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# Making the Uneven Visible: Narratives of Ecomodernism and Environmental Justice in Sweden

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*Re-Post from the Milano School Blog*



The last few decades have seen an exponential rise in the deployment of wind energy worldwide, mostly through the development of large-scale wind farms. Onshore wind is land-intensive: because wind energy is more dispersed than fossil fuel energy, it has significant spatial requirements, and with those requirements come an increasing number of conflicts—from the Americas to Asia, Africa, and Europe (Avila 2018). Two key features of these conflicts are pressures on land and patterns of uneven development, which create problems of space and justice (Avila 2018). Pressures on

land tend to lead to disputes over territorial rights, often involving local communities in indigenous conflicts with the state around the maintenance of livelihoods and cultural identities (Avila 2018). Half of the wind conflicts examined in one study were contested in the context of indigenous and ethnic territories (Avila 2018, 609).

For more than a decade, Swedish company Svevind has been working on a project that is emblematic of onshore wind struggles around land and indigenous peoples—the Markbygden 1101 project (EJAtlas 2016). Located in northern Sweden's Arctic Norrbotten region, this project is billed as Europe's largest wind farm with 1,101 wind turbines, 33 percent of which are already in operation (Svevind 2021). The project would cover 450 km2 of Sami reindeer herding area, threatening the loss of about one-quarter of winter reindeer-grazing land, and include an extensive road infrastructure (Avila 201; EJAtlas 2016). While the Sami are theoretically protected by a law that gives them vast grazing rights across northern Sweden, in practice it is almost impossible for the herders to prove they have been using the land because it is 95 percent owned by two forestry companies (EJAtlas 2016). The Sami point out that they were never properly consulted about

the Markbygden 1101 project and have mobilized through the Saami Council to develop a network for collective action, involving national and international NGOs, filing lawsuits, and inspiring allies to engage in shareholder financial activism (EJAtlas 2016). The project's environmental impacts include deforestation and biodiversity loss, in addition to human rights violations and the potential socio-economic impacts of displacement, loss of livelihood, loss of traditional knowledge and practices, and land dispossession (EJAtlas 2016). The Sami say that the wind farms will limit their movement in the region and endanger their animals; reindeer are integral to their identity and if they lose the reindeer, they lose "language, culture, traditions, and ability to move in nature" (EJAtlas 2016). Despite strong international and UN criticism and pressure to respect Sami human rights and land, the Swedish government has not stepped in (EJAtlas 2016).



To situate the push for the Markbygden 1101 project, it is helpful to contextualize it within ecological modernization, or ecomodernism, which envisions an environmentally sound future where business is reshaped through technology and the application of market mechanisms. Ecomodernism claims it can decouple economic growth from environmental damage with eco-efficiency and green products and services (Wright et al. 2018). "Unlike neoclassical economics in which environmental protection is viewed as a threat to profitability, corporate environmentalism promotes a 'win-

win' vision of businesses augmenting profits by improving environmental performance" (Wright et al. 2018, 461). This may be an appealing and reassuring narrative for those with financial resources who want to be seen as "green," but ecomodernism fails to address the needs of the poor and marginalized—those whose needs go unmentioned in this sunny future.

Wind farms turn out to be fertile ground for ecomodernists and the Svevind project is no exception. Wind is seen as an endless resource and creating massive industrial wind farms is a means to an end (of a low-carbon future) (Avila 2018). As wind energy technology advances, wind is viewed as a clean and efficient solution that can be both profitable and "green." At the same time, the land and material requirements of wind farms are rarely if ever highlighted, much less the (Sami) people whose livelihoods are dependent on a very particular ecosystem. Svevind's website highlights "news," linking to a video from *Monocle* that appears to be a cross between a Norrbotten recruitment video and sponsored content. Between images of snow-covered boreal forests and 1,000-Euro-a-night treehouses, Norrbotten Governor Björn Nilsson pitches the area's growing "green" industry: "It's a new era where sustainability is the

competitive edge and the way forward" (Leigh 2021). After highlighting the area's burgeoning tech and sustainability sectors, Nilsson closes by saying that "when it comes to sustainable growth, my take on [Sweden's] Agenda 2030 is actually that it's not only necessary to save the planet, but it's also good business" (Leigh 2021). In all the beautiful ecomodernist images of Norrbotten there is no mention of how many picturesque trees will need to be cut down to make space for this megaproject or how its indigenous Sami people face losing reindeer- herding livelihoods. These images have been effectively cropped out of the picture—they are not part of the eco-efficient means to a low-carbon future.

While environmental justice (EJ) is implicit in my framing of wind megaprojects, the importance of centering EJ struggles in energy transition narratives cannot be overstated. Highlighting these conflicts, whether in analysis or directly in the EJAtlas, makes visible what is socially and geographically unequal and uneven within the modern industrial economy (Avila 2018). It also underscores what the discourse of ecomodernism obscures: that the negative impacts of energy extraction (as well as other forms of extraction, pollution, toxics, etc.) tend to fall on low-income, people of color, and other marginalized groups, while those with power—be they corporate, state, or otherwise—profit. Fundamentally, employing the EJ narrative points out that these are *political* issues, not just energy issues (Avila 2018).

Unlike struggles against fossil fuel extraction, local and indigenous groups in Sweden make it clear that they do not oppose wind power itself, but instead oppose "the ways wind power is being portrayed, arranged, and deployed" (Avila 2018, 611). The Sami are not being recognized as having a claim to the lands they call home; they have been

procedurally excluded from the project's start. From the point of view of ecomodernism, local groups tend to be seen as impediments to progress (Avila 2018). Whether from the perspective of the state and/or a corporation, "local groups increasingly appear as questioning the viability of such a win-win scenario in terms of its social, political and environmental implications" (Avila 2018, 601). Patrick Lantto, a historian at the Swedish Centre for Sami Research, states that there is "a strong sentiment that reindeer husbandry could prevent development in the north" (EJAtlas 2016).



Given the ascendancy of ecomodernism in Sweden, finding a path forward is challenging. For communities like the Sami fighting against large-scale wind projects, presenting an alternative like a wind cooperative—as communities in Mexico have done—that decentralizes infrastructure and centers community control is an option (EJAtlas 2020). Meanwhile, some might seek or hope for advancements in energy technology that do not put pressure on indigenous communities and lands, but technological optimism is for ecomodernists, not for those studying environmental justice. I

would argue that struggling toward more just options is a form of harm reduction.

For now, the most important point is that environmental justice can serve as a counter-narrative to hegemonic narratives of ecomodernism. Within this sphere, tools like the EJAtlas have enormous potential to expose the forces operating within these conflicts, particularly the *corporate* forces. Centering environmental justice also shifts the focus from economic framings and priorities to community framings and needs. Given that many conflicts take place within (neo)colonial contexts, it must be said that the goal of contestation is ultimately decolonization, or "self-governance for indigenous peoples, the return of stolen lands" (Davis and Todd 2017, 774). At present, however, the focus needs to be on community mobilization with support from transnational groups and allied organizations to lift up the voices of the Sami and ensure the continuation of their unique way of life in the Arctic.

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