

**Rural History**  
**University of Essex**  
**13-16 sept. 2010**

**Session: Oral history and the history of forests, Monday 13 sept. 16.00-18.00, room B**

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## Father's little helper – the construction and contradiction of gender, place, and modernity in Swedish villages for forest workers 1950-75

This paper is based on an ethnological investigation in middle Northern Sweden about forest work and living conditions in small “forester villages”, primarily located along the river Indalsälven.<sup>1</sup> During the period of 1950-1975, workers in Finland were recruited to work in the Swedish forest company of SCA (Svenska Cellulosa Aktiebolaget), due to shortage of workers. After spending a few seasons as guest workers, some of them were offered to buy houses in small residential areas and they were encouraged to bring their families. Some of

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<sup>1</sup> As part of the project “Woodland life - an intersectional perspective on processes of change in middle northern Sweden”, together with Rosemarie Fiebranz. I have used about 15 interviews with inhabitants and former inhabitants in these communities, and material from the archive of SCA and Medelpadsarkivet.

these “forester villages” were dominated by Finnish immigrants, others were populated by forest workers born in Sweden and Finland, but the community I have studied most closely mainly consisted of logging families from Finland, often related to each other as relatives and friends.

I tried to analyze the specific cultural and social processes experienced by inhabitants in these forest communities in terms of intersectionality (Hancock 2007, Yuval-Davies 2005, Lykke 2003, Mc Call 2005), discovering that this concept with its explicit or implicit focus on the “holy trinity” of gender, class and race/ethnicity wasn’t “wide” enough to help me understand the historical situation. Of course, there were stories loaded with meanings of gender, ethnicity and class in the interviews, but there was so much else that seemed significant. In my theoretical framework, it turned out to be the actual making of difference in the material that came into focus, allowing categories a status as (temporary) results, rather than points of departure (Vallström 2010).

In this paper I would like to put further weight of the cultural and social processes themselves, on a rather “down to earth” empirical matter, but structured by three concepts: gender, place and modernity. These concepts are explored by this general question: how is gender, place and modernity constructed and contradicted in these small villages in northern Sweden, approx. 1950-1975?

### ***Instructional places***

Compared to their earlier counterparts in for example Canada, the Swedish modern forest communities in this study were smaller and situated in villages already existing, not rising from the ground “out of nowhere” (Rajala 1989). In earlier and contemporary Swedish industry, there were communities (sometimes called “ideal communities”) built up from the ground in close connection to plants, sawmills, mines or hydroelectric power stations, for example Laver, Norrbyskär, Grötingen or Alby in northern Sweden. Since transport by car became possible in the 1950’s, it was no longer necessary to live close to the workplace and, of course, the need for production located near raw material had gradually lessened. Still, working in the forest was in a way inevitably located to a specific place, and this workplace was continually shifting at the same time. During the period of expanding forest industry, the solution was to build more or less comfortable huts, later on barracks with modern standard, in the forests. Until the 1950’s, it was common and necessary to live up in the woods for longer periods of 2-3 months (Andersson 2005). The local communities were organised in a

heterosexual matrix, men worked in the forest, while his wife worked on their common smallholding, with cattle, during the winter season. This system was criticized as irrational and out of date, in the discursive formulation of Swedish modernity. The modern differentiation and specialization were in the countryside in northern Sweden articulated in efforts to separate the mixed maintenance situation of smallholding and logging (including a wide range of other occasional occupations, like log-driving, road-building, cooking, sewing, coaling, cleaning etc.). Parallell to this, Swedish forest workers left the countryside to work in contemporary urban industry. This resulted, as I mentioned above, in a severe labour shortage for the forest companies. As a strategy to regain the workers, the companies made an effort to “industrialize” the forest worker, making him an all-year round employee, offering him living conditions comparable to workers in the cities (Fiebranz 2004)

Since it was still essential to be fairly close to the actual forests, villages for foresters were built in rural communities with a certain degree of societal service (schools, shops, communications). Yet these housing areas probably appeared as conspicuously modern with facilities not yet available for earlier inhabitants in rural villages, such as bathroom with WC, laundry machine and central heating. The exterior of the houses were standardised and modern as well, in contrast to older houses and farms in the countryside. The modern forest community of Svaningen, Jämtland, was of this character, with facades in aluminium (Nyberg 1992). It was a housing estate, and the migration mobility was considerably high.

The whole idea of building modern residential areas near the forest, but also in contact with rural villages, was an effort to make the forest worker modern, bringing him- and her, as in the case of the female cook – *home* from the woods. It also teared down the conditions for “irrational” small scale cattle breeding. Thus it is possible to see the villages as “instructional spaces”, a term used in research on urban housing, but in my case possible to use in a rural context. Ideas of professionalization, specialization and rationality was “built in”, creating new conditions for living and working, for men and women both, tearing others down (Byerley 2009).

Since “work” became a masculine practise, the place to live (home) became a space for his leisure (Eivergård/ Hansen 1992). On the other hand, women’s work with small scale cattle breeding and farming were cut off. Instead, a professionalization of her role at home began: she was to be a rational housewife. The rural women should be “released” from the heavy farm work, free to be – at home.

## **Experience**

How did the inhabitants form these “instructions”, or as Patricia Pessar and Sara Mahler (2003) has put it, these “social locations”? How were they “lived out” in practise? What unintended consequences occurred? The experience of the seasonal pattern described above was something that forest worker families from Sweden and Finland both had in common . Swedish rural women were used to take care of the farm while her husband and sons were at work for longer periods. They shared this kind of every day- life with guestworkers around the world (Pessar/Mahler 2003) and thus also the women from Finland with their spouses working in Swedish forests. Most of them lived in rural villages, (even if not all of them had smallholdings). This social organization meant quite a heavy workload for rural women in both Finland and Sweden. They shared, I would say, a common value or work ethic: work was a very central part of life. Women in lower strata of society, in the countryside of northern Sweden not the least, didn’t know of anything but work, even though the word “employed” or “wage work” didn’t fit. A woman who grew up in the logging districts of northern Sweden during the 1950’s, writes:

Of all the Grand Swedish ideas that fits northern Swedes particularly bad, the idea of the 1950’s being the heydays of the housewife is one of the worst. Where? I ask myself. In the researcher’s middle Swedish, middle class childhood? Maybe in the working class of the towns, but even there many, not to say most of the working class wives, had some sort of an income from a few hours work here and there (Ryd 2004:166, my translation).

Ella Johansson and Ingar Kaldal have argued that Northern Sweden respectively the logging districts of Norway and middle Sweden (Värmland) had a very specific gender relation, with a strong emphasis on being a “working person”, concerning both sexes (Johansson 1989: 201 f, Kaldal 2000: 89). Johansson’s study concerns an earlier period than mine, but Kaldal also studied the period I have investigated.

## **Aspirations**

Some of the families moving in from the countryside of Finland explicitly preferred moving to a rural area in Sweden, rather than to the towns in Finland. One of the women put it this way: “we knew the forest, having been there since early years (literally: as little boys)” (interview N9). Arriving to Sweden, however, they came to a totally different place, a sudden meeting with the modern, by one of them expressed as “coming to heaven” (interview A, cf. Berglund-Lake 2006). The comfort of the new houses was quite different from their former

homes. This modern living made it possible for women to get an employment; coming home in the evening to look after the older children and having no extra work with cattle (cf Brandth/ Haugen 1998: 428). With the experience of the profound importance of work, in combination with comparably large loans, it seemed like an alternative. But there was a problem: where? Job opportunities in the countryside were few and communications often failed (Fiebranz 2004). Being a female cook was one option, depicted in contemporary writings as bringing light and air into the dark and stuffy hut; a position with hygiene and rationality as modern banners (Andersson 2005, Persson 2001). During the period of forest guest workers, it was possible for women (mostly unmarried) to work as female cooks. As a matter of fact, approximately 5 % of the forest workers in this district were female cooks in the mid 50's, but it was a trade in decline (SCA archive, Bispfors skogsförvaltning, handlingar rörande utländsk arbetskraft). Precisely the construction of forester villages put the female cook-position in the home (unpaid), rather than in the forest as professional earners.

### **Getting modern 1: Forest work**

One strategy for women moving in to the forest worker villages was to take part in the work available: when there was room in the small company bus in the morning, some of the women jumped in and worked in the forest alongside their men. The culturally accepted explanation of this work was “helping”; she helped him doing his work, an explanation which can be interpreted as grounded on a complementary, heteronormative model (Martinsson 2006:210), or, in other words, on their previous experience of working hard in an interdependent relationship.

As a consequence of this explanation of “helping”, she was not on the pay-roll either, which in turn partly could explain why workers from Finland were considered to have enormous working capacity.<sup>2</sup> Sometimes their children were working in the forest as well, under the same name, later on as workers on their own. Since the wages at this time still were based on piecework, the need for help was certainly elastic. Help could be necessary for getting enough earnings to survive, or function just as an addition, an extra resource to get better off.

Wives, mothers, children or grandparents tended to “fill the gap”; getting an extra income or “just helping” in doing what was needed to be done to fulfil the “actual work”: lopping the twigs and branches and peeling the bark, while the man (husband/father) conducted the

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<sup>2</sup> In the Swedish industry, later in the 60's, immigrants from Finland were accused of “destroying” the price of the piece-work, since they were working so hard, so this might not be the sole explanation (Ågren 2006:113).

“actual” work: felling the tree. Generally, hard working women wasn’t always counted for, or didn’t see themselves as working, since the “real” or “actual” (not to mention “waged”) work was described as a matter for men (Kaldal 2000: 90, 96, cf Andersson 2003: 79, see also Brandth/ Haugen 1998: 432, 438; Byerley 2009).

In families with children, it was necessary to arrange child care when both parents were working in the forest. Smaller children were left at home with their siblings or taken care of by a neighbour (interview A, 5, 6). Older children were often taking part in forest work, on weekends and vacations (interview 2). It is interesting and important to note that this habit of bringing the children along could just as well be seen as childcare than child labour. Ella Johansson has noted that boys often stayed with their fathers in the woods, not primarily to work with him, but more watching and playing (Johansson 1989: 205, see also Kaldal 2000:91f, 96). Of course, this practice probably was very relevant for socialisation in gender structures, but it surely happened that boys were with their mother and girls with their father, for example if there were only girls in a family (Kaldal 2000:96)<sup>3</sup>. This can also be a question of what we are looking for as researchers. In the Swedish historian Jonny Hjelms thesis on the introduction of the power saw in Swedish logging, an interesting blindness is exposed concerning this gender issue. Quoting a forest worker’s story about him being at work with his father as a child, Hjelm keeps calling the children “boys”, even though two sisters are mentioned in the quote, as well as two brothers (Hjelm 1991:30).

There were a few women doing the “actual” forest work as well, described in one of the interviews as “she was working like a man. And she used the power saw” (interview BE).<sup>4</sup> When asking what reactions she arouse, the man in the interview said that it was nice, that women in the forest was “kind of a change” (interview 2). Forest working women (both “helping” and “actual”) was in another interview described as *inappropriate*, while it was “too heavy” for women. The elderly woman who uttered these words, were occupied with afforestation herself, on seasonal basis, like most of the female immigrants in the community (interview E2). But she made a difference between working in the forest and afforestation. It was necessary to make a distinction against those women who worked with forest work, to describe them as “inappropriate” maybe as a way to disidentify with her own class position (Skeggs 2006: 119ff). Mastering the female position of a housewife was a way to get modern and a way to (dis)identify class. Working with afforestation wasn’t an obstacle for being

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<sup>3</sup> From a picture in a book on forest work, you can tell that boys were helping (!) their mothers collecting plants from the side of the road, accompanied by a peace-time soldier, in 1945 (Hagner 2005: 204).

<sup>4</sup> This interview is made with a couple, and it was the husband who said “she was working like a man”, while the wife said: “And she used the power saw”.

referred to, or identify as, a housewife, as long as “helping” and “actual” forest workers were defined as something else. Thus it was a significant difference, partly obeying the instruction of a modern housewife, partly transformed in a way that suited their previous experience and current living conditions.

## Getting modern 2: Being “at home”

The Swedish historian Yvonne Hirdman has spoken of the 1950’s as a period when the “household gender contract” was a dominating model for male-female relations on different levels. In Sweden, women’s participation in the “Peoples home”: the Swedish welfare state, was restricted to the private home, she argues (Hirdman 2001: 148 f.). This instruction of being at home was certainly built into the villages for forest workers, as we have seen. But “being at home” or “being a housewife” evolved to a position far from restricted to the villa garden. The concept was widened by including other work conducted by women: afforestation, cleaning logging huts, collecting cones, taking lodgers (bachelor forest workers, guestworkers) including cooking for them, and also picking wild berries for sale. These tasks were not described as “actual” work, but as a natural and inevitable part of *being at home*. One of the women said, about a woman married to a foreman in a nearby forest village: “She was at home, working with the same thing as me, afforestation” (interview 2). There is a small possibility that this “widening” has something to do with nationality or at least language. In Finnish, the word housewife has at least two meanings: *Perheenemäntä* is a rural female position, including care for home and children, but also different kinds of work outside the home. The term *Kotiruova*, on the other hand, was more perceived like an upper class female position. (Lammi 2009: 533). It was then a question of *affording* to be a housewife (by having a male breadwinner, being *provided for*), becoming a “professional” - and hence modern - housewife. The definition of being a housewife in Sweden had a duality as well, in the 40’s, in a discussion on the opening hours of grocery stores, “gainfully employed housewives” is mentioned (Hirdman 2001:157, Engstrand 2010: 138). The word “husmoder” (literally “home mother”) is then used. The women in my case who did the “helping” kind of work in the forest could be described by that definition, but in my interviews there was just the distinction between the women who were *at home* (housewives) and the women that were *in the forest* (working). Thus it was a definition of the (proper) place to be, rather than a definition that was somewhat essential to the person’s identity. One way of acting out the other, discursive meaning of the modern housewife, more in accordance with the instruction, was to join the housewives’ association (husmodersföreningen, literally “home-mothers” association).

### Getting modern 3: moving up?

The activities in the local housewife's league was above all regular meetings in the homes of the members, drinking coffee, singing and listening to lectures in how to cook or use household appliance (for instance, rational cooking, or a course in how to use bananas). The members also discussed social issues at large, all in a vivid mix: "We have discussed garbage tins, cleaning weeks, housewife's exercise (gymnastics) and the question of abortion" (Medelpadsarkiv, Sillre m. o. husmodersförening hem och samhälle, SHHS, B1:1). During the war, they participated in charity work (directed to Finland, actually) and at a local level they worked in many ways for the benefit of children. Every year the group made a travel in the summer time, sometimes to Norway or Finland, staying away for a couple of days. There were opportunities to participate in diverse courses and meetings in Sweden, related to the housewife's league on regional and national level. One of the local banks invited the members to a lunch in the nearest city, Sundsvall (ibid,:A1:7, E1B:16).

All women living in one of the forest communities were invited to the association in 1964, explicitly *as* immigrants, due to the national housewives' association's (Sveriges husmodersföreningars riksförbund, later Husmodersförbundet hem och samhälle) request on inviting "foreigners" into the local groups (SHHS A1:6).<sup>5</sup> Seven women (all of those who were invited) joined the association in 1965. Participating in the local housewife's league meetings, they were sitting for themselves, talking Finnish and singing songs in Finnish after or before the Swedish songs.<sup>6</sup> One of them understood Swedish and translated for the others. By their membership the women from Finland got an opportunity to participate in Swedish society which rarely was the case otherwise, thereby gaining some symbolic capital concerning modernity and femininity, but they participated *as* Finnish women. Whether it was an aspiration, whether it was intended or not, their participation didn't work out in achieving "Swedishness". Speaking with Skeggs, the women from Finland wasn't able to *pass* as Swedish (Skeggs 2006:147).

After a period of eight years the whole group of women from the forest community had quit. The first one to leave was one of the "actual" forest workers, she stayed as a member for two

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<sup>5</sup> There were other "colonial" traits in the relation between Finland-Sweden, especially since the war ("Finland's cause is ours"), with the giant project of bringing child refugees to Sweden and continued in the local housewives' league signing up for welcoming Finnish children in their homes during the summer (SHHS A1:7)

<sup>6</sup> For example, "Our Land, our land" a nationalistic song, were sung in both languages at the first meeting (Ibid A1:6).

years only (SHHS, D2, interviews 1, 2). A few years later one of them, a wife of a forest foreman, signed up again for the housewives' association. She was earlier one of the "interpreters", being the one most fluent in Swedish in the years after 1970 (interview 1, D1). In 1972, the year when all the others quit, she was elected into the board for this last year (which no one else of the immigrant women achieved). In the protocol from one meeting this year, it was noted that she sang the last verses of "Our Land, our Land" in Finnish all by herself, since there was no Swedish translation of them (Ibid A1:7, 21/2 1972, D1). She quit with the others in 1973. But after only one year, a daughter of the "actual lumberjack" mentioned above, joined the league, which might explain the re-entry of the solo-singer. And a year after that, one of the newcomers in the forest community, also joined in, a woman who belonged to a family described by neighbours as striving for a quick and efficient integration in Swedish society (SHHS A1:7, 14/10 1974, 10/2 1975, 6/12 1976, D1). When this woman joined the association, the protocol concluded "our Finnish-born members A, E and I sang a beautiful song". Hence the Finnish immigrant women and their descendants had moved from a position as "foreigners" to "Finnish-born members" during these eleven years (SHHS A1:7, 6/12 1976).

*(missing text: men's strategies for managing the new modern context, sadly it was not enough room/time for them. But I can give a hint: It concerns interpreting, driving, buying horses, mobility, education)*

## **Conclusions**

Arranging villages for forest workers can, on a general level, be seen as a way to gain some control over the forest workers, both regarding work, union activity and gender. It was an expression of a modern order, with strong beliefs in the impact of housing, and with emphasis on professionalization and specialization. Offering the forest worker a modern living standard and an all year round, permanent employment and offering him what was considered to be favourable loans, was of course, from one perspective, an act of social responsibility. From another angle it was also a question of gaining control over the (at the time very fluctuant) work force and reassuring women a position outside wage labour, since her place in this context was at home. These families were situated in a dual position, in a way, they were the most modern, in another they were the most dependent forest workers in the area.

Richard Rajala has argued that the modern forest communities he studied were a way to domesticate the workers (Rajala 1989, Mercier 2001). Maybe the modern forest communities in my case could also be seen as domesticating by being an instructional space. But, as Rajala

shows, there is no inevitable outcome of this, the forest workers in his study developed a stronger resistance and strengthened the union activities in the new communities, since it offered them a place to meet, quite simply. Andrew Byerley has described a similar, and, for my case contemporary, situation in Uganda, where modern housing estates were built and the “Africans” were to be detribalised by certain schemes. However, this “target group” didn’t respond, they thought it was too expensive to live in the modern housing and took no interest in the matter. A majority of the modern houses were populated by collar workers and worker immigrants with their accommodation paid by their employer. Strategies among those Africans who eventually moved in was similar to what I have described here; taking lodgers, working extra, cultivating. These strategies were received in shifting ways by the authorities; sometimes allowing or even encouraging them, sometimes forbidding them. In my case, a wide range of strategies was developed in relation to the given social locations or instructional spaces of modern living. It is possible to see these routes and courses as aspirations, whether it was for independence or mere survival. By merging values of work, specific organisation of gender and a certain inventiveness in the aspiration for a better life in general, the forest worker families manage to cope quite well in the new national and modern environment. In this period, a constant balance act was performed, a process of change that combined continuing hard work in doing all the kinds of work described above, more or less paid, on one hand, and on the other, trying to “get modern” by handling the ideals of professionalization and gender differentiation: he being employed all year round in forest work, instead of on seasonal basis, she being confronted with a restriction – and paradoxically, an extension or professionalization – of being at home, instead of working with farming. In short: the inhabitants in these modern forest communities were responding to modernity in a locally specific way, grounded in previous experience and driven by aspirations (cf Johansson 1994: 165 ff).

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