and separately connected to the regional authority, on one hand, and to the grassroots women's movement on the other. In literature on the relationship between the state and civil society, *co-optation* is generally described as a state governing strategy to defuse or domesticate radical voices and claims through cooperation and policy alignment (De Jong & Kimm, 2017). In feminist literature, co-optation is described as processes where feminist ambitions or concepts are transformed or even used to promote contradictory policy goals when inserted in existing policy frames (Stratigaki, 2004).

The intricate and threatening relationship between gender equality and economic growth is in this representation often described as “risky” in different ways. The overarching risk identified by several participants is that close cooperation between the women's movement and the regional development authorities could defuse radical claims for gender equality. One participant expresses this when reflecting on how gender equality is viewed as a tool for economic growth:

R: If you only talk about that [gender equality] is beneficial for growth, then you lose the soul of the cause (...) you also have to address it as an issue of rights and remind of the historic struggles that are already won. (...) We are doing ourselves a great disservice if we make these struggles invisible by saying that [gender equality] is good for growth. You have to say that it is first and mostly about rights.

The representation of co-optation articulates a risk that economic growth becomes the only legitimizing premise for gender equality, which is further developed in the interviews in two ways: a reduction of what gender equality as a policy goal becomes in regional development, and as a problematic measuring stick to assess when and how gender equality work is legitimate. One participant discusses the reductive effects for gender equality, in that regional growth policy tends to emphasize the private sector, which narrows the scope of regional gender equality work. The discussion can be illustrated with the following quote:

R: It's still a lot about women entrepreneurs (...) I think it is important to see the labor market as a whole. Not just to talk about private businesses and think that this is the only problem. Both the private and the public sector is a common labor market. Production is related to reproduction and I would say that the welfare organizations makes the foundation for production. But the general notion is that production lays the

foundation for welfare. (. . .) I believe that it is important to see linkages between production and reproduction in gender equality work.

The second effect that is emphasized in relation to the risks of co-optation regards how highlighting positive economic effects of gender equality could backfire, in the sense that the need for gender equality becomes dependent on its function for economic growth. The promotion of gender equality through economic arguments could undermine the legitimacy of claims of justice in the long run. One of the participants describes the current situation like this:

R: I see huge risks. Kind of, when we started talking about that we have to show that gender equality is profitable, what happens if it is not? What happens if economic growth doesn't increase when we add gender equality, are we supposed to stop promoting it then?

Related to such risks, some participants bear witness to the hardships of gaining traction for rights-oriented arguments. Unless there is an argument for growth, attitudes about gender equality work in the field of regional development are described as “unimportant” or “difficult to see the relevance”. One participant describes the situation like this:

R: I think it's important that some people talk about, I mean remind about, the perspective of rights. Because it's really important. But it might not get you anywhere. I mean, even if you talk about rights, something also must be done. And that's the problem.

In the representation of co-optation, the conflictual and risky relationship between gender equality and economic growth is emphasized. The conflict is articulated as a struggle about what makes gender equality legitimate as an end, and not a means of regional development. The domination of economic growth as a premise for development work is articulated as a long-term threat to gender equality work, and as obscuring the societal problems and challenges that gender inequalities bring.

Trojan Horses

The third representation of the intersection between gender equality and economic growth also emphasize a hostile nature of the relationship. However, in this representation, the premise of gender equality as legitimized by justice is articulated as strategically and secretly infused in the language of economic growth to achieve radical changes in the long run. The more radical claims are articulated as hidden in Trojan horses of economic growth to obtain the keys to the regional development policy field as it is asleep. In this representation, gender equality work is viewed as a step-by-step motion performed covertly. The co-optation literature describes how this strategy is used by organizations with the intention to change the system from within and therefore “make themselves available” to co-optation in relation to the state (Stratigaki, 2004).

In contrast to the reciprocal representation described above, the representation of Trojan horses does not articulate the intersection of gender equality and economic growth as a win-win relationship. Rather, interaction with economic growth as a policy goal is motivated through a hidden agenda of gender equality. One important aspect that is manifested in the material is to gain “a way in” for justice-oriented ambitions and access resources and political institutions to work for long-term change. As expressed by one of the participants:

R: I think ‘whatever goes’, I mean, I think you should use whatever argument that will get people onboard. In that sense, you can prostitute yourself a bit [. . .] I do believe that we will have a much better society if we share power and influence and recourses between us and that each and all of us possess more influence over our lives. If I can win you over to join that struggle by pushing the benefits for growth, then I will.

Another participant emphasizes that, to be taken seriously, justice-oriented claims must be communicated in a language that will generate enthusiasm in the audiences that needs to be reached to make progress:

R: It's the only way in [...] the people who runs businesses would never do this if they didn't believe that is was a possibility to make more money and generate growth [...] but before we are done we will widen the concept of growth.

Another aspect of the Trojan horse representation is that dimensions of power and justice needs to be communicated in a less threatening way to be accepted within the political institutions. Playfulness, accessibility, and a less conflictual notion of gender equality are some examples of this. One participant exemplifies this aspect when describing their work with a playful workshop material where notions of gender roles are problematized in communication.

R: [The workshop material] has in its simplicity helped to defuse the issue (...) when I have been talking before about gender orders and all of that, some find it interesting, others go to sleep and some get irritated. Now I can talk about the same things, without using the words – norms and structures – without making it difficult and fuzzy in the eyes of many. (...) So, [gender equality] has become a little less dangerous to talk about.

A premise in the representation of Trojan horses is the notion of gender equality as a process of incremental progress. Therefore, several participants describe it as important to be aware of “how far we have come” and adjust the claims accordingly, not to risk scaring important stakeholders away. The goal is articulated as long term and the ambition is to let the organizations “mature” in their gender equality work. As one of the participants put it:

R: This is all really just plaster on the facade, if we are to get to the real work we have to get access to power and money. (...) it will probably be unpleasant for some but I think that we are better equipped for that fight now. We weren't ready three years ago, or the organization wasn't ready, but I think we have better preconditions now.

The representation of Trojan horses is characterized by a long-term, incremental understanding of gender equality work. Although gender equality is articulated to—under the surface—be about power and justice, the institutions and language of economic growth is understood as vehicles to push the struggle forward, by securing resources and gaining access to political infrastructure where true progress can be made in the future.

The Legitimacy of Emancipatory Claims in Regional Development

In her book *Undoing the demos* (Brown, 2015), Wendy Brown describes a *quiet struggle* in how the political rationality of neoliberalism undermines and delegitimizes positions from which claims of justice can be openly made. This study sheds light on this struggle, specifically between neoliberalism and feminism, by examining whether emancipatory claims for gender equality can be articulated as a legitimate end in itself or must be legitimized as a means for productivity and economic growth in the policy field.

The representations of reciprocity, co-optation and Trojan horses articulates the dynamics between gender equality and economic growth in terms of means and ends in quite different ways: as mutually reinforcing in a reciprocal relationship, as a risky relationship of co-optation where economic growth is undermining gender equality, and as a long-term, incremental process of gender equality progress from within the language of economic growth, in the shape of Trojan horses. What can be concluded is that in none of the representations are emancipatory claims of gender equality understood as legitimate in their own right. That is, the agenda for gender equality, is either represented as intertwined with, dominated by, or hidden from the policy goal of economic growth. None of the representations articulate open feminist emancipatory claims as legitimate in their own right in relation to economic growth. Justice-oriented claims are articulated as either dependent of their relationship to economic growth, eroded by economic growth, or disguised and temporarily legitimized by economic growth through a sly strategical move. So even if there are contesting articulations in the material—articulations that challenge and problematize the primacy of economic growth and forward emancipatory feminism in its own right—such articulations are

represented as suppressed, excluded, or hidden. They do not, at this point, openly contest and politicize a political rationality where gender equality is a means for competitiveness and economic growth. Even if there are challenging perspectives and rationalities brewing under the surface, a neoliberal rationality still takes a dominating position in how legitimate policy claims of gender equality can be formulated.

Fraser (2013) refers to the development in a similar way as Brown when she discusses the strategy of contemporary feminism. Her message is that emancipatory movements must be very careful and pay close attention to what the consequences of allying with the forces of marketization might be. Otherwise, the function of an emancipatory project might end up simply reproducing neoliberal rationality with the risk of undermining the position to claim justice from which they act. She argues that the soul of emancipatory movements is at stake in this strategic decision:

Will the emancipatory struggles of the twenty-first century serve to advance the disembedding and deregulation of markets? Or will they serve to extend and democratize social protections and to make them more just (Fraser, 2013, p. 241)?

Fraser's dilemma is present in this study as the representations of the relationship between gender equality and economic growth are articulated. The differentiation between reciprocity, co-optation and Trojan horses is mainly based on three different ways to relate emancipatory feminism and markets, as coinciding, as the markets dominating and construing feminism, or as feminism "sabotaging" the market logics from within. But none of the representations construct emancipatory feminist claims as separate—legitimate in their own right—articulated openly from a position of *homo politicus* within the policy field of regional development in Sweden.

This raises questions about how we should view feminist strategical progress and achievements in an endeavour with a 30-year history. Some are more hopeful about the power of feminist agendas in the intersection with neoliberalism. For example, Prügl (2017) encourages to not underestimate "the subversive power of great ideas" even if embedded in settings dominated by neoliberal rationality (p. 48). Kantola and Squires (2012) also remind us to pay attention to new openings and opportunities to "use market mechanisms to challenge neoliberal norms" (p. 395). These messages give strength to the strategy of Trojan horses to advocate gender equality. Others are less hopeful and call for a confrontative strategy. Brown (2015) argues persuasively that neoliberal rationality can only be successfully resisted and contested from a position of *homo politicus*, where claims of justice demand legitimacy in the policy field of regional development. A crucial strategical challenge for feminism in intersection with neoliberal rationality is to gain traction, resources, and relevance, and at the same time (re)establish and defend the legitimate right to claim justice.

Conclusions

The aim of this article was to contribute to the discussions on the relationship between feminism and neoliberalism. My approach has been to analyse rationalities of gender equality work within the highly marketized field of regional development in Sweden, with a specific interest in the convergence of the policy goals of gender equality and economic growth. My approach has been to study how this relationship is represented by gender equality workers and to discuss the status of emancipatory claims from a perspective of political rationality. The analysis showed three representations of the convergence of gender equality and economic growth: reciprocity, co-optation and as Trojan horses. Whereas these representations differ in the sense of how conflicting the goals of gender equality and economic growth are, and which of the goals eventually dominate the other, none of them articulate feminist emancipatory claims as legitimate in their own right. Thus, the study shows how a neoliberal rationality of regional development is not compatible with emancipatory claims unless they are beneficial for economic growth or hidden through marketized language or logics. In this sense, making claims from the position of *homo politicus* as described by Brown

(2015) does not appear as a legitimate platform to promote gender equality in the material. The study also illustrates how the gender equality workers—in a very tangible way—try to cope with the balancing act of emancipatory feminism and market logics as described by Fraser (2012).

In 2021, the Swedish government initiated a process to reform regional development policy. A strategy to move from “regional growth” to regional “sustainable development” as the overarching policy goal. Even if the content of this reform is still not determined, there is an ambition to widen the concept of development to incorporate aspects of environmental and social matters to a greater extent. It would require future studies to determine if the primacy of growth and regional competitiveness becomes contested by this reform process, widening the opportunities for feminist politicization of regional development and creating new spaces to raise emancipatory claims of justice without disguise.

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