ABSTRACT

REREADING FEMINIST HISTORIES IN NORTHERN SWEDEN: INTERNATIONAL WOMEN’S MOVEMENTS PRACTICES AND STATE DISCOURSE ON GENDER EQUALITY

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This paper explores the traffic in ideas, strategies and histories of feminism from the perspective of two groups of ‘activists’ in rural northern Sweden in the late 1990s. While the future of Jämtland county is dependent on acquiring and using substantial funds available for EU approved development ‘projects’, regional identity is largely constructed around an imagined experience of ‘marginality’ or ‘peripherality’ in relation to both Sweden and the EU. EU membership is a contested ‘modernization’ discourse in which ‘progress’ is intimately tied to equality between men and women. Highlighting competing understandings of gender, power and change, this paper compares two different sets of ‘activists’ whose projects are both globally imagined and strategically localized. Women engaged in EU funded jämställdhet (gender equality) projects invoke feminist histories which reflect social democratic ideals about equality and labor in relation to gender within the context of a modern welfare state. Presenting equality between men and women as a global progress narrative and ‘a matter of knowledge’, their stories and understandings of the meaning of feminism naturalize heteronormative ideas about gender complimentarity and difference. Young ‘radical feminists’ situate their politics in relation to other ‘radical’ projects, including veganism, animal rights, and anarchism. Through lived experience of geographic marginality and transnational accounts of feminist history, they situate themselves as part of an imagined global women’s movement. The embodied politics of ‘radical feminists’ offer a counter narrative to the largely neoliberal understandings of place, identity and the future of EU funded developers. Their ideas of change through conflict disrupt mainstream ideas of jämställdhet. The invocations of histories of women’s movement practice and ideology and the embodied practices and strategic ‘feminist’ identities of both groups serve to challenge both ‘masculinist’ local understandings of place and identity and negotiate ideas of gender/power which inform hegemonic Swedish state discourse on jämställdhet.