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New collective identities and alliances
A study of activism in Möllevången, Malmö

This paper discusses the aims and preliminary findings of my ongoing PhD project; an ethnographic study that explores the conditions for and the consequences of political activism, with special regard to the creation of new collectivities and identities, changes of urban space, and activism as one pathway of migrant emplacement. Two main methods serve to collect data: participant observation and in-depth interviewing. I use biographical interviews in order to collect personal narratives – with the aim of exploring the experiences of individual activists in the context of their life trajectories in general and their life in the town of Malmö in particular. The activism that I study takes place in the context of neoliberal urbanism and restructuring, immigration, and a rise of right-wing groups and populism in Sweden.

The main assumption is that collective actions contribute to the social and spatial emplacement of people with different social, economic, ethnic and educational backgrounds, and create spaces for shared visions and solidarities. Collective action in public space is conceptualised in the thesis as an important resource for the public articulation of new, inclusive identities. I explore whether such identities remain local or bear a more far-reaching political potential, i.e. if they – in case of the Swedish town of Malmö in the second decade of the 21st century – challenge regional and national anti-immigrant sentiments, and affect migrants’ self-perception in relation to the city and its history.

The activists I focus on in Malmö are organised in local extra-parliamentarian political groups and networks that arrange meetings, campaigns, demonstrations and other collective actions in public space as well as online. Their activism concerns migrant and asylum seekers’ rights, anti-racism, and ‘right-to-the-city’-struggles, and moves in between the fields of charity to advocacy to
more radical forms of direct action like blockades and sit-ins. These groups are part of a larger network of leftist extra-parliamentarian activists that struggle for urban and social justice, in Malmö, other cities in Sweden as well as abroad.

Two important sources of urban social change are of particular interest when studying activism in Malmö; migration patterns and neoliberal restructuring. They produce ‘new battle zones around privatization, retrenchment and social polarization’.\(^2\) My research aims at explaining how these global forces of economic restructuring, migration and dispossession unfold in the town Malmö. I analyse the trajectories of power as they emerge in the form of activists’ collective actions of resistance, in a particular urban location, the neighbourhood of Möllevången. I use the definition of ‘contentious politics’ for what I call activism, as referring to ‘concerted, counter-hegemonic social and political action, in which differently positioned participants come together to challenge dominant systems of authority, in order to promote and enact alternative imaginaries’.\(^3\) The hegemonic norms that are challenged can be located in the state, the market or civil society.\(^4\)

In contrast to scholarship that uses ethnic background as a principal analytical category, I focus on collective actions in public space as arenas of action and interaction – where ethnicity or migrant status may or may not matter for the people involved, but are just one of the many markers of diversity. Class is for example an important variable in history and also as an activist narrative in contemporary Möllevången. Möllevången is represented in tourist guides as well as the municipality’s public material as ‘the diverse’ neighbourhood of Malmö, and Malmö as the diverse city among other cities in Sweden. Focusing on activism as a particular kind of urban practice, while doing research among people I conceptualise as migrants, is a way to go beyond the ‘ethnic lens’.\(^5\) I further argue that, in order to be useful for studying activism in Malmö, the concept of diversity should not only include the common aspects of diversity found in migration literature (most often geared toward difference based on people’s origin), but must allow for including also political affiliation, migrant generation, and the (urban) location as related to the perceptions of belonging and modalities of identification.
Dispossession, displacement and emplacement
Several influential scholars have convincingly argued that the most significant structural social conflicts in the 21st century concern the production, control, and effects of urban processes. David Harvey describes them as the neoliberal drive towards ‘accumulation by dispossession’. The processes of dispossession produce various forms of physical and social displacement and are currently being experienced by a growing number of people, whether or not they have physically moved to another residence, city or country. Displacement includes not only border-crossing migration precipitated by war, so-called development, structural adjustment and impoverishment, but also the increasing precarity of those considered locals, who experience unemployment, part-time employment, lower wage rates, loss of employment security, forced relocation and downward social mobility. Displacement as a result of the processes of dispossession is not related to the origins, culture or the inherent properties of the displaced. Whether we consider ourselves natives or of migrant decent, anywhere around the world, people are subject to the forces of dispossession and displacement.

The activists whom I interviewed in Malmö understand (and many of them experience) dispossession and displacement within a concrete urban setting. For them, it is not ‘the end result of large and abstract processes … it is the daily experience of people that shapes their grievances, establishes the measure of their demands, and points out the targets of their anger’. These experiences are not isolated instances of frustration that lead to acts of disobedience. Rather, they are ‘clues to underlying structures and relationships which are not observable other than through the particular phenomena or events that they produce’.

The residents and activists of Malmö experience dispossession differently; people are unevenly affected, depending on their legal, social and economic situation. Some activists who are relatively privileged (in terms of education, employment and dwelling), act in solidarity with more vulnerable people such as e.g. undocumented migrants, while some activist trajectories coincide with less privileged personal trajectories of dispossession and displacement. Dispossession and displacement, in whatever form they take, may
facilitate connections to other displaced and dispossessed people.11 My research shows that urban sociabilities enacted in the neighbourhood of Möllevången – established by people who despite their differences construct domains of similarities and shared experiences – enable the transformation of precarity into struggles against the growing disparities and displacement of global capitalism.

I approach the concepts of dispossession, displacement and emplacement also as related to subjective feelings of belonging and the feeling of ‘the right to be here’.12 These concepts provide the frame for understanding the activists’ life stories against the background of my ethnographic observations.

Migrants as a broad analytical category

None of the activists I met and observed in the course of fieldwork originally came from the neighbourhood of Möllevången, and very few were born in Malmö. Some activists are internal migrants from other parts of Sweden, both rural and urban; some are from the cities in neighbouring countries of Norway and Denmark, and others are migrants from war-ridden countries such as Afghanistan, Syria and Palestine. In my thesis, they are therefore all seen as migrants.13

Once I approached all of those who moved to Malmö within the same analytical category of migrants, I could see that the biographical interviews with individual activists reveal a shared narrative. This is a narrative of displacement – the act of leaving one’s place of birth and childhood, whether because of war and poverty, or lack of work and study opportunities and service facilities. At the same time, it is also a narrative of emplacement – the re-establishing of life in a particular locality, building networks, making friends, and developing a feeling of belonging to a new place: Malmö and Möllevången.

By including both internal and transborder migrants into the category of ‘migrants’, I am able to capture a broad range of experiences and does not end up in the trap of the ethnic lens which would exclude from the picture the migrants to Malmö from other parts of Sweden since they are not ethnic ‘others’, or children to migrant parents which many of the Malmö-activists are. By using migrants in this broad analytical sense I challenge the rather narrow use of the term migrant in public discourse (today ‘migrants’ connote war
refugees, European Romani and labour migration). However, in doing so, I do not dismiss the critical awareness of migrants’ different positionalities within hierarchies of power, and the various existing forms of structural and everyday discrimination and racialization.

My research focuses on activists, not migrants, while at the same time being interested in political activism as a pathway of migrant emplacement. In the approach I am advocating, I set aside the liberal language of integration (often talked about in terms of ‘culture’ and the ‘functional’ domains of integration, such as e.g. labour market, within a particular nation-state). Instead I focus on processes of migrant emplacement through activism. Emplacement is not just another way of naming integration. Unlike the terms integration or assimilation, as used in a discourse that targets migrants as threats to social cohesion, the term emplacement emphasizes the ongoing processes of establishing social relationships within space and time, as they encompass both migrants and non-migrants (generally differentiated by scholars and policy makers as either ‘migrant’ or ‘native’). Emplacement, as used in my research, is defined as the social processes through which a dispossessed individual builds or rebuilds networks of connection within the constraints and opportunities of a specific city.

**Möllevången – a ‘red zone’**

All activists I met during fieldwork have a relation to Möllevången, an inner city, socially mixed, historically working-class neighbourhood (of total 11,000 inhabitants as of 2015, out of the 328,000 totally in the city of Malmö), currently under gentrification. They either live in or close to this neighbourhood, or it is the place where they spend much of their daily and activist lives. The neighbourhood is known for its high presence of political representations and frequent collective actions in public space, but also of migrants (of different origins and generations). The latter is used in the city’s narrative to attract residents, tourists and investments.

When I talked to vendors and local businessmen they showed awareness and positive attitudes towards the vivid political life of the neighbourhood. They had also noticed changes in the population in the area since the turn of the century; more affluent young people are moving in while older and less affluent locals are moving out.
Several big demonstrations have taken place in Malmö and Möllevången the past few years, most recent, in March 2014, when 10,000 people marched against fascism and Nazism, as a reaction to the event when members of an ultra-right party (The Party of the Swedes) stabbed five leftist activists in Möllevången. Activists and protesters from the entire leftist spectre gathered on Möllevången square, and one of the speakers said: ‘We do not have the same opinions on all matters, but we are all anti-racist’. Möllevången provided a forum for negotiation across (political) difference, at the same time allowing collective mobilisation around common interests.

The location of Möllevången facilitates this kind of sociabilities to take place and is therefore an important pre-condition for the building of a strong activist space that, in turn, defines this neighbourhood as a ‘red zone’. Its history of class struggle, its central location in the city and still relatively cheap premises, the existence of a big square allowing for thousands of people to stand together, for mobilizations, a number of political cafés and other clearly left-wing meeting points, provide for a potent infrastructure for activist socialising. Möllevången was an important neighbourhood for the working class movement already in the beginning of 20th century; it is a defining location for urban struggles against displacement and dispossession in contemporary Sweden.

Möllevången is not only a geographical location and physical place but also a locus in and of narratives. Activists co-produce the history of Malmö and the neighbourhood of Möllevången. The statue Arbetets ära (The Glory of Labour) by Axel Ebbe (from 1931), placed on the square, is an important symbol of the workers’ movement. It represents women and men lifting up the city with their bare hands. The city – Malmö in the 1930s – is presented as an industrial city with a skyline of its factories. This working-class historical identity is much used in the contemporary narrative of the place that is today created and reproduced by activists.

‘We want Möllevången to remain what it has always been: an open and inclusive neighbourhood. You don’t have to be a ‘professional’ activist, or an expert in Marxism to be able to say: I don’t want any fascists or homophobes in my city’, said Showan Shattack, one of the activists who got life-threatening injuries by the
 ultra-rightists in the aforementioned night in March 2014. This quote illustrates the red-zone discourse of the neighbourhood, and the clear political stance it resides on. The activists challenge the power relations and norms that deny particular bodies to access urban space – such as Romani, the homeless, women, racialized youth, informal and illegal workers, undocumented migrants, disabled people and activists. They want to create a space for all people. In practice, this means excluding the people who represent or practice sexist and racist ideologies and attitudes, the members of The Party of the Swedes clearly not belonging to Möllevången – and not being given access to the neighbourhood.

Migrants’ emplacement in Möllevången

Examples of emerging friendship and activist ties can be found through the solidarity work of the migrants’ right activist groups Action against deportation and the Asylum group, which create spaces of daily interactions between local activists and newly arrived migrants (mostly from Afghanistan, Syria and Somalia). Their practical solidarity work includes help with finding shelter for and hiding the refugees, providing them with food, clothing, and access to health care as well as political activities such as demonstrations and sit-ins. Through these forms of activism, internal as well as trans-border migrants rather quickly develop a broad network of friends and acquaintances and with that comes a strong feeling of belongingness to the city and neighbourhood.

Another example of similar work as mentioned above is through the activist group Allt åt alla (Everything for Everyone), which engages in solidarity work with EU-citizens – the Romani from Romania and Bulgaria who beg in the streets in Malmö – supporting their struggle, through co-organized demonstrations and campaigns, for decent living conditions, and against their marginalization in Malmö and stigmatization in mainstream discourse. This also goes for the cultural and political centre called Kontrapunkt and the activists connected to it, who work with both refugees and Romani.

Several of the refugees and Romani who received support from the Malmö activists became activists themselves during the process of politicisation of their dispossession. For example, two activists
from Afghanistan planned and organized and carried out the Asylum March, which was a 32 day-long walk from Malmö to the capital Stockholm, organised to raise awareness about undocumented people’s situation, and to put migration policies on the national political agenda. The march involved hundreds of people; activists and supporters in different ways (participating in the march; hosting people along the way; donating food; etcetera). Some asylum seekers claimed that activism has in itself been an important factor for them to receive permanent residency in Sweden.

Lastly, the presence of anti-racist activism and discourses in Möllevången make people with transborder migrant background feel safe in this place, knowing that there are people who will care and stand up if any xenophobic incidents would occur in the neighbourhood.

Hence, activism is a non-ethnic form of migrant emplacement which connects migrants (both internal and transborder) in social relationships built on factors other than a claim to common origin and culture. By opening up opportunities for migrants’ emplacement in the city, activism contributes to the destabilization of the category of ‘immigrant’ as we know it in Sweden.

Creating collective identifications

Collective identification is the process in which social actors recognize themselves – and are recognized by others – as part of collectivities, and develop emotional attachments to them, always in interaction with other social actors. Collective identifications need not to refer to, e.g., class, gender, territory and migrant background, but – as discursively outlined by the activists in Malmö – may be based on shared orientations, values, attitudes, worldviews and lifestyles, as well as on shared experiences of action.

The activist scene in Möllevången presents urban conflicts in quite a different manner than the national mainstream discourse, which is influenced by the anti-immigrant rhetoric that has gained audience, not only in Sweden but also elsewhere in Europe. The activists frame it as a result of the crisis of global capitalism, and not as ‘a problem of immigration’. Allt åt alla is especially conscious of the economic aspects:
The EU citizens [a term used for Romani and other temporary migrants in Sweden\textsuperscript{23}] fleeing the crisis of capitalism are our allies. Their struggle for the right to housing and survival go hand in hand with our fight for the same. The right to housing should be unconditional, and apply to both the residents of Sorgenfri [referring to an encampment built by homeless EU citizens, on an empty industrial ground next to Möllevången where temporary visitors resided for two years] as the precarious worker who switch between third hand contracts, and everyone in between.\textsuperscript{24}

This is an example of how the activists break down the tradition of constructing identities as binaries of difference sustained by a cultural logic that dichotomises self and the stranger, in other words they do not represent migrants as bearers of cultural difference with regard to the natives.\textsuperscript{25} Hence, the activists in Möllevången do not use categories of ethnicity to interpret their (or others’) social situation, but instead employ a language of power relations and material differences. Their solidarity is framed in terms of the practical activities (e.g. joint demonstrations) and purposes (e.g. decent housing) of people collectively seeking to realise interests, and not in solidarity based on ethnic or cultural affiliation.\textsuperscript{26}

**Conclusions**

The form of activism in focus in this study promote a sense of belonging to an urban neighbourhood, and not on group identities related to migrant status and countries of origin. Collective identifications are thus based on shared orientations, values, attitudes, as well as on shared experiences of action and of precarity as experienced in Malmö. The lens of activism allows for highlighting the ways in which local and global concerns and dynamics of power are emplaced in Möllevången – a neighbourhood defined by immigration, activism as well as by the processes of urban gentrification. Locally organised political events and initiatives promote not only a sense of belonging to the neighbourhood but, for both internal or transborder migrants, become a pathway of social and spatial emplacement.
Political activism thus provides opportunities for people with different social, economic, ethnic and educational backgrounds to forge collective identifications around common interests and concerns.

The activists of Möllevången hold a relative kind of power in the sense of defining the place by the means of narratives as well as through actions such as demonstrations, festivals, book fairs, political posters and graffiti in public space as well as by living their everyday lives there. The activists (most of them being migrants to the neighbourhood) relate their power to the symbolism and history of the place, and its residents who support and share the values that this neighbourhood came to represent. The activists also claim power: the power to define conflicts; and they claim rights; by claiming the space and the right to be in (that part of) the city. Last but not least, they claim the right to making it a better place to live in – for all people, locals as well as newcomers as well as temporary visitors such as the Romani.

Their power is also demonstrated through their ability of building networks with activists and supporters outside of the city and of the country; and consequently, through their ability to quickly mobilize people from the outside. Places are always constructed through articulations of social relations which are not only internal to a locale but also linked to other places. The neighbourhood of Möllevången is defined by activists’ local and translocal relations that span the ‘red zones’ elsewhere in Sweden and in Europe.

**Noter**

1. Christina Hansen is a doctoral student at Malmö University since February 2013 in the doctoral program Migration, Urbanisation and Societal Change (MUSA) at the Department of Global Political Studies. She has an undergraduate and Master’s degree in Peace and Conflict Studies. Her research interests concern political activism, migration and urban restructuring.


4. These characteristics build on the definition developed and elaborated by
Tilly and Tarrow (2007). Contentious politics involve ‘interactions in which actors make claims bearing on someone else’s interests, leading to coordinated efforts on behalf of shared interests or programs, in which governments are involved as targets, initiators of claims or third parties. Contentious politics thus brings together three familiar features of social life: contention, collective action, and politics’ (Ibid., 4).


16. Glick Schiller and Çağlar, 2013

17. Malmö Turism, “Malmö,” ArrivalGuides.com (Malmö, October 2017),


23. EU-medborgare – EU citizens in English – is the common category used for people, of which many but not all are Romani from Romania and Bulgaria, travelling throughout Europe (using their right of mobility) in order to beg for living. The term EU citizens is considered a non-stigmatizing term.


**References**


