Epilogue: From Growth to Decline to Degrowth? The Future of Northern SPAs

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A New Beginning in the End?

As we write, an ongoing pandemic is raging around the globe. Already, some months into the chaos caused by the virus SARS-CoV-2, there are huge challenges presented for the different systems we have created both economically and politically but also in terms of different healthcare systems around the world. Needless to say, the outbreak might change the rules of the game quicker than we ever thought possible. The quote below is from the Swedish research council FORMAS indicating what will be

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the biggest challenge in our time and underlining the threat of climate change. If the urgency of climate change did not feel real, the shock wave produced by this microscopic virus does (Box 20.1). What impact this disturbance will leave when it is all over is of course not possible for us to envisage in detail, but some indications that we have observed and presented in this book might be further encouraged by it.

Box 20.1 Window of Opportunity or “Here We Go Again”?
Ingemar Elander

Is humanity thrown into a “perfect storm” of coincidence between several huge challenges such as climate change, the corona pandemic, the accelerating extinction of species and the refugee crisis? Is there even a crisis of governance and democracy (Freedom House 2018; Mastropaolo 2012)? In the analysis of path-dependent institutions, policies and practices, the concept of “critical juncture” comes to the fore, that is, when decisions of crucial actors are causally decisive for the selection of one path of institutional development over other possible paths (Capoccia 2016). The challenges/crises are mentioned by many scientists, some world leaders and a broader audience considered as existential threats in need of urgent action, commonly labelled “securitization”. As the causes, effects and adequate reactions are contested, there are no given solutions how to “de-securitize” the perceived threats, neither one by one, no less together (Bigo and McCluskey 2018). In other words, it is ultimately a question of how government and governance in a particular context choose to decide on the road forward—time will tell!

Renowned geographer/historian Jared Diamond, author of Guns, Germs, and Steel (Diamond 1997) and other books, stated in an interview for a Swedish daily that the corona virus has a “limited mortality. The climate crisis can literally kill us all. It is without doubt the worst threat. It is fine that people buy protecting masks against the corona virus, but they should also buy masks against coal power” (Gelin 2020). Although the economic, social and political consequences of the corona virus in terms of loss of profits and jobs seem to overshadow their epidemiological root causes, most world leaders still look for reinventing the wheel by massively fertilising banks, big companies and even households with new money. There seems to be an explicit or implicit confidence among financial and political leaders that it is both possible and necessary to return to something like “The Great Acceleration” (the post–World War II era of intensive resource exploitation)
during which the economy grew exponentially, and most curves of welfare and happiness seemed to indicate progress.

What signs of hope are there in the current “perfect storm” and “critical juncture” of crises? Related to the particular focus of this book, for example, downshifting may sound a provoking concept when, in the wake of the corona pandemic, mass-unemployment knocks on the doors world-wide. Despite this, strategies for making people return to work and make their living do not necessarily have to, and certainly cannot, just imitate the economistic “success story” (environmental damage excluded) of the past. Kallis et al. (2015), for example, state ten theses in favour of “de-growth”, for instance, that growth—as we know it so far—is “senseless”, “uneconomic”, “unjust” and “ecologically unsustainable”. Paradoxically, this might be exactly the critical juncture and window of opportunity needed to inspire and boost alternative strategies of work and living as indicated by buzz-words like “green growth” (especially in the energy and transport sectors), “universal basic income” and “creative adaptation” (cf. Box 8.4 in this volume).

Instead of downshifting I would suggest using “re-shifting” or “co-shifting”, as keywords, indicating more of flexibility needed in such a turbulent time—when dramatic downshifting/shutting down of jobs is accompanied by extreme upshifting for people working in the social and healthcare sectors. At the time of writing we also see an increasing amount of voluntary efforts by individuals and civil society associations helping vulnerable people in the risk of being hit by the corona virus, losing their jobs or lacking any kind of insurance, for example, by giving support to professional health workers, delivering food and other necessities to old and sick people, and creating virtual networks to keep and nurture education and social relations, without physical contact. There is thus an enormous potential of “crisis governance” to release outside the narrow economistic discourse of the Great Acceleration. We all face “the great challenge of balancing emotional messages of fear and hope in order to create a story that opens up space and also provides incentives for action” (Lidskog et al. 2020: 122).

Will our children look back at this period as a unique, temporary backlash of an eternal capitalist growth society when the big nations and economies of the world took a break to recover before re-starting and speeding-up the wheels faster than ever? Or was this the critical juncture when utopia became “nowtopia”—more than a naïve dream—replacing the current popularity of retrotopian ideas without returning to a destructive carbon-dependent “capitalocene” (Moore 2017)?
The next ten years will be crucial if the world is to achieve sustainable development. Entire social systems, sectors and industries need to change. It requires courageous political decisions, new ways of organizing, managing and planning our societies, new business models and changing consumption habits. None of this is easy or arises by itself. (FORMAS 2019: 5, authors’ translation)

For example, new movements in society show that there is a tendency for a new “green wave”, possibly offering new opportunities in some rural areas for in-migration and renewal especially revisiting our friends in the Tavelsjö area (Box 20.2). Ideas of downshifting and re-growing, downsizing and degrowth are challenging rural “decline” as the negative result of general restructuring in sparsely populated areas (SPAs). The ongoing

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**Box 20.2 Post-productivism in Tavelsjö**

Håkan Appelblad, Marco Eimermann and Göran Sundqvist

This box links back to the box on TuRe in the introductory chapter. Many cases in this book exemplified ongoing themes around post-productivism when much fewer people are employed in agriculture and forestry than before. Another example is the “100 beds” project in Tavelsjö, in which locals investigated possibilities to convert existing agricultural barns and buildings into Bed and Breakfasts. Challenges were identified in terms of high costs for short visits, meaning that (former) farmers needed to charge high prices per overnight stay to make this economically viable. At the moment, TuRe is not taking any concrete steps, but it would be valuable to conduct a survey to see how, for example, high costs can be reduced with collective solutions.

At the same time, TuRe communicates with researchers about a project to study autonomous vehicles in rural areas, and there are plans for a new sports hall. The local sports clubs are very active, for instance, maintaining the 7-km cross-country track in Rödåsel or organising outdoor winter and summer sports events. One of the first projects was the 20-km-long hiking track around lake Tavelsjö. Another project is the half marathon-running event that has been arranged since 2012, and notwithstanding the corona outbreak, the lake’s first ever frozen track run was organised in March 2020. As part of the year-round hiking trail *Tio Toppar Tavelsjö*, inaugurated in 2019, locals have created marked trails for those who like to leave the beaten tracks (Fig. 20.1). This trail leads to ten local hilltops, the highest at 282 metres above sea level.

(continued)
In winter when lake Tavelsjö is frozen, a group of locals invest innumerable late evenings and weekends creating and maintaining a 13-km ice-skating track. In 2020, this attracted a group of 13 ice-skating enthusiasts from Belgium and the Netherlands. Their long-weekend visit was organised by an Umeå-based travel agency and the group leader (the chairman of the Belgian ice-skating club LBSG) had good previous contacts with the organisers. The visitors participated with 40 others in an ice-skating race on natural ice, covering 52–104 km in different categories. After the race, they enjoyed a stew in the cosy lakeside restaurant, recently opened by an Englishman and his wife. They had met while working in a restaurant in London and decided to move to Tavelsjö because she grew up there (and Brexit didn’t make things easier for them in London).

Ice skating is not a big sport in Sweden, but this example shows the big potential to develop this sport for an international target group. Two Belgian journalists had joined the ice skaters, and they published about this event in a national newspaper and on a well-known weblog. Gert (chairman) said he would like to see a somewhat larger group of ice skaters from the low countries next year, but not too many. With a smile, he said, “40-50
would be nice, so they can help each other during the race, but I wouldn’t like it to become a Benidorm on ice!”

Besides continuing to work and lobby for apartment construction, an elderly care centre and improved bus connections, new concerns regard school closures of primary schools in Tavelsjö. Overall, one of the biggest concerns is on those new village inhabitants who work in Umeå and don’t seem to engage locally. During a meeting, one of the TuRe representatives exclaimed, “in today’s society, it seems like everyone works and no one has time for spontaneous activities!” We can link this back to this book’s section on “who works?”, and we identify this as a field for future studies, for example, on potential conflicts and synergies between different stakeholders in such places. A field excursion for geography students would be a good start. Perhaps more students will write their thesis about the fascinating developments in northern SPAs!

outbreak might encourage more people to act on their longing for the “better life”. Furthermore, new technologies (some of which have been developed in the north) are making it increasingly possible to provide services to small populations in isolated locations, and this is also changing the conditions for living in rural peripheral areas to the better. In Storumans Kommun, a project encouraging owners of unoccupied houses to rent them out or even sell them proved very successful. Also in Storuman, the development of the “Virtual Health Room” by local medical practitioners and researchers means that people living in isolated villages no longer need to travel hundreds of kilometres for straightforward medical consultations.

As discussed, amidst (and often intertwined with) the signs of departure are signs of new arrivals both short term and long term. The old forestry huts, which were often themselves re-used seasonal lodging for livestock farmers, have been repurposed for tourism and recreation. Farmhouses that may originally only have been seasonally inhabited anyway, remain that way through their use as summer (or winter) second homes for residents from other parts of the north or further afield.

“Permanent” international in-migration to the north has received increasing academic attention, with a focus on “lifestyle migrant
entrepreneurs” from other parts of Europe and refugees who were at least temporarily settled in the north in large numbers following the global refugee crisis in 2014/2015. Interestingly, quite a number of the lifestyle migrants who expected to stay long term move on after a short period of time, and some of the refugees who were expected to stay short term are now intending to settle permanently in the north. Many of the refugees are young adults, and their increasing presence requires a re-think of the perception of the north as a place that young people mostly leave. In fact, young adults are also the largest group of in-migrants to the north, sometimes returning home after university, sometimes coming north for further education and sometimes coming north for work which tends to be more plentiful (for people with particular qualifications) and even better paid (relative to seniority and experience) here than in the south or coastal regions. A number of these young adults choose to live in very small and isolated villages which otherwise have lost population at the expense of the larger centres, particularly the municipal capitals.

In the future some SPAs will be prosperous in attracting such mobile populations either short or long term. This will not however be true for all SPAs, and the development will be highly diverse. We usually assume that this is a slow process which will not be seen on a greater scale for a long time—if ever—but that it locally might generate significant impacts both short and long term. What will happen now in the turmoil caused by the Covid-19 disease we do not know. However, it is reasonable to believe that for some people it will impact their decisions in such a way that they act on their desire to find “the good life”, whatever that might be.

The End (of the North as We Know It?)

Ever since the Siljan symposium in 1960, some researchers have argued that it will not be long before the SPAs are empty from people: the economic possibilities are next to none and the urban norm will make it less and less likely that people move there. Furthermore, in time the dimension that urban people do not need the SPAs has been added. However, sparsely populated areas are still sparse, but not empty of people, and the need for rural people, places and products has not disappeared. On the
contrary, change, transformation and adaptation have been pivotal for development, and this is what we have seen as examples throughout this book. This has been something that we have wanted to share with you since we started to plan for the book some three years ago. A sense of gratitude and duty towards the people and areas we are studying has been guiding all of the work presented, and we hope that the research we are doing will be useful for as many as possible. In short, we hope that you (as a reader) appreciated this book! (Fig. 20.2).

Fig. 20.2  The promise of new things to come. (Painting: Paul Breddels [A Dutch artist living in Sweden], 2019)
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