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# The discursive nature of environmental conflicts: the case of the Öresund link

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*This paper analyzes the environmental conflict concerning the construction of a permanent link between Malmo, Sweden and the Danish capital, Copenhagen. The conflict is approached as both a discursive and institutional struggle, in which representations of nature and the environment are used not only to legitimize, but also to question institutional policies and development plans. The analysis focuses primarily on three of the counter-discourses that have emerged in conflict with the hegemonic, institutional discourse, and also indicates how spatial representations have become important constituents of the discourses.*

***Key words:*** *Sweden, environment, conflict, discourse, space, representation*

## Introduction: The birth of a (contested) geographical vision[1]

During the last two decades, an increasing number of environmental conflicts, originating in controversies over infrastructure investment, planned development of natural sites and negative consequences of exploitation of natural resources for local communities, have emerged. A common feature of these conflicts is their discursive nature, where representations of nature, the environment and the future are used not only to legitimate, but also to question institutional policies and development plans (Harrison and Burgess 1994). In this article, the environmental conflict over the Öresund Link will be analyzed.

A permanent communication link, such as a bridge or tunnel, between Scania, the southernmost part of Sweden, and Denmark, had been proposed from the late nineteenth century. Schemes of varying practicality have been put forward, the most optimistic of which suggested reclamation of the Sound (see Ek and Hallin 1996). Agreements have been reached a number of times between the Swedish and Danish governments, but the plans were not put into effect until 1991.[2]

The plans for bridging the Sound between Sweden and Denmark have been controversial and a source of many protracted and heated debates. In the early 1960s, a geographical vision and an institutional discourse of an integrated Öresund region gradually evolved. In this vision, a fixed link over the Sound became one of the key prerequisites. By the end of the 1970s, the vision of an Öresund region seemed to have temporarily lost its attraction, only to reappear on the political agenda in the middle of the 1980s. Today, the region is still predominantly a social construct, but an influential elite, consisting of business people, politicians, planners, journalists and academics, is strongly promoting the idea. A discourse of the region has been constructed, expressed through oral presentations, written documents, images and maps.

However, the vision of the Öresund region has not evolved without criticism. In particular, the negative environmental impact of a permanent link over the Öresund has been emphasized, and gradually different counter-discourses have emerged. As with many other European infrastructure projects, the Öresund Link has become a focus of public reaction and direct action, with the planning process more an

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issue of conflict resolution than 'rational planning' (Nijkamp and Blaas 1994). The environmental conflicts over the Öresund Link will be approached in this article as a discursive and institutional struggle, where representations of nature, the environment and the future are used not only to legitimize, but also to question the construction plans. The aim of the article is to analyze different counter-discourses that have emerged in conflict with a hegemonic, institutional discourse, and how spatial representations have become important constituents of the discourses.

## Discourse analysis

Environmental conflicts may be regarded as exceptionally illuminating examples of the fact that the relation between social life and material space can only be theorized indirectly, through social mediation. This social mediation takes place through social practice, itself situated in time and space (Simonsen 1996, 497). As discourse is an important mode of social practice (Fairclough 1995), discourse analysis may be a useful way to explore how space is being socially constructed and, as in the case of the Öresund Link, contested. The relevance of discourse in the analysis of environmental and planning conflicts consequently has gained increasing attention in recent years (see, for example, Whatmore and Boucher 1993; Harrison and Burgess 1994; Hajer 1995; Harvey 1996; Macnaghten and Urry 1998).

The study of discourse is practised in a broad field of disciplines, and consequently several different definitions have been employed (for reviews see, for example, Macdonnell 1986; Mills 1997; van Dijk 1997a 1997b; Howarth 2000). According to Howarth (2000, 6ff.), theories of discourse have undergone three significant transformations: the investigation of 'language use'; discourse extended to a wider set of social practices and phenomena; and finally the expansion of the scope of discourse analysis so as to include non-discursive practices and elements. In this paper, discourse is defined as 'bounded ways of representing the world' (Harvey 1996, 83), with 'the use of language seen as a form of social practice, and discourse analysis is then the analysis of how texts work in socio-cultural practice' (Fairclough 1995, 7); furthermore, discourses must be seen 'as practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak' (Foucault 1972, 49). However, discourses do not occur in isolation, but in dialogue, contrast or opposition to other utterances or discourses. This means that discourses are not socially neutral, but are organized around practices of exclusion and relations of power (Richardson 1996; Mills 1997, 11, 12). They are ordered in discursive orders, where some discourses become hegemonic and thus determine what is to be considered as truth, knowledge and common sense (Foucault 1972; Fairclough 1995; Hajer 1995). However, discursive formations must not be viewed as isolated domains of social life. They are internally related to other aspects of the flow of social and material processes, such as power, social relations, institutions, beliefs and material practices (Harvey 1996, 78ff.). Processes which together are crystallized into material landscapes, such as the Öresund Link and the Öresund region. Consequently, on the one hand, the approach in this paper moves beyond a perspective that focuses solely on texts and linguistic structures; on the other hand, we do not fully assert a position where discourse is viewed as occupying a hegemonic or deterministic place in social processes.

As a way of understanding the order of discourse, Hedrén (1994, 13) introduces the concept of discursive core in order to illustrate how statements or ideas are perceived as more or less natural, more or less correct or self-evident. In the core of the discourse stand utterances and statements that are considered self-evident and unquestionable; in the periphery of the discourse are statements that are considered unessential or unimportant. Furthermore, it is from this peripheral point of departure that a critical and reflexive analysis of the discourse is possible. An advantage with this discursive core–periphery model is that it can be applied to different levels of discourse. In this article we will use the model to clarify both relationships within the different discourses of resistance, as well as the relationship between these discourses and the hegemonic discourse of regional evolution.

Another concept that will be important in the following analysis is the discursive arena. Discursive arenas are defined here as the spaces where texts, utterances or other forms of discursive and social practices are performed. They are spaces where discourses become visible, but also where lines of conflict are manifested. These discursive arenas could be institutions such as planning departments and courts of law, as well as city squares or newspapers. By introducing the concept of discursive

arena, we wish to draw attention to the fact that discursive practices are always situated in space.

## Focus groups

In this article, four different discourses of the Öresund region will be presented. The first is rooted in different institutions and has dominated the public debate over the years. This discourse has been analyzed by several scholars, and most of the conclusions presented here are based on this research (Ek and Hallin 1996; Idvall 1997 2000; Tägil *et al.* 1997; Wieslander 1997; Bengtsson 1998; Dekker Linnros 1999). In opposition to the dominating discourse, several counter-discourses have emerged. These have evolved within and among NGOs opposing the idea of an Öresund Link, and in this article three of the most influential of these NGOs will be analyzed. The research method used is focus groups, and in order to obtain a background picture of the organizations and a broader interpretative context for the analysis of the focus group discussions, other complementary sources of information have been included, such as written texts, photographs and illustrations.

Focus group techniques have gained increasing attention as a method of qualitative data analysis (Burgess *et al.* 1988a 1988b; Byers and Wilcox 1991; Burgess 1996; Goss and Leinbach 1996). In this article, discussions in three focus groups, representing different perspectives of the opposition to the Öresund Link, will be analyzed. The first group consisted of six members of an organization called *The Scanian Environmental Action Group* (SEAG, *Aktion Skåne Miljö*), the second was composed of four members of a local branch of *The Swedish Youth Association for Nature Studies and Environmental Protection* (SYANSEP, in Swedish *Fältbiologerna* or the Field Biologists), and the third consisted of three members of an action group called *Stop the Bridge!* The participants were recruited through contacts with representatives of the organizations, and by 'snowballing'. Each group met once, with one of the co-authors as moderator and the other as participant-observer. The discussions were audiotaped and subsequently transcribed. After the sessions, the group discussions were analyzed: discussing the themes and topics that came up and how different individuals responded to them. Finally, for every focus group a discursive 'map' was drawn, summarizing the most important story-lines (Davies and Harré 1990; Hajer 1995) of the discourse.

## The formation of a hegemonic discourse of the Öresund region

At the end of the 1950s, the formation of a discourse of the Öresund region was initiated by a small number of Danish and Swedish planners, academics and journalists.[3] Gradually, these first tentative steps assumed more institutionalized forms, and in 1964 a specific council was set up with representatives from 15 Swedish and Danish municipalities plus several regional organizations.[4] However, the national governments were not represented, and the public had limited, if any, access to information. It was predominantly experts and politicians that were able to force the issue, while others were excluded from the discursive arenas. Another important part of the formation of the discourse was the formation of concepts, and their combination in different story-lines. Of specific importance was the multi-modal approach that was employed, where different modes of representation such as written texts, maps and other spatial representations became important building blocks of a narrative of the region's development.

The construction of a common narrative was one of the key factors making the discourse, and enabled the vision of an integrated Öresund region to survive over the following four decades. The narrative can be summarized as follows:

> Predominantly in the Western world, some countries and regions are leaving the industrial era and are now entering a new phase of development. However, not all countries or regions will be part of this process, and only the most advanced will take this step into the future. The Öresund region has the prerequisites to be one of these regions. Its history, educated population, industry, and institutions of higher education, together with the region's geographical location, constitute a platform from which to take a leap forward into a post-industrial society. This potential is being restrained by the region's low level of integration, with an inefficient transportation system one of the main barriers. In order to improve the level of integration, investment in infrastructure, such as the bridge between Copenhagen and Malmo, are necessary. Without such investment, the region will be surpassed by more successful and far-sighted competitors. (Ek and Hallin forthcoming)

At the very core of the discourse of the Öresund region stands a paradigm of development emphasizing the evolution of regions (Ek and Hallin forthcoming). From this discursive core, different themes or story-lines have developed. Some of these

have remained unchanged over the years, while others have been excluded, toned down or incorporated in the discourse. In the present paper the narrative structure will not be analyzed in detail, but during the late 1980s three story-lines have been of specific importance: European integration, European regionalization and ecological modernization (Dekker Linnros 1999; cf. Richardson 1997).

The narrative, and the discourse of the Öresund region, have been developed, reformulated and adapted during a period of more than 40 years and, with few exceptions, has dominated public debate. It was, however, not solely a process of concord. On the contrary, it was characterized by conflicts of interest, where three main areas of conflict arose: a conflict between national perspectives and regional interests; antagonism between different interests within the Öresund discourse; and finally, conflicts between proponents of a fixed link and the environmental movement (Ek and Hallin forthcoming). It is this latter conflict that will provide the focus of the article from this point onward.

## Discourses of resistance

Opposition to the Öresund Link principally has emphasized the environmental consequences, not only of the construction process *per se*, but also of the regional development as a whole. Even if the fixed link has become a focal point and unifying symbol for many environmental conservationists, several different counter-discourses have emerged since the end of the 1980s based on different constructs of nature and justifying different positions. In this article three of these discourses will be analyzed: *Fertile Earth*, *Protect Nature* and *'Concrete' Thinking*.[5]

Fertile Earth was constituted with an organizational basis in the SEAG activist group. The members of the focus group had a high average age (67 years), and almost all had actively campaigned against the Öresund Link in the 1970s when the organization was founded. This discourse clearly has its ontological roots in the conservationist movement of the 1960s and 1970s. The narrative that weaves the discourse of Fertile Earth together can be summarized as follows.

The development of modern society has taken a wrong and dangerous direction. Rapid urbanization and extensive infrastructure investment have led to uneven regional development in areas such as Scania, and overexploitation of the fertile Scanian soil. This development constitutes a threat both to regional and global natural resources, and furthermore creates inhuman environments. The Öresund Link is only one of a number of infrastructure projects that open the floodgates to a disastrous development.

In the discourse of Fertile Earth, three different but interrelated story-lines can be identified (see Figure 1). The first emphasizes, as the name indicates, conservation of soil as an important resource for future agriculture.[6] This line of reasoning must be viewed in the light of the environmental discourse of the 1970s, in which scarce, and diminishing, natural resources was one of the main topics, not only on a national or regional level, but also on a global scale. The Öresund Link, and all the infrastructure projects that have been planned in connection with it, are consequently viewed as a threat to feeding a rapidly growing global population.

A second story-line focuses on unequal regional development: increased urbanization is expected to lead to extensive urban agglomerations in predominantly the west of Scania, while other parts of southern Sweden would decline. This development is considered to constitute a threat to the environment and to people's quality of life. Furthermore, uneven regional development is viewed as disturbing the balance of both nature and society, transforming society from 'a state of stability' into 'a state of mobility'. If society is to survive, large-scale projects must be substituted by small-scale, decentralized solutions. A third story-line emphasizes the lack of knowledge: society's negative development is comprehended as a result not only of the public's ignorance, but also of the lack of knowledge on the part of politicians and planners. Scientific facts are available, but they are not reflected upon, nor do they serve as a basis of decisions. Therefore, SEAG's main task is to inform these groups about modern society's cul-de-sac.

In this campaign of enlightenment, the conflict was to be resolved predominantly in the established discursive arenas of policy formation and decision making. Politicians have been petitioned, parliamentary bills tabled, letters written to editorial columns and information distributed to stakeholders. SEAG has striven for acceptance as a legitimate actor in the formal, institutionalized discursive arena, and they have viewed knowledge as their weapon.

If formal and institutionalized language has been the means to gain acceptance as a representative in the decision-making process, the discursive strategy

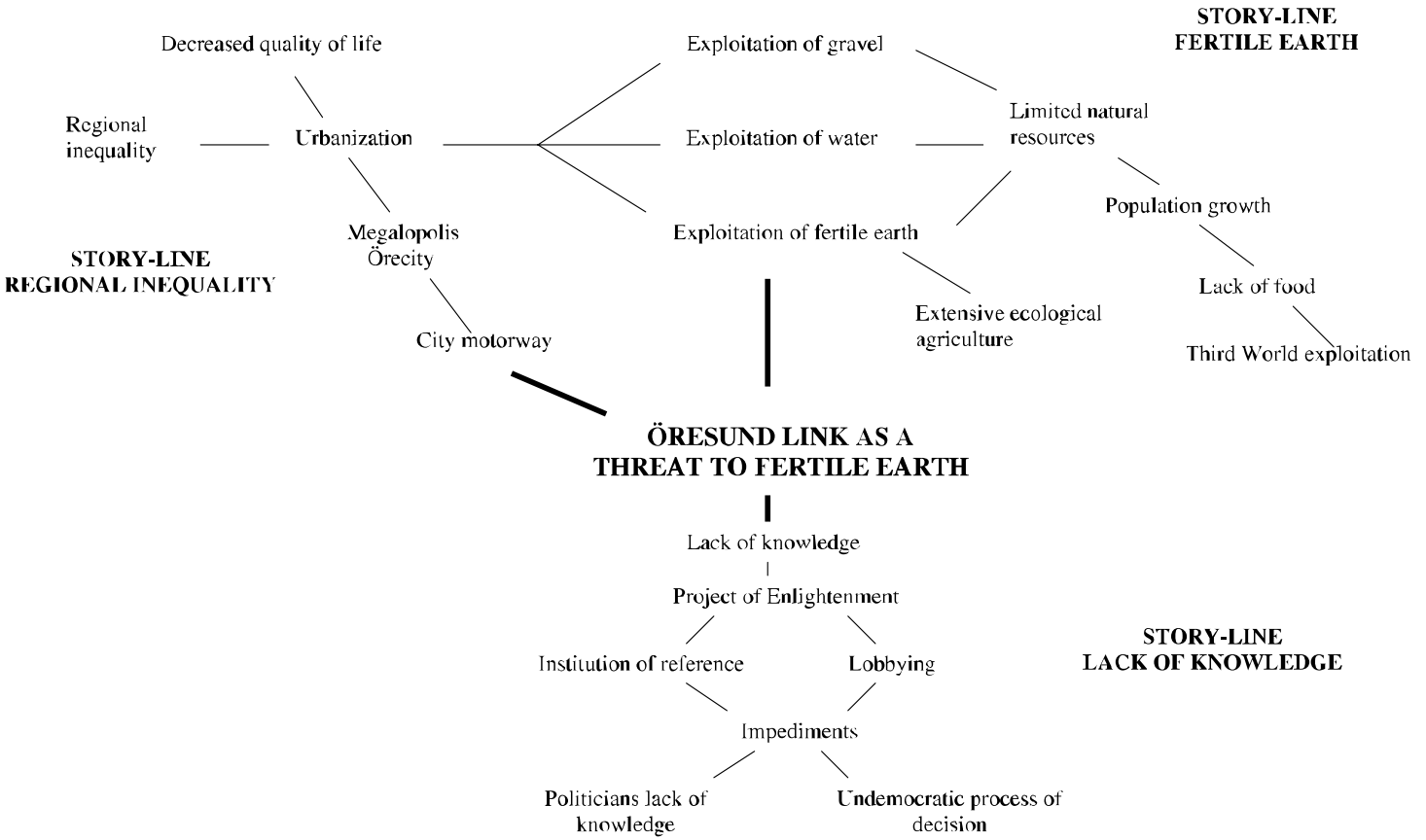


**Figure 1 Discursive 'map' of Fertile Earth. The figure illustrates how story-lines can be represented graphically**

to question the institutionalized representations of space has followed another path. SEAG supports an implicit spatial vision of Scania where small-scale, dispersed patterns of settlement and a 'balanced' relationship with nature are the prerequisites for achieving a 'Good Society'. This geographical vision is not presented in pictures, films or other visual forms of counter-representations. Instead, the institutionalized representation of space has been questioned by demonical caricatures of the expected development. In one picture, the Öresund Link takes the shape of a giant octopus, stretching its tentacles across the fertile Scanian landscape. This discursive strategy of presenting contrasting pictures is aimed at disclosing the 'real' consequences of the regional development, and of deciphering the socio-spatial practices that are claimed to be inherent in the institutionalized plans (see Figure 2).

A second counter-discourse is entitled *Protect Nature*. Protect Nature has its discursive core in a specific view of nature, and its proponents express a very strong emotional commitment to nature. Furthermore, this commitment is anchored in a spatial practice of 'being out in nature', which was vividly expressed by the interviewed members of the regional branch of The Swedish Youth Association for Nature Studies and Environmental Protection (SYANSEP). In contrast to Fertile Earth, there is not a specific narrative about society in this counter-discourse. Its focus is nature, which is expressed through several themes or story-lines that recurred constantly in the discussions among the members of the focus group: commitment to nature, protection of nature and being 'the young and angry'. In this organization, as in SEAG, there is a long history of resistance to the Öresund Link, although in SYANSEP the active members may not have been born when the debate began in the early 1970s.

Commitment to nature is anchored in a spatial practice that characterizes the 'Field Biologists':

> We talk a lot about commitment to nature, it's something you get in the Field Biologists. You are outdoors . . . in windy watchtowers, and sleep rough. You get a relationship, a relationship to nature which strongly reinforces your commitment. (Male member of SYANSEP)

Nature is experienced bodily, where all the senses come into play. By hearing, seeing, smelling and moving in nature, a mix of sensation and emotion is generated. This spatial practice creates an intimacy with nature, a feeling that opposes modern society's tendency to subdue and control the environment. Instead, nature must be preserved, observed and understood in its original and untouched state (cf. Macnaghten and Urry 1998). In accordance with this view of nature, a Field Biologist places honour in understanding nature scientifically. Furthermore, 'being out in nature' is not only a spatial, but also a social practice: it creates a social commitment, a space for self-discovery and a context for learning new skills.

The commitment to nature also underlies the environmental commitment in this group:

> I think generally for most members of the Field Biologists, and for all of us as well, it starts with an interest in nature, and an interest in studying nature, and then one discovers that there are threats and exploitation going on. Then, gradually a commitment to environmental issues arises. (Female member of SYANSEP)

The vision of nature as unspoiled, and the desire to preserve it as such, has triggered other spatial and social practices than those directly linked to nature. In the resistance to the plans for the Öresund Link, public spaces have become discursive arenas where the Field Biologists have tried to influence public opinion — not only by 'traditional' means such as petitions and demonstrations, but also by organizing mock funeral marches, sit-ins and other forms of non-violent action characterized by performance and show. Such publicity stunts also serve to reinforce an image of being the Young and Angry. Members of the Field Biologists are predominantly in their teens or early twenties. They are in a process of identity testing, where the dramaturgic character of their actions challenges dominant meaning systems or symbols of contemporary everyday life. In this way, resistance to the Öresund Link plays an important role in their identity formation (Meluci 1989; Eyerman and Jamison 1991, 48).

The spatial dimension is fundamental to the constitution of the discourse of Protect Nature. A geographical vision of unspoiled nature, protected from human influence, is at the very core of the discourse, and spatial practices play an important role in at least two ways. First, the personal experience of nature through different spatial practices is crucial to the discourse. Second, spatial practices, such as demonstrations in public spaces, are used to express dissatisfaction with official plans that threaten natural sites and species. These spatial practices can also be viewed as constructing 'representational spaces', where space is 'directly lived through its associated

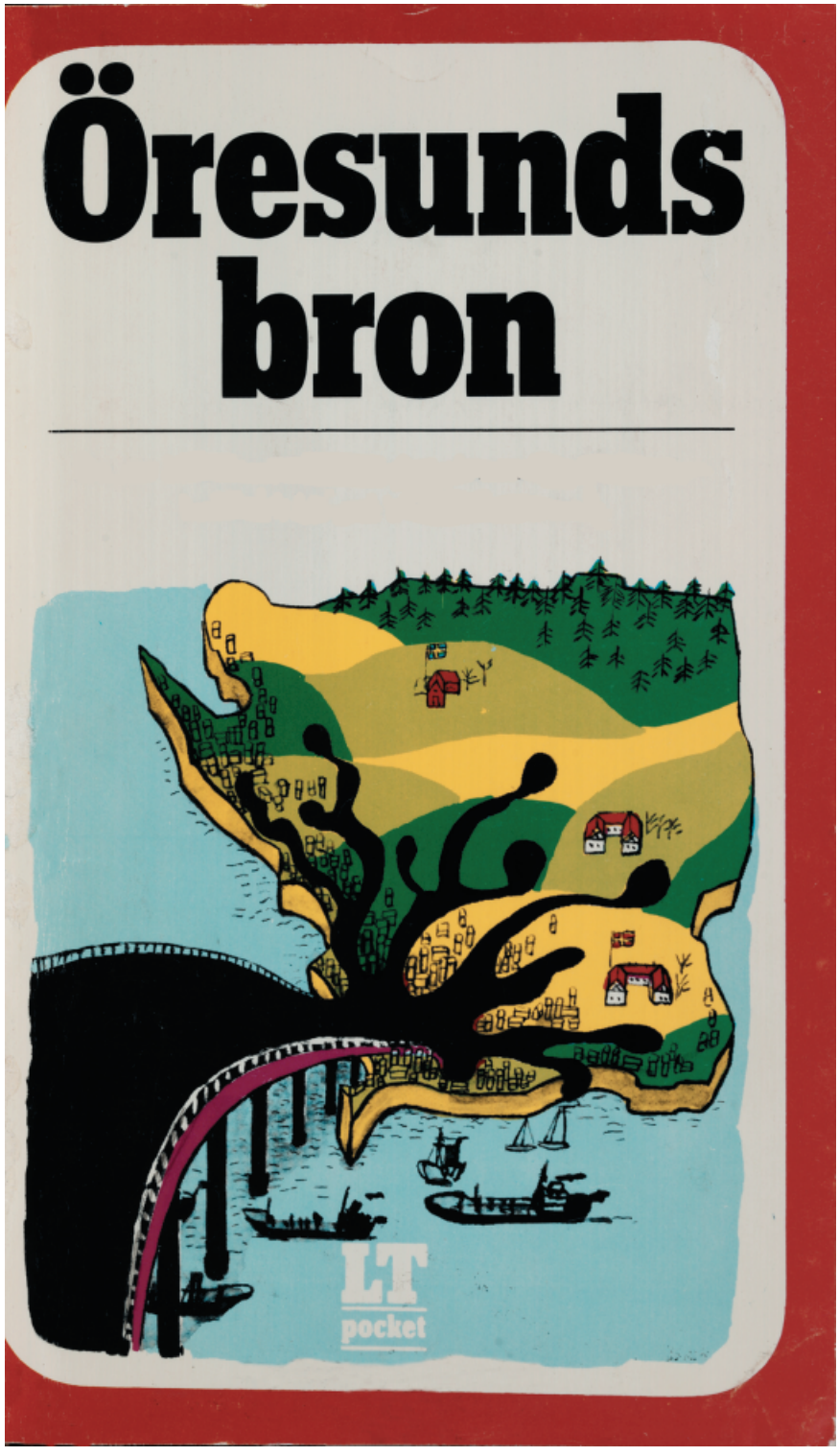


**Figure 2 The Öresund Link as a giant octopus. Source: SEAG (1974)**

images and symbols' (Lefebvre 1991, 39). Indeed, nature and public spaces have been the most important discursive arenas for the Field Biologists.

A third counter-discourse is labelled *'Concrete' Thinking*. This discourse has its foundation in the organization Stop the Bridge!, and in order to achieve a more significant impact on the formal decision process, the organization has tried to co-ordinate the resistance to the Öresund Link. At the end of the 1980s, some activists found it necessary to develop a common denominator for the multitude of organizations opposing the plans for a permanent link between Denmark and Scania.[7] As a result, Stop the Bridge! was founded, and 'Save the Environment — Stop the Bridge' became a unifying slogan. However, despite the ambition to unite different branches of resistance, this organization has very much developed its own counter-discourse.

'Concrete' Thinking has its discursive core in a critique of the Establishment with its modernistic view of society, where large-scale projects and rigid processes of decision making are viewed as restraining necessary change in the course of development. Two distinct story-lines have dominated the discourse of 'Concrete' Thinking: large-scale projects and authoritarian decision making.

The development of late modern Malmo is characterized by large-scale building projects that have been intensely criticized by local public opinion. Furthermore, in order to turn around the negative economic development triggered by an industrial decline in the 1970s and 1980s, politicians and other decision makers have regarded comprehensive infrastructure investment as a necessity. Consequently, the Öresund Link is a logical outcome of this pro-urban and growth-oriented philosophy. Many critical voices have been raised against what has been perceived as bureaucratic and authoritarian planning processes, where ordinary citizens have not had the opportunity to influence the process. The expression 'Concrete' Thinking was used in the focus group to symbolize both large-scale projects and a rigid process of decision making, as well as referring to images of leading local politicians.

> It's partly about disregarding people's opinions, not listening at all . . . not reflecting on what voters and other people think. For me, that's concrete thinking. (Female member of Stop the Bridge!)

Stop the Bridge! has focused primarily on the political process, and has developed a discursive strategy based on questioning the formal process of decision making. Members of Stop the Bridge! consider themselves the true representatives of the people and, unlike other organizations such as the SEAG, have not striven for acceptance as legitimate negotiators. They have contested the hegemonic discourse very consciously and, like the Field Biologists, also symbolically. When 509 VIPs attended the ceremony to cut the first turf at the bridge abutment, Stop the Bridge! appealed to their members to form an even larger counter-demonstration and to bring spades which they used to symbolically fill the holes that had been dug. They characterize their opposition to the bridge as a battle, and the battle fields (discursive arenas) have been the streets, squares and other forms of public spaces.

Based primarily on written texts, an analysis of the discourse of 'Concrete' Thinking shows that a geographical vision of a future Malmo region is not explicitly contained in the discourse. However, focus group participants expressed opinions that indicated a vision of a 'greener' Malmo. Unlike large-scale building projects that are viewed as making an old industrial structure permanent, the development of the city is expected to involve small-scale projects, 'green thinking' and citizen participation. In this process, and in order to produce a critical form of cultural politics (Hajer 1996, 262), Agenda 21 is viewed as a pivotal document, and a lever for breaking previous commitments (Hajer 1996, 262).

## The order of discourse

The hegemonic discourse of the Öresund region has, since its formation in the late 1950s, been in conflict with other positions, where intense debate took place during the early 1970s, at the end of the 1980s and at the beginning of the 1990s. These conflicts were 'fought out' in newspapers, television, radio, public debates, institutions and public spaces. During the first period of conflict, the clash of opinions was triggered predominantly by the growing awareness of diminishing global natural resources, which was accentuated by the oil crisis in 1973. The discourse of Fertile Earth could here serve as an example of an opposing world view. The second and third periods of conflict comprised a broader set of issues, and involved more contrasting discourses and opinions than previously. However, environmental problems were still the dominating issue, being expressed through different discourses and organizations. In Table 1, the different discourses presented in this

**Table 1 Content and characteristics of the different discourses**

| | Regional Evolution | Fertile Earth | Protect Nature | 'Concrete' Thinking |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Discursive core: | Regional evolution | Earth | Nature | Political process |
| Discursive agents: | Policymakers, planners, journalists, business people | Activists as independent experts | Advocates of nature | Voice of the people |
| Discursive arena: | Political institutions, informal networks, media | Political institutions, lobbying, media | Nature, public spaces | Public spaces |
| Discursive strategy: | Exclusion, inclusion | Formal acceptance | Opposition | Opposition technologization |
| Spatial representation: | Modern utopia | Small-scale society | Unspoiled nature | Greening of Malmo |

article are summarized according to their discursive cores, discursive agents, discursive arenas, discursive strategies and spatial representations.

As a result of the employment of a number of exclusionary procedures and internal mechanisms, the discourse of Regional Evolution has maintained its hegemonic position over the years, both in public debate and in institutions of power. However, these exclusionary techniques have not only been employed by the proponents of the institutional discourse, but have also been utilized in the production of counter-discourses. Through different discursive measures, such as exclusion on the basis of scientific criteria or through determination of the conditions under which people are allowed to enter the discourse, the inner constitution of a discourse may be maintained as well as a distance created in relation to other discourses (Foucault 1972).

One of the reasons for the successful maintenance of the discourse of Regional Evolution has been its broader approach, where a comprehensive set of issues has constituted the discourse, which in turn facilitated strong support among political and economic interests as well as different institutions. The discourse has emphasized economic growth and development, wealth and other aspects of traditional modernistic thinking, while the opponents' suggestions have been depicted as leading to the opposite outcome. The discourse has been developed and reproduced in comparatively closed networks, consisting of business people, politicians, planners, researchers, journalists and higher civil servants. Meetings, seminars and conferences have in general been closed to opponents and have further been strictly ritualized where statements about the region's inherent economic potential and the necessity of a fixed link have recurred constantly. Furthermore, the two newspapers with the widest circulation in Scania (*Sydsvenska Dagbladet* and *Arbetet*) have exercised a strong influence on public opinion in favour of a permanent link, especially through their editorials. Moreover, the opponents have not launched a coherent, alternative view of the future, while the proponents have outlined a comprehensive geographical vision in texts, pictures and computer animations.

Even if the opponents did not successfully question the overall picture of a future Öresund region, they succeeded in focusing on its weakest link: its environmental consequences. During the first phase of intensive conflict, land use and the use of natural resources were in focus, and anti-urban views, even at government level, were influential. Much of the conflict was focused in one word — *Örecity* — which, in order to positively symbolize a future highly urbanized region, was coined by journalists and then promoted by regional newspapers. However, the concept did not concord with public opinion, and gradually the opponents took over and successfully gave it a new and negative meaning. 'Örecity' became a symbol for an unrestrained and inhuman version of urban development. Large-scale solutions were criticized, and were often presented in dramatic and apocalyptic terms. Finally, in 1973 the Danish government terminated the agrement with the Swedish government, its decision motivated by a new and restrained economic order.

During the mid-1970s and at the end of the 1980s, the discourse of Regional Evolution was reproduced, not least through a number of public inquiries that attempted to evaluate the economic and social consequences of a fixed link between

Denmark and Scania, and through the influence of the lobbying activities of the European Round Table of Industrialists (ERT) (see Richardson 1997). At the end of the 1980s, the plans assumed a more concrete form, and in 1992 a new agreement was signed between the Swedish and Danish governments. In response, conflict again arose: action groups were formed and political parties expressed their opposing views. At the Swedish national level, the Socialist Party, the Green Party and the Centre Party were strongly against the plans, while the Labour Party and the Conservative Party largely promoted the idea.

As in the 1970s, apocalyptic themes characterized the debate. Critics emphasized environmental aspects as before, focusing on the negative impact of increased vehicle traffic and the critical situation of the Baltic Sea. However, in contrast to the utopian visions of the 1970s, proponents strongly emphasized the necessity of avoiding economic dystopia, and the need to create the conditions for vitalizing the Copenhagen and Scanian regional economies. Furthermore, and crucial to the success of the Öresund Link, environmental issues were now incorporated into the perspective of ecological modernization, where solutions to environmental problems were viewed as determined by economic development (Hajer 1995). The representatives of the discourse of Regional Evolution had incorporated the opponents' key issue and, moreover, they made it a vital part of a late modernistic view of development. This strategy of inclusion was complemented by making environment a disjunction marker, where only science and scientific expertise could analyze and evaluate the environmental consequences of various solutions (Hajer 1995, 269).

This scientific line of reasoning was surprisingly supported by the Centre Party. In order to halt the development plans, the Swedish Minister of the Environment, in the firm conviction that it would be impossible to accomplish, forced through an agreement which demanded a zero-solution: the bridge was not to influence or hinder sea currents through the Öresund. However, based on scientific models, some experts or 'knowledge brokers' (Litfin 1994) claimed it was possible. Environmental problems had now been reduced to a question of sea currents, and thereby excluded from a broader political arena. In this phase, most of the opponents' arguments were disarmed, and ironically representatives of the discourse of Regional Evolution ascribed the opponents for making the infrastructure investments so environmentally friendly. Even the opponents were now symbolically included in the discourse (Figure 3)!

## Conclusions: the threat of 'sustainable development' to environmental opposition

In this article, we have analyzed the environmental conflict surrounding the construction of the Öresund Link between Denmark and Sweden. From this analysis, several conclusions can be drawn. Firstly, this infrastructure project provides another illuminating example of the fact that the production of material space cannot be understood without an analysis of the social practices involved in this process. The construction of a permanent link could thus be interpreted as an ontological transformation, where the invisible geography of social relations is transformed into a material reality (Olsson 1980 1995). It should be noted that this ontological transformation is not a one-way process, since the gradual, visible emergence of the bridge may in turn change people's perception of it. As the construction proceeded, and since the fixed link was inaugurated on 1 July 2000, it would seem as though people have become more positive towards the entire project.

Secondly, the construction of an Öresund region can be seen as an expression of how powerful geographical visions or representations of space may be. In this case, the vision had a history of more than four decades before it could be realized. To understand the success of this geographical vision, it is necessary to analyze how the idea of the Öresund region has evolved in a constantly changing societal context. This leads us to our third conclusion, namely the importance for planners to acknowledge the significance of discourse in the production of space, where specifically, its relations to power, social relations, institutions, and social and material practices must be emphasized. Discourse analysis places micro-politics in a wider socio-political context, which makes it possible to understand local environmental conflicts, such as the one over the Öresund Link, in ways that relate to wider debates.

Fourthly, the environmental conflict concerning the Öresund Link provides an example of how interpretations and representations of nature change over time. What counts as an environmental problem is not something that is such at all times (see, for example, Pepper 1989; Hajer 1995). Environmental issues that in the 1970s were perceived as serious

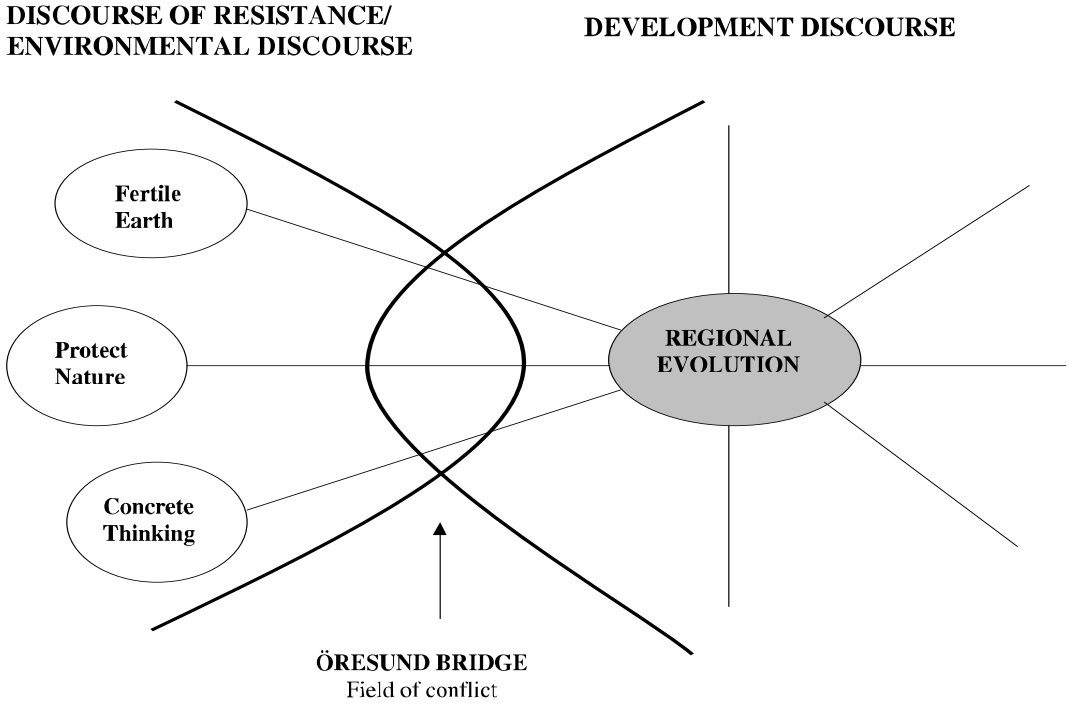


**Figure 3 The order of discourse represented according to the core–periphery model. In the figure, 'regional evolution' constitutes the core of a broad discourse of development, which through the construction of the Öresund Link comes into conflict with environmental counter-discourses, together constituting a broad discourse of resistance**

obstacles to the realization of the Örecity vision, such as the depletion of natural resources and the loss of land for recreation and conservation purposes, have hardly been able to make the agenda of the 1990s debate. Instead, the environmental impact of the project has in the current hegemonic, institutionalized discourse almost exclusively been discussed in terms of sea currents and the so-called zero-solution, an issue that was totally absent in the debates of the 1970s. Such dramatic changes of local environmental discourse cannot be explained by references to changes in the ecological environment, and are only to a limited extent the result of the availability of new knowledge. Instead, explanations must be sought in the way the social and political context of the conflict has changed over the years, and also on how the inner dialectic of the project proceeded. The environmental movement successfully brought up environmental problems in the public debate and they lobbied support in some influential political bodies. The plans for a fixed link were so institutionally anchored, prepared in detailed plans and grounded in social and material practices, that environmental arguments alone had no opportunity to be met with support. An inner logic of the project was formed that made new or old critical views impossible to include if they did not adhere to the project's main logic. The 'zero-solution' was a critical standpoint that easily could be included in the project, and furthermore could successfully be attained by dredging.

Another important change in political context is the way environmental concerns have managed to reach the top of the political agenda through the discourse of sustainable development and ecological modernization. However, the success of the concept of sustainable development does not seem to give any real advantage to environmental activism. On the contrary, it may create a superficial consensus, efficiently concealing the cultural politics of environmental conflicts. How to avoid such discursive inclusion and how to avoid 'the end of critical environmentalism' are some of the major problems environmental movements have to face.

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## Notes

1 This part of Sweden was for much of its history part of Denmark.
2 The bridge was inaugurated on 1 July 2000, with several other comprehensive infrastructure projects such as motorways and metro systems and also new residential and retail areas completed in the following years. The total cost of the bridge is calculated at approximately £2.3 billion.
3 Foucault (1972) outlines four important components of the formation of discourse: (1) formation of objects that consider the contexts where discourses emerge, and how they are delimited and classified; (2) enunciative modalities that enable only certain individuals to speak; (3) formation of concepts and how they are internally related; and finally (4) formation of strategies that include basic theories and themes. However, once a discourse has been formed, it is not stable: statements are reformulated, concepts are redefined and contrasting arguments are neutralized or included in the rhetoric of the discourse. In this article, different aspects of the components mentioned above will be illustrated.
4 In 2000, more than 20 organizations are working on different projects to integrate the Öresund region. They cover a wide variety of areas, such as legislation, business cooperation, transportation solutions and different forms of political cooperation.
5 These are our names of the discourses, chosen on the basis of the most prominent theme in each discourse.
6 In Swedish, the same word *jord* is used for both 'soil' and 'earth'.
7 Over the years, more than 30 organizations joined Stop the Bridge!, including environmental organizations, political parties, women's and youth organizations, and trade unions.

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