

Activists' role in the creation of Möllevången as a space for superdiversity

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I. INTRODUCTION

Five years ago, I defended my dissertation *Solidarity in Diversity: Activism as a Pathway of Migrant Emplacement in Malmö*.¹ My dissertation was the first comprehensive study made on what the sociologist Kimberly Creasap calls Sweden's strongest social movement scene.² The prominence of radical activism in Malmö in a national context are closely connected to the particularities of the neighbourhood of Möllevången, the area where their actions are concentrated. As I showed in my dissertation, activists play a critical role in the creation of Möllevången as a space for resistance.

Activists also play a critical role in the creation of Möllevången as a space for superdiversity. In my usage, I expand the concept to include not only the common aspects of diversity found in the migration literature, such as class and cultural and legal differences, but also political affiliation, migrant generation, and the (urban) location as related to perceptions of belonging.³ In this text, I revisit some of the observations that I made in my dissertation, focusing specifically on the relation between superdiversity and the reality of political activism today.

II. ACTIVISM IN MÖLLEVÅNGEN

Möllevången (popularly called Möllan) is socially and ethnically mixed, albeit gentrifying, inner-city

neighbourhood. Ever since the birth of the labour movement, Möllevången has been a place with strong left-wing traditions, and it has among the city's highest percentage of leftist voters. Since the 1980s, as the availability of cheap rental apartments facilitated the concentration of young activists from across the country and beyond, the area has been known as a stronghold and incubator of the extra-parliamentary radical left. Concretely, the activists are part of different yet interconnected extra-parliamentarian groups composed of people with left-radical outlooks such as syndicalism, anarchism, communism and autonomous Marxism.

Solidarity in Diversity contains interviews and observations of a movement that has historically been very closed to both researchers and journalists. The thesis focussed on the years 2013-16, a dramatic time that was characterized by the struggle against immigration controls; solidarity with the city's Roma settlements; recurrent antifascist mobilisations under the slogan 'Kämpa Malmö' after a nearly lethal instance of nazi violence in Möllevången; the Asylum March; and the movement's shift toward refugee aid during the 2015 "migrant reception crisis".⁴

With the terms 'solidarity' and 'diversity' in the thesis' title, I wanted to point to the various ways activists attempt to re-create the city and their aspirations for another, more equal and diverse society. It also refers to the diverse conditions of Malmö as a "migrant city"⁵ and the activists' ability to mobilise a diverse set of people. Is it still the case five years later?

III. SUPERDIVERSITY AND ACTIVISM IN MALMÖ TODAY

The activist scene in and around Möllevången is diverse in terms of lifestyles, age, and backgrounds even within one and the same activist group. Although all activists in Möllevången regard themselves as left-wing in the broadest sense, their political viewpoints, concepts, theories, and practices differ widely. The great majority of the activists are not born and raised in Malmö, and few, if any, are from Möllevången originally. Understanding that the activists are 'migrants' to Möllevången, makes it possible to rethink migration beyond the confines of international migration.

Most activists in Malmö are Swedish citizens from other parts of Sweden. Many of them have migrant backgrounds, i.e. they are born to immigrant parents, mostly from Middle Eastern and Latin American countries. Although these activists have full residency rights or legal citizenship and were even born in Sweden, they are still subject to anti-immigrant discourses that subject them to racialisation and marginalisation.⁶ Some activists are citizens of Nordic countries such as Norway and Denmark; others are non-citizen migrants from war-ridden countries, such as Afghanistan, Syria, and Palestine. Despite the diversity of trajectories, they share the act of leaving one's place of birth and childhood because of war and poverty or the lack of work, study opportunities, and service facilities, and the process of re-establishing one's life in a particular locality, building networks, making friends, and developing feelings of belonging to a new place (in this case, Malmö and Möllevången). There are of course crucial differences between those who migrated voluntarily and those who, in the process of migration, were dispossessed of their rights and citizenship. These fundamentally different trajectories nevertheless meet and merge through activism in Malmö.

The stories activists tell of Möllevången as "red" (the colour traditionally associated with socialism) and "anti-racist" help generate strong relations among activists, which are needed to facilitate mobilization. These articulations further attract not

only activists and leftist-oriented people in general to the neighbourhood but also asylum seekers – especially those whose applications have been rejected – who go to Möllevången to seek support from pro-asylum activists. Also, Roma migrants who hold citizenship in other EU countries are attracted here to seek employment – and sometimes beg – due to Möllevången's favourable conditions, including the presence of amiable people who defend them if attacked by passers-by.

In Möllevången we find a particular form of what cultural geographer Doreen Massey calls "throwntogetherness".⁷ It is a site where people from different places, with different social and ethnic backgrounds, and with different needs are thrown together and forced to seek new social contacts. When migrants and activists meet, networks are built and knowledge is shared. Through Möllevången and the solidarity they build between different struggles and between activists and migrants, they want to show that there are other ways of living in community that transcend differences between people based on citizenship, legal status, ethnicity, class and gender.

What activists and residents share is their strong emotional and ideological attachment to a place: Möllevången. Identification with Möllevången is central for activists in Malmö and this place-based identity is not ethnically bound. 'Being a Möllevången resident' is a referent for being left-wing or anti-racist, which is inclusive of different ethnic and racial identifications. This idea of Möllevången enables politically engaged people to construct a meaningful sense of self (an identity as being anti-racist, for example) and to create a sense of belonging to a meaningful place (an 'anti-racist' place). This shows the importance of place in providing the opportunities for networking across different clusters of activists. It also shows the importance of place for harbouring the identities and relationships of movements in quieter periods while waiting for a new opportunity to emerge for mobilization.⁸

However, as contradictory as it may seem, this kind of activism is increasingly becoming incorporated into the cultural diversity that

constitutes the attractiveness of the city in the context of neoliberal economic changes.⁹ The main threat against this space of resistance and diversity found in Möllevången is the ongoing but slow gentrification of the neighbourhood. When activists no longer can afford to live in this part of the town, its strength as political space will most certainly dissolve. As activists get displaced, diversity will too.

What speaks against an increased gentrification of Möllevången is the proportion of rental apartments in this neighbourhood. Despite being a centrally located neighbourhood in the city, half of Möllevången's housing stock are still rental premises. However, if the rents of these apartments and for local stores and businesses rise, and more rental apartments are converted into ownership flats, gentrification will grow. At that point, Möllevången's identity as a left-wing and anti-racist environment might come under threat.

IV. A MASSIVE SOLIDARITY MOVEMENT ENTERS THE ACTIVIST SCENE

From around 2018 up until a year ago the activist scene in Möllevången has been quieter compared to the years of my ethnographic fieldwork. In part, this can be explained by the Covid19 pandemic. But since Hamas' attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, and Israel's subsequent war of aggression, genocide and ethnic cleansing in Gaza, a new large and vivid movement has emerged. The Palestinian solidarity movement has had a major impact, both politically and physically, on the city's activist scene and the neighbourhood itself. It also illustrates how conditions of superdiversity, within a city and within a protest movement, can facilitate unity and solidarity as well as generate challenges, tension, and conflict.

Research shows that the left-right ideological scale plays a key role in attitudes toward Israel and Palestine in Sweden.¹⁰ Left-wing voters hold positive attitudes towards the Palestinian cause and right-wing voters hold positive attitudes towards Israel. It is therefore not surprising to see the vast public support for Palestine in Möllevången. Any visitor to Malmö would notice when entering Möllevången, seen through the

Palestinian flags hanging out of residential windows throughout the neighbourhood and people wearing *keffiyehs* (the Palestinian scarf). The roundabout at the heart of Möllevången was inaugurated as The Gaza Roundabout (*Gazarondellen*) during the Eurovision Song Contest in May 2024, when tens of thousands of protesters from all over the country gathered in Malmö to protest Israel's participation in the contest. Most illustrations on the graffiti wall as well as most political stickers on lampposts, benches etc. concern the war in Gaza. For more than one year now, people have mobilized every week to various demonstrations, sit-ins and public speeches. Every Sunday since the start of the war, there is a march from the city centre ending at the Möllevången square, showing support of the victims of the war, cease fire, and an ending of the Israeli occupation. When the Israeli military intensified its attacks on Lebanon, Lebanese flags and slogans in solidarity with the Lebanese became included in the activists' political rhetoric.

Several new activist groups were formed in Malmö in October 2023, such as Health workers for Palestine, Latinos for Palestine, Queers for Palestine, Students for Palestine, Malmö Academics for Palestine, Judiskt upprop (the Jewish appeal) formed by Jewish residents in Malmö, and Hayna Hon formed by Malmö residents with Palestinian background. The formation of new groups enables new connections and affiliations beyond the city's more long-lived groups, such as Asylgruppen (the Asylum Group) and Allt åt alla (Everything for Everyone). A new generation of young activists, even children and whole families, has been activated and politicised through their participation in the struggle for justice and peace. This activation contributes to, and builds on, the representation of Malmö as a superdiverse city. This representation is made possible by the highly diverse demographic composition of the people living there.

The solidarity mobilizations in Malmö intersect with numerous conflicts revolving around migration and diversity. An important context of the Palestinian solidarity movement in Malmö is the general story in Sweden of Swedish Muslims and Muslim migrants as "difficult to integrate" and

of Islam as fundamentally incompatible with Swedish “values”.¹¹ This story has gained strength throughout the political spectrum since the entrance of the far-right Sweden Democrats in the Swedish Parliament in 2010. The far-right holds racist and sexist values but nevertheless uses gender arguments to paint “the Muslim” as someone who is not able to live by gender equality and therefore Sweden must be protected from these Muslims.

Yet another important context of the current Palestinian movement is the use of “antisemitism” in the public debate as a political weapon to dismiss criticism against Israel and the support of the Palestinian cause.¹² Both these contexts, the general anti-Muslim rhetoric in Sweden and the use of “antisemitism” as a political weapon against the Palestinian cause, can help explain the perseverance of the solidarity protests in the past year and the close collaborations between Swedish activists and the new generation of activists with Middle Eastern backgrounds. It also helps to understand the importance of this movement to enhance and preserve the superdiversity and political activism of Malmö and Möllevången.

It may be argued though that the mobilisations concerning the Gaza war overshadows other current political struggles. Arguably, it is hard to mobilize for causes that are not as desperate as the atrocities and suffering of the civilians in Gaza and Lebanon. Nevertheless, the ongoing social movement in solidarity with Palestine has the potential to fuel and enhance the social movement scene in general, giving strength to other political struggles in the future such as the support of undocumented and Roma migrants or campaigns against racism, gentrification, neoliberalisation of the commons, or restrictive migration policies. In a book release in late October 2024, the Malmö based journalist, writer, and activist Shora Esmailian argued that it is necessary to merge the Israel-Palestine conflict with the climate crisis.¹³ The climate vulnerability of Palestinian communities under the Israeli occupation is critical.¹⁴ We can see the efforts made by Greta Thunberg (2024) and Fridays for Future to merge these two political struggles by publicly taking a stance for the

Palestinian cause, claiming that “as climate justice activists we also fight for justice and liberation for all oppressed and colonised peoples”. To see if and how this merging of struggles is happening in the activist scene in Malmö, further research is needed.

As all political mobilisations, the protests in the past year are not without challenges, tensions, and conflicts. The ongoing social movement against the Gaza war has attracted activists from various and diverse ideological groups and traditions, causing arguments about what political methods and slogans to apply. The Palestinian solidarity movement has also made visible the tensions between the movement and its outside, for example the disruptions and turbulence it has caused in both the Social Democrats and the Left Party. It has also created tensions between parts of Malmö’s Jewish and Muslim populations. One example is the Jewish-Muslim joint project Amanah, aiming to combat Antisemitism and Islamophobia in Malmö, which currently has a time-out due to collaboration difficulties.

A movement’s, or a city’s, superdiversity come with complex relationships and they may give rise to complex conflicts. The solidarity movement in the past year has nevertheless proved to be an enormous unifying force. Recent changes in the activist scene in Malmö confirms what I showed in my thesis. Möllevången is not only a place, but a symbol, a story of a city (Malmö) or a country (Sweden) as it can be: a superdiverse and radically open space in an increasingly authoritarian and repressive world.

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