

“The baby-boom is over and the ageing shock awaits”: populist media imagery in news-press representations of population ageing

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Abstract

From an international perspective, media representations of population ageing have been described as apocalyptic in character. In this article, we analyse the way population ageing is represented in three Swedish newspapers: *Aftonbladet*, *Dagens Nyheter* and *Västerbottens-Kuriren*. The aim is to investigate Swedish news-press representations of population ageing and the old age identities that they offer. We conduct qualitative analyses of the articulations between the verbal content and the use of illustrations, metaphorical language, headlines and captions using the concepts offered by discourse theory. The analysis of the material shows that the studied newspapers firmly position population ageing within a wider discourse of political economy and as a threat to the concept of welfare. Growth is promoted as a self-evident means for adjusting to the expected threat. Illustrations and metaphorical language helped to constitute population ageing as a serious, dichotomised (e.g. young

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vs. old) and emotive (e.g. addressing anxiety and fear) problem. The analyses also show how the representations of population ageing bear some populist features, and we argue that such features support a de-politicisation of the phenomenon population ageing.

Keywords: population ageing, media, old age, populism.

Introduction: The Construction of Population Ageing as Threat

The understanding of demographic phenomena as the cause and origin of expected social and economic crises has often been criticised. One of the latest phenomena to attract interest in this sense is population ageing (Mullan 2002). McDaniel (1987: 331) talks about an “emerging problem paradigm” that seems to serve as a model of explanation for a variety of different phenomena, such as increased health care costs, sluggish economic growth and an increased tax burden on people of working age (see also Vincent 1996). There is an “eagerness to explain and to address a variety of social and economic problems (...) by reference to population aging”, writes McDaniel (1987: 335).

What is common in the body of research that has touched upon cultural aspects of population ageing is the recognition that it is often conceptualised as a societal threat. The concept of “apocalyptic demography”¹ is widely used (cf. Evans et al. 2001; Gee & Gutman 2000; Robertson 1997; Rozanova 2006; Vincent 1996) and referred to as the tendency to focus on the economic costs of the expected changes in the proportion of older and younger persons in the population. Longer life spans and lower fertility rates, together with the large generation of baby boomers that are now reaching retirement age, will constitute a situation in which fewer and fewer will have to support more and more in a way that will eventually collapse the social security systems – or so the argument goes. Gee (2002: 750) has convincingly described how apocalyptic demo-

¹Other value-laden phrases have also been used to make similar points, for example “demographic alarmism” and “voodoo demography” (Gee 2002), and “demographic demagoguery” (Cruikshank 2003).

graphy has been used to “reconstruct and redefine social problems in ways that fit a political agenda or, at least, that calibrate with current and popular ideological positions” (see also Evans et al. 2001; Vincent 1996).

Media is claimed to have a significant impact on the creation and distribution of apocalyptic demography (cf. Cruikshank 2003; Fealy & McNamara 2009), and research on how population ageing is made comprehensible has often used media examples (cf. Martin et al. 2009; McDaniel 1987; Northcott 1994). Northcott (1994: 68) recognises media’s tendency to both reproduce stereotypical understandings by repeatedly multiplying them in printed text, and, thereby, to “... fuel perceptions of an age-related economic crisis”. McDaniel (1987: 331) suggests that regardless of the likelihood of the suggested future crisis, once reproduced in the media, the problem paradigm of population ageing can become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The earlier descriptions show how representations of population ageing have been recognised in an international context. However, this empirical study’s geographical focus is Sweden, in which news-press reports on population ageing became salient in the late 1990s (Abramsson 2005). These reports closely resemble the previous arguments of apocalyptic demography; they are dominated by a focus on political economy, primarily depicting population ageing as a definite, but vaguely characterised threat (Lundgren & Ljuslinder 2011). Investigating the Swedish press is of special interest because the Swedish welfare system, which is frequently referred to as “the Swedish model”, is often depicted as unusual from an international perspective, as it is general and primarily funded by income taxes (Bengtsson 2010).

Aim

In this article, we investigate Swedish news-press representations of population ageing and the old age identities that they offer. We do this by considering the content of these representations in relation to the visual imageries that are used – illustrations, figurative language and the parts of the article that are graphically distinguished. The reason for specifically studying visual imagery is because they are what first catches the audience’s attention and directs their interpretations of the often

polysemous media content (cf. Lind 1994). We work from the supposition that media is one of the most important sources of information (cf. Curran 2002; McLuhan 1967; McQuail 2005; Schudson 2003), especially regarding phenomena that the audience does not have any direct personal experience of. On the basis of previous research (cf. Lin et al. 2004; Ljuslinder 2002), we also presuppose that media content has an impact on people regarding self-identifications, approaches to other persons and on the way society's resource allocation is legitimised.

In this article, we argue that population ageing partly functions as an empty signifier in Laclau's (1996) sense of the word – a signifier that is open to different but vaguely defined inscriptions. Visual imageries and content help to constitute this signifier in ways that string together notions of population ageing, old age, welfare and Swedish national self-image.

Materials and Methods

The empirical material consists of three Swedish newspapers' reportage on the subject of population ageing; the two daily papers *Dagens Nyheter* (DN) and *Västerbottens-Kuriren* (VK), and the tabloid *Aftonbladet* (AB). Both DN and AB have national coverage and are amongst the largest newspapers in Sweden, while VK is a local newspaper and is published in Umeå in northern Sweden. The motivation behind the choice of the local VK is the high average age of the people in many of the municipalities in the county of Västerbotten. After already having been confronted with some of the experiences of population ageing primarily because of out-migration, we found it interesting to include this newspaper in the investigation. Even though there were some marginal differences between the three newspapers' reports, these differences were not decisive because our focus was not on the differences between various types of news-press. The reason for our choice of three different types of newspapers was mainly motivated by a desire for breadth.

Using the full-text online database Mediearkivet, the chosen newspapers were initially searched for articles containing the expression "population ageing" or semantic variations thereof. We chose to delimit the investigation to the time period 1988–2009, in order to cover the rise in media awareness that occurred in the late 1990s (cf. Abramsson 2005). In total, 594 articles

(DN = 398, AB = 83, VK = 113) were found. These articles included reports on population ageing from Sweden and other countries. We included these as well because they contributed to the mediated construction of population ageing. The material was first analysed quantitatively and coded for genre, main topic, definitions of population ageing, expected consequences, old age positions, positions referred to as sources and whether the article related specifically to the inland of northern Sweden. The frequencies of each category helped to highlight the cultural construction of meaning that was made within the studied representations. A full account of the quantitative analysis is found in Lundgren and Ljuslinder (2011).

For the analytic purposes of the present article, two qualitative analyses of the material were performed. First, a selection of articles containing illustrations was analysed qualitatively (DN: 250, AB: 51 and VK: 40), focusing on the visual imagery: illustrations (photos, drawings, tables, etc.) and, as press images are seldom read in isolation (Barnhurst & Nerone 2001; Hirdman 2004), their relation to any other visually emphasised components of the article (headlines, captions, etc.). For example, population ageing would be interpreted differently if it was articulated with a photograph of happy and healthy older people than it would be if it was articulated with a photograph of older persons lying in a hospital corridor. Similarly, the caption may reveal that an illustration is ironic rather than serious.

There are plenty of methods for analysing images. In order to be able to take part in the process of “taking an image apart and tracing how it works in relation to broader systems of meaning” (Rose 2001: 69), the classical method of news-press image analysis that was inspired by the semiology of Barthes (1967) was chosen. This method works well with the ontology of discourse theory. We have used Hillesund’s (1994) suggestion of analytical tools: *denotation* (descriptive level), *composition* (e.g. contrasts, angles), *connotation* (associative level) and the *function* that the illustration seemed to have in the text. Concerning the function, two aspects were detected. A *referential function* means that an image refers back to something written in the article text with the aim to depict or illustrate it. An *emotive function* means that an image does not only depict but also conveys feelings or evokes emotions in the audience.

Second, and parallel to the analysis of illustrations, the same selection was re-read to pick up on how population ageing and old age identities

were described. Research has often stated that, for example, the use of *metaphor* “allows us to understand a relatively abstract or inherently unstructured subject matter in terms of a more concrete, or at least more highly structured subject matter” (Lakoff 1993: 245). According to this view, understanding is achieved “by mapping the structure of one domain onto another” (Kövecses 2002: 147). The analysis was carried out by first searching the material for descriptions of population ageing and of older people, and specifically any use of linguistic metaphor, metonymy or recurrent words and phrases that stood out. The imagery that was found was themed into groups depending on the words and phrases that were used. Each description was then analysed with regard to the aspects of the phrases that were (potentially) transferred to the understanding of population ageing. We have worked from the supposition that the choice of words affects how the phenomenon of population ageing can be comprehended. We limited the scope of the investigation to the printed articles and did not take into consideration the intentions behind the articles or how these intentions were perceived by the audience. Whenever we speak about any potential meaning to an audience, we do so from a theoretical or analytical point of view.

Clearly, all the illustrations or graphic descriptions that occurred in the articles were not aimed at illustrating population ageing or old age identities as such. For example, when one article dealt with the political conditions in the sparsely populated inland communities in Västerbotten, and population ageing was mentioned as one among several other threats, the article was illustrated by a photograph of a spruce forest taken from the air. Such an illustration might say more about common ways of representing the sparsely populated inland of northern Sweden than it does about population ageing. We have nevertheless chosen to include all the illustrations in the analyses. The reason is that we wanted to see the total discursive terrain of illustrations that accompanied the textual representations of population ageing.

Theoretical and Methodological Points of Departure

In the analysis of the news-press articles, the concepts of the discourse-analytical approach often called “discourse theory” have been deployed

(Laclau & Mouffe 1985). Discourse theory is typically *problem-driven* and in this article it is “population ageing” as represented by the news-press that constitutes the primary “problem”.

Overall, discourse theory involves an understanding of the social as discursive and a conviction that all social phenomena (whether material or not) can be analysed using the tools offered by discourse theory. It also involves a research emphasis that displaces a focus on specific categories, for example “older people” in this case, to the underlying logics that make social categories possible (cf. Laclau 2000). More specifically, it implies a take on the material as fixations of discourse, as well as the view that such fixations are at the core of the (re)production of identities. This means that, for example, illustrations and choices of words are viewed as materialised discourse and analysed as such.

In the pursuit of analysis, some concepts have been specifically important. The concept of *discourse* is typically defined within discourse theory as the structured totality that is the effect of how a certain phenomenon is comprehended and talked about (Laclau & Mouffe 1985). We will primarily use the concept of discourse to identify specific ways of writing about, or otherwise portraying, for example, population ageing. For example, writing about it from a medical point of view or from a rural perspective represents different ways of comprehending the phenomenon. Analysing such discourses as they appear in the news-press material involves an examination of their construction. How is the sign “population ageing” connected to other signs in order to explain or describe something? The concept that is used to pinpoint such connections is *articulation*. Articulation is thus possible to understand as fundamental in the construction of meaning, and it is also central to our analytical method (cf. Howarth 2005).

Central to discourse theory is also the notion of contingency. It is assumed that identifications can never be fully realised and that there is always the possibility that there are alternatives. However naturalised, all articulations are, so to speak, possible but not necessary. This enables some degree of sensitiveness towards differences and antagonisms between fixations that try to define and temporarily fixate the meanings of any given social phenomenon.

Every discourse has a discursive centre that is ascribed a privileged position within the discourse and from which the other signs get their meaning. If such a centre is somehow emptied of meaning and made to comprise a range of different elements that it binds together, Laclau (1996: 36), following Levi-Strauss, talks about *empty signifiers*. The concept empty signifiers is often defined in terms of surfaces of inscription for various political demands. Typically, signs like “freedom” or “feminism” are described as such unifying signs that are open to different and sometimes contrary inscriptions. The process of constituting the chains of meaning that are symbolically equal to different identities under such an empty sign always makes up a space that seems to constitute the (equally empty) opposite: a constitutive outside that functions as a perceived *enemy* to the person’s own identity. For example, “patriarchy” emerges as the antagonistic enemy of feminism – an enemy that marks the limit of feminism and is simultaneously threatening and necessary: without patriarchy feminism would lose its defining limits (cf. Gunnarsson Payne 2005). We use the concept empty signifier to show how certain phenomena, for example, the notion of welfare, functioned as a unifying idea that was supposedly threatened by population ageing.

The representations studied in this article were different in character. Nonetheless, and despite their differences, many of them displayed some features that also recur in the theorisations of *populism*. A common and pejorative use of populism is when it is seen as a rhetoric style characterised by someone ascribing himself/herself power by claiming to represent “the people” against a ruling elite. Theoretically, the concept of populism has been used by Laclau (2005) and others (cf. Swyngedouw 2010; Žižek 2006) to indicate a process where articulatory practices divide society into two antagonistic camps where “the people” is one. However, rather than viewing “the people” as a given entity, the focus of the theorisations of populism is on how this entity is *constituted* by the parallel constitution of a threatening “other”. Faced with this threat, an empty signifier is formulated that succeeds in uniting “the people” despite its internal differences and particular demands. A broad and seemingly homogeneous category of “the people” is thus produced through the establishment of a chain of equivalences between a series of otherwise particular demands that are now posed in the name of the people, for

example “better social security, health services, lower taxes, peace, and so on” (Žižek 2006: 553).

When expanding on the character of empty signifiers, Laclau (1996) distinguishes between empty signifiers and what he calls *floating signifiers*. Whereas the empty character of the former functions as the driving factor behind politics, inciting different groups to struggle to define the agenda and achieve hegemony, floating signifiers merely stand for equivocal signs that are attached to different signifieds in different contexts. A floating signifier thus means different things to different people, and as such works to dislocate the stability of the sign, but it does not incite any united struggle under its flag. We will argue that the position of older people is best understood as such a floating signifier.

We will begin by analytically describing the material, and specifically its content, illustrations and metaphorical language, to briefly identify some important articulations. We then move on to tease out three discursive patterns that recurred throughout the studied articles. In an attempt to explore the effect of these patterns, we then discuss them in relation to the theoretical notion of populism, which, in our view, pinpoints some important political implications.

Description of the Material

Content

The material exhibited three main traits (for part of the analysis, see Lundgren & Ljuslinder 2011). Firstly, the writers as well as named sources were almost always positioned as *experts* – politicians, researchers and persons responsible within the health care system. This fact contributed to the constitution of population ageing as a phenomenon that was owned by some kind of expertise.

Secondly, the overall view in the studied articles was that population ageing constituted a *threat* that was similar to the one found in the discourse on apocalyptic demography. What was supposed to be threatened varied, but in the majority of articles it was vaguely defined as the “the Swedish welfare model”, “the welfare”, or even “the people’s home of Sweden”. These phrases mostly implied the general welfare provided

by the government through the transfer of taxes. Sometimes it was “the economy” or “growth” that was put forward as threatened, but these concepts were always related to welfare because growth was always presented as the self-evident tool for maintaining welfare.

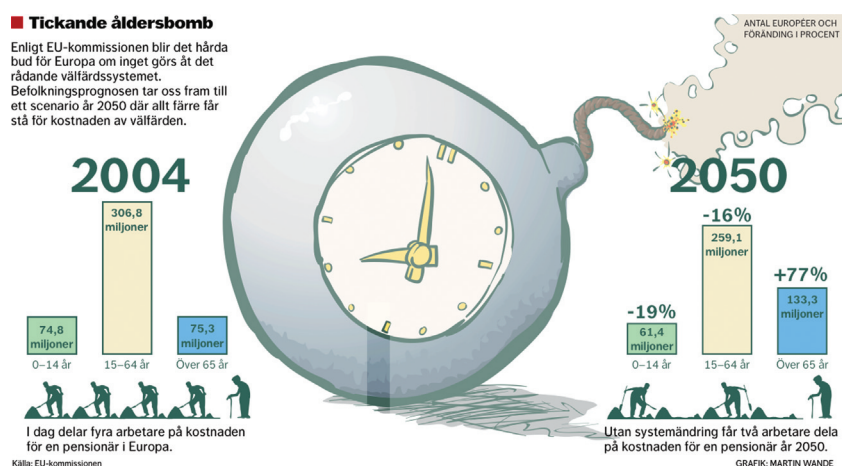
The majority of the space used in all three newspapers related to Swedish conditions with only a minor part focusing on international conditions (percent: DN: 60/37, AB: 74/25 and VK: 28/11). The major distinguishing characteristic between the newspapers was that DN described the effects of population ageing in the northern inland in only 1% of its coverage, and AB only 3%, whereas the percentage in VK was 61. What an article constituted as a threat or as being threatened in VK was sometimes situated locally in Västerbotten, and in these cases the focus was partly shifted from “welfare” to “inland”. The threat to welfare seemed to be likened to the impossibility of living and ageing in the sparsely populated areas of Västerbotten.

Thirdly, population ageing was often represented as an *unproblematised cause of different problems* and was therefore distanced, thus becoming abstract and separated from the socio-economic context that produced it. Therefore, by first referring to the naturalised threat of population ageing, the articles could then suggest certain orientations for politics where the suggested urge for the preparatory planning for population ageing could rule out other political questions. Even though it was not always explained, population ageing was ascribed explanatory value. By naturalising a demographic situation as a self-evident reason to carry through certain political ideas, references to population ageing were also used to suggest solutions to perceived social problems in a way that made political decisions look like administrative measures against the inevitable threat.

Illustrations

There were various kinds of illustrations that often supported the themes detected in the content in different ways (see Figure 1 for an example): population ageing was a serious and threatening thing that had to do with costs, care and older people. The older people were, however, never portrayed as active. Furthermore, there was a focus on experts in the illustrations just as in the texts.

Figure 1. Population ageing as a ticking time bomb (from DN, November 24, 2006)



Note: Reprinted with the permission of DN.

The most frequent kind of visual illustration consisted of small passport-like *portrait photographs* of experts of different kinds, showing no significant facial expressions. Photographs are often seen as being neutral and are often referred to as having only a referential function (Hillesund 1994). The number of photographs of experts in the studied material (very often the same persons over and over again) can, however, not be considered to be only referential. As media content consists of relatively few persons taking up the majority of the content space, these persons come forth as *media elites* who define and interpret events and situations and legitimise concepts, norms and the positions used in the representations (Edström 2006). In the articles illustrated with portrait photographs there was no obvious communication between the photo and other visual codes. However, the corresponding headlines often connoted threat by including expressions like “Global problem, but inland first out” (VK July 7, 2007b) and “Crash on its way” (DN October 5, 2005). These headlines were articulated with the solemn faces of the portrait photographs and supported the threat-connoting headlines.

A large percentage of the articles were illustrated by *graphs, maps* or *charts*. These figures often visualised, for example, statistics and estimations of the proportions of older and younger persons in the contemporary population and the population in the future. These illustrations bring a sense of *logos* and facticity into the context, inviting the audience to comprehend the credibility of the articles' messages logically. Even though the figures alone did not always represent population ageing as necessarily threatening, the articulation with the content and headline often accomplished such a reading. One article (VK July 7, 2007a) was illustrated by two bar graphs that showed the population pyramids of the inland and of the Umeå area in 2025. The graphs were articulated with the headline "Old-age bomb to detonate soon" and the caption read "... When the pyramid looks more like a nuclear bomb cloud the burden for those who work will be extremely heavy". One quote from the article was magnified. It said: "It is unsustainable. We cannot have a society consisting of pensioners only, such a society has long since ceased to function".

Apart from the portrait photographs of experts and various types of tables there were also *photographs depicting medical care situations*. A typical example depicted anonymous nurses pushing a hospital bed in a corridor. Such photographs could very well represent an ordinary workday for nurses, but when they were articulated with the headlines an atmosphere of threat was created: "More pensioners threaten welfare" (VK June 14, 2000) and "Baby-boomer generation triples our health care costs" (DN July 29, 2008). The photographs helped to define problems in the future as having to do with older people, economy and care.

Some articles were illustrated with *pictures of unnamed older people* or *close-ups of an old person's hands*, metonymically illustrating the category "older people" in general. Just like the images of care situations, but unlike the workings of graphs and charts, such illustrations can be said to have an emotive function (Hillesund 1994), thus appealing to a sense of solidarity through their articulation with headlines such as "Dare to stand up for the elderly and the geriatric care staff" (VK April 7, 2009). The ones that were addressed and prompted to act were not those who identified themselves as old (or as geriatric care staff). The old-age positions that were hereby

constituted often connoted anonymity and passivity, but also a need to act in a way that portrays a well-deservedness of older people (and care-staff).

Some of the articles representing population ageing contained illustrations that set out to *depict the Northern regions' inland of Sweden*. Such illustrations occurred only in the local VK. The region was mostly illustrated by a photograph of a solitary farm or a derelict house (VK July 11, 2007; VK March 12, 2009), and showed a striking absence of persons and human activities. The photographs can be said to have an emotive function by creating dystopian connotations to desolation and connoting "loneliness" and "desertedness". As this desolation is unwanted, it is emphasised through articulations with headlines like "impossible situation for rural municipalities" (VK March 12, 2009).

Problem-laden Metaphoric Language of Population Ageing

Population ageing seemed to give rise to the use of metaphorical language. Even though the metaphors were of very different characters, sometimes innovative, and at other times clichéd, they all made population ageing comprehensible by associating meanings from other contexts.

The process of population ageing was sometimes described as a *challenge*: "see it as a challenge and cheer if only for one day" (VK August 13, 2004). Even though they were potentially charged with positive connotations, expressions like "the demographic development is one of Sweden's biggest challenges" (VK May 8, 2008), or "difficult" (DN May 16, 2001), "major" (DN May 29, 2001), "substantial" (DN March 14, 2003) or "serious" (AB April 24, 2007) challenges were only very rarely articulated with anything that was described in terms of desire. Seemingly, the challenge metaphor was rather used to point to the fact that if this challenge was not met, it would lead to terrible consequences.

More commonly, the threat of population ageing was described in terms of a *problem* or *crisis*; "population ageing" was likened to expressions like "the crisis threat" (DN June 23, 2004), "age crisis" (VK July 13, 2007) or just "problem" (AB January 25, 2002), and the distribution of people in different ages was described as "distorted" (VK July 7, 2007), suggesting that something had happened that had dramatically dislocated a former, and better, status quo. The future was described as "dark" (DN February 21, 2002), and adjectives used in order to emphasise the nature of the

problem to come were “nasty”, “unwanted” and “galloping” (VK July 13, 2007). One writer of a debate article stated: “One prepares for an acid test” (DN March 12, 2009). A few news articles referred to a report called “The demographic desert is spreading over Sweden” (Wikner 2009).² The severity of the expected desertification was emphasised by VK’s statement that “The threat of desertification must be fought off” (VK July 30, 2009).

Within a scientific demographic discourse, population ageing is commonly understood as a parallel process that includes both a declining fertility rate and an increasing longevity rate (cf. Harper & Leeson 2008). The metaphors that were used to describe the process of population ageing, however, focused on the expected rise in the proportion of older people in the population to a much higher degree than on the expected decrease in the proportion of younger people. The most common way to describe this rise was by using the word *boom*: “retiree-boom” (DN November 18, 1991), “grey panther-boom” (DN October 10, 1999), “old age-boom” (DN March 25, 2007) “senior-boom” and “grandma-boom” (DN August 18, 1999). In Swedish, the word *boom* is usually explained as “a sudden, very strong upswing” (the National Encyclopedia: boom) that indicates both content (upswing) and form (sudden, very strong). Therefore, the word *boom* infers a change that is not necessarily valued. To stress the problematic context of the boom, it was therefore often articulated with more value-laden words and expressions: “Pessimists croak about the senior boom” (DN August 18, 1999).

Slightly more drastic was the similar use of the word *shock*, implying the sudden and dramatic impact of population ageing: “The baby-boom is over and the ageing shock awaits” (DN January 2, 1999). The word “shock” infers the notion of a shocked subject: often “society”. This seemed to be deliberate because many articles, specifically debate

²The use of the word “desert” articulates well with how old age is often conceptualised as a period of sterility. It also positions older people outside the economy in a way that has often been criticised (Narushima 2005; Warburton & McLaughlin 2005). But “desert” also has other qualities that are picked up on, for example the potential to “spread” – which is to explain metaphorically a demographic tendency or process in terms of surface.

articles, pointed out how ill-prepared society was to meet the expected population ageing.

However, there were also even stronger metaphors. Population ageing was often compared with a *bomb*: “age bomb” (VK July 13, 2007), “ageing bomb” (VK July 4, 2007a), “population bomb” (DN October 10, 1999), or an *explosion*: “age explosion” (AB August 21, 2003), “old-age explosion” (VK June 14, 2000). The bomb and explosion metaphors constitute population ageing as something that will happen suddenly and forcefully, and as something that threatens to destroy something. Even though there is a suddenness to several of these metaphors, many were formulated so that the reader would understand that these bombs and explosions were expected. The expressions “ticking bomb” and “timed demographic bombs” (DN April 26, 2004; DN November 24, 2006) install measured time as a factor. A similar reference exists in the phrase “The situation today is the calm before the storm” (DN February 7, 2004). “The storm” is a metaphor for population ageing that brings notions of uncontrollable natural forces into the representation. The “ticking” of “timed” bombs and the awareness of the storm that is to replace the calm constitute the argument that was often promoted: population ageing is happening and we must start preparing for it. The critique inserted the supposed fact that nothing was being done.

“Othering” Metaphors of Older People

Even though a large number of the total amount of articles did not mention older people explicitly as a category at all, some articles did, and there was often a clear distance built into the expressions. One common way of referring to older people was in terms of “our elderly” or “our old” (AB November 7, 1996; DN October 26, 1996; VK December 22, 1988). This kind of pronoun simultaneously indicates an *addressed* and an *addressing* community (Nilsson 2008; Rørbye 1998). Expressions like “our old” instigate a “we” that in many respects equals “society”. This “we” is supposed to attend to the needs of older people, but it is also a “we” that owns, as it were, the elderly. This construction of older people can be understood as a way to highlight a category that is otherwise often neglected in public debate, and as an active desire to discharge the category from responsibility, but, as Nilsson (2008: 106) has

put it, it simultaneously “robs the category of agency”. A similar duality is maintained in the metonymic use of hair colour. Older people were sometimes referred to as “the grey” (DN July 12, 1998) or “the silvery-haired” (DN November 11, 2005). In these cases hair colour seemed to signify a collective (“them”) in a way that embodied difference (from “us”). However, grey hair was also used in self-descriptions, as in one letter to the editor in which the writer brought up the rise in the cost of medicine and health care for older people. “The grey-hair ranks ferment” (AB June 1, 2009), says the writer, using grey hair as a metonymy for older people, the word “ranks” to suggest (military) unity among older people, and the parable “ferment” to illustrate a situation where something grows in strength and proportion.

Sometimes older people were referred to quite respectfully as “older people”, “pensioners” or “50+”. Less positive references were terms like “oldies”. Even though condescending expressions were not used very often, the material did contain ageist examples where older people were referred to using negatively charged stereotypes (Andersson 2008). One article began by stating: “Germany considers introducing voting rights for children to compensate that a majority of the electorate soon wear out the park benches and feed pigeons. That is a sharp reminder of how rapidly populations are ageing in Europe” (DN November 9, 2003). In this quote it is obvious that the description of the category of older people is consciously demeaning. It is in order to make the German consideration comprehensible that the category of older voters needs to appear in a negative light. The negatively invested description, “wear out the park benches and feed pigeons”, strengthens a view of older persons as standing outside the labour market and as being taxing to the economy.

The words *obstacle* and *hinder* also occurred with some frequency in the articles: “The rising proportion of older people seems to be the true obstacle to growth” (DN December 10, 1993). Such descriptions hint at a wider metaphorical understanding of the political economy and social life in terms of a path or a track. Consequently, older people are understood as hindering an expected progress: “In modern industrial society you do not get more adept over the years but only slower, and thus increasingly becomes an obstacle in the system” (DN January 29, 1992).

Obstacles also imply standstill and stagnation, words that are often articulated with ideas of the past, of nostalgia, retrospection – and old age (Lundgren 2010).

Discursive Patterns

Taken together, the content and visual imageries used in the news-press representations of population ageing displayed three interrelated discursive patterns.

Creation of Seriousness

The first and most prominent strategy was *the creation of seriousness*, both in the sense of severity or gravity, and in the sense of credibility. This was accomplished in a number of ways. The articulation of population ageing with graphs, maps and tables gave the representations the power of impersonality and a scientific legitimisation, which helped to strengthen the truth claims. A further contribution to this impression was the articulation of such expert knowledge in numbers and statistics combined with quite value-laden words and predictions:

If we divide the number of elderly people over the age of 65 with the number of people aged 20–64, this ratio will increase significantly until 2050, which seemingly gives grounds for the horror scenario. Isn't the demographic disaster then a fact? (AB September 24, 2007)

Even though the word “seemingly” is used, the article quoted above used a mathematical argument and a statement concerning the result of this calculation to invoke the idea of population ageing as a serious threat.³

The frequent use of photographs of politicians and other experts also contributed to the construction of population ageing as an important and severe phenomenon that justifies it being dealt with and commented on by

³ The use of dependency ratios is central to arguments referred to as apocalyptic demography. The way such ratios have created divisions between dependent and non-dependent people in the population solely on the basis of age has been critiqued (Gee 2002; Robertson 1997).

supposedly competent people. Over-explicit headlines that risked being interpreted as exaggerated were charged with *ethos* through their articulation with photographs of named experts and well-known politicians. However, a sense of seriousness and severity could also be achieved without the references to expert systems. The repeated use of the bomb metaphor implied the significance and gravity of population ageing. The efforts to metaphorically illustrate or describe population ageing in terms of a bomb, a shock or an explosion, as well as the graphic uses of statistics, also enacted pseudo-concreteness (Žižek 2006: 556) – a concrete figure chosen to represent the vague threat. Maps showing the areas in the world that were most exposed to problems associated with population ageing, and illustrative population pyramids, reduce a range of different aspects into unambiguous and pseudo-concrete visualisations, suggesting that the meanings of population ageing are possible to understand and even predict.

In some of the debate articles written by oppositional politicians, severity was constructed as an effect of the author taking the position of whistleblower. The author was telling the public about something that was hitherto unknown, while suggesting that it was known *but ignored* by the ruling political majority. This type of positioning charged population ageing with severity, and not only because the phenomenon was itself constructed as a severe threat, but also because it positioned the reader as extradited to, and deceived by potentially ignorant or even lying politicians.

Dichotomisation

The second strategy that was used was *dichotomisation*. Following a logic of equivalence, the articles formed dichotomised and often oversimplified positions that were pitted against each other. Of these, there were particularly three partly interrelated dichotomies that reappeared: the young/old, the taxpayers/dependent and the whole of Sweden/the sparsely populated Norrlandic inland. An example of an articulation of the first two dichotomies is found in the following quote:

We are living longer and do not have to work in old age. But we also give birth to fewer children. The balance between the young, economically active, and the old, supported, thus becomes increasingly skewed. (VK July 4, 2007b)

In the quote, the relation between different parts of the population is economised by articulating “young” with “economically active”, and “old” with “supported”. The dichotomies were sometimes illustrated by using staged photographs (VK July 7, 2007) or stylised graphics (DN November 24, 2006) in which older persons stood on the one side and younger persons on the other, thus creating an image where generations stood against each other. It was sometimes suggested that a “generation war” was to be expected (DN August 18, 1999; DN October 19, 2005; DN January 18, 2006). Something that contributed further to the logic of difference structuring the discourse on population ageing were the many illustrations of older people depicted metonymically by photographs that emphasised the details that separate older persons from younger ones: crookedness, white hair or old female hands. Similarly, population ageing itself was represented as part of a dichotomy that consisted of population ageing and disaster on the one hand, and welfare and growth on the other.

At first, the dichotomy “old/young” seemed all-embracing. The imagery that was used to represent older people was often imbued with exoticism and focused on the features that supposedly distinguish older people from younger: grey hair, wrinkles, the use of a cane and care dependency. However, the articles displayed two kinds of old-age positions, thereby highlighting the category as a floating signifier (Laclau 1996). On the one hand, older people were comprehended as part of the equivalential chain of identities that were threatened by population ageing. In these cases, the exotic descriptions seemed to create a sense of compassion on behalf of the audience. On the other hand, there were times when older people seemed rather to be equated with the term population ageing itself. When this happened, the category of older people was comprehended as part of the threat rather than as the potential victims of this threat. Older people could in such cases be articulated with notions of actually *being* the obstacles of population ageing, as mentioned in the previous section: “Pensioners a hinder” (DN December 10, 1993).

Use of Emotion

The third strategy included *the use of emotions*. Metaphors are said to arouse emotions that guide our understandings of the world, and writers of newspaper texts utilise the potential of metaphor, for example to

“reassure the audience, or in contrast, to increase anxiety or raise anger” (De Landtsheer 2009: 63). The explicit metaphorical references to future catastrophes in the material worked to address feelings of anxiety or even fear. The strongly alarming and disturbing metaphors of population ageing were often articulated with illustrative graphs connoting objectivity. However, the metaphorical language was also repeatedly articulated with photographs of single older persons in vulnerable positions. The reader was thereby positioned to feel sympathy for the category of older people, imbuing the discourse with the idea of a stereotyped “ideal victim” (Lindgren & Lundström 2010; Nilsson 2003) of population ageing.

Emotions were also present in many references to welfare. These references seemed to engender feelings of national pride and having something to protect, and the articulations with welfare often connoted complex symbolic notions of a cherished “Swedish welfare state” or “people’s home of Sweden” – expressions that lie at the heart of the Swedish self-image (Hultén 2006). Research has pointed out the particular impact that the media in general has had on maintaining and reproducing a sense of national community and identity (Anderson 1983; Löfgren 1993), and how such national identities are in turn charged with emotions (Nilsson 2000).⁴

Populist Formation of an Empty Threat

“Apocalyptic imaginations are decidedly populist”, writes Swyngedouw (2010: 219) in his thought-provoking analysis of climate-change discourse. Even though our material was not apocalyptic in its entirety, we argue that some important populist features were displayed in the representations, and that seemingly sober and “neutral” representations supported rather than contradicted these features.

⁴ In the Swedish case, there are some arguments that the welfare state in the shape of “the people’s home” no longer exists, just as there are efforts made to explain that “the people’s home” is still a credible description of the Swedish welfare system, even though “the market and the family nowadays are more common complements in welfare provisions” (Bergh 2010: 113).

“The people”

What is central to populist processes is the division of the population into two antagonistic camps, where one camp consists of “the people”. The unity of these respective camps is dependent on the possibility to articulate otherwise separate demands through a common equivalence. In the case presented here, it was the different and distinguished demands and fears related to population ageing that gave rise to the position of “the people”. This position was often present in the articles in terms of a “we” or an “us” that sometimes referred to and included society as a whole, sometimes “the wage-earners” and sometimes “the not yet olds”. There were differences in what population ageing was taken to imply, and it was often not defined at all, which means that it was left to the reader to interpret. However, population ageing was described as threatening welfare in all the articles.

Following the populist logic of the apocalyptic demography discourse, this “we” (“the people”, “the welfare”) is possible to view as an empty signifier that was constituted as being threatened by the likewise empty and antagonistic signifier “population ageing”. Population ageing was installed, so to speak, as an empty threat that simultaneously managed to form a link between the range of different identities and demands that constituted the “we” in the first place (Laclau 2005; Žižek 2006). Without population ageing there would be no obvious connections between the particular demands for the improvement of care services for older people, decent retirement pensions and a more generous labour immigration policy, that were now brought together, nor would there be “a people” (an “us”) to attribute views and demands to.

A Global Threat

Important to note is that although some geographic areas were described as more threatened than others, the threat of population ageing was primarily constituted as a global threat: “Collapse or not, that is the question. And the question is global” (VK July 13, 2007) or “A development that [...] will affect both Umeå and Stockholm, and the densely populated continent” (VK July 13, 2007). This meant that even though the “we” that was constituted as threatened was sometimes

a very local “we”, it was always implicitly included in a universal “we” that consisted of all people, populations or states. This constant potential of widening the “we” increased the scope of the threat, but simultaneously obscured the possibly particularistic character of these positions.

The positions that were constituted as threatened were thus seldom (if at all) described as heterogeneous political subjects with potentially antagonistic views on the matter, but were rather portrayed as universal victims of the threat of population ageing, “suffering from processes beyond their control” (Swyngedouw 2010: 221). This tendency also existed in debate articles signed by politicians. Even though they represented a particular political party, the described threat (i.e. population ageing) tended to unite the supposed victims of this threat into one homogenous category in a way that de-politicised the matter of population ageing. By naturalising the threat and homogenising the supposed victims, population ageing and any suggested measures stood out as self-evident and beyond the political realm.

An External Enemy

What is central to populism is not just the constitution of an enemy, but also the location of that enemy outside of the system. In the studied case this meant setting aside the possibility that the processes of population ageing are inherent to modern societies. For example, modern aspects such as improved and increasingly technology-intensive equipment, more expensive medical care, better living conditions, norms of “finding oneself” before starting a family, increased demands for higher education and so on, all contribute to higher average age rates and lower fertility rates. These are all things that most people find central to an individualised democratic modern lifestyle and which they do not wish to change. By ignoring how our way of living and thinking contribute to a situation of population ageing, populist discourse produces population ageing as not only a threatening enemy, but also as an external enemy that is conceptualised as inexorable.

The external enemy of population ageing was often described as an impediment. The “fantasy” of a threatening enemy thus has qualities that bear likeness with what Glynos and Howarth (2007) have called the “horrific” and “beatific” dimension of fantasy; at the same time that

the enemy is seen as foretelling disaster, it is also conceptualised as the impediment that *hinders* the vague notion of the good society being realised: if “we” only solve the problem, everything will be fine.

Postponed Catastrophe

Even though the bomb metaphor seems to bring with it an antagonistic charge and a sense of immediacy and acute menace, the reports always placed the threat of catastrophe in the future. This postponement was brought into the bomb metaphor by the fuse, which was never named in the text but was clearly visible in illustrations, suggesting that we are on the path to disaster, but not yet there (see Figure 1). Of course, this postponement of the awaited disaster also made it difficult for the reader to determine whether the news-press articles represented a reasonable interpretation of population ageing. As the apocalyptic discourse thus never proved itself to be wrong, it made it possible for the news-press to continue using the same populist rhetoric (cf. Mullan 2002; Swyngedouw 2010).

Paradoxical Liberalisation Tendencies

The suggested measures brought up in the news-press representations of population ageing show quite a large amount of liberalisation tendencies. “Increased fees required in care” (DN May 12, 2002) and proposals for “exposing welfare services to competition” (DN December 8, 1999) are obvious examples. Consequently, these representations came to support the taking up of certain well-trodden political and ideologically charged positions; it supported the political focus on an employment policy that aimed to increase labour force participation by increasing the retirement age and levels of labour immigration, and also made it more difficult to get sick leave or live on income support. Paradoxically, the liberalising solutions, which were presented as administrative measures, were proposed under the pretext of saving the general – i.e. the state offering its services to all citizens – and tax-financed welfare. Welfare surfaced as an empty signifier that was able to host otherwise antagonistic views. The visual imagery supported the suggestions made by displaying

images connoting severity and threat, thus indirectly contributing to feelings of inevitability.

Conclusions

The studied newspapers showed some minor differences in the way they represented population ageing. Such differences have been described as inherent in different newspaper types – tabloids and newspapers – and the former should not be criticised because it is unlike the latter (Connell 1998). Our main point is, however, that all the studied representations, taken together or studied separately, supported some central and partly collective features. They unambiguously displayed population ageing as a threat, they appointed politicians and academics as experts rather than “ordinary people”, “wage-earners” or “older people”, and they seldom defined the concept of population ageing explicitly. These features were built up and legitimised by a range of recurring patterns: the creation of seriousness; the use of dichotomisation; and the use of emotion.

While discourse theory has otherwise been said to be a blunt and abstract tool for analysing how language is used in interaction, it proved helpful for the aim of this article: to tease out and visualise the concrete articulations that constituted the aforementioned features and patterns. The theorisation of populism by writers influenced by discourse theory further showed valuable in providing an explanation of the potential political implications of the kinds of equivalences found in the material.

Looking at the material from a perspective of populism, there were some complexities concerning the chain of equivalence constituting the ones threatened by population ageing. It consisted of two main positions: wage-earners and older people. However, while wage-earners were exclusively positioned as threatened, the news-press did not offer any such unambiguous positions of identification for older people. Older people were rather positioned as floating signifiers – sometimes conceptualised as the ones most affected, even victimised, by the threat of population ageing, and at other times described as actually being guilty of population ageing. This floating character made it somewhat more difficult to link the positions within the chain of equivalence together, and to raise general demands in its name (cf. Griggs & Howarth 2008: 125). If the logic of populism in the

news-press representations were to be truly populist in the theoretical sense of the word – and thus able to attract broader coalitions of people outside the news-press discourse, urging them to identify as a united collective raising collective demands as to what needs to be done in order to deal with population ageing – it would need a more unequivocal scheme of the process and its involved identities: a more palatable fantasy. Such a uniting logic is inherent in many democratic struggles and is what constitutes the strength of populist reason.

However, and importantly, such a move towards an all-embracing populist logic would risk blinding us to the nuances of the political processes of population ageing (cf. Žižek 2006). Analysing the Swedish news-press, such an absence of a multifaceted representation of population ageing is a discernible fact. With the help of populist discourse, including a sometimes powerful and hard-hitting visual imagery comprising illustrations as well as choices of words, the news-press representations offer dualistic rather than a plurality of positions. However, one of our key findings is that this was not accomplished solely by the articles that were “apocalyptic” in character. Furthermore, articles that seemed quite different, and written from a seemingly “neutral” point of view, contributed to, rather than contradicted, the populist features. Taken together, the implicit choice posed to the audience (the “we”, “us” or “society”) stood between doing nothing and awaiting disaster, or following the suggested measures with the effect that *a demographic situation is made to naturalise certain political ideas, making them appear administrative, rather than political in character*. This is a choice that is not really a choice.

In this article, we have stayed within the frames of the news-press discourse, and we have argued that its visual imagery displays populist tendencies that work ideologically to de-politicise the issue of population ageing. These tendencies, although not devoid of some ambiguity, offer certain positions for the audience. They do not say, however, how the audience will react. It has been noted that people’s responses to populist and post-political tendencies displaying ineligible choices are themselves often populist – people will either protest or ignore them. One topic for further research would be to investigate how people respond to the images of population ageing that are presented by the news-press, among

others, and how such images are made comprehensible within the frames of everyday life.⁵

Acknowledgements

The research is financed by the Swedish Research Council and is included in the Ageing and Living Conditions Programme at Umeå University, Sweden.

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⁵ As a continuation of this research, we have, during 2011, interviewed politicians, health care workers and people over the age of 55 and living in the inland of Sweden about their conceptions of population ageing and how they think and plan for this future "challenge".

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- DN July 12, 1998. *Vart går börsen när de grå säljer?* [*Where Does the Stock Market Go When the Grey Sell?*] (H. Bergström).
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