Islanders, others and other islanders.

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Intro

'Once unusually homogenous, now it has become multicultural'. Such is the core of a widespread discourse about Sweden that provides explanations to much of the development over the last 50 years, whether seen as cause or effect, positive or negative. A simple map is produced, with the Swedes on one hand, and the immigrants on the other, complicated only by a growing number of Swedes of "immigrant origin", and more recently by a growing islamofobia that replaces "blackheads" with muslims as the most threatening other. The locus of this "multicultural Sweden" is "the suburb", a generalized topos, always in the singular, located in the vicinity of the big city centers, a marginalized place somehow "outside of society", where Swedish is barely understood, and where unemployment and criminality is high.

Among ethnologists in Sweden much effort has been made to complicate this map. In my current research project I intend to contribute to this from yet another perspective, that of islands and islanders. In this presentation I will reflect on a specific case, how insiders and outsiders, centers and peripheries are mapped in Gotland, one of the islands in the Baltic Sea that I am currently researching.

Gotland

Gotland is the largest of Sweden's island. Around 57.000 people live here permanently, less than 2% of Sweden's population. Approximately 22.000 live in

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Visby, on the islands west coast. Once one of the most prosperous places in Northern Europe, Gotland has since long been a marginalized part of Sweden. Earlier Gotland was farming area. Today the urban middle-class is rapidly increasing. Statistics tell us that 70% of the islanders are born on the island. About 25 % are from the mainland, most of which are born in Stockholm County. Approximately 5% are born abroad, around 11% have "immigrant background", many of which have lived for long on the island and are well integrated.

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From the islanders perspective the affective presence of the great divider, the sea, have helped to organize the world into a few basic categories, arranged on a scale from insiders to outsiders. The main "we" are the "Gotlanders ", a primordial ethnic category of islanders genealogically rooted in a past rural Gotland. Thus, you are born Gotlander, you cannot become one, which in practice means that around a third of the total number of Gotlanders does not actually live on the island, and that around 30% of the islands population are not considered "true Gotlanders". A number of "others" have been brought together as "mainlanders" An important category of "mainlanders" are the permanent residents not born on the island, most of which are educated urbanites in white collar professions, living in Visby. Also locally important are the "summer-Gotlanders", a fairly large number of mainlanders commuting to their summer-houses around the island. To the largest category belong the around 6-800.000 "tourists" that pay an occasional and often short visit to the island during the hectic summer months.

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More recently, however, this map has changed. In the 1970's, simultaneously with the emergence of a mainland "multicultural Sweden" discourse, Gotland saw the emergence of a new category of 'Gotlanders', permanent residents that are neither islanders nor mainlanders. This, in turn, led to the establishing also of a new category of supposedly authentic islanders, called "gutar", sometimes also "ur-gutar", original

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gotlanders,[1] often represented as a rural elderly male, islander of third or seventh generation, dressed in farmers clothes, speaking the old island vernacular language, 'gutamål', leading a traditional, old-fashioned life, and enjoying the old Gotlandic traditions.

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In effect this constitutes a double change in attitude to island identity. On the one hand "Gotlander" changed from a primordial, essentialistic category to one of voluntary choice, thereby also from closed and exclusive to open and inclusive. Today, just about anybody that has lived long enough on the island can be considered a Gotlander. On the other hand the new "gutar" became a more exclusively primordial and essentialistic category, more authentic, rural, old-fashioned, and backwards than older versions of the original islanders.

What happened and why?

Why did this happen and what can we learn about the organization of diversity from this example? The first thing to be noted from an island perspective is the overwhelming number of islands and islets in the Swedish speaking area, somewhere around 300.000, of which about 600 are permanently inhabited. Even though Sweden is most likely the second only to Canada largest island-nation in the world,[2] it's national narrative and self-image is a hundred percent continental. Islands are firmly anchored in the periphery, as a kind of anomalies.

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[1] The word is derived from the old ethnonym "got"

2 According to a recent survey Sweden proper has 221 800 islands, of which 401 are permanently inhabited (Ansén & Justusson 2001). Källgård 2005:295 relates the method: "In most parts of the country, the data were calculated from digital information on the scale 1:10 000, which means that 'islands' as small as 25m^2 were included. In some areas (typically close to the capital, Stockholm) even better maps were available, so that even smaller chunks of land were counted; on the other hand, in the high mountain regions in the north, the scale used was 1:50 000, so that only somewhat larger islands were included there." If the many islands in the Swedish speaking areas along the west coast of Finland and in the Åland archipelago ("a puzzle of 3000 patches of land over a surface of 15.000km^2 creates the world's highest density of islands (Depraetere & Dahl 2007:71) are counted by the same method, the number is likely to be around 300.000.

A second observation is that "island" is a cultural phenomenon that is produced by inscribing certain types of places in an old and widespread figure of thought that departs them in time and space from their mainlands. To travel to places remote and islanded is to travel backwards in time, which is why islanders often are described as especially "old-time" and authentic. Being since long remote and islanded, Gotland is a place in the past, or of the past, therefore the perfect place for producing mindscapes of the past. In few places heritage has been produced with such intensity as in Gotland over the last decades. If the past is a foreign country, Gotland today is certainly foreign, as they do things differently there.

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A third observation is that in places remote and islanded like Gotland, diversity is organized differently. Although there is a high level of diversity in the island, in terms of expressive forms and styles, and in terms of religious and ethnic groups, there are very few "multicultural" arenas, events or forms. Also, the discourse about a postmodern, globalized "multiculture" has little if any relevance. Since the most relevant boundary on the island is between "islanders" and "mainlanders", it is not unusual to find Gotlanders and immigrants on the same side in relation to the many "mainlanders" and "tourists". So, if Sweden at large is described as multicultural, most of its islands are placed in another Sweden, less modern, less multi-, more homogenous and original, "the way it used to be." What is highlighted on islands such as Gotland is that "multiculturality" in countries like Sweden is not so much an empirical fact as a political project that organizes diversity in a way not diverse enough to contain the existing diversity.

A fourth observation is that the production of multiculturality in some places and the radical heritagisation of other places are two sides of the same coin. While on a global level heritage production is about preserving human diversity, on a local level the construction of homogenized cultural reserves has led to a general reduction of publically displayed cultural diversity, especially in terms of class and ethnicity.

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Heritage is closely tied to 'islanding', the production of bounded places with a distinctive and rich history, which is precisely what heritage is about

So, while mainland Sweden has been cast as multicultural, its islands have been produced as ever more remote, authentic, and archaic. In Gotland, as in so many other islands, the interest in local history and heritage have been generated largely by people “from away”. Their appreciation of the place they have moved to is constituted through a temporal distance, making them somewhat oblivious to the presentist concerns of the locals. Today, islanders often find themselves promoting the image of remotedness as vital to the tourist trade, while at the same time struggling against what this image brings about. Many islanders internalise remoteness as a feeling of inferiority and backwardness, ultimately leading the younger generation to migrate.

With all this in mind let us now return to the new categories and why they emerged. This chart shows that in the late 1940's Gotland had almost 60.000 inhabitants and that within little more than 10 years around 15% of the population had left. Large governmental investments in the 60's made the curves point upwards again. 1996 the population had reached almost 58.000, after which a new decrease began. The old Gotland that saw the population decrease was among Sweden's most rural areas. The new Gotland saw the fast growth of a new urban middle-class. Most of the newcomers from the mainland were educated urban professionals attracted by the islands nature and climate, its rich cultural and historic legacy, and also by ideas of a more authentic culture, a warmer and more embracing community, a slower pace of life. Most of them settled in Visby. A gentrification began, that transformed the somewhat shabby quarters of the medieval town to a habitat of a new aesthetic and intellectual elite, a process completed in 1995 with the declaration of the Hanseatic town of Visby as an Unesco World Heritage site. Locked out of the “old traditional Gotland”, as being newcomers from the mainland and therefore on primordial

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grounds excluded from being ‘Gotlanders’, the newcomers were able to take place by staging new narratives and cultural representations that did not exclude them, but on the contrary, positioned them in the very center. The linking of place to identity, a political choice of self affirmation, made it possible to raise claims of belonging, and of control over the representations of the place.[3] This led to an urbanisation of the cultural representations of the island. If before the “true Gotland” was situated in the countryside, it now moved to town. [4]

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It is among these new permanent residents of “mainland origin” that both the new categories ‘Gotlanders’ and ‘gutar’ seem to have emerged. With the change of representation of true Gotland from rural to urban followed a new understanding of what constitutes a Gotlander, from primordial essence to voluntary choice. And if anybody could become a Gotlander, what then to call the original islanders of third or fifth generation? An answer was the revival of the oldish and highbrowish term “gute”, earlier seldom used. While “Gotlander” thus became an ethnonym that both original and new islanders can use about themselves, “gute” is almost exclusively used by the newcomers about the old islanders. If at all used by the original islanders it is not seldom in a self- ironic, joking mode.

Islands

In few places the association of culture with geography is stronger than on islands. 'Belonging' and the notion of 'islander identity' have been seen as naturally growing out of the island condition, producing a culture "intimately bound up with place"[5] Thus, what we are concerned with here is not simply ‘pieces of land surrounded by water’, but rather “islands of the mind”, a realm of a “geosophy” that maps out a vast

[3] Cresswell p 27-29. Cf p 39 “raw material”

[4] By taking place they were able to claim an identity that gave them right to belonging in cultural/ethnic terms.

[5] Feintuch 2006

meta-archipelago of powerful metaphors, myths and ideas.[6]

The idea of islands as microcosms, bounded and remote, have made them gateways to the past, reserves for the original and natural, archaic and endemic. The idea of a natural boundedness makes islands look like communities, villages, a natural and authentic Gemeinschaft that have been lost in mainland urban centers. To that comes remoteness, a matter of perceived distance to a centre. Thus the remote is always the peripheral. The more remote the less up-to-date and modern. As the world becomes more accessible, the remote becomes more rare, attractive, and expensive.

There is a striking resemblance between 'island' and 'culture'. A case could even be made for 'culture' being modelled upon islands and islanders. The association of an authentic culture with the bounded, remote, archaic and endemic made islands and islanders constitutive to the "mythical geography" of the modern Western world. What I argue here is that islands are constitutive also to the mythical geography of the late or post-modern world, and to the mapping of its centers and peripheries. The power ascribed to islands, their agency if you will, is substantial, formatting the organisation of diversity differently from mainlands.

What this example shows in the end is that notions of we and them are, as always, in constant flux. But on the other hand it also shows that essentialistic, primordial ideas are growing in places like Sweden and its islands. And, as has been the case elsewhere, much of these ideas are fostered by people in transit, and projected on certain others cast as static, bounded.[7] It is in such a context, I believe, that the changes in the categorisations of the "us" and "others" in Gotland is to be understood.

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[6] Gillis 2004

[7] Marked by stasis and boundedness, immobility. The process has been termed altercasting.