Between party politics and local identification: political responses to a rural protest

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ABSTRACT

How do politicians make sense of situations in which they may find themselves caught up in between opposing loyalties, for example, party loyalty on the one hand and loyalty to neighbours and friends or ideological convictions on the other? Based on interviews about a rural occupation in protest of a political decision in a small community in Northern Sweden, this paper explores the approaches of local politicians to the protest and to the people involved in it. The results show how discourses of geographic space and party-political loyalty structured the negotiated responsibility for the situation, affected the politicians’ descriptions of the occupation as such, and made support for the protest become more or less difficult.

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1. Introduction

How do local politicians make sense of rural protests in which they may find themselves caught up in between opposing loyalties, e.g. party loyalty on the one hand and a place-based loyalty to neighbours and friends on the other? With the aim to explore local politicians’ sense-making around rural protest and the roles played by themselves, other politicians and the protesters, this paper is based on interviews with local politicians about their views on the events in a small community in Northern Sweden: Dorotea Municipality in the county of Västerbotten in Northern Sweden, with a population of approximately 2,600. In 2012, the local health centre was occupied in protest of the county council’s austerity plans, including a decision regarding cutbacks to the local care service in Dorotea. The occupation became publicly known as the ‘Dorotea uprising’. It lasted until 2015 when politicians announced that the care service would be restored.

The relationship between rural protest and political parties has been described as under-researched (Brett, 2018), and studies on how local decision makers relate to political protests that they (partially) sympathize with are scarce. Most studies focus on protesters rather than decision makers (e.g. Uba, 2005), and the ones that focus on decision makers are often based on survey data (e.g. Gilljam et al., 2012). This article contributes...
to the study of space and polity by highlighting the significance of discourse and spatial identification for political standpoints. Its results contribute to the study of leader responsiveness and the focus on politics of the rural within rural studies by showing how discursive investments positioned the politicians, and affected their perceptions and descriptions of the Dorotea uprising. We argue that a comprehensive understanding of the discourses that condition local politicians’ views, may help explain the difficulty for local populations to jointly protest against the challenging situation faced by many sparsely populated rural areas. Although the empirical data for the study has been gathered in a small municipality in Northern Sweden, its results should also have implications for the understanding of political responses to protests also in other rural areas.

2. Background

The Dorotea uprising must be understood in relation to a general trend of urbanization, and, in particular, to the emphasis on the ability to create local and regional growth that has guided Swedish regional politics since the 1990s (Hudson & Rönnblom, 2007; Tillväxtanalys, 2012). Both processes have contributed to economic difficulties in many Swedish rural regions and resulted in considerable cutbacks. Although the Dorotea uprising concerned a specific decision in a specific region, the protested issues were also recognized and experienced in other parts of rural Norrland in the Swedish north, and the media attention that the occupation received (e.g Ahtén, 2016) speak of the general interest. There was a widely held conviction among the rural population that rural areas – although constituting a key theme in the self-understanding of Sweden as a nation (e.g. O’Dell, 1998) – were being unfairly treated by national rural and regional policy. The Dorotea uprising fought for what was described as welfare rights – rights that the protesters claimed as citizens of the nation. In this sense, the occupation differed from other rural protests in which the object of protest is closely associated with specific rural identities, as in the case of farmer-coalitions or the UK hunting lobby (Anderson, 2006; Reed, 2004). In such cases, a central argument is that it is important for rural areas to be able to keep rural specificity, thus projecting an identity based on both nationalism and ‘farmer exceptionalism’ (Reed, 2008).

The interviews with local politicians were part of a research project on rural protests, in which we had previously interviewed participants of the uprising (Lundgren & Nilsson, 2018; Berglund-Lake 2020). In the interviews with participants, politicians were repeatedly mentioned. The occupation was built on the premise of a conflict between local residents and county council politicians who had taken the decision regarding cutbacks, which was seen as an immoral betrayal of the local population. Thus, politicians were primarily framed by the protesters as being ‘insensitive, authoritarian and ignorant’ (Lundgren & Nilsson, 2018, p. 18) and the occupation as a reasonable and appropriate reaction to the blatant injustices brought about by substandard rural and regional policy and poor judgement on behalf of county council politicians.

According to voices in the media, the occupation was supported by all political parties in Dorotea municipality (Christenson, 2012; Sandin, 2012), and specifically by politicians in opposition to the social democrats who ran the municipality. Since the protest was directed at the politicians on a county council level, local politicians were not the prime target of the protesters’ criticism. Even so, one consequence of the events
during the occupation was that during the elections in 2014, support for the social democrats decreased from 48.2% in 2010 to 22.4% in 2014 also on a municipality level. The local opposition party, Dorotea Kommunlista (Dorotea municipal/local list), who explicitly supported the occupation, saw an opposite trend and support for this party increased from 22.7% to 38.9% (The Election Authority, 2017).

3. Understanding social protest

The present study is situated in the intersection of research on leader responsiveness and rural protest, contributing with an emic approach that takes the effects of discourse seriously.

Studies that have focused on leader responsiveness, i.e. how people in positions of power perceive social protests have shown that whether they view protests as legitimate or not is decisive to their attitudes; established forms of political action, such as referendums and demonstrations, are often perceived to be legitimate, while strikes, occupations and possibly violent protests have more often been regarded as being less so (Tilly, 1999; Uba, 2016). Also, the perceived identities of the protesters, just like decision makers’ own experiences, their position on the left-right political spectrum and whether they are in office or in opposition are of significance (Gilljam et al., 2012). Studies of protests that have used the controversial method of occupying buildings further point to the presence of an either/or perspective that is articulated with a moral valuation (Manjikian, 2013); protesters are either emphatically described as individuals who react against and rightly protest a situation of social vulnerability (Smith, 1996; Uitermark, 2004; van der Hor, 2010), or they are depicted as criminals whose methods of protest break the law (Dee, 2016; O’Mahony & Cobb, 2008). Despite the urban bias in much of the literature (but see Cattaneo, 2013), it recognizes occupations as an extension or symptom of a situation that goes beyond the local situation and may instead be associated with the nation as a whole (Manjikian, 2013).

Recent studies of rural protests have noted a shift from rural politics to a politics of the rural (Woods, 2003), in which politics no longer takes the rural for granted in the struggle regarding how best to govern it, but where the rural is increasingly politicized as such. The shift has taken place at the same time as the identification of the emergence of a new rural social movement, which comprises a plethora of different interest groups that struggle on behalf of rural areas (Larsen, 2008; Paniagua, 2017; Woods, 2003). The interest in the politics of the rural has been visible in studies on how such politics are fought through rural discourses materialized in contexts such as popular culture (Horton, 2008), destination images (Baylina & Berg, 2010) and rural organizational material (Nilsson & Lundgren, 2019). We align with such studies and the way they define discourse as constitutive ways of understanding and describing the world (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985), thus taking into account the power that comes with representation insofar as ‘[r]epresentation through language is […] central to the processes by which meaning is produced’ (Hall, 1997, p. 1). Influenced by Lawson et al. (2010), we view social phenomena (such as social protest) as not solely the effects of political and economic restructuring, but as being equally affected by cultural and ideological processes in particular locations. In this sense, the structuration of the politicians’ repertoire of representations of the Dorotea uprising is significant since it produces and conditions
notions of protesters and politicians, as well as of the protest itself and the rural area in question.

This definition means that discourses are also enacted by rural actors (Edensor, 2006; Woods, 2011). In such enactments, people are not only caught up in discourses of rurality, but also in other realms of significance (Massey, 1994). In this paper, we recognize the impact of spatial and political situatedness for how politicians view and represent rural protest, and for how such views and representations are interwoven through desires and identifications that are made on other levels than the local, and which may include quite different goals.

4. Material, methods and methodology

This paper is based on semi-structured interviews conducted in 2017 with 10 politicians in Dorotea Municipality. The politicians represented four of the major parties (1–4 per party), and had all been politically active during the events of the Dorotea uprising, e.g. as members of the municipal council (kommunfullmäktige) or members or deputies on municipal committees. They were all still very involved and exhibited a clear party-political attitude during the interviews. Four of the interviewees were male and six were female. Their average age was just over 50 years and they represented parties from the ruling majority as well as from the opposition. At the time of the occupation, the Social Democrats and socialist/feminist Left Party held the majority. However, this changed and, at the time of the interviews, the Liberals (social liberals) and Dorotea municipal/local list (a local party unwilling to define in relation to the left-right political spectrum) held the majority. Some politicians declined to participate, citing a lack of time.

In a sense, the interviewed politicians possessed a symbolic capital, including an experience of verbalizing their opinions which, according to Harvey (2011), makes it both important and possible for them to angle interviews in their own favour. Since our focus was on politicians’ meaning-making around the Dorotea uprising, any attempts on behalf of the interviewees to present the situation in a manner that was advantageous to them were not regarded as problematic but rather as constituting the core of our interest. We were not primarily interested in the ‘truth’ but in how the politicians took part in the constant creation of truth. This means that while the interview as a form of conversation most likely affected the way in which the politicians chose to present the events, their chosen lines of narration are still telling of their efforts to frame them to an outsider.

In the interviews, an interview guide comprising a combination of open, overarching questions and more specific questions was used. The semi-structured character permitted the interviewees to expand on matters that were important to them, also when this was not covered by the interview guide. We started with questions on protests in northern rural areas generally and continued with questions that were more related to the situation in Dorotea. Lastly, we focused on their experience of and views on the Dorotea uprising. The interviews were recorded using Audio Highjack software. They were stored digitally and transcribed verbatim.

The interviews were conducted either via phone or Skype, primarily due to the politicians’ stated lack of time. The interviews lasted between just over 20 min and 70 min,
but on average lasted for around one hour. Even the shortest interviews were quite rich and detailed, possibly as a consequence of the politicians being experienced speakers who are used to express and defend their opinions in public. It probably mattered that they had already had reasons to talk about the Dorotea uprising before. Thus, the interviews did not appear to suffer from the methodological shortcomings that are sometimes associated with telephone interviews (Novick, 2008).

The paper is situated within a discursive approach, which means that the transcribed material is analyzed as representations that partake in the continuously ongoing construction of reality. In practice, the analysis included identifying central signifiers, and the way they were articulated, thus constituting specific discourses. As a practice, articulation links different signs together such that their former identities are changed and something new is created (Glynos & Howarth, 2007; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). Some signs within discourse, referred to as ‘nodal points’ by Laclau and Mouffe, stand out as specifically privileged. In the analysis of the politicians’ narratives, such nodal points were highlighted.

Importantly, and legitimizing this paper’s focus on spoken discourse, is that discourse not only provides a language for understanding, but materializes on an ongoing basis (Howarth, 2000; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). For example, talk about withdrawing an ambulance service would make the act of actually withdrawing it possible, and, if this was carried out, it would have significant and material consequences for people in the area who required the ambulance service.

We read the transcribed interviews not only for how they were structured through discourse, but for how the structuring discourses constructed subject positions. Thus, an important issue was identifying and describing how the studied discourses struggled to make sense of people, i.e. how they offered subject positions through which identities were produced (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985).

In order to offer critical explanations to the studied production of discourse, we turned to a psychoanalytically influenced approach to discourse theory, which furnished us with a vocabulary to explain the hopes, fears and desires that were ordered by, and dramatized within discourse (Glynos, 2011; Glynos & Howarth, 2007). The subject is thus viewed as a subject of desires that can never be fully reached (Glynos, 2001). Discourses, and the fantasies of the world that they offer, work to explain this unsatisfactory situation, not seldom through the blaming of someone (‘someone else’, ‘they’, an ‘Other’) (Dean, 2007; Glynos & Howarth, 2007).

Hence, the politicians’ narratives were analyzed in terms of processes of desiring; they participated in an ongoing and future-oriented collective endeavour in order to produce discourses that would benefit desired understandings of themselves as local politicians and rural inhabitants. Here, notions of morality were central as the politicians struggled to ‘make and remake the world around certain values’ (Benson & Fischer, 2007). The politicians were thus not seen to be determined by discourse and bereft of the ability to act. Rather, it is important to emphasize the role of agency, defined here as the (conditioned) possibility of choosing between the different discourses that structure a phenomenon. For the politicians, framing the occupation and themselves in particular ways were clearly not acts without purpose.

Describing the discourses that were employed, the subject positions they offered and the ways in which the politicians navigated them, meant that we could come closer to an
understanding of the motives at stake when rural protest is recounted and made comprehensible. In what follows, we first account for the four themes that recurrent when the politicians discussed their views of the occupation: situating the uprising in space, debating the represented reasons, assessing the methods and approach of the occupation, and evaluating the consequences. The identification of themes is based on a combination of prevalence in the interviews and whether or not a certain theme was emphasized and offered as a significant explanation of the events that constituted the Dorotea uprising. We then discuss how the themes were structured through two dominant discourses and how these evoked particular subject positions.

5. The local politicians’ narratives: four themes

The local politicians’ narratives about the Dorotea uprising articulated the events in different ways. The rhetoric can be seen as ongoing articulations that presented the politicians’ respective opinions to the interviewer and that conditioned the possibilities to identify as protesters and politicians.

5.1. Situating the uprising in space

Present in all interviews regardless of the interviewees’ political affiliations was the situation for the Norrland hinterlands and the rural population’s dissatisfaction with the current state of affairs (cf. Hansen, 1998). The theme primarily articulated the Dorotea uprising in terms of discontent with cutbacks, closures and retrenched service, and with expressions of grief and sadness about the situation: ‘It’s just sad in the north …’, stated a Social Democratic Party interviewee. The situation was all the more irritating, another politician argued, as ‘people in power’ on a national level deliberately contributed to the downfall of rural areas, while at the same time benefitting from all the (natural) assets in Norrland: ‘They take everything from the rural areas – mines, hydropower, forests – but we don’t get anything back’ (The Left Party). The reflected feelings of betrayal thus included an enemy figure who was made responsible for the situation and who was sometimes vaguely referred to as ‘they’. ‘They’ might refer to the state, government and parliamentary politicians but also the larger coastal cities and areas in Southern Sweden. The dissatisfaction regarding where national rural and regional policy had left the rural areas of Norrland (e.g. Nilsson & Lundgren, 2019) gained momentum from references to a history of Norrland being a plundered colony of Sweden, but also to the local history; protests against a proposal to merge municipalities in 1973 were specifically mentioned as constituting a local political (protester) identity.

Against the background of being treated unfairly, both by national politicians and by the media, the local politicians agreed that rural uprisings and social protests were generally acceptable and related to the democratic civil rights of citizens. It was pointed out that protesting is ‘a right that we have in Sweden’ and that ‘we must protect that right to speak out’ (Social Democratic Party). Protests were further seen as a good strategy for drawing attention to the general situation in rural areas and, in the case of the Dorotea uprising, for marketing the village: ‘… this kind of protest often receives a lot of attention … In a sense, it’s a way of marketing the whole village! We get a lot of attention when things like this happen’ (Dorotea municipal/local list). In this sense, the
narrative on rural vulnerability was closely associated with a neoliberal discourse in which regional competition is promoted and place marketing strategies are seen as being key to attracting in-migrants (cf. Niedomysl, 2008).

5.2. Debating the represented reasons

A recurring theme in the narratives about the uprising concerned the reasons given for the protest. Politicians who supported the occupation agreed with the protesters that the decision regarding cutbacks was a fair reason for protest. Politicians who were critical of the occupation sometimes attacked and denied those reasons, arguing that a distorted understanding prevailed regarding what the decision taken by the county council was about. According to one Social Democratic Party interviewee, there had never been any question about closing down the emergency care service, only about moving it to different premises in Dorotea: The occupiers ‘got into their heads that we were to be without [emergency care], but we weren’t!’ The social democrats’ real intention, she argued, was only to move the care service, not close it down, but the occupants were unwilling to listen to this information and the interviewee felt betrayed by this unwillingness. For her, the protesters’ misunderstanding of the decision caused a rift between politicians and protesters that made it difficult for her to fully identify with the local population. A protester-biased media logic was stated as being one of the reasons why communication had become difficult (cf. Woods, 2010) and why there was no clarity about the decision: ‘The journalists don’t want to listen, either. They only want to cover what is sensational […] and that’s not the same as the truth!’ (Social Democratic Party). That fact that representations in the media were endorsed by the political opposition perhaps came as no surprise, and the social democrats noted how the opposition ‘enjoyed’ this chance to receive local support.

Related to the above was also the criticism that the uprising was in fact not representative of the local population but driven by a few persons with a history of protesting. This implies a tendency to individualize the occupation, i.e. to ascribe responsibility to individuals rather than acknowledge societal structures or (perceived) general and place-related injustices. It also involved a political delegitimization of the occupation. Rather than being comprehended as being related to unjust power relations of geographic space, it was described as a consequence of the unholy alliance between sensational media, the strategies of opposition politicians and trouble-making individuals.

5.3. Assessing the methods and approach of the occupation

The politicians generally claimed to support protests that could be defined as ordered, democratic and nonviolent, while protests that displayed any form of aggression were generally criticized and repudiated (cf. Uba, 2016). It was, however, clear that they adopted different approaches to evaluating the Dorotea uprising. Two different perspectives, or ways of assessing the methods, stood out.

The first perspective (primarily connected to the social democrats) described the methods as undemocratic, partially unlawful and immoral. It contained a critique of the choice to occupy rather than adopt the usual channels of communicating discontent. Amicable consensus and discussion were set against trouble-making and protest. It also
emphasized how the Dorotea uprising was an ‘ugly affair’ involving personal insults as well as pressure to silence those residents who did not sympathize with the occupation. Interviewees talked about insults and exposures in the local paper and how this had silenced people: ‘people haven’t dared to say anything’ (Social Democratic Party). Thus, the first perspective created a division between those who were for and those who were against the uprising, where opponents were portrayed as victims of the occupiers’ abuse. The occupiers were clearly depicted as having transgressed the moral boundaries regarding how to act decently. This, in turn, was believed to have silenced the opponents of the occupation.2

The second perspective (connected to the opposition) described the occupation as peaceful, ordered, democratic, well run and moral – a very ‘peaceful’ and ‘well-organized’ protest (Dorotea municipal/local list). In this sense, politicians agreed with the protesters themselves, who emphasized the orderliness of the protest as being an important legitimizing factor (Lundgren & Nilsson, 2018).

Characteristic of most interviewees when evaluating the protest method of occupation was that they had not personally participated in the occupation. Being both a politician and an activist would put politicians in a difficult position as the occupiers had decided that in order to legitimize their claims for equal health care it was necessary to downplay any party-political associations (Lundgren & Nilsson, 2018). For the occupiers, this was a question of keeping the protest together and not be divided. However, for some of the politicians it also meant that they felt unwanted and unrecognized as part of the local population.

5.4. Evaluating the consequences

A fourth recurring theme was associated with the perceived consequences of the occupation. In retrospect, the occupation was defended through an emphasis on the positive consequences of the occupation process on the local community. It was argued that the occupation had put Dorotea on the map, which was considered important from a place-marketing perspective. The construction of the new health centre that followed the occupation was associated with hopes for the future: ‘It’s a sign that something positive is happening’ (The Liberals). Among the positive effects highlighted was also an increased social cohesion: It ‘created a sense of social togetherness [that] united many of the participants, above all, perhaps the older, lonely participants’ (Dorotea municipal/local list).

The apparently positive consequences of the occupation were used to support the occupation and to represent it as legitimate, but also shifted the focus away from the political issue of access to care. This option to position yourself as sympathetic was important, partly because the local politicians were also friends and neighbours of (some of) the protesters and the opportunity to talk well about the occupation without supporting it seemed to be welcome.

However, not everyone shared the view that the occupation had had positive consequences. In hindsight, those who had been critical of the occupation were also those who expressed the sharpest criticism of the consequences of the occupation. There was criticism of the financial costs, for example, the costs of the referendum that the occupation had worked hard to bring about but which was subsequently turned down by the county council.3 The critics also argued that the occupation had not had any
effects at all on the degree or quality of care, and that it had had negative social consequences, for example, a divided community with two groups standing against each other. This division was still visible in the community years after the occupation had ended, they argued: ‘people don’t say hello to each other anymore and so on’ (Dorotea municipal/local list). The latter argument was described as being specifically troubling for a community that was small and economically vulnerable.

6. Discussion

When comprehending the occupation, the interviewees oscillated between identifying with the position of living in and representing rural areas and the position of representing a political party. The identifications were made possible within the different, and partially contradictory discourses that struggled to define the occupation as an object of knowledge (Foucault, 1972, p. 49; see also Edensor, 2006; Woods, 2011). In this section, we describe and discuss the discursive terrain and the processes of desiring involved in the politicians’ narratives.

6.1. A discourse of centre and periphery

The discourse of centre and periphery (Sjöstedt Landén, 2012) foregrounded the significance of space. It was based on a sense of ‘righteous indignation’ (Rapport, 1997) that understood the occupation to be a moral and just reaction against a spatially unequal situation. Rural populations were interpellated as moral agents with an obligation to ‘speak out’ when the political establishment failed them. Through this discourse, remarks such as ‘They take everything from the rural areas – mines, hydropower, forests – but we don’t get anything back’ became comprehensible, as were the narrated feelings of grief and sadness over the situation. Such remarks assumed, and naturalized, notions of rural areas as being robbed of their wealth, and also, of the enjoyment that was supposedly associated with it (cf. Žižek, 1993).

Emphasizing the spatial injustices – highlighting signs in the discourse that included unjust cutbacks, outmigration and an unfair rural and regional policy – no doubt meant that rural space was enacted in a specific way (cf. Massey, 1994), and reinforced notions of (defective) democracy, justice and equality (cf. Manjikian, 2013; Tilly, 1999; van Leeuwen, 2007). When recounted from within a discourse of centre and periphery, the four themes that recurred in the interviews were structured with this in mind: the location of Dorotea in rural Norrland was highlighted as significant to the decision on cutbacks, the reasons given for the occupation by the protesters were accepted as true and legitimate, the methods were defined as well-organized and as popularly anchored performances of responsible citizenship, and the consequences were seen as beneficial for the local community. Overall, the occupation was described as being both reasonable and highly moral.

By extension, the discourse of centre and periphery also promoted associations between the local situation in Dorotea and other rural areas that were also suffering from peripheralization through cutbacks and closures. In line with Davis (2017) findings on global assemblages of activism, this meant that the occupation could easily
be associated with other rural uprisings and also bolstered by people from outside Dorotea.

The discourse of centre and periphery was inclusive and attracted politicians from all parties, although politicians from the opposition parties dominated. Evoking the discourse of centre and periphery made it possible for the politicians to identify themselves as being part of the local population – and with rural populations in general – which, in turn, made it easier for them to sympathize with the protests. The discourse thus exhibited what has been called a ‘place frame’ that managed to bridge dissimilar goals (Larsen, 2008) and, temporarily, unite the otherwise conflicting groups of ‘politicians’ and ‘population’ into the same chain of equivalence (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). This was a potentially strong connection as it tended to downplay antagonistic party-political leanings and, at least theoretically, form the basis of a broader rural protest movement. This opportunity to unite with the local population stood out as compelling and as embodying both moral and symbolic values that were desirable to the politicians and motivated them to narrate the uprising in accordance with the discourse.

However, the discourse of centre and periphery also provided the formation of local identity with a necessary but threatening outside position constituted by parliamentary politicians on a national level. It was primarily to them that responsibility for the well-being of rural areas was shifted within the discourse of centre and periphery.

6.2. A discourse of party politics

There was also a competing discourse which we have called a discourse of party politics. Rather than highlighting unjust spatial power relations, it structured the recurring thematic notions of the occupation around party political affiliations and loyalties. Being invested in the discourse of party politics meant interpreting the occupation – its reasons, methods and consequences – in ways that would benefit your own political party within the local/regional political game.

Thus, because the politicians belonged to different political parties, the discourse of party politics harboured antagonistic views and lacked some of the potentially uniting qualities of the discourse of centre and periphery. When speaking from within the discourse of party politics, the social democrats were generally negative towards the occupation as it partially targeted the Social Democratic Party. The opposition parties were more positive. Due to the foregoing events on a regional level, the local politicians thus displayed a different pattern than is otherwise reported, where politicians on the left tend to be positive towards grass roots protests, while politicians on the right tend to be more negative (Gilljam et al., 2012; Uba, 2016). Interestingly, the discourse of party politics succeeded in achieving a somewhat unholy alliance between the opposition (right and centre) parties and the left party; as only the social democrats and not the left bloc as a whole were held accountable for the protested decision, the left party could still identify itself as being supportive of the protest.

Employing the discourse of party politics, politicians could be said to gain from positioning themselves against the decision and in favour of the occupation. In this sense, the party-political rhetoric of the opposition (and the left) coincided with the rhetoric of the discourse of centre and periphery; it sided with the rural population, or the ‘people’, in their struggle for healthcare equality and against the (social democratic and supposedly
‘anti-rural’, or even ‘anti-popular’) political establishment. Hence, at times, both discourses highlighted ‘the people’ as a nodal point, as the social democrats argued that it was because they were elected by the ‘people’ that they could not shy away from their economic responsibility. This situation undoubtedly spurred a sense of jouissance among opposition politicians. For them, the occupation’s disapproval of the Social Democratic Party’s decision gave them a chance to criticize their political opponents. Suddenly, they also felt the support of people who would otherwise have been prone to vote for the social democrats; at least, this was a theme in the retrospective interviews. It was enjoyable for the opposition politicians to depict the social democrats as a political establishment that was increasingly distanced from the very people they claimed to represent. The enjoyment increased through the historical association between the social democrats, the labour movement and the struggle for the right to engage in radical forms of protest such as strikes (Olsson & Ekdahl, 2002).

When the discourse of party politics was employed by the critics of the occupation (primarily, though not only, the social democrats) the decision was described as necessary and responsible, given the difficult financial situation. Within this interpretation of the discourse of party politics, the politicians who supported the occupation were quickly understood as ‘only’ performing party politics and affinity with the occupation was described as being solely strategical. The discourse of party politics also struggled hard to undermine the attractive protester identity offered by the competing discourse of centre and periphery by emphasizing specific signs in the discourse, such as budgets, economic responsibility and financial deficits. As long as the protesters were understood to be righteous, it was difficult for politicians who supported the decision to be recognized as responsible. Instead, and in line with previous findings (e.g. Dee, 2016; Manjikian, 2013; van der Hor, 2010), the critics made an effort to position the protest outside the established culture of consensus. This was accomplished through morally charged descriptions of the occupation and the occupiers (cf. Lawson et al., 2010). Repeatedly describing the method of occupation as a breach of democratic order, its reasons as misunderstandings, its consequences as being bad for the local community, and the protesters as individual ‘dirty-playing’ trouble-makers, clearly allowed the politicians to identify as being responsible, well informed about the political system and highly moral. Thus, within the critics’ employment of the discourse of party politics, the occupiers were detached from the collectivizing and otherwise positively charged notions of the ‘rural population’ or the ‘people’. All in all, this implied a delegitimization of the protesters that meant a transfer of responsibility for the situation from the politicians to the occupiers.

6.3. Processes of desiring

The objects of desire identified in the politicians’ narratives were all related to their local worlds (Benson & Fischer, 2007). They wanted to be recognized for siding with the rural population against a perceived unjust rural policy. They also wanted to be recognized for representing the values of their political parties. Further, they wanted to be recognized by their neighbours and friends, of whom some had taken part in the protest and some not. The politicians thus appeared to be involved in different ‘processes of desiring’, deciding the discourse being employed. The different discourses oriented the politicians
differently. Within the discourse of centre and periphery, the politicians primarily appeared to desire being acknowledged for representing and siding with the people in their claim for healthcare equality. It oriented the politicians towards the local community. Within the discourse of party politics, processes of desiring primarily comprised leverage within the local political game. While this oriented some politicians towards the local community, it made others distance themselves from it.

As Benson and Fischer (2007) note, the objects of desire (e.g. a specific idealized identity) – just like the practices that embody the desiring of such objects (e.g. a specific narration of events) – are associated with notions of shared moral values. Sticking to a discourse must therefore be understood as driven by locally agreed notions of what is regarded as being the right thing to do. It was clear that when employing the discourse of party politics, the politicians appeared to be driven by the desire to have their political party appear as the responsible option. Here, the critics of the occupation struggled, since what they emphasized as being moral (financial responsibility) was defined as immorally managed by the supporters of the occupation, but also, and perhaps more disturbingly, since most of the critics themselves agreed that the given financial situation that was used to justify the protested decision was unfair. For the critics, party political affiliation explained their reluctance to fully identify with the potentially more uniting discourse of centre and periphery.

7. Concluding remarks

This paper’s focus on the connections between politics and rural protests shows how politicians’ positionings reflected the preceding events on a regional level rather than being simple consequences of their party-political positions, personal experiences of conflict, or the design of protests as suggested by previous research (e.g. Gilljam et al., 2012; Uba, 2016). It also shows how the investment in discourse permeated the morally charged descriptions of the occupation and the occupiers (cf. Lawson et al., 2010).

Of the two discourses that structured the themes that were repeated in the interviews, the discourse of centre and periphery was the only discourse whose basic assumptions were agreed on by all the politicians – at least when speaking on a general level. However, as a framework for explaining the specific conflict it failed to sufficiently ‘grip’ all subjects – it did not succeed in bridging the rifts between the politicians’ respective party-political loyalties. This inability to downplay the competing discourse of party politics may serve as an example of a situation in which rural populations are differently positioned and identified in relation to (partially) antagonistic discourses. It adds to the research (e.g. Reed, 2004) that tries to explain the problems encountered by local populations in engaging in united protests against the difficult situation faced by many sparsely populated rural areas. The article’s focus on discourse shows how political responses to rural protest partially operate on the level of identification and unspoken processes of desiring – below the more official public discourse.

Notes

1. The municipal council in Dorotea has 25 members who are appointed every four years. To keep confidentiality in a small community, we only indicate party-political affiliation in
quotes and not the politicians’ names or other detailed information that could reveal their identity. All interviewees are cited in the paper.

2. Accusations of ‘silencing’ people were made by both sides. Representatives of the Dorotea uprising suggested that local politicians had been given a ‘Stasi role’ aimed at silencing the people (Doroteaupproret, 2014). There was a strong reaction to such a parallel being made, again with arguments that the Dorotea uprising was itself a group that demanded total obedience from its participants (Henricson, 2015).

3. The county council required a turnout of at least 50% in order to give the referendum an advisory status. The turnout was 29%.

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