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Marginal Rural Areas in Sweden – Problems and Perspectives

By Gerhard Gustafsson

Abstract

With the aid of experiences from a case study on the Östmark area in Värmland, Sweden, it is possible to treat globalization as both a problem and an advantage - a problem because of the economic forces that can be seen as promoting urban growth and thereby making different areas in the world look more alike, and an advantage because the process brings people closer together as a result of different forms of communication and this implies that different areas have much in common. In this presentation, I have attempted to show how marginality in this situation can be seen as something positive in the sense that areas like Östmark represent a type of social structure that is more likely to survive in a future society more adapted to meet the threats from “climate change”. The presentation consists of both empirical examples of changes in the area, between global and local constructions, and a more philosophical consideration of ideas about changes in society. It is based on a discussion of different ways of developing marginal areas as well as other areas in the future i. e. an A-society or a B-society. The conclusion is that development in marginal areas can be seen as a strategy for total social change and is no longer marginal, but central.

Background

Marginality, as in the case of Östmark in Sweden, is the result of a long process of urbanization and structural change in economic sectors. It has resulted in depopulation, fewer jobs and less service. The only regions with growth are the big city regions and rural areas around them within commuting distance, where counter-urbanization occurs. On the other hand, if you “think rural”, all regions seen from their own perspective are central. As a result of its construction, the globe makes that statement work.

In Sweden, there are many ideas related to a liberal ideology promoting economic growth and various kinds of innovations and creativity and this is changing society in an uncertain direction. For a long time, tourism has been the key factor for regional development in the country. There is little discussion of the goals for the development of the whole social geographical structure. Furthermore, on the political agenda changes in the structure of the administrative regions in Sweden are under consideration with the objective of increasing their size. This is the case on all levels, from the local municipalities, where we already have had a change from around 2.500 in 1950s to 290 today, to the counties dating back to 18th century, where we recently had a reduction from 24 to 21. Creating new regions is meant to solve all development problems. I have argued that there are in fact many spatial organizational factors apart from regions to be considered, like places, networks and more space over bridging structures related to the IT society (Gustafsson 2011).

There is very little discussion of alternative development such as alternative life modes or changes necessitated by the problems resulting from climate change, which is in focus today.

Therefore, this paper is an attempt to develop a different approach to the dominant growth paradigm with a focus on marginal rural areas. My main message is that it is important to discuss the quality of life or life modes and that this is of the greatest importance for the development of marginal areas in a global world.

Alternative development thinking – a theoretical statement

The current wide-ranging discussion of climate change is reminiscent of an old debate that seems to be more topical than ever. Back in 1980s, thinkers like Emin Tengström and Lage Wahlström at Gothenburg University in their examination of the structure of the society found it interesting to differentiate between an A- and a B-society (Tengström 1980 and Wahlström 1981 - see also Gustafsson and Wahlström 1990). The simple distinction was that an A-society represented the growth economy and the B-society represented an alternative structure with “zero growth”. Today a B-society might be said to represent the structure of a society adapted to climate change where the meaning of life, the good life and sustainability, could be considered in terms of different concepts of life modes. Figure 2 indicates some of the possible aspects of the two societal structures.

• B-society	• A-society
- Spiritual values	- Material values
- To be	- To have
- Ecological base	- Nature exploitation
- Divided working hours	- Fixed working time
- Informal economy	- Formal economy
- Small scale production	- Big scale production
- The base of local resources	- The base of regional and global resources

Figure 1. Structure of society related to an A-society and a B-society

The structures are here dichotomized to make the distinction clearer but, of course, in real life, in a real society, the content may differ. Here I will just comment on working hours. I maintain that a B-society means that the demand for work in a society can be divided equally among all its members. If a society requires a fixed number of working hours per week, this will mean that there will always be an attempt to develop new products or services so that all people can be “fully occupied” with work. This development would not support a greater adaptation of society to the effects of climate change with, for example, less material consumption.

This idea may be developed further by relating the two types of society to different time perspectives, as shown in figures 2. In a B-society there is a circular time perspective with a

focus on preservation as the ideology. In an A-society there is a linear time perspective with a focus on change as the ideology. A B-society represents a peasant society, a farming society or the native people/tribes, whilst an A-society represents the modern society.

Figure 2. Structure of society and the time perspective in an A-society and a B-society

If you link rural marginal areas and central urban areas to the discussion of the structure of society, it is clear that marginal rural areas can be seen as very close to a B-society with an opportunity for alternative life modes related to historical time and a societal structure closer to nature. It is also clear that these areas are lagging behind central urban areas as regards change. Central urban areas, on the other hand, represent more of an A-society with a growth economy as the driving force and are ahead of marginal rural areas in terms of changes in societal structures. Of course there are aspects like “Urbanized rural areas” and “Ruralized urban areas”, discussed in PIMA-research (PIMA=Planning Issues in Marginal Areas) (See for example Gade, Miller and Sommers (eds.) 1991 or Andersson and Blom (eds.) 1998) that complicate this distinction somewhat. Global and local life modes also result in differences in the content of the societal structure between areas/regions.

Here, it is possible to formulate a hypothesis, If the A-society collapses, which may happen if nature hits back, this will be to the advantage of the rural marginal areas since they have not changed so much in an A-society structural way. The situation is described in figure 3. This means that the focus is on rural marginal areas as positive aspects in the development of society, not as problem areas as is usually the case. It is very likely that this will be the case in the future since there is little hope that politicians all over the world can come together and make decisions and actions that will result in an adequate adaptation to climate change (see, for example, what happened in Rio in 1992 and the following meetings of the United Nations on “Sustainable Development”).

- Marginal rural areas
- Already adapted
- Central urban areas
- Dramatic changes (nature will hit back)

Figure 3. Collapse of an A-society and the effects on marginal rural areas and central urban areas

There are various trends in society promoting either an A- or a B-society. For an A-society, these are the growth economy (development/modernization all over the world), a belief in high-tech solutions and in innovation and creativity. Supporting a B-society are the global economic crisis, the economic crisis in Southern Europe, ideas about slow society (originating in northern Italy with slow food), the end of globalization (reconstruction is necessary) and climate change. It will be interesting to see which trends survive in the long term.

Another method of looking at the pathway into the future is to focus on ethics. Gustafsson (1986) maintained that it was possible to distinguish between two opposing lines of action for the future related to an A- and a B-society (see figure 4): “Human egoistic planning in harmony with nature” or “Laissez-faire attitude to the future of mankind”. It is perhaps a controversial statement but it can be said in justification of a B-society that you save nature for the survival of the human being. It is interesting to introduce “the rabbit strategy” here. The discussion today concerning carbon dioxide and meat production leads to the conclusion that the best meat would come from rabbits and this fits the B-society. Long ago, it was determined that the mammal which would survive if man destroys the earth was the rabbit, which was the one that was best adapted to nature if natural conditions were poor. Thus, in all societal structure the rabbit will survive.

• B-society	• A-society
Human egoistic planning in harmony with nature	Laissez-faire attitude to the future of mankind
- Conserve	- Change
- Live for the future with security in the present	- Live in the present for an insecure future

Figure 4. The future and ethical strategies related to the structure of society

To sum up there is a risk that A-society will collapse, depending on which trends prove to be strongest and there are different ways of justifying actions for the future. These circumstances can promote the development of both marginal rural areas and the globe as a whole.

Presentation of the development of a study area – Östmark

Östmark is located in the northwestern part of the county of Värmland, which is a so-called forest county and a border region (see map1-2) (for deeper knowledge - see also Gustafsson and Singh 2009).

In the valley there is arable land and the hills are forested. People settled in the valley first. Later, during 1640s and onwards, Finns from what is now eastern Finland settled on the hills. Population developments have been dramatic (see figure 5). Today there is just one fourth of the population maximum that was reached in the 1870s for Östmark. The reasons for the population decline can be found both in emigration to the US, starting in the 1860s, and, later, in urbanization starting in the mid 20th century.

Changes in the occupational structure are described in table 1. It is clear that the number of people occupied has decreased considerably during the last decades, and this process is still going on. This is true for both the people working in Östmark (“Day”) and people working elsewhere but living in Östmark (“Night”) – see note under the figure. There are still many people working in agriculture and forestry compared with the country as a whole. Many individuals commute out of the region to the town of Torsby in the southeast and to Norway. This explains the big difference between “Day” and “Night” occupation.

The landscape itself reveals many signs of dramatic change in the region (see Photo 1-2), providing evidence for the decrease in agriculture and the closure of services.

Map 1. Location of the county of Värmland and Östmark
Source: Gustafsson 1986

Map 2. Östmark region – the old local municipality
Source: Gustafsson 1986

Figure 5. Population development in Östmark and Torsby municipality
Source: Gustafsson and Singh 2009

Table 1 Occupation structure for Östmark parish 1965-2004
Source: Gustafsson 1986 and Statistics Sweden 2004

Population	Day		Night		Day		Night		Day		Night	
Year	1965				1980				2004			
Sector	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%
Agriculture	221	37.5	223	28.1	145	50.0	174	34.0	34	21,0	47	11.0
Forestry	159	27.0	208	26.2								
Industry	31	5.3	81	10.2	30	10.4	98	19.1	4	2,4	60	14.2
Building	65	11.0	137	17.2	20	6.9	62	12.1	11	6,8	42	9.9
Trade	29	4.9	36	4.5			23	4.5	18	11,1	59	13.9
Bank	3	0.5	4	0.5	45	11.5	29	5.7	1	0,6	15	3.5
Transport	24	4.1	29	3.7								
Private S.									14	8,6	33	7.8
Public S.	57	9.7	76	9.6	50	17.2	126	24.6	80	49,5	168	39.6
Total	589	100	794	100	290	100	512	100	162	100	424	100

Note: 'Day' means people with their work place in the area. 'Night' means people living in the area. For the years 1980 and 2004 Agriculture includes Forestry. For the year 1980 and Day, Bank includes Trade and Transport. For the year 1980 and Night, Bank includes Transport. For 2004, Bank includes Transport, and Private Service is a new category.

Photo 1. Sörmark – old shop, now used for “Loppis” (second hand shop)
Photographer: Rana P B Singh 2008

Photo 2. Sörmark landscape – bushes and trees take over. See the planted spruces behind the house
Photographer. Ran P B Singh 2008

Östmark today exemplifies many of the current trends, such as population decline and a reduction of jobs and services. The informal sector in the area is extensive. People help each other with childcare and other services and let other active farmers use their arable land without rent, just to keep the landscape open. Local initiatives have helped the region to survive, a new “Memphis café”, for instance, and a “Memphis magazine” related to the culture surrounding Elvis Presley as well as a new shop and petrol station central located in the church village of Östmark, but established with the aid of local mobilization. There is also the road sign at the southern entrance to Östmark church village – “Monopol”(monopoly) village (as a result of local mobilization via an internet competition the local people succeeded in getting Östmark accepted as one of the place names in the popular game some years ago. There are, then, links to the global and national cultural levels in the local development work and signs of both an A-society and a B-society.

The future of Östmark depends to a certain extent on what its people can do, However, it is perhaps more important for people at the grass root level what happens at the global level. Whether the A-society collapses or the people in Östmark decide to develop into a B-society, they will succeed. As shown in photos 3-4, Östmark can either become more marginalized (A-society) or take advantage of a B-society and develop on the basis of local sustainability. Local food production and local control would, for example, be important and a good strategy, given the recent discovery that horsemeat has been used in meatballs and other meat products when it has been advertised as beef.

B-society

A-society

Cows at a farm in Östmark Church village
Photographer: Rana P B Singh 2006

Långbacken – closed shops since long time ago (about 30 years)
Photographer: Rana P B Singh 2008

Photo 3 and 4. Östmark in the future: local sustainability or decline and marginalization

Conclusions in a global perspective

The best solution on the global level would be for the whole world to develop in line with a B-society model, where rural and urban areas had the same ideology but a different character based on their historical circumstances and varying spatial density. Hope lies then not with politicians but with the people, as shown in summary form in figure 6. Development along these lines would deal with the problem of climate change at the same time as providing a solution for rural development, especially the development of marginal rural areas

- A humanistic perspective based on tolerance and acceptance among people
- A geography for people
- A geography by people
- Perhaps a two-fold society (strong links to the soil and strong links to the information society)
- A base in a B-society

Figure 6. The solution for the development of society adapted to climate change

The conference theme was “Think rural”. I have used the term marginal areas earlier, but I now realize that it is better to use the term rural. This is more neutral and has better connotations for the people living in the actual areas/regions. As social scientists, we have to consider our contribution of knowledge to society. There is, perhaps, a risk in constructing special education for jobs in rural areas or marginal areas – a risk of stigmatic effects. However, I think it is necessary to try to determine what knowledge different academic disciplines can contribute. Together they can, I believe, contribute a great deal since there are many stories to be told when dealing with rural development. To understand each other, it is necessary for each discipline to broaden its perspective and be open to different approaches. It is a question of complementarity instead of incommensurability. In different case studies of rural development all over the world, there is considerable relativism in the relation of urban-rural social structures. Therefore, it is important in the future to work on comparative studies to find common ground. It would also be interesting to see how different local areas/regions could be developed if a B-society strategy were implemented.

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