



Modernizing the Economic Landscapes of the North

Resource Extraction, Town Building and Educational Reform in the Process of Internal Colonization in Swedish Norrbotten

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Abstract

The article deals with two lines of economic and cultural development of the Swedish Norrbotten as a region subjected to a special exploitation and internal colonial power relations in the decades around 1900. It is in the first place the industrial modernization of basic industries and a modern employment market, which spurred the rapid urbanization of a landscape that previously barely created any urban areas. And second the article deals with the enlargement and the boundaries of the state's educational territory during the same time-period. The position of the Sámi population in the new educational system that evolved with society's gradual democratization is discussed within the context of internal colonization. Government policies in different areas such as urban planning, infrastructure, education and schooling based themselves in the beginning of the twentieth century on discussions of the Sámi's 'qualified dissimilarity', a concept which also was meant to 'protect' this group. This was a government-sanctioned differentiation and a cultural segregationist policy to ensure a non-mixing of different societal and economic interests. But even more so, the purpose was to place the Sámi economic activities within cultural parenthesis, isolate the traditional way of life, devalue it and make it immutable and static, severing it from industrial development and the promises and materialization of modernity and progress.

Keywords: colonization, education, mining town, Norrbotten, Sámi, urbanization

Introduction

Two small towns in the north of Sweden are currently preparing a significant relocation of substantial parts of their urban structure. New urban plans are being administered in the town houses and parts of the communities are being dismantled and are disappearing. Whereas one of the towns, Kiruna, turns the relocation into a spectacle with architectural competition and international media coverage from BBC to Al Jazeera, the other town, Gällivare, is doing it in quiet secrecy.¹

Norrbotten, the northernmost region of Sweden, is best known for its vast natural resources and areas and sparsely populated communities. In this regional environment, Kiruna and Gällivare appear as exceptional societies. For over a century they have been the backbone of the iron ore industry of the country and they have simultaneously developed unique features as towns in their own right. The communities were central to the establishment of the industrial ‘mega system’ of Norrbotten during the twentieth century: iron ore fields, railways, hydraulic plants, harbours and urban military defence complexes interconnecting with public services over a vast regional area.² During recent decades the extraction of the iron ore has been causing seismic activities that are destabilizing the towns’ physical structures to such a degree that they are facing land degradation and major relocation needs. The towns must within the coming years move substantial parts to new locations, or just completely abandon constructed areas that are already turning into wastelands.

The process of abandonment and relocation raises historical questions about previous practices of internal colonization and the motives and outcomes of what could be called the ‘extended urbanization’ of the Norrbotten region.³ The development of forestry, hydroelectric power plants and mining has repeatedly underlined issues in regard to the endangered environment and the indigenous Sámi people’s right to land use.⁴ Today’s discussions are no exception. Compromises are sought on how the mining industry should be able to advance without too much damage to the reindeer herding economy. Negotiations between the Swedish government, international mining companies and the Sámi population’s representatives are intense and sensitive.⁵

This article deals with two lines of economic and cultural development, which can be seen as prominent in the development of Norrbotten

as a region subjected to a special exploitation and internal colonial power relations in the decades around 1900. It is in the first place the industrial modernization of basic industries and a modern employment market, which spurred the rapid urbanization of a landscape that previously barely created any urban areas. And second the article deals with the enlargement and the boundaries of the state's educational territory during the same time period. The position of the Sámi population in the new educational system that evolved with society's gradual democratization will be discussed within the context of internal colonization.

These developments have rarely been considered together, even though the processes took place simultaneously. The exploitation of natural resources in the Northern regions – and the gradual displacement of the native population from its own habitats – have often been interpreted as played out in a 'wild' and almost unpopulated landscape. This article argues that industrialization, and the foundation of towns that followed the resource extraction in the Norrbotten inland, made internal colonization into a national modernization project, with a more regulated relationship between indigenous groups and the hegemonic 'Swedish' society.

The Process of Internal Colonization of Norrbotten before Industrialization

The subjection of Norrbotten to internal colonization has a long history. The term 'internal' refers predominantly to the perception of the dissemination of a homogeneous, 'Swedish' culture within an imagined and recognized, nation-state. Historically the process began during the consolidation of the Swedish nation during and after the Reformation in the sixteenth century.⁶ The Swedish government's administrative and economic control of the Sámi areas was not exercised through conquest and subjugation, but mainly by incorporation of Sámi land in national tax regulations and policies. As historian Gunlög Fur has shown in a comparison of the colonial enterprises of the Swedish state in the premodern era, the fact that Sámi land rights were respected by the government in the sixteenth century was not related to any recognition of Sámi rights as a group of people. The state's recognition was individualized and therefore came recurrently in conflict with the

collective, traditional organization of land use, which awarded the Sámi village communities superior control over the access of land.⁷ Four economic activities were taxed permanently: agriculture, hunting, fishing and reindeer herding. Towards the end of the seventeenth century the state sought to promote the colonization of Norrbotten by encouraging settlers to start farming within the Sámi territory. The idea was that farmers would live alongside Sámi, but not compete with the reindeer industry. This economic policy was called the ‘parallel’ theory. But the agricultural techniques of the settlers resulted in an ecological imbalance. In practice the state regulation of the agrarian colonization was not as protective of the Sámi as intended. Land conflicts followed one another and the Sámi had to conduct animal husbandry within areas with agricultural settlements.⁸

Before industrialization, it was the northward agricultural expansion that mainly threatened the Sámi and reindeer husbandry. But the early modern period was also characterized by other major structural changes in the Northern regions. The resource-rich hinterland was connected to a national and international trading system and to this end trading posts and new towns were necessary. Rulers of the early modern era conducted extensive foundations of coastal towns in the North. The region has no urban history dating back from the Middle Ages, but towns and networks of urban settlements developed gradually during the seventeenth century by government decisions, control of local politics and major land investments.⁹ The purpose of the settlement policy was to have the new founded towns in the North as an enforced part of an urban system that ultimately would provide Stockholm – the capital of Sweden and the only city in the country that was allowed to engage in foreign trade – with export products. Already in 1620, Axel Oxenstierna, the general advisor and King Gustavus Adolfus said that ‘[i]n the North, we’ll have within our borders an India, if only we understand to use it.’¹⁰ The town foundation phase in the North was, however, not entirely successful. The towns remained small and insignificant. In some isolated cases demographic and economic trends were so negative that the towns had to be founded twice and get comprehensive investment support from the national government.¹¹

In the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century Sweden was confronted with rapidly declining international influence. The country had lost its eastern half (Finland) to Russia in 1809, and

its premodern era of grandeur was over. Sweden was not expansive like other European nations and additionally marked by domestic political instability. The number of people who lived in the Swedish area of interest had dropped. Since the country was unable to be successful in overseas colonial expansion, the need to develop assets that were within its own national borders and under state control grew. The Swedish government and private companies conducted inventories and collected means in order to extract the resource-rich parts that were available.¹²

The sector that originally brought the state – alongside private interests – to establish its presence in the northern regions was the mining industry. The search for silver and copper also meant that state interests and the culture and economy of the Sámi people from the seventeenth century increasingly came into contact, and conflict, with each other. For parts of the Sámi people the early mining industry created strong negative experiences of collective exploitation and memories that survived undiminished over generations. For example, Sámi workers were conscripted to labour for the silver mine in Nasafjäll since they were the only ones who knew the topography and the winter roads of the lakes, and they could handle shipment with reindeer sledges.¹³

Mining drove the internal colonization of the northern regions, just as mining also did in other parts of the world. After silver mining came extraction of iron ore from the river valleys. The line between nomadism and the new settled existence was not razor sharp, but gradual, transient and mixed. Habitual practices in the historic cultural landscape around the mountain ores gave shape to the iron production as well as to settler communities. Hunting, fishing and animal husbandry served as the constitutive elements of a subsistence economy where agriculture stabilized the local community and existence. This constituted the structure of the everyday livelihood in the mineral-rich regions of the North. Natural and service exchange took place between nomads and settlers.¹⁴

During the nineteenth century the interest in resource extraction increased together with the continued far-reaching settlement movement that spread settlers over Norrbotten's barren areas of cultivation. The lack of land for small landholders was acute in southern Sweden and emigration to America and the New World had to be countermanded.

In an attempt to protect the Sámi reindeer economy from rural settlers establishing croplands and gradually penetrating more deeply into

pastures for reindeer husbandry, the Swedish state mapped out a 'limit of cultivation' in 1867. This cultivation limit replaced the so-called 'Sámi boundary' from 1751, which had had two main purposes: first, to separate industries in the coastal area from those in Lapland, and second to determine the range for which the privilege applied in the construction of new settlements.¹⁵

But during the phase of industrialization and national consolidation in Sweden this would rapidly change. With the establishment of the mining operations in the second half of the nineteenth century, and the decision to build the town of Kiruna shortly before the year 1900, the state broke with its own limit of the cultivation-law of 1867. Now that mining communities were planned above the limit, both the settlers' mixed natural economy and the Sámi reindeer husbandry became increasingly constricted.

Sámi rights had gradually been undermined in several aspects during the last decades of the nineteenth century. The borders between Norway, Finland, Sweden and Russia had been closed for reindeer herding, which meant that Sámi groups were subjected to a restricted position in the policies of the national states. In Sweden, a government proposition from the 1870s concerning the taxation of reindeer herders had emphasized that Sámi could not contribute equally with other citizens since they lacked permanent residence, and they were furthermore considered 'less suitable to participate in the care of the welfare of the country as well as in general municipal affairs'.¹⁶

The Industrialization and Mining Town Foundations in the North around 1900

The modern industrialization of northern Sweden with mining, hydro-electric development and large-scale forestry exploitation activities opened the way for investments by government and private enterprises, scientific expeditions and tourism since the last decades of the nineteenth century. The expectations surrounding the Norrbotten as a 'country of the future' for Swedish national modernization and wealth were remarkably strong in the decades around 1900. It was also a period of economic and political implementation of a continuing colonial system exploiting the natural resources found in the northern part of the country.¹⁷

Activities taking place in the development of resource extraction came together and followed a particular pattern of exploitation: the financially strong businesses broke new land in the remote and pristine wilderness. Next came the smaller players; manufacturing, trade and entrepreneurship that could take advantage of the infrastructure once the large investors had established this. The major players in northern Sweden have always been mining, forestry, hydropower – and in these activities, the state has repeatedly intervened on behalf of the owner or administrator.¹⁸

For residents of the region the investments and the physical changes in the landscape meant a huge upheaval. Certain types of economic activities soon disappeared and new ones were created. Small-scale farming in the vicinity of the ore fields began to be gradually phased out. Farmers started to seek livelihoods in the mining industry. The changes also affected Sámi groups who were not occupied in the traditional reindeer herding. The old bilateral relationships between small farmers and native Sámi people changed and began to partially dissolve.¹⁹

Kiruna and Gällivare emerged as urban communities from different concepts of economic production and social organization. Both towns were created to support resource extraction; they were nodes for national economic development and for the general urbanization process during the twentieth century. But the social lay-out of these landscapes of large-scale resource extraction followed different development patterns. In short, one could say that an originally international, export-driven exploitation logic conflicted with visions of a national model town society and pre-welfare policies around 1900. Kiruna and Gällivare became analogous to ‘frontier towns’ in the late nineteenth century; places that gradually developed into urban expressions of settler colonialism and at the same time constituted tools of nation-building. The towns relied on people who were pushed into these new societies and landscapes: migrant workers, farmers, indigenous Sámi groups, investors, producers and tourists. And they all had to share the physical space to varying degrees.²⁰

The phosphorus rich iron ore of the fields in Norrbotten became exploitable for the world market in the 1880s due to the innovation of the Bessemer process. The rapid growth rate of ore production was largely due to export opportunities and foreign-owned companies originally dominated the production. An English company, Wilkinson &

Jarvis, was the main contractor for the iron ore rail line between Luleå and the ice-free transport harbour of Narvik on the Norwegian coast, and the company also leased the right of mining in the region for fifty years.²¹

The large foreign ownership began to stir national protests and voices were raised for the state ownership of both the iron ore line and ore mining towards the end of the nineteenth century. The iron ore line reached Gällivare in 1888, by then a small village of 276 permanent residents and the surrounding areas otherwise characterized by Sámi reindeer herding. But within a few years an unregulated and informal shantytown emerged as the mining workers themselves built around 650 wooden sheds, huts and dugouts in the vicinity of the mine.²²

The iron ore district of Gällivare was ordered by the state to conduct a development plan in 1895 – the first version was a strict engineer-designed grid plan. The company AGM, an international consortium that also had the Swedish state as a small shareholder, had a lease on the area that would later become the town plan. Permanence in the workers' settlements was not something that interested the company at this time.²³ Mining sites differed notoriously from industrial communities because they were assumed to have a migrant working population, broken down in different teams, which hyperbolically could come together and dissolve depending on market cycles.

But the mining workers in Gällivare wanted to buy land and have full ownership of their homes with secure tenure. The workers also wanted to live under the public health ordinances applied in other town communities in the country. However, the provincial government imposed absolutely no planning requirements on the mining company.²⁴ The antagonism between the workers and the provincial government reflected the recurrent tension between resource-extraction activities by profit-seeking companies on the one hand, and community formation and social rights for the local residents on the other hand. Shortly before 1900 the mining township of Gällivare had developed into a national scandal. The increasingly 'wild' settlement had resulted in overcrowding, unhygienic circumstances, fire incidents and a general lack of social services.

When just a few years later, a town plan was worked out for Kiruna, the situation of Gällivare constituted a deterrent example of community formation process. The growing national interest and gradual

nationalization of the mines after 1900 became important preconditions in planning Kiruna as a model town.

The Kiruna town plan from 1900 was a direct response to the Gällivare ore field urban grid from 1895. A Camillo Sitte-ideal of climate adjusted street routes soon became famous – the building plots laid to block the northern wind and small squares modelled after the *sámi vistén*, small gathering spaces in stark contrast to the vast landscape (see Figure 1). Additionally, an emerging municipal leadership in the town, seamlessly involved with the mining company LKAB, in which the Swedish state from 1907 owned 50% of the shares, promoted education and culture investments as characteristic model features of Kiruna's establishment as an urban municipality.

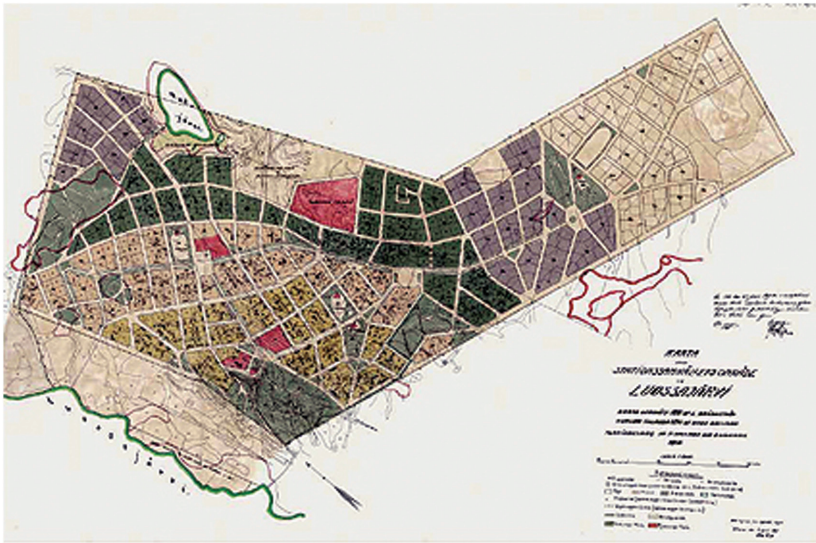


Figure 1: The Camillo Sitte-inspired model town plan of Kiruna, 1900 (The Kiruna Town Archive).

Around 1900, Norrbotten and Lapland were the Swedish Klondyke. The natural resources of forests, water and minerals were offered on a liberal and unregulated market. It was mainly international interests and businesses, which were the first to establish mining operations in northern Sweden, as previously mentioned. But when the state came in and began to partially finance the costly railway construction through the vast region, this investment gave rise to the idea that the national state

should also have full ownership of both infrastructure and resources on the iron ore fields. Iron ore assets were linked more closely to the Swedish national interest, and a protectionist attitude toward mining operations in northern Sweden rapidly became the main line of official policy.

With the state's admission as partner in the dominant mining company in Norrbotten, LKAB in 1907, the provision of housing and services improved also in Gällivare mining districts. Both Kiruna and Gällivare received so to speak a 'society' in return for the extraction of the ore deposits. This would probably not have happened if the capitalist development had not been associated with a national moral project that also addressed orderly conditions in the private sphere, leisure and family, demanded permanence and social services, and that took care of social necessities outside of the immediate resource extraction activities.

On the one hand, the development of new mining communities depended on the urbanization process of the early twentieth century. The town formation process increased with industrialization and the expansion of the rail network across the country. This meant that rural settlements or towns in the countryside with increasing production developed new administrative and political status. More economic activities were planned, which forced new building legislation, health regulations; hospitals and administrative buildings. Large investments were made locally in education, both in schools and in associations and unions linked to employment. The population of the mining towns was composed of migrant workers from across the whole country. Virtually all regions of Sweden and parts of Finland were represented in the population, and they contributed with heterogeneous regional experiences from other industries and crafts, associations and early workers' unions. Fairly soon a strong civil organization in the new towns emerged linked to mining work and the rapid development of municipal services.

On the other hand, Kiruna and Gällivare were planned new towns, the physical development of which had become intimately associated with the local topology, the ore body geology, the ownership structure of resources and not least with the situation in the international iron ore market (see Figure 2). Economic cycles and the development of mining had immediate repercussions on the local urban community. The iron ore, and iron ore market, always had the last word, as well as the first.



Figure 2: Gällivare – the iron ore district depicted in a postcard from the late 1950s (Norrbotten County Archive).

Work and Education in the Industrialized Society

What part did indigenous people and other minorities in the region take in this major transformation of economic geography around 1900? Many native communities began to perform essential preparatory work for the mines. The Finnish speaking Tornedaler did clearance work before the mine in Kiirunavara could get started. Sámi workers also became contracted for transportation to the mines. Overall, a variety of services and manufacturing, of brick, for example, were performed by Sámi and Tornedalers from the villages around the mining communities. Brick manufacturing also became a task performed mainly by women from the indigenous population.²⁵ This gradual involvement of especially Sámi people in the mining industry was looked upon with great concern by prominent representatives of the dominant society.

Some of the early industrial developers in Norrbotten harboured strong romantic ideals about the Sámi's nomadic way of life – notions supported by the biological and anthropological sciences of the time – as a mode of existence that could be 'destroyed' by modern society's competitive logic and division of labor. A 'doctrine' was established according to which the reindeer-herding Sámi would be separated both economically and

culturally from industrial society and from ‘modern Swedish’ society. Industrialists, scientists and educators did not want Sámi people to abandon their nomadic existence ‘for a life that they perhaps would consider more convenient’.²⁶ The words come from the first mine superintendent at LKAB, Hjalmar Lundbohm, who during the 1910s and 1920s was very active in developing a program for the ‘qualified dissimilarity’ of the Sámi, who therefore were seen to need protection in a number of areas.

The segregationist policies of both the government and the companies were played out in two fundamental sectors of society. First, there was a prohibition that the state mining company, LKAB imposed on employing Sámi workers. And secondly, the Sámi education was altered, which turned out to be a decision of profound impact for decades to come.

During the 1910s and 1920s the Swedish state devoted several official inquiries and investigations to the educational reform connected to Sámi land administration and reindeer husbandry. Previously, various independent schools accounted for Sámi tuition and many Sámi groups had allowed their children to be taught by wandering teachers who gave basic education mainly of a religious nature – in mission schools or in regular schools along with resident children. Around 1910, however, the Swedish government explicitly considered Lapland as part of its educational territory. The question of what and how to teach the youngest children, between seven and fourteen years of age, became a political issue. In the official reports on future educational models for the youngest Sámi children, the contact with ‘civilization’ was minimized.²⁷ It meant that a segregated school system was established where children of reindeer herders had to attend special ‘nomad schools’. The nomad school system started in 1913 with the aim of providing more suitable and better schooling for the Sámi community, but with the ambition that they would still go back to herding after completing the compulsory years of primary education.²⁸

A lot of work went into developing separate educational materials for the nomadic school. Hjalmar Lundbohm, LKAB’s first managing director, corresponded intensively with the final author of the ‘Sámi reader’, a special textbook for the nomad school curriculum. The correspondence clearly shows how Lundbohm wanted to avoid taking up certain knowledge fields, above all topics that had to do with engineering and modern economic and political development.

The system of nomadic schools in Norrbotten would remain intact until the 1950s. This type of school was not a comprehensive primary schooling, and could not be compared with the normal elementary school. Nomad schools had their own curriculum, their own teaching materials and a separate school subject – ‘nomadism’ – which was basically a field for object lessons centred around the reindeer and reindeer husbandry. The nomad school had less skilled instructors, and the school year was shorter. During fixed periods the school boarded students in so-called household huts for the three summer months each year as they went to the same school.

On a superficial level the nomadic school curriculum corresponded to methods belonging to progressive and reform pedagogy at the time. It placed the immediate living environment of the child at the centre of learning. But the curriculum lacked integral steps in the purpose of facilitating community membership by offering knowledge of modern society functions. The ‘educational territory’ did not assimilate the Sámi, but consolidated a ‘qualified dissimilarity’ between the Sámi and Swedish. The Sámi language would be preserved as instruction language in the nomad schools and not be replaced by the Swedish language. The Norrbotten County Governor wrote in a statement to the Department of Education in 1918 that the nomad school teachers must ‘themselves have been born in a Lapp cot’.²⁹ Education, occupation and language represented barriers, or safety zones, embedded in the nomad school’s agenda to emphasize the differences between the various cultural spheres. The knowledge that Sámi pupils in nomad schools would acquire had limited ambitions: ‘legible handwriting, basic Bible knowledge, satisfactory spell checking and knowledge of the Swedish language’. As historian Julia Nordblad has summarized the segregating school policy in Norrbotten in the early twentieth century: ‘In the nomad school it was not the unique child that was supposed to be safeguarded, but the unique Sámi.’³⁰

The measures regarding the employment of Sámi people in state-owned large corporations active in Norrbotten, and regarding the official education policy to emphasize the ‘qualified dissimilarity’ of the Sámi population bear evidence that there was a colonial differentiation in Sweden in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries, and that the Sámi population was the subject of a decision dictated by internal colonization policies.

Conclusion

This article has dealt with the internal colonization and the urbanization of the Norrbotten region in Sweden, originally characterized by vast natural resources and a cultural landscape of transhumance reindeer herding. For centuries a tension existed between, on the one hand, the region as *locus* of economic investment in forestry and mining, driven either by private or state enterprises, not seldom in a combination – and the region as *civitas*, on the other hand, a lived society with specific cultural features of the Sámi people, but also including other inhabitants adapting subsistence economic strategies for their livelihood.

The resource extraction industries as well as the supporting state policies defined the Northern regions as an economic landscape where the tradition of Sámi reindeer herding could not have equal claims on the profits of the land. This separation of interests was further strengthened by the fact that the Sámi population often lacked the right to vote before the democratic reform in 1920, because of their low taxable income. The political status of the Sámi people was in fact unclear until revised citizen's rights legislations were established in the 1950s.

In the beginning of the twentieth century, government policies in different areas such as urban planning, infrastructure, education and schooling based themselves on discussions of the Sámi's 'qualified dissimilarity', a concept that also was meant to 'protect' this group. This was a government-sanctioned differentiation and a cultural segregationist policy to ensure a separation of different societal and economic interests.

But even more so, the purpose was to place the Sámi economic activities within cultural parenthesis, isolate the traditional way of life, devalue it and make it immutable and static, severing it from industrial development and the promises and materialization of modernity and progress.

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