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Supervisor: Kilian Spandler
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Environmental Activism- a Threatening Outside?

*A Discourse Analysis of a Non-violent Civil Disobedience
Protest in Stockholm, Sweden*

Kandra Wahlgren Eales

Abstract

This study examines the identity construction of environmental activists in discourse following a political protest in Stockholm, Sweden. More specifically it aims to understand how environmental activists have been subjected to securitisation, and what underlying ideology supports this perception. It follows the poststructuralist assumption that language is not objective nor fixed and is instead vital in producing and reproducing political and social reality. Hence, through qualitative research of political statements, newspaper articles, and debates this study finds that environmental activists have been depicted as operating ‘outside’ of formal politics in dominant discourse. The portrayal of environmental activists as a ‘constitutive outside’ has also worked as a prerequisite for them to be subjected to securitisation – viewed as posing fundamental threats to hegemonic ideas of what constitutes legitimate protest. Often this notion is guided by deliberative democracy as the rational way of politics. These findings were emphasised using signifying chains to comprehend how environmental activists are seen as ‘deviant’ in dominant discourse. Along with this, neoliberal ideology seems a vital component in the creation of what constitute legitimate political activity.

Key words: securitisation, discourse analysis, non-violent civil disobedience, post-structuralism, hegemony, deliberative democracy, neoliberalism

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1. Introduction

A characteristic of western environmental movements in the 21st century is its increasing association with non-violent civil disobedience as a result of the lack of government action in reducing greenhouse gas emissions and hindering climate change. Although the diversity of movements, such as Extinction Rebellion and A22 Network etc., do not necessarily share political demands, their presence has fallen under similar forms of activism. In attempts to influence the national and international agenda, manifestations such as roadblocks, general disruptions, and targeted actions toward cooperation's and institutions describe some of the settings of environmental protest.

Following this development, the response to environmental activism has been conflicted and to a great extent characterised by strong opposition in media, academia, and politics. Consequently, activists have been positioned within a security framework, portrayed as posing “fundamental threats to Western Civilization” itself (see Carlin, 2013, p. 1063). This development is also prominent within a Swedish context following the establishment of environmental groups such as Fridays for Future, Extinction Rebellion Sweden, and Restore Wetlands. The perception of environmental protest and the representation of environmental activists is ambiguous. On the one hand, civil disobedience is considered a legitimate form of political protest operating within democratic principles. As Amnesty Sweden, Greenpeace, and Civil Rights Defenders puts it, “everyone with the slightest knowledge of the suffragette movement, Mahatma Gandhi, Rosa Parks and Nelson Mandela understands the importance of civil disobedience, and how this method has been central to democratic development throughout history” (Amnesty Sweden *et al.*, 2022). The competing discourse on the other hand attempts at discrediting acts of civil disobedience and environmental activists by contrasting their identity to legitimate political activity and at times view protests as a fundamental ‘threat’ to the formal. This discourse, portraying environmental activists as ‘outside’ of the political, is the focal point of analysis in this research. More specifically, this study aims at analysing the narrative of the ‘threatening activist’ that followed a political protest carried out in 2022 by the Swedish non-violent civil disobedience group Restore Wetlands.

1.1 Purpose of study

This paper attempts to learn how current processes of securitisation of environmental activists is shaped and reproduced in dominant discourse. Due to the inherent nature of identities as unfixed the message of social movements is likewise. For this reason, it is necessary to view political protest through the lens of discourse. Consequently, the object of analysis throughout this text pertains to the formation of identity rather than an analysis of 'objective' reality itself. Discursive processes that shape political identity have substantial effects on the legitimacy of political movements, and the message of environmentalism at large. Though this study does not cover any 'real-life' implication of discourse, it highlights the importance of uncovering initial processes that influences whether activism resonates with audiences, and hence if it is successful in bringing about policy reform. Furthermore, potential future research can study the ways discourse provides the basis for policies and laws directed at environmental activists and the consequences of these reforms. This follows the poststructuralist assumption that policies are inherently founded upon ideas of identity.

There is a certain lack of research studying the discursive processes which shapes environmental movements as 'threatening' to security. Hence this study is relevant within the field of political science as it contributes to the understanding of how political and social reality is produced discursively. More specifically, the study contributes to the poststructuralist strand of this field and sees securitisation as part of the 'othering' of political entities. Thus, this study aims to answer the research questions stated below using the methodological approach of discourse analysis. Furthermore, the dominant discourse will be discussed in reference to relevant theories and concepts; the main ones being securitisation theory and hegemony.

How is environmental activism (Restore Wetlands) securitised?

What underlying ideology legitimises this representation of environmental activists?

2. Background

2.1 Restore Wetlands

Restore Wetlands, established in early 2022, has through different means attempted to affect politicians to restore Swedish wetlands. While the group is primarily founded on the ideas of civil disobedience as an effective way of influencing politics, they have not exclusively resorted to these methods. In three separate letters written to the Swedish government, Restore Wetlands expresses the urgency of restoring wetlands. According to the group, dried out wetlands cause 25% of Sweden's carbon emissions, thus their restoration would have large impacts on Sweden's carbon footprint (Återställ Våtmarker, n.d.a). The following was expressed in all three letters without a response from the Swedish government:

“Due to the emergency situation, we need action quickly. Therefore, we give you until March 26 to invite us to a public dialogue about how you intend to reduce emissions this year. If you do not respond or immediately take action to reduce emissions, you betray our country, the people of Sweden, and life on Earth. It is the ultimate crime for a Prime Minister to not do everything to stop global warming and protect their population. We will then be forced to act with peaceful civil disobedience.” (Återställ Våtmarker, n.d.a)

Consequently, a number of actions have been conducted by the group to emphasise the passivity of politicians in reforming policies to fight climate change. Out of these protests, the blockade on the E4 highway was debatably the most controversial one, eliciting reactions from both politicians, media, and the public. It was furthermore in the midst of the ongoing election in Sweden, making the protest even more significant in affecting opinion.

It is important to note that a cornerstone of Restore Wetlands strategic approach is resorting to non-violent measures to convey their political message. This is partly because non-violent protest is significantly more effective in achieving change compared to violent means – something Restore Wetlands informs about themselves (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2008; Återställ Våtmarker, n.d.a). It is also because non-violence is a vital component of civil disobedience as a moral form of political protest. This definition entails the absence of direct violence, even in cases of defence, as well as a general respect for institutions by accepting (and often even seeking out) punishment (Delmas, 2016).

2.2 The blockade on the E4 highway

On the 29th of August 12 activists from the environmental group Restore Wetlands blocked the Swedish highway “E4” in Stockholm partly by gluing themselves to the road. The action led to traffic jams in which an ambulance was delayed in reaching the hospital, however no one was harmed due to the protest. Much of the debate that followed the event centre on the interruption of emergency services, and after being questioned by the press, Restore Wetlands answered to the critique as followed:

"The police are informed from the moment a blockade is established. We ourselves inform the police of our location and that emergency vehicles are allowed through. This information also goes to the emergency services and hospitals. The last thing we want is for ambulances to get stuck in blockades, and we do everything we can to ensure that this does not happen. Drivers also have a responsibility to make way for emergency vehicles, as they do in Stockholm's usual traffic jams all weekdays." (Restore Wetlands, n.d. as cited in Expressen, 2022a).

As a result of the event, all activists were convicted of sabotage as well as disobedience towards law enforcement. This led Amnesty Sweden, Greenpeace, and Civil Rights Defenders to react strongly. In a debate article, written jointly, they stress that activists were subjected to unjust and unproportionate laws, stating that “to not understand these manifestations in the light of freedom of demonstration will lead to wrong, potentially dangerous and antidemocratic development where constitutional rights are at stake” (Amnesty Sweden *et al.*, 2022). The crime sabotage is a serious allegation previously used in instances of substantial hazardous activity to society, such as detonations and explosives (SFS 1962:700). Environmental activists in Sweden have never been prosecuted for the crime before, thus the application of the law is a historically significant undertaking within a Swedish context.

2.3 Previous research

Substantial scholarly attention has been devoted to the study of securitisation and the ways it can be utilised for political ends. However, little research has been conducted specifically on the securitisation of environmental activists. One of the scholars who bring certain attention to this issue is Vanderheiden. Vanderheiden (2005) studies the extensive use of security language

to describe acts of civil defiance of environmental activists in *Eco-terrorism or Justified Resistance? Radical Environmentalism and the "War on Terror"*. Through his in dept analysis of the term "terrorism" and the ways it has been historically used, Vanderheiden asks whether it is accurate to classify "ecotage" i.e., the destruction of inanimate objects, as terrorism. The study adopts a moralistic and legalistic approach, addressing the issue of securitisation of environmental activism to some extent. However, Vanderheiden does not study environmentalism through the lens of discourse and is rather analysed in terms of policy change.

Building on this, a social constructivist approach to language and identity goes beyond the mere political act of changing categorisations; it also looks at the surrounding ideas that legitimises this change and the ways they shape identity. Plenty of research can be found on the study of identity construction of political protests and activist movements. Hannigan (2016) discusses media's role in producing and socially constituting environmentalism and environmental activists. This constructed representation often portrays environmental activists as irrational actors who operate outside the status quo and how "protesters are implicitly blamed for the disruption of normal commerce, the rationale for their actions is compressed into short sound bites and the background to the conflict is downplayed" (*ibid*, p. 90). Thus, media plays a significant role in setting the agenda for environmental issues and consequently influences how they are addressed in political decision-making processes. Hannigan highlights a general tendence in media discourse but does not associate it to a specific event or delve into the underlying ideologies that motivate this representation. Thus, a discourse analysis carries more weight in revealing what power dynamics are at play and how language is built on pre-existing ideas of the social.

Within a Swedish context, Charlotte Fridolfsson studies the social construction of political identify in her paper *Politics, Protest and the Threatening Outside: A discourse Analysis of Events at an EU Summit*". Here Fridolfsson contextualises a political protest at an EU summit in the city Gothenburg, and how the following discourse forms the perception of the event by positioning protesters as the "constitutive outside" (Fridolfsson, 2011, p. 88). Fridolfsson concludes that through this binary composition between the formal and informal, the message of political subjects is silenced, and the hegemonic order is in turn reinforced rather than challenged.

The three vastly different studies mentioned above address the role of language in identity formation and the way threat images are used in this fabricated representation. Similarly, to Fridolfsson (2011) this study attempts at analysing the identity construction of political subjects with environmental activists as the object of study. While recent environmental protests have caused large debates; little scientific research has been conducted to contextualise the surrounding discourse which describe them. As previously mentioned, the way identities are shaped have substantial effects on the way their political message, and vehicles for change is perceived. Thus, further research can build on this study to comprehend the effectiveness of civil disobedience or to understand how the dominant discourse affects current policies and the general democratic development in a Swedish context.

3. Theory and concepts

3.1 Civil disobedience

While the focus of this study does not entail an analysis of the actual act of civil disobedience, it is nonetheless important to discuss the term as it inevitably affects the way activism resonates with people. Hence, civil disobedience can be seen as moral or immoral depending on the social context in which it takes place, along with ideological perceptions of what constitutes legitimate protest.

One of the more prominent classical scholars discussing the field of civil disobedience is John Rawls, defining the phenomena as “conscientious, public, politically motivated, nonviolent breach of law undertaken in order to persuade the majority to change a law or policy in a nearly just, legitimate society.” (Delmas, 2016, p. 681). This definition has since been under scrutiny by other scholars in the field (see Delmas, 2016., for an elaborate account of this discussion). For example, Rawls subscribes to the idea that for protests to be morally conducted they must also act within the deliberative framework of politics i.e., the ‘public reasoning’ of “how we ought to argue in the public sphere” (Delmas, 2016, p. 684). The characteristic of civil disobedience in the 20th and 21st centuries very loosely subscribe to this definition, with protests such as “ecotage, animal rescue, digital disobedience, leaks, and government whistleblowing” (*ibid*, p. 684). Despite the extensive development of the term, the deliberative model is still set as the hegemonic understanding of what constitute legitimate protest, thus “the costs of noncompliance remain high in liberal democracies” (*ibid*, p. 688). This will be discussed

further in reference to Chantal Mouffe's and Ernesto Laclau's comprehension of contemporary hegemony in the segment that follows.

3.2 Hegemony

The concept of hegemony is important as it acknowledges power dynamics in society and how ideas and ideologies are upheld and internalised by populations. Drawing from Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau, the concept of hegemony expresses the consensual or unchallenged agreement in society and is discursively constituted in the cultural, social, and economic (Martin, 2006). The concept originates from the Gramscian idea of hegemony as class dominance that arises not merely through coercion but also in the fusion of “economic, political, intellectual and moral objectives” (*ibid*, p. 25). Laclau and Mouffe expands the idea of hegemony to the field of democratic theory in describing how the discourse of liberal democracy effectively combats dissent on the basis of moral values and the “consensus at the centre” (*ibid*, p. 60).

Contemporary liberal democracies are thus built on a general agreement of the success of deliberative processes as the rational way of politics. However, Mouffe argues that this consensus ignores the antagonistic nature of the political and thus neglects the possibility for disagreement as elements of a thriving democracy (Martin, 2013, p. 161). Hence, it is during conflict or antagonism that the current hegemony becomes apparent as the totalised agreement is challenged. It is also in this process that identities are shaped and given meaning through their ‘otherness’ to the hegemonic order. Since identities are inherently relational, the ‘self’ requires an outside to identify against and equally the outside requires a self to exist in exteriority. Thus, any political opposition to hegemonic formations fills this void of meaning (Martin, 2013, p. 120). Furthermore, subjects do not exist external to discourse, rather the identity of people in society is its product, implying that identities are equally as unstable as discourses themselves and can take different forms depending on the position of analysis. Thus, there is always a notion of power that controls what discourse, and consequently what identity construction solidifies (Bergström & Ekström, 2018, p. 256). This power can partly emanate from policy reform as policies and identities are inherently intertwined, affecting and shaping each other. Thus, as Hansen (2006) explains in *Security as Practice: Discourse analysis and the Bosnian war*, identities are also formulated in their relationship to policy. This is specifically interesting in relation to securitisation theory as the construction of an ‘outside

threat' carries strong incentives for both policy reform and identity formation. This will be discussed further in segment 3.4 *Securitisation*.

The event in Stockholm reveals the constant struggle to fixate the meaning of the political, and the challenge to hegemonic understandings of legitimate protest. In this study, 'dominant discourse' refers to the attempts to rationalise the event that occurred on the E4 highway. Thus, the concept of hegemony helps to understand how environmental activism is contrasted to formal politics since discourses are only given meaning through their constitutive outside i.e., what they're not. This distinction can act in a polarising way so that environmentalism is not only seen as different from, but also a fundamental threat to formal politics and current hegemony. Here, the idea of hegemony is used to comprehend how the notion of threat images are partly justified based on "social truths". In other words, hegemony guides how we view the social, and consequently what is seen as legitimate protest and what is seen as illegitimate protest.

3.3 Neoliberalism

The contemporary dominant mode of thought is the political and economic theory of neoliberalism. Thus, much of the states' objectives is creating frameworks to uphold "private property rights, free markets, and free trade" (Harvey, 2007, p. 2). The global reach and wide dominance of neoliberal ideas are partly due to it resting on fundamental concepts of "human dignity and individual freedom" (*ibid*, p. 5). These are concepts that are easy to find ideal, supporting the Fukuyaman idea that we've reached a natural conclusion, and highest possible state of development in neoliberalism (Fukuyama, 1992). While Fukuyama's thesis, and the exceptionalism of neoliberalism has since been under extensive criticism both within and outside of academia, the dominance of neoliberalism still prevails - upheld by global institutions such as the IMF, World Bank and political leaders worldwide.

Environmental activism often challenges the fundamental principles of neoliberalism, the belief in endless growth, and the commodification of natural resources (see Martinez-Alier, 2012). The conflicting nature of economic growth and environmental sustainability thus puts environment activists in a position of exteriority to neoliberal ideology. While environmentalism is not inherently against neoliberalism, activists are usually framed as opposing hegemonic ideas of political rule (and often do so as well). The 'threat' to the

hegemony of neoliberalism is another way in which securitisation of environmentalism operates, and the E4 blockade will thus be discussed in reference to ideology.

3.4 Securitisation

Security is a contested concept and has in recent history been broadened and deepened to include issues that traditional International Relations have failed to acknowledge. Amongst these is the poststructuralist stance which is often argued to be the “most extreme alternative to the traditional literature” (Smith, 2005, p. 49), as it rejects the epistemological ground of conventional theory and understands language as equally ontologically significant in shaping opinions than any material reality (Hansen, 2006, p. 16). Within this field of thought, emphasis is placed on the “role of identity, discourse, and narrative” (*ibid*, p. 49) in understanding events and conflicts. Viewing security as a discursive practice looks beyond any ‘neutral’ ground of materiality and instead highlights the relational nature of identities and the ways they are constructed through domains of “inside/outside, self/other, and domestic/foreign” (*ibid*, p. 50).

Thus ‘security’ is a highly political concept as its meaning can be altered depending on ideological and cultural circumstances. A prominent theory which describes the subjectivity of security is *Securitisation Theory* developed by Ole Waever and the Copenhagen School. Securitisation is built on the constructivist assumption that subjects are formed and produced in language and can take binary forms of us/them. This is done by labelling an issue a security threat to a specific referent object i.e., what is existentially threatened, and is often initiated and carried out by a ‘[political leader, bureaucracy, government, lobbyist or a pressure group]’ (Buzan & Hansen, 2009, p. 214). In doing so they also gain control over it through invoking a state of exception or placing an issue beyond the normal political realm - justifying extraordinary measures to confront it. Thus “those who administer this order can easily use it for specific, self-serving purposes” as a securitised issue is no longer addressed within the constitutionalised framework (Waever, 1995, p. 51).

In this article, securitisation is seen as a discourse that contextualises processes of identity constructions of environmental activists, rather than an immediate act carried out by any specific institutional power. Generally, securitisation theory is applied to describe the process of states or international organs publicly announcing something a national or international threat (Buzan & Hansen, 2009). Here instead, securitisation is viewed as a more subtle and discrete process in the fabricated representation of environmentalists and consequently its role

in the production of a culture of fear. Because the traditional use of securitisation assumes there already exists an 'other' to be securitised this 'other' is the precondition for any securitisation to take place. Thus, the process of shaping the identity of environmental activists to fit into ideas of exteriority is essential for them to become subjected to securitisation in the first place. Therefore, the securitisation discourse studied in relation to the E4 blockade contextualises the identity construction of environmental activists as operating outside of the democratic process. Understanding securitisation in this way means that activists are not subjected to securitisation in a traditional sense, rather it is seen as a part of their 'othering' in discourse.

The concept of securitisation is not only important as it shapes the identity of the those subjected to it; it also means that discourses of security gain hegemony in relation to other discourses such as the one produced by activists in bringing attention to climate change. The process of securitisation can thus be paradoxical as the inability of politicians to act for the climate ends up reinforcing their agency as security actors rather than challenging their capabilities. This is because 'security' calls for a certain urgency and places the responsibility in the hands of authority (Ericson, 2018, p. 97) Thus, the political significance of securitisation in reinforcing power relation makes itself clear in situations of discursive dispute. Hansen (2006, p. 16) makes a similar claim as security is seen as a "particularly radical form of identity construction with a distinct political force that invests political leaders with power as well as responsibility". Thus, through security policies identities are constructed, but it is also the identity formation in the first place that can lead to policy change.

3.5 Terrorism

One of the more effective ways of securitising an issue is by using the term 'terrorism' to label those deemed a threat to security. Securitisation theory and the political substance of 'terrorist labels' in justifying and legitimising abuse of constitutionalised laws was evident following the 'war on terror'. Hence the definition of terrorism is as contested as the concept of security and carries strong political contest. Conventionally, the term is understood as "the systematic use of coercive intimidation against civilians for political goals" (Norris *et al.*, 2004, p. 6) However, the term has come to be sensationalised and used for foreign ideological means through simplistic portrayals of issues. Following the "war on terror" counterterrorist strategies became a central part of foreign policy, primarily in the U.S. Thus, to depict someone as a 'terrorist' is regarded as the "ultimate condemnation of their political strategy" (Claridge, 2007, p. 49).

Hence the study of terrorism has evolved from a traditional security framework of the realist emphasis on the importance of materiality, to include the role of identity and language in forming terrorist threats (McDonald, 2016) This has also meant asking essential questions such as “who defines terrorists” and consequently “whose ends are served by those definitions” (*ibid*, pp. 114-115). This is important since the term ‘terrorist’ has come to be used to undermine the democratic legitimacy of political movements and thus exposes the power dynamics in the political act of labelling activists and their actions. Often this is expressed as a “rhetorical commitment to the defence of democracy and liberal values” (*ibid*, p. 117) thus actively undermining dissent on the basis of the status quo and hegemonic values.

In 2005 Sweden established the National Centre for Terrorist Threat Assessment (NCT) which evaluates the national threat from terrorism every year on a scale from 1 (low) to 5 (high). Since 2010 the threat level has been assessed at a level 3 (with the exemption of reaching level 4 between 2015-2016). According to NCT a level 3 designation indicates an increased risk of terrorist activity against the nation (Krisinformation, 2023). It is interesting that the NCT has maintained this level of risk for thirteen years, operating under the assumption that the nation state is constantly under threat. Therefore, the use of the term terrorism has become more normalised, yet still as sensationalised as before as nations have operated under a state of crisis with the perception of an outside threat. It’s normalisation in discourse has meant that it has been applied to an ever-increasing identity of agents who oppose the hegemonic order, while still retaining its weight as a term used to describe fundamental enemies of the state. This narrative of terrorist threats is not only defined and spread by governments; they are also reinforced in popular culture through newspaper articles and other media outlets (see for example Aftonbladet, 2023; Svenska Dagbladet, 2023). Thus, governments and media play a significant role in producing a ‘culture of fear’, and consequently lay the foundation for terms to be used in discourse to describe political acts.

4. Method

The following section describes the methodological approach for collecting and analysing data relevant to the study. It follows a qualitative methodological approach as the study is interested in gaining in-depth insights into the complexity of language and the ways expressions are used to produce and reproduce social and political reality. Furthermore, the research process is guided by theory and thus makes certain predictions about the dominant discourse studied (Bryman, 2016, p. 49). The section ends with a paragraph discussing the epistemological challenges and moral complications of research.

4.1 Discourse analysis

Empirical material always needs to be interpreted to be understood. This is a complex process as people interpret texts differently depending on their own subjective positions in society. Therefore, there are different strategies to help interpret texts. Within the discursive oriented strategy of interpretation, discourses are mapped out by interpreting a multitude of material (Bergström & Boréus, 2018, p. 33). Discourse analysis is a broad methodological approach which looks at the ways language is used to construct social reality to either reinforce or undermine power relations and dominant ideologies or hegemonic ideas. Thus, it is built on the poststructuralist assumption that language is neither fixed nor objective but dependent on the surrounding context (Bryman, 2016, pp. 474-476).

To conduct a discourse analysis, it is foremost necessary to define what is meant by the concept of 'discourse'. A multitude of scholars have contributed to this theoretical and methodological field, amongst them being Michel Foucault, Norman Fairclough, Judith Butler amongst others. In this study, 'discourse' is discussed in reference to Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau who define the term as "the structured totality resulting from the articulatory practice" (Laclau & Mouffe 1985, p. 105) Thus, the term 'discourse' refers to a totality of meaning or a primary mode of thought which is constructed in speech, writing, and images. Discourses support certain social configurations by giving meaning to specific articulations and trivialising the meaning of others. For this reason, discourses are not seen as reflecting social reality but instead plays a crucial role in producing it (Martin, 2013). The discourse studied in this text refers to the narrative portraying environmental activists as subjects operating outside of politically legitimate processes. This discourse also places environmental activists in relation to concepts of security and is thus also analysed in reference to securitisation theory. The analysis is mainly

based on textual material but is complimented with visual analysis where relevant. Throughout the text this discourse will be referred to as the ‘dominant discourse’ as it is upheld by hegemonic assumptions of political reality. This is because political elites, who are often in positions of power in decision-making processes, engage in the narrative studied.

4.1.1 Chain of equivalence and chain of difference

To analyse the ways identities are constructed and given meaning, Laclau and Mouffe developed the theoretical framework *chains of equivalence* and *chains of difference* (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, pp. 127-129). This approach is used to achieve a transparent and consistent study of discourse, to dissect its different components and their meaning in specific configurations. By deciding a nodal point, i.e., the identity which a discourse attempts to fixate, and connecting it to theories and concepts, it is possible to comprehend its meaning in specific contexts. The nodal point in this text is “environmental activist”. Thus, through its attachment, or differentiation, to other concepts and ideas the nodal point is made equivalent to, or distinct from them, constituting a chain of equivalence or a chain of difference. It is only through this contextualisation that the nodal point is given a specific meaning (Bergström & Ekström, 2018, p. 262). Protests, such as the one studied here, point toward the inherent antagonistic nature of the social, and the unfixed perception of political activity. Within this ambiguity, universal terms, or floating signifiers, give discourses a positive or negative connotation. The floating signifiers here will to a large degree centre on the use of security rhetoric's and the application of threat images to political identities. For example, both ‘terrorism’ and ‘security’ are floating signifiers as their meaning is contested and can be used strategically for political ends. ‘Threats’ are equally ambiguous, and can be viewed in terms of military threats, environmental degradation, economic stability etc. Hence the set definition in a specific context both affects political priorities and shapes the identify of those perceived as ‘threatening’.

4.2 Descriptive ideological analysis

This study is furthermore interested in the underlying ideological beliefs that generates identity formations. Ideology refers to the ideas and foundational belief systems that guide people's worldviews and actions. Hence, in difference to a discourse analysis which studies reality as a product of language, descriptive ideological analysis refers to the underlying beliefs that guide this discourse in the first place. Chains of equivalences and chains of differences are still useful

methodological tools as associations to concepts and theories can reveal ideological motives behind articulations. Hence, the nodal point, environmental activist, is studied against the background of broader ideological reference points, such as fundamental values specific to certain ideologies. However, this approach is complimented with a descriptive ideological analysis as it is of value to reveal contradictions or unclarity in texts to disclose ideological undertones. Similar to discourse analysis, descriptive ideological analysis requires interpretation, and it is thus important to acknowledge that research can never be fully neutral or unbiased. Interpretation of ideological beliefs involves exposing explicit and subtle political messages in texts to comprehend and reveal the specific worldviews of a certain discourse (Bergström & Svärd, 2018, p. 141).

The analysis adheres to a deductive approach as potential ideological reference points are based largely on previous, and contemporary debates about environmental movements. Often the narrative of the ‘threatening’ activist is found in conservative and neoliberal debates both within academia and politics (see for example *Modern environmentalism: a longer-term threat to western civilization* by Alan Carlin, 2013). This idea is often based on the fact that, as neoliberalism is viewed as the contemporary dominant economic and political model, activism naturally poses some form threat to its stability. It is for these reasons that neoliberalism will constitute the focal point of ideological analysis, while still staying open to other potential ideological convictions in describing the dominant discourse which sees environmental activists as a ‘threat’.

4.3 Material

Having set the purpose of study, and framework of analysis, material is gathered accordingly. Thus, the chosen method of data collection is a purposive sampling, meaning that empirical material is acquired based on its relevance to the subject (Bryman, 2016, p. 350). This study is therefore limited in time and scope as material is:

1. gathered within a strict time period as it is narrowed to one of Restore Wetlands political acts (the E4 blockade).
2. only concerned with the dominant discourse surrounding the event i.e., the narrative portraying environmental activists as operating outside of legitimate processes. Thus, in this text “environmental activist” refers to participants of the E4 blockade.

3. gathered from sources with a larger public influence. This point will be discussed more elaborately below.

Despite the fact that the dominant discourse is produced by a variety of actors both within civil society and the public sphere, the research will emphasise people with a larger audience as their statements has a more significant impact on public perceptions. That is not to say that individuals in civil society are insignificant; in contrary they are often fundamental for discourses to manifest and solidify into social truths. However, the actors Buzan & Hansen refer to i.e., '[political leaders, bureaucracies, governments, lobbyists or a pressure groups]' are invariably the individuals who define security as they are the ultimate securitising actors (Buzan & Hansen, 2009, p. 214). For these reasons, empirical searches included the names of party leaders of all Swedish parties in government as their influence largely affects public opinion and specifically the idea of what constitute 'security'. On the same note, established newspapers are also seen as playing a vital role in effecting the identity of activists and establishing the concept of security. This is mainly due to their large public reach and recognition as a legitimate source for credible information. Expressen and TV4 are examples of sources used in this research that subscribe to this reasoning. Thus, in order to reach a broad variety of material the main search engine used was google. Furthermore, the search was set within a strict time frame, from the event-date (29th of August) and three months ahead as Restore Wetlands is still an active group and frequently conduct new protests. The material collected originates from a diversity of sources such as newspapers, social media, interviews, and debates. Ultimately, Twitter was one of the more prominent sources for data collection as it is frequently used as a platform for politicians to comment on public happenings. In order to collect relevant material, key search words were used, such as, *terrorism, democracy, security, environmentalism, threat, safety, Restore Wetlands, environmental activist, civil disobedience, protest* etc. This follows a deductive approach in which empirical data is guided by theory, in this instance securitisation theory and hegemony (Bryman, 2016, p. 49). Around 30 separate texts were retrieved using this method of data collection. The material was then sorted according to the actors assumed public influence, as well as the texts relatability to the research questions posed. After this process, approximately 15 texts were used in this research to exemplify the dominant discourse surrounding identity construction of environmental activists.

4.4 Positioning and epistemological challenges

This study is limited as there will always exist resisting and conflicting discourses to the one studied here, following the Foucauldian understanding that “where there is power, there is resistance...” (Foucault, 2002, p. 105). This resistance is partly activists themselves as they play a part in their own representation in legitimising their agency as political subjects. There are also institutions, organisations and individuals etc., that support the resisting discourse that supports the environmental movement based on non-violent civil disobedience. For example, Amnesty International recently launched a campaign under the name *Protect the Protest*, emphasising the need for global support in protecting those who actively challenge governments and consequently face resistance because of it (Amnesty International, n.d). Individuals from Restore Wetlands have also been nominated by Aktuell Hållbarhet as part of the list of most influential individuals in Sweden for sustainability in 2023 (Aktuell Hållbarhet, 2023). Furthermore, a poll made by Kantar SIFO showed that 75% of the Swedish population agree that restoring wetlands is an important initiative in achieving sustainability goals – something Restore Wetlands acknowledges on their website (Återställ Våtmarker, n.d.b). Hence the movement has, parallel to the dominant discourse portraying them as a threat, also succeeded in bringing attention to the issues of restoring wetlands.

Thus, this paper does not claim ‘objective’ truth, rather the contrary as it is built on the mode of thought which actively resists the idea of coming to any such conclusion. While this study is limited to one event and cannot be generalised to describe other acts by Restore Wetlands or similar non-violent civil disobedience groups, it gives an insight into the security discourse that operates within a Swedish context. Hence, further research can build on this study to comprehend the hegemonic extent of discourse and the power dynamics enabling it.

There are furthermore certain challenges to the epistemological nature of this research as it is built on poststructuralist assumption of the importance of identity and discourse in constituting social reality. For example, since hypotheses cannot be ‘tested’ against an extra-discursive materiality the causality between theory and practice is impossible to ‘prove’ in any positivist sense (Bryman, 2016, pp. 32-35). Since this research aims at mapping the foundational beliefs that ground discourse and discusses the connection between identity and social reality, it is important to acknowledge that any causality cannot be ‘proven’ but is instead built on the idea that identity, discourse, ideology, and policy are fundamentally linked and intertwined. Moreover, this also poses a few ethical considerations to take into account when conducting research based on qualitative methodology. As empirical material is collected and interpreted

by the researcher it cannot escape subjectivity (*ibid*, p. 352). There is thus an ethical caveat in the inability to interpret statements fully in line with the authors intentions. For this reason, this study stresses that it is the dominant discourse surrounding environmental activists that is the focal point of the research, while empirical material is used to exemplify this narrative. Ideally one would also reach out to those subjected to the study (that being the peoples statements used) to ensure transparency and creditability (*ibid*, p. 354). However, due to the limitations of the research, this is not feasible. Another point to draw attention to is that all translations from Swedish to English are made by myself. Thus, some of the implicit meaning is inevitably lost in translation.

5. Analysis

The following section seeks to analyse empirical data related to the dominant discourse placing environmental activists who participated in the demonstration on the 29th of August 2022, ‘outside’ of formal politics. The following segment is divided into two sections. The first section seeks to comprehend the positioning of activists as operating external to hegemonic ideas of what constitutes ‘authentic’ and legitimate political activity. The second section delves deeper by unveiling the ways activists are not only seen as distinct from conventional means, but also as posing fundamental threats to these. One could say that every individual text represents identity in a distinct way and therefore produces separate discourses, but since political debates are “held together by a concern with a set of shared issues” (Hansen, 2006, p. 34), the segments studied here are intertwined through the shared concern that environmental activists are structured as an exteriority and consequently also as a ‘threat’.

5.1 Constitutive outside

As aforementioned securitisation requires an ‘other’ to be subjected to security and equally it requires an ‘inside’ or ‘self’ to express who is threatened. The construction of a ‘constitutive outside’ is not only a condition for the ‘self’ to identify against in relation to security, is also a requirement for an ‘us’ to exist in the first place (Martin, 2013, p. 120). One of the ways this can occur is through chains of equivalences or chains of differences that fills subjects with meaning (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, p. 127). Any form of activism naturally operates on a

political arena and is thus subjected to various interpretations and given meaning through these interactions (Fridolfson, 2011, p. 82).

“There must be an end to the coddling of these so-called climate activists. Legislation should be made stricter to allow for more direct arrests. If they want to influence politics, they should engage in a political party instead of putting people's lives in danger.”
(Forsell, 2022)

These were the words of Johan Forsell posted on his twitter account. Forsell is spokesperson for the Moderate Party on legal policy. It is evident that Forsell contrasts the agency of activists to ‘real politics’ through his emphasis on their need to “engage in a political party” instead of confronting environmental policies through the means of civil disobedience. His use of the expression “so-called activists” emphasises the belief that the group does not fit the definition of rational, moral and legitimate activism. Ulf Kristersson (2022), leader of the Moderate party follows a similar narrative in the following tweet “those who want to influence politics should engage in democratic ways instead of endangering human lives”, perpetuating the idea that environmental activists fundamentally exist outside of the democratic. Thus, through this binary composition between authentic politics and the activity which operates outside of it, activists' identity is formed through their ‘otherness’ to the hegemonic order of liberal democracy. The ‘rational consensus’ which makes up deliberative democracy thus marks its own presence in instances of antagonism when resistance is effectively undermined (Martin, 2013, p. 195) In other words, through activists alleged ‘otherness’ the legitimacy of the hegemonic power (the Self) is in turn strengthened.

Identity is thus formulated in its relation to the preestablished and is given meaning in its opposition to democratic values. While this study does not necessarily focus on the implication of identity on policy it is worth mentioning that identity is also shaped in its interplay and inseparability to policy. This is because identities are “articulated as the reason why policies should be enacted, but they are also (re)produced through these very policy discourses: they are simultaneously (discursive) foundation and product” (Hansen, 2006, p. 19). Thus, Forsell's focus on enacting stricter legislation also contributes to the identity creation of environmental activist. Making legislation stricter reinforces the portrayal of environmental activists as criminals, simultaneously it is the initial perception of them as illegal actors which enables policy reform. Thus, the notion of stricter policy inevitably deprives the activists of political

legitimacy while simultaneously reinforcing the idea of stricter policy on activism. “This is not activism, it’s criminal behaviour and should be treated as such.” (Åkesson, 2022), is another example of the inseparability of identity and policy, written by the party leader of the Swedish Democrats.

“Stand up now. Let the ambulances, fire department, and police through. Go and vote instead, just like the rest of us” (Pehrson, 2022), was another tweet written by the party leader of the Liberal party Johan Pehrson. Again, through differentiation to the formal, activists are shaped as subjects operating outside of the institutionalised and contrasting activists to “the rest of us” creates an even stronger binary in which activists are not only seen as different, but fundamentally as a societal anomaly distinct from the ‘normal’ or ‘rational’. Furthermore, Pehrson's deliberate listing of emergency services can be viewed as an effort to point out a perceived endangerment of the public order as they are regarded as the primary agents responsible for upholding and maintaining it. Consequently, if one is considered a danger to emergency services, they are also deemed a danger to the social order at large. While the ambulance that was delayed because of the protest was the subject of considerable attention and discussion in the debate that followed the event, the listing of all emergency services elicits a connotation to the fundamental order of society and is thus not merely a reference to the event that occurred. It is for this reason that Pehrson's tweet carries an implicit meaning which positions subjects as an exteriority to the fundamental structures of society rather than only operating outside of democratic principles. This can also be viewed in terms of securitisation as emergency services are seen as actors crucial for upholding safety and security within societies. Securitisation of environmental activists will be discussed in more detail in segments to come.

The discourse portraying activists as operating outside of democratic values is perpetuated primarily by centre-right parties. However, Jan Emanuelsson, former member of parliament representing the Social Democrats also engage in the ‘othering’ of activists. In difference to viewing environmental activism as a threat to deliberative democracy the ‘othering’ of environmental activists is partly validated on the basis that environmental activists are perceived as a deviant from the environmental movement at large. The following quote is retrieved from a video clip produced by the Swedish public service television (SVT) in which Emanuelsson speaks directly to the press spokesperson of Restore Wetlands.

“What you have managed to do is to make people speak contemptuously about the environmental movement. A small group of people who behave like complete idiots have destroyed what the environmental movement has built up in reputation over decades. You are a disgrace to the environmental movement. You should be ashamed” (SVT, 2022)

By differentiating the group to “the environmental movement” Emanuelsson places Restore Wetlands ‘outside’ of rational political activity and distinct from ‘normal’ environmentalism. In this way Restore Wetlands is deprived of political meaning and reduced to a group of individuals “who behave like complete idiots”. This separation between Restore Wetlands and environmentalism is a strong distinction as it is precisely environmental policies the movement attempts to affect, thus stripping them of their direct political message.

Despite Social Democrats engaging in the narrative of activists as an ‘exteriority’, there is a clear political bias in the way that actors respond to environmental activism and the power dynamics that legitimises this representation. While other parties also distanced themselves from the protest, they don’t portray activists as an exteriority to deliberative democracy. “Completely unacceptable...”; “We strongly distance ourselves from these kinds of actions”; “...I understand that you believe you are doing it for a good cause. But you are risking the lives of many people, so just stop” (Stenevi, 2022; Eriksson, 2022; Bolund, 2022), are some of the comments made by representatives of the Green Party. It is evident that while political figures on the left distance themselves from the event, it is rather the *form* of protest deemed unacceptable rather than the group as a political entity. Thus, these specific statements are not viewed as contributing to the ‘othering’ of activists, while still criticising the actions undertaken. With that said, there are still actors on the political left who contribute to the narrative of the ‘threatening activist’ and thus engage in the securitisation of Restore Wetlands. This will be discussed further in the segments that follow.

5.2 Securitisation of environmental activists

So far, the analysis has covered the prerequisite of a ‘constitutive outside’ in defining security threats and the ways environmental activists are positioned in relation to hegemonic ideas in order to conform to this exteriority. The following segments build on this presumption and describes securitisation of environmental activists in a more distinct way. It is divided into

three parts for structural purposes; however, the sections are viewed as part of the same totality. The concept of ‘terrorism’ is a recurring concept throughout the discussion that follows.

5.2.1 The labelling of activists as ‘terrorists’

As previously discussed, security is a contested concept and is not merely a material condition but also a discursive practice that constructs reality and shapes identities. Equally, ‘threats’ are constituted through the articulation of actors in society and hence does not exist external to the discursive processes which shapes them (Hansen, 2006, p. 22). “It is not climate activism – it is terrorism” (Göteborgs-Posten, 2022), was the headline of an article written by the Gothenburg Post in which two other articles were referenced with the titles “Climate extremism is just the latest form of radicalism” and “The green terrorism is soon here if we don’t watch out”, written by the same newspaper. The texts are written and produced by the Gothenburg Post Editorial team, presenting itself as “independent and liberal”. This narrative is thus considered a legitimate representation of environmental activists as it produced and accepted by the GP editorials at large. This is interesting since it implies that the idea of the ‘terroristic activist’ is partly normalised within GP journalism, and consequently spread to the public as a ‘social truth’. One of the presented reasons for actively referring to environmental activists as terrorists is the following "If one is willing to sacrifice the lives of innocent people in their political struggle, regardless of the intended goal of the struggle, they are not an activist. They are a terrorist." (Göteborgs-Posten, 2022). The term ‘sacrifice’ refers to an intentional action made to attain specific goals, and a willingness to jeopardise and harm lives in the process of achieving them. This neither fits the definition of non-violent civil disobedience, nor the political strategy of Restore Wetlands. Hence, the use of the word can be considered an attempt to affect the identity of the movement to subsume to groups who are inherently immoral, and who have no respect for human life. Often ‘sacrifice’ in the context of harming people, is associated to cult-like movements who operate outside of social norms and human values.

Thus, activism which attempts at bringing attention to a political issue through the means of non-violent civil disobedience, is made equivalent to the act of deliberately instilling fear and terror amongst citizens in society using violent and harmful methods. The contradiction between the intentions of environmental activists and their portrayal in discourse is radically different and point toward the inconsistencies of language. The use of the term ‘terrorism’ hence “works as a powerful political signifier, serving to delegitimise certain forms of action and the actors undertaking them” (McDonald, 2016, p. 115) and can be viewed as a rhetorical

commitment to actively silence the political message of environmental activists. The portrayal produced by the Gothenburg Post is understood as attempts to dehumanise the movement through linking them to extreme violence, thus rendering the condemnation of their actions justified on the grounds of basic human morals.

5.2.2 The labelling of environmental activists as ‘saboteurs’

“Saboteurs” and “Blue Light Saboteurs” or better translated as “Saboteurs of the emergency services” were expressions frequently used to describe the activists in the aftermath of the event, both by private and authoritative figures. This was due to the fact that all activists were accused of sabotage by the police and later charged for the crime. As aforementioned, sabotage is a crime usually associated with severe societal destruction and can lead to a sentence of up to 4 years in prison (SFS 1962:700). The use of the label carries strong associations to the general security of society and has not been used to convict environmental activists before. While the term perhaps does not elicit the same ‘culture of fear’ as the use of terrorist labels, it subsumes to the same comprehensive category since a ‘terrorist’ is invariably also a ‘saboteur’. For this reason, the term is viewed as milder substitute to the term “terrorism”, and thus seen as more acceptable to be used by politicians and the media.

One of the people referring to activists as “saboteurs of emergency services” was Carl-Oskar Bohlin, Minister for Civil Defence and part of the Moderate Party (Bohlin, 2022). The responsibility of Civil Defence is preparing society for potential crisis and “in times of war, protect the population, secure the most important societal functions and contribute to the Swedish Armed Forces’ ability to meet an armed attack” (Regeringskansliet, n.d.). Thus, Carl-Oskar Bohlin assumes a crucial role as a securitising actor within a Swedish context due to his responsibilities of maintaining safety and security. Labelling activists as “saboteurs” strips them of political agency and instead portrays them as a danger to the very functioning of society, rendering their political message redundant. Thus, securitisation effectively undermines the legitimacy of protests through this representation of environmental activists' identity.

Political figures of the left have also expressed securitisation language in reference to the protest. In a discussion published by the Swedish public service television (SVT), between Jan Emanuelsson (Social Democrat) and Josefin Eidrup Dahlberg, spokesperson for Restore Wetlands, Emanuelsson expresses the following. “It is almost like a terrorist organisation, no

that's completely wrong, it's too strong of a word. But you are really sabotaging. You are saboteurs, embarrassing saboteurs" (SVT, 2022). It is interesting the Emanuelsson instantly expresses regret for using the term "terrorist organisation" to describe the group, suggesting that he understands the implication and negative connotation of the term in describing political actors. His quick replacement of the term to 'saboteurs' is a clear example of the security undertone of this narrative, and the interchangeability of the concept 'terrorist' and 'saboteur'. While the legal implications of these crimes are radically different, the term 'saboteur' is here used as a substitute for 'terrorism' to evade the criticism and stigma attached to the use of 'terrorist labels'. Emanuelsson has not merely expressed his condemnation of Restore Wetlands through the means of language but has previously interfered with protests by carrying activists off the street himself (SVT, 2022). This sends a message that it is not merely the responsibility of law enforcement to hinder environmental activists, the public should equally engage in the process of resisting protests.

Aida Hadzialic, party member of the Social Democrats equally engages in delegitimising and deviating the political movement of Restore Wetlands by constituting them as threatening. "Hooligans" is the word Hadzialic uses to describe environmental activists.

"The hooligans who prevented ambulances from reaching their destination in the Stockholm Region have delayed an emergency response for a priority one case. I hope they will be prosecuted for sabotaging emergency services. It is a crime that can result in up to four years in prison." (Hadzialic, 2022)

Seen as a chain of equivalence, it is evident that this is a commitment to view environmentalists as equivalent to subjects such as "fascist neo-nazis or football hooligans causing commotion" (Fridolfsson, 2011, p. 86). Thus, similar to the negative connotation of the term 'saboteurs', 'hooligans' are also seen as deviant criminal subjects whose acts are deemed destructive in nature. Despite Restore Wetlands clear emphasis on *non-violent* civil disobedience, Hadzialic's expression is an evident commitment to attach the group to violent means. This is because hooligans are often associated with intended abuse, destruction, violence and in extreme cases even murder.

Analysed in terms of securitisation theory, it is evident that the empirical material presented so far constructs environmental activists as a fundamental threat. In this discursive process, signifiers such as 'saboteurs', 'terrorists', and 'hooligans', are central in guiding the identity

construction of Restore Wetlands as ‘evil’, ‘deviant’, and ‘violent’ actors. Not merely is the group positioned in exteriority to hegemonic ideas of what constitutes a rational and well-functioning society, they are also perceived as threatening to these notions. Thus, the referent object pertains to the abstract idea of political and social rationality, which encompasses the preceding discussion on environmental activism as exterior to deliberative democracy. Furthermore, the reference to policies aimed at further criminalising environmental activists brings certain urgency to the legal concerns of non-violent civil disobedience. Policy proposals thus also plays an imperative role in the construction of the identity of environmental activists. Sabotage laws, and stricter legislation for prosecuting environmental activists are examples of these. The discussion of securitisation will be elaborated further in the following segment in which the analysis is complimented with visual material.

5.2.3 The use of images in securitisation

Discourses don’t necessarily have to be verbal, as Hansen (2006, p. 21) proclaims, non-verbal language such as “sign or body language” can be equally as ontologically significant in the conceptualisation of identity as any spoken or written language. Different techniques are thus implemented to shape and form identities to conform to certain social realities. One of the techniques discussed in reference to Hansen (2006) is the normalisation of threat images and the use of terrorist labels to narrow the space for debate amongst political dissent. News Media plays a significant role in reinforcing and colouring ideas about who constitute a terrorist threat, often doing so in line with already dominant worldviews and narratives (Norris *et al.*, 2004).

“Here are the climate activists who are being prosecuted after the protest on the E4” is the headline of a report written by the news site TV4 (TV4, 2022). The article is a ‘mapping’ of the activists who participated in the event and is followed by an image depicting the silhouettes of two people in front of the protest (see figure 1). The article proceeds to list the participants, exposing their gender, age, area or residence along with an extract of their criminal records. The headline of the chart listing their identity reads “Mapping: The criminal records of climate activists”



Figure 1: The front-page and headline of a news article written by TV4. The text reads “here are the climate activists who are being prosecuted after the protest on the E4” (TV4, 2022).

The individualisation and dissection of the group reshapes its identity to be associated with deviant criminal behaviour rather than recognised as a group of activists conveying a political message. In other words, by fragmenting the group the collective identity can be deconstructed and reshaped to centre on the actions of a few select individuals. Through this reductive process the identity of the individuals partaking is also reduced to their criminal acts and reconstructed to seen as subjects to actively watch out for in society. Along with this, the listing also brings a certain urgency to the fact that these individuals should be actively monitored by media, the state, or other authoritative figures. The nodal point, environmental activism, is made equivalent to the signifier ‘criminal’ both in writing along with the silhouette on the front page of the news article (Figure 1).

Expressen made a similar report with the title “The climate activists that hindered the ambulance” (Expressen, 2022c). The following image has been intentionally blurred to avoid perpetuating exposures of the personal integrity of activists. However, due to its significance to security discourse it is included as Figure 2.



Figure 2: The front-page of a news article written by Expressen. The text reads “Here are the ten individuals suspected of sabotage in connection with the climate action on E4” (Expressen, 2022)

Similar to the article written by TV4, Expressen also ‘maps out’ the individuals who participated in the event by posting images of their faces and descriptions of their occupation. “Among them are a writer, a nurse, two self-employed, a former teacher, a preschool employee, a former mental health caregiver who is running in the election, a retiree, and a student” (Expressen, 2022c).

Drawing from the clear emphasis on ‘suspected sabotage’ and the collage of the individuals faces (Figure 2) the article evokes a sense of a perceived ‘danger’ to ‘normal’ society. This format of a collection of close-up portraits of faces taken from straight ahead is often associated with mug shots as a mapping of the profiles of criminals. Mugshots are used to present the individuals behind deviant behaviour, both as a way for law enforcement to keep track records, and for the public to be notified about ‘evil’ protesters. This has a historical link to “wanted posters” that serve as a means to actively seek out or locate suspected criminals; often posted in newspapers. Furthermore, exposing their vastly different occupations further underscores a notion that radicalisation is reaching ordinary people in ordinary occupations, making it a more urgent security issue to address. Thus, providing the images in combination with naming professions that are relatable to us all elicits a sense of fear as activists ‘exist amongst normal people’. While the listing of professions could potentially illustrate how activists are a part of the ‘us’, it is evident that what is being communicated is rather about ‘suspected criminals’ than ‘political actors’.

Thus, both Expressen and TV4 engages in the securitisation of environmental activists in their journalistic techniques to produce a narrative of the ‘wanted, criminal and deviant activist’. The perpetuation of security frameworks is made more evident by the use of images, understood as a signifier in itself. The clearly negative portrayal of the individuals, and deliberate fragmentation of the group reproduces their identity to conform to ideas of criminal behaviour. Hence, the political message of Restore Wetlands and their considerations for environmental policy is concealed by security concerns, shifting focus away from the issue at hand.

5.3 Ideological frameworks

The discussion above has focused on uncovering the ways that activists are shaped in dominant discourse to take forms of “otherness” - essential in portraying them as a security threat. While this discussion has touched upon the underlying beliefs that guide the act of constructing the identity of activists, there is still a need for a systematic structuring in order to make any assumptions on the ideologies that legitimises dominant discourse. This section thus aims to delve deeper into the analysis to understand what enables securitisation of environmental activists in this political context. There is also a slight caveat to be made as it is impossible to retrieve the ‘true’ motive behind any one expression. For this reason, the analysis attempts to look at the general patterns of dominant discourse, however, will still use individual cases to exemplify tendencies.

5.3.1 Neoliberalism as an ideological ground for securitisation

The blockade of the E4 highway took place in the midst of the ongoing election in Sweden. For this reason, the portrayal of activists as a ‘threat’ was used by politicians to strengthen their own agency by associating other political parties to the event and to Restore Wetlands. Thus, the idea of the ‘deviant’ and ‘evil’ activist is already a somewhat established concept in the Swedish society. In other words, the Restore Wetlands is partly already a given subject identity, attached to negative connotations of disruption, deviance, evil, and threatening. Without this pre-existing understanding, its use to describe political parties would be redundant. It is however important to stress that these assumptions are not ‘objective’, but attached to dominant discourse and hence specific to the narrative ‘othering’ environmental activists. With that said,

the discussion below illustrates the preconceived ideas about Restore Wetlands and discusses the ideological grounds for their subjection to securitisation in dominant discourse.

In 2020 the Green Party invited representatives of the environmental group Extinction Rebellion to parliament to discuss the issue of climate change (Extinction Rebellion Sverige, 2020). For this reason, other parties justified portraying Restore Wetlands as an arm of the Green Party in the discourse that followed the E4 blockade. The following statements are made by the party leaders of the Christian Democrats and the Moderate Party:

"The Green Party has contributed to legitimising these actions by previously inviting them to parliament and not distancing themselves from previous blockades during a radio interview."
(Bush, 2022)

"The Green Party activists endanger lives ... it is certain that thousands of people are prevented from getting to their jobs. When Per Bolund was interviewed by Swedish Radio the other week, he defended Extinction Rebellion and other groups that engage in civil disobedience, that sabotage companies, and that glue themselves to the road. The Green Party has even invited them to the Parliament and posed with them in pictures." (Kristersson, 2022)

Thus, it is not merely the act of civil disobedience that is condemned; the deliberative efforts made by the Green Party are deemed equally as unacceptable as political protest. This is interesting since centre-right parties, as previously discussed, frequently position activists as threatening deliberative democracy. However, when environmental activists operate within the confines of established democratic frameworks they continue to be depicted as illegitimate political actors. Another example of this contradiction is Carl-Oscar Bohlin's (Moderate Party) tweet, "If anyone wonders why Lorentz Tovatt [Green Party representative] had some difficulty distancing himself from the Blue Light Saboteurs, it may have to do with the fact that he invited them to parliament..." (Bohlin, 2022).

One explanation for this contradiction is the perceived threat that environmental activism poses to neoliberal values, and consequently its perceived threat to individual freedom and the pursuit of companies. Kristersson makes this argument apparent when emphasising the urgency of activists preventing "[thousands of people from getting to their jobs]" and "[sabotaging] companies" (Kristersson, 2022). The portrayal of activists as a threat to the foundational values

of neoliberalism results in the validation of their exclusion from democratic principles to voice their opinion. Since opposing neoliberalism is made equivalent to threatening the foundational concepts of “human dignity and individual freedom” (Harvey, 2007, p. 5), undermining the agency of political dissent is made easier.

Furthermore, by portraying environmental activists as a fundamental threat to the values of western civilisation, Restore Wetland is used as a political tool through association with political parties. This further explains why Kristersson intentionally refers to the group as “The Green Party activists” rather than Restore Wetlands as his set representation of activists and their political ‘othering’ is made equivalent to the Green Party. The chain of equivalence thus extends beyond the identity construction of activists to also affect the identity of political parties. This suggests that the discourse of the ‘threatening’ activist has partly reached a totalising effect and is consequently used as a signifier itself to shape the identity of the Green Party.

In this way the paradoxical nature of securitisation makes itself clear as the inability of neoliberal governments in combating climate change ends up reinforcing their hegemonic power rather than challenging it. This is because portraying activists as a security threat to fundamental human values inevitably shifts attention back to politicians and the established hegemonic order in their role as providers of safety. Media also plays a significant role in reinforcing this paradox of hegemonic stability. “Green Party leaders posed with convicted climate activist” (Expressen, 2022b) was the title of an article written by Expressen. Again, environmental activists and the Green Partys deliberative efforts are condemned despite acting within institutionalised frameworks. Equally, in the aforementioned article “The green terrorism is soon here if we don’t watch out” (Göteborgs-Posten, 2022) the headline is followed by an image of Greta Thunberg holding a speech in Glasgow during the UN climate conference. It is thus evident that the narrative of the ‘threatening activist’ in dominant discourse is not limited to civil disobedience but is rather a rhetorical commitment to deprive activism of political legitimacy across the environmental movement.

6. Conclusion

This article encompasses the ways the identity of environmental activists is shaped in dominant discourse to conform to political exteriority. Through signifying chains and binary oppositions of security/threat, authority/activist, democracy/protest etc., Restore Wetlands is perceived as deviating from hegemonic ideas of what constitutes rational political activity. Hence, environmental activists are constructed as a 'constitutive outside' to deliberative democracy which acts as a prerequisite for Restore Wetlands to be subjected to securitisation in discourse. Through connotations to terrorism, sabotage, violence and criminal activity, the group is constructed as a security threat to society and the status quo. Hence, dominant discourse effectively de-politicises the protest through the production of security narratives. Signifiers such as 'sabotage' and 'terrorist' play a significant role in this identity creation due to the intertwined nature of identity and policy. In this process of securitisation, the legitimacy of the hegemonic order ends up being reinforced as security calls for an urgency and provides political entities with the responsibility of upholding safety and security. Hence, viewed in terms of power, this dominant discourse results in strengthening the monopoly of who ought to define what is considered legitimate political activity.

While the evidence for the ideological motives that support this narrative might be scarce, it is nonetheless evident that neoliberal values are important components in portraying environmental activists as a security threat. Since activists are seen as deviant whether they operate within the confines of deliberative democracy or outside it, the referent object is greater than deliberative democracy itself. Neoliberal values and the general stability of this ideological hegemony is often viewed as threatened by environmental activism. In this context, Restore Wetlands fits this image of disrupting the status quo. Hence, the dominant discourse can be viewed as desperate attempts to uphold ideological superiority by portraying environmental activists as deviant, terroristic and violent actors.

As aforementioned, sabotage laws are already a historical move to confine and suppress the acts of environmental activists within a Swedish context. Hence, future research can study the ways discourse influences policies and consequently the effects of these reforms on activists, the broader environmental movement, and how constitutionalised laws are at stake, such as the freedom to protest, freedom of speech, and the democratic development at large.

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