Reinventing the People’s House: Time, Space and Activism in Multiethnic Stockholm

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Abstract
The paper focuses on an anti-austerity and anti-racist urban movement, emerging from the multiethnic precariat in Sweden’s most disadvantaged metropolitan areas. It has catalysed the reinvention of a common space with roots in the labour movement of the late 19th century, The People’s House, a meme for contemporary community centres, loaded with hopes of contesting racial stigma and structurally conditioned precarity of citizenship and labour. Scrutinising a specific case, the authors address the ambiguous emplacement of a People’s House in a Stockholm wrought by financialisation, polarising processes of segregation, the commodification of welfare institutions and interventions by competing NGO coalitions in a post-political age.

Keywords
precarity, racism, transversal politics, civil society, urban activism, neoliberalism, sociology

The People’s House shall be its castle, from where they shall defend what they have already won, but above all with the arms of spirit and power undertake new achievements.

Hjalmar Branting, 1898

[The] present is never at one with itself. It is riddled with time-holes torn open by the past’s unfulfilled promises for the future.

Jan Verwoert, 2009

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Vistas of Another Rebirth

The Hunger² is the title of a book on the birth pains of an epochal social transformation that was with the winds of time to transpire as the ‘exceptional’ Swedish welfare state. It confronts us, in the trails of a great famine, 1867–69, with historical memories of poverty, usurpation of the commons, arrogant ruling class neglect, and a massive overseas emigration as the 19th century drew to a close. Sweden was then one of the poorest countries in Europe, and only 6 per cent of the population had voting rights. Industrialisation was still at an early stage, with an incipient working class exposed to precarious livelihoods and working conditions, child labour and abject housing. It was a state of precarity that triggered critical thinking and politics of contestation. A broadening political subjectivity and unionisation was supported by a solidarity network of self-governing local community centres, The People’s Houses, (Swedish: Folkets Hus), cradles of democratic socialism across a changing nation (Ståhl, 2005). The first People’s House in Sweden was founded in the City of Malmö in 1893, and soon workers’ assemblies were established throughout the country. The People’s House drew its label from Maisons du Peuple, working-class meeting places for unions and political associations, initiated by the socialist cooperative movement in Belgium. It was a time when ‘the free word’ was still a vision (Ståhl, 2005: 13) and autonomous worker-driven meeting places seen as an essential ground for the struggle for freedom of speech and assembly.

The Swedish labour movement was to become pillar of one of the most successful models of democratisation, economic development and social welfare of the 20th century. At its zenith by the mid-1970s, it promised, under the insignia of international solidarity, the inclusion on equal terms of fellow humans fleeing wars and persecution, into a ramifying edifice of social, political, labour and cultural rights (Ålund and Schierup, 1991). This historical rebirth of the nation carries a critical message to our present, when Sweden can no longer legitimately claim ‘exceptionalism’ in terms of inclusionary solidarity and social justice (Schierup and Ålund, 2011). Indeed, Sweden figured in one of the world’s most prominent economic magazines (Financial Times, 2013) as a ‘hazardous neoliberal experiment’, in an editorial comment on riots in Stockholm’s racially stigmatised suburbs, 2013, an urban uprising hardly related to issues of migration or ethnicity, but to an obsessive dismantlement of the welfare state. Disregarding this, the so-called Swedish model continues to figure internationally in visions for an inclusive democratic socialism as ‘the most liveable society in history’, which ‘got the furthest along in undermining capital’s power’ (Sunkara, 2019: 105–106).

At home, however, in contemporary Sweden’s precarious urban communities, ridden by poverty, discrimination and racialising stigma, we could recognise a more convincing reception of this mythical past in the agenda for social justice of an anti-racist movement by young post-migrants; a ‘renaissance from the margins’, building transversal solidarity across ethno-cultural identities, confessional affiliations and institutional confines (León Rosales and Ålund, 2017; Sernhede et al., 2019). In the following we address the trajectory of their activism as it transpired as a new political subject in the 2000s. Departing from a reading of the Stockholm uprising in 2013 as a potential ‘window of opportunity’ (Kellecioglu, 2017), we relate this issue of urban mobilisation to the ‘reinvention’ of the old working-class common of the ‘People’s House’. In focus stands the case of the community centre, Folkets Husby (Husby of the People), founded in 2016 in the Stockholm community of Husby, from where the 2013 uprising took off. The new community centre was envisioned as an ‘oasis for organisation’ (Al-Khamisi et al., 2019) in a capital torn apart by socio-spatial polarisation.

Given this background, we ask whether ‘a new beginning is posited’ in which an ‘unlost heritage takes possession of itself’? (paraphrasing Bloch, 2000 [1917]: 3). It is a question that needs to
be posed in the context of a wider discussion on how a prevailing post-political hegemony could be challenged, and what could, under the burden of a neoliberal urban governance regime, be the comportment of ‘civil society’. In focus is a scrutiny of a growing engagement of professionalised non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in politics for redemption of the most disadvantaged and its impact on the space, position and agency of a contestative urban activism. The central issue is an assessment of openings for what Yuval-Davis (1999) has referred to as ‘transversal politics’, implicating dialogue between disparate actors on equitable terms.

We build the following analysis and argument on research, 2012–20. It is grounded on a continuous interchange with movement activists in Stockholm’s disadvantaged neighbourhoods, combined with sustained participant observation (on site and through social media), and on interviews with representatives of major civil society organisations CSOs/NGOs and the Stockholm City Administration. Our approach is informed by a ‘third option’ for engaging with contentious social movements, aiming to bridge the divide between a detached ‘invocating’ academic objectivism and a solidaristic ‘advocating’ engagement with movements (Haiven and Khasnabish, 2014).

**A Post-Political Time Hole**

Under the banner of ‘flexibility’, the great neoliberal ideological and political-economic transformation has posited contingent employment, a truncated citizenship and fragmented livelihoods as a new global norm. A multifarious, allegedly ‘dangerous’, precariat in search of identity has entered world history. Its predicaments are forged by deep changes in the relations between capital, state and civil society; a crisis of liberal democracy out of which new contestative movements have been born.

**Anatomy of a ‘Stealth Revolution’**

Precarious conditions of work and citizenship arrive in tandem with a transformation of a redistributive welfare state into a neoliberal ‘regulatory state’ (Majone, 1997). Seen from this perspective, the state is ‘not anymore . . . the mediator or ‘the shield’ protecting society from the tensions between capital and labour through . . . redistributive policies’ (Sommer-Houdeville, 2017: 162). It is a transformation of the state in which innumerable new regulations are tailored to undermine citizenship, the capacity to mobilise contentious resistance and to form political constituencies, giving way to a hypertrophy of technocracy and the executive. Trapped in consensual ‘post-politics’ (Mouffe, 2005), old political parties have deserted visions of solidarity, equality and social justice, and are losing popular legitimacy. Democracy has taken the form, asserts Ali (2018: 147) in speaking of Tony Blair’s ‘Third Way’ Britain, of an ‘extreme centre, in which centre-left and centre-right collude to preserve the status quo’. It has been depicted in terms of a ‘stealth revolution’ (Brown, 2015), which spells the end of liberal democracy by casting its very moral reason and institutional foundations in the mould of market rationality; an ‘undoing the demos’ that holds implications for the role of civil society. In the Global North as well as the South, renegotiated social contracts, signified by state marketisation and the expansion of a technocratic ‘participatory governance’, are matched by growing prominence of a reconfigured, professionalised and NGOised civil society, with a role as service providers rather than as a mobilising force in politics (Kaldor, 2003; O’Brien and Penna, 1998).

Even in Sweden, centre-right and centre-left have come to converge towards a new hegemonic normal defined by a dogmatism of neoliberal austerity. ‘[B]ourgeois and [Social Democratic] led coalitions’, muses Therborn (2018: 3), ‘that have alternated in power since 1991 have operated as relay runners in the promotion of inequality and profiteering. Together they have lowered taxes on
inheritance, wealth, and residential property to zero, made capital income less taxable than labour income, and tightened the scale of social benefits, while making them harder to access.’ It is a politics that, in the 2000s, has kept company with a fear-mongering racist discourse on the ‘non-belonging’ Other as a floating post-political signifier. This is, evidently, the significative trademark of the so-called Swedish Democrats (Mulinari and Neergaard, 2017), with roots in the pre–World War II Swedish Nazi party, step by step spinning itself into the position of today’s second largest political party in the polls. Yet, it is a racialising political agenda that centre-left as well as centre-right have bought into in vying for the votes of a disorientated electorate to whom appeals to welfare solidarity do not sound convincing any more (Schierup and Scarpa, 2017).

A xenophobic and racialising discourse has, in consequence, been instrumentalised by a Swedish corollary of the ‘extreme centre’ with the effect of suppressing democratic deliberation on ground causes of a welfare institutional, so-called ‘system collapse’. It has been exploited to paint over structural disjunctions of a financialised political economy, precarisation of labour and a fragmenting commodification of the entire welfare institutional system (Allelin et al., 2018; Schierup and Scarpa, 2017); a state of the nation, coupled with a polarising urban segregation. It is a state of apparent apoliticality that disguises or represses political antagonisms (cf. Mouffe, 2005), rendered void of democratic deliberation in favour of expert rule driven by the dogma of New Public Management. From a state in the 1980s, still with a reputation for being one of the world’s most egalitarian societies, Sweden has become one of the most unequal societies in the world in terms of the distribution of wealth, and the OECD member with the fastest growth of inequality of income, which has, alleges Therborn (2018: 4), been taken back close to the state of the late 1930s.

‘Spaces of Outsidership’

A former Swedish ‘exceptionalism’ has been transmuted into a ‘state of exception’ (Schierup et al., 2014), an immanent condition by which civil, political and social rights pertaining to citizenship are truncated. A systemic precarisation of citizenship, labour and livelihoods is most obvious in extended rental housing complexes on the periphery of the major cities, predominantly populated by immigrants and post-immigrants with their backgrounds in Asia, Africa and Latin America. These marginalised urban spaces are parts of the Swedish post-political polis from which vital social institutions have been evacuated or depreciated. Youth in these areas suffer, in particular, from the consequences of an extreme commodification of primary and secondary education, producing a cumulative, spatially articulated, race and class inequality (Kornhall and Bender, 2018).

Yet, the precariousness of these so-called spaces of outsidership (utanförskapsområden) is functional from the perspective of a prevailing ‘accumulation by dispossession’ (Harvey, 2004). They offer ‘occupational ghettos’ (Feuchtwang, 1982), in which devalued welfare provisions and disciplinary workfare generate cheap, hands down exploitable labour reserves for the service economy of the post-political metropolis (Schierup et al., 2006: 195–230). They are, moreover, the lucrative prey of transnational housing companies, reaping hyper-profits through bogus takeovers, exclusivist gentrification, sham renovation and the illicit raise of rents. The resulting stress on the budgets of families subsisting on precarious livelihoods has forged housing congestion and eviction of impoverished tenants (Polanska et al., 2019), a condition contingent on a ‘monstrous Swedish housing system’, creating and reproducing socio-economic inequality (Christopher, 2013).

These deprived metropolitan areas have in the course of the 2010s become hotspots for politics of securitisation, involving militant policing and racial profiling (Schclarek Mulinari, 2020), and
producing a lockdown Sweden with overcrowded prisons. Still a militant securitisation continues
to keep company with a soft biopolitical twin, involving interventions through a broad repertoire
of technologies by police and social workers (Dahlstedt and Lozić, 2017; Gressgård, 2017), focused
on therapeutic fostering of potentially ‘delinquent youth’, on responsibilisation of ‘dysfunctional
parenting’, and on redemption of ‘traditionalist migrant women’.

The idea of ‘spaces of outsidership’, which continues to guide government intervention, social
work and prescribed activities of NGOs in precarious urban neighbourhoods, was first master-
minded by the centre-right People’s Party in 2004 (Folkpartiet, 2004). It speaks, in terms of the
culture of poverty thesis, about areas of a ‘particularly deep outsidership’, suffering abject exclu-
sion, a state reproduced by an abnormal culture, transmitted from generation to generation. Here,
perceived ‘cultural differences’ vis-a-vis an autochthonous so-called majority are supposed to con-
tain ‘situations in which groups living in outsidership do not . . . understand how . . . central
social arenas function and neither the set of values and cultural points of reference that lend these
arenas their cohesive cultural glue’ (Folkpartiet, 2004: 8). The cure is prescribed as ‘empowerment
against outsidership’. It is a formula operationalised in terms of training for ‘entrepreneurship’,
embedded in politics for social cohesion, fostering the deviant Other into values of liberal democ-
racy in the encounter with ‘situations of conflict when mutually irreconcilable individual and
group-related value systems, goals and ambitions meet’ (Regeringen, 2008: 59).

A Predicament of Counter-Hegemony: Invited versus Invented Spaces
Yet, the perceived victims of ‘outsidership’ were to strike back. Reclaiming the city from com-
modifying politics of enclosure under the banner of ‘place struggles’, a new urban justice move-
ment was, as we discuss further ahead, spearheaded by young post-migrant ‘organic intellectuals’
(León Rosales and Ålund, 2017). They proved to possess a critical understanding of how the
‘central arenas’ of society work and of the conditionality of civic activism, exposed to an ever-
present risk of being deemed ‘uncivil’, beyond the pale of ‘liberal democracy’.

In tackling this predicament, they have been wedged between what Miraftab (2004), in her
writings on local governance in Cape Town, defines as invited and invented spaces. She defines
invited spaces ‘as the ones occupied by those grassroots and their allied non-governmental organ-
isations that are legitimised by donors and government interventions’ (Miraftab, 2004: 1). Invented
spaces are in contrast those also occupied by the grassroots and claimed by their collective action
but directly confronting the authorities and the status quo. The prevailing urban governance
regime and mainstream media promote, Miraftab argues, the imaginary of an ‘authentic’ civil
society operating within invited spaces, opposed to an image of an ‘outcast’ civil society con-
nected with contestative civic action sited in invented spaces. However, grassroot strategies are
flexible and their collective actions move between these spaces to advance their cause. Miraftab
(2009) relates further this flexibility to the Gramscian notion of ‘hegemony’, defined as a con-
sensual ideopolitical rule, and uses the notion of ‘counter-hegemony’ to describe flexible prac-
tices that destabilise relations of power in urban governance. She illustrates how grassroots
movements use the hegemonic system’s political openings to determine their own terms of
engagement and participation in order to ‘expose and upset the normalised relations of domin-
ance’ (Miraftab, 2009: 34). Or spoken through a Gramscian terminology: They launch a coun-
terhegemonic ‘war of position’ acting within, being subordinated to, but also challenging the
institutions of urban governance.

In Sweden, a comparable conditionality of contentious movements has been brought about by an
exceptional decentralisation of urban governance. The Social Democratic party, governing
uninterruptedly for 44 years (1932–1976), was originally an integrated part of and the political
vanguard of self-directed popular movements surging during the early phase of industrialisation. In the period of coordinated capitalism after World War II, these movements were incorporated into a centralised welfare state through institutionalised strategies of consensus making, including state funding (Peterson et al., 2017). This political culture was increasingly challenged by the new social movements from the late 1960s onwards, including, in the 2000s, the post-migrant led urban justice movement. It gave rise to a multiplicity of disciplinary measures in terms of soft repression as well as militant policing of protests. As the neoliberal transformation grew in depth from the early 1990 strategies for reforming a consensual political culture have become framed by decentralised, business-friendly public-private-civil society ‘partnerships’: invited spaces constituting a market for CSOs as providers of welfare services. Consequently, incorporation of civil society in governance has not necessarily decreased; but it has become shaped, conclude Peterson et al. (2017: 383), in their discussion of contentious movements in Sweden, 1950–2015, by a post-political consensus making, restricting, rather than expanding, the space for democratic influence.

‘Place Struggles’

Youth uprisings, in the cities of Malmö, Gothenburg and Uppsala in 2009, and in Stockholm in 2013, brought into focus disadvantaged citizens’ claims for social justice. These claims became intellectually and organisationally substantiated through an articulate social movement emerging from Sweden’s stigmatised suburbia (förorten), home to disadvantaged population groups with a preponderance of immigrants and their descendants. Precarious living conditions in segregated neighbourhoods exposed to racialising stigmatisation, welfare cuts, lack of spaces for democratic participation in urban planning’s and decision making have during the 2000s contributed to growing and widely expressed feelings of frustration among post-migrant youth. Through a multiplicity of activism, these feelings have been converted into collective learning processes, creating critical awareness both within the movement and in addressing the wider society (Sernhede et al., 2019). By re-inscribing their communities into the city and the wider space of the Swedish state and society, they have produced a ‘differential space’ (Lefebvre, 1991), or what among Swedish suburban activists came to be referred to as place struggles (León Rosales and Ålund, 2017), reading predicaments of the political on their own terms. They badged themselves the suburban movement (förortrörelsen), with connotations of förorten (the Swedish word for ‘suburb’) matching the social, cultural and racial inferences of the French idiom of the banlieu. An important activist group was the Stockholm based Megafonen (Swedish for ‘The Megaphone’), striking a note of glocal solidarity through its slogan, ‘A united suburb will never be defeated!’.

Megafonen emerged originally as an activist group in Husby, a precarious neighbourhood of 12,000 inhabitants in the area of Järvafältet in metropolitan Stockholm (e.g., León Rosales and Ålund, 2017). Järvafältet is an area with a population close to 100,000 marked by a disorganic social geography. It harbours Kista Science City, one of the world’s most important information and communication technology (ICT) clusters, side by side with poor communities, like Husby, with a majority of low-income households with vulnerable livelihoods, dependent on precarious labour and a fluctuating gig economy, coupled with congested apartment housing. Still, concludes a detailed survey, published in 2016, the inhabitants of Husby convey a view of their community as beautiful, safe, orderly and convivial, in contrast to a prevailing image of Husby among outsiders in greater Stockholm of a ‘dangerous’, ‘chaotic’ and ‘ugly’ no go area; a stigma, ‘which deeply affects their lives and their access to labour’ (Fischer et al., 2016: 67).
An Invented Space in Making

Megafonen was founded (2007) at a juncture when segregation in Järvaflåtet was developing in an increasingly precarious direction, with growing unemployment among youth in communities like Husby, and closure of public welfare institutions such as schools, health centres, the post office, the municipal office and the social insurance office. Megafonen’s engagement in local and national media had, however, also roots in a history of struggle against broken promises from the local city administration. Related to this, their first major intervention in a public debate took place in 2012, after young people in Husby had been invited by the district administration to present their view and ideas on the urban development programme, Järvalyftet. This was an import experience of participation within an invited space for so-called citizens dialogue (medborgardialog). Järvalyftet was launched in 2007 by the conservative majority in the Stockholm City Hall with the purpose of stimulating economic growth by integrating the area into the development of greater Stockholm as a whole. This, supposedly visionary, developmental programme offered citizens participation in the planning process and space for the influence of local inhabitants. However, an actual boundedness and exclusionary politics of Järvalyftet became a source of disappointment and frustration for local activists, including Megafonen, as formulated by Al-Khamisi (2015: 159) in a retrospective view under the heading of ‘A dialogue that ended up as a monologue’.

This experience was followed up by Megafonen through interventions in national media and became a springboard for further development of alternative invented spaces for civic activism (León Rosales and Ålund, 2017). This was, not least, achieved through a series of public lectures engaging researchers, politicians and administrators, and by becoming a voice in public debates and in mass media with capacity to articulate a critical perspective on conditions of precarious neighbourhoods and urban governance in general. Megafonen’s political programme, published on what was then their home-page,9 aimed at making ‘a society for all free from racism, sexism and class oppression’ by ‘mobilising the power that repression in suburbia gives birth to’ (quoted in Schierup et al., 2014: 14). It claimed opportunities for people in socially disadvantaged and racially stigmatised urban neighbourhoods to influence politics. This pertains to investment in public services and for facilitating social activities in disadvantaged suburbs, the establishment of a fair educational system guaranteeing the achievement of high-quality results in all schools independent of social background, decent work for all, development of proactive social programmes, and a housing policy recognising the right to decent livelihoods. The programme conveys what Isin (2009) defines as attributes of ‘activist citizens’ making contestative claims. Their ‘acts of citizenship’, through struggles for rights and social justice, produce subjects as authentic citizens through creating ‘new sites of contestation, belonging, identification. . . different from traditional sites of citizenship, such as voting’ (Isin, 2009: 371). Thus, the surge of movements, such as urban justice movements, with post-migrant generations at the core, produce acts of citizenship as an expression of the need for being heard in one’s own right, which has become defining for contemporary global politics (Isin, 2009: 384).

Megafonen emerged invigorated out of the time hole blasted by the 2013 Stockholm uprising. At the time, Megafonen was still treated in mainstream media as an example of an untrustworthy insurgent activism, involving direct action against gentrification, sham renovation and demonstrations against the selling out of public housing in Stockholm to speculative venture capitalists. Yet, with its, heavily criticised, efforts to publicly explain the wider structural-institutional causes and predicament of the 2013 uprising (Schierup et al., 2014), it became a public voice of Sweden’s precarious urban communities, nationally and internationally.
By time organic intellectuals originally organised in Megafonen have become engaged with different organisations and networks, organisations of civil society, human rights movements and critical think tanks. One instance was the first public presentation, at an international UNESCO-sponsored workshop in 2015, of a report on Social movement lawyering (Al-Khamisi, 2017), a report commissioned by the leading Swedish leftist think tank, Arena Idé. The workshop brought together activists from Sweden, the United States, South Africa and France. The report discusses potentials of movement lawyering with reference to discriminated inhabitants in Sweden’s disadvantaged urban communities. It was followed up by the foundation of an Academy for Movement Lawyers, an autonomous educational common that draws on the experience of Black Lives Matter as well as lawyers and movements linked to Brazil’s favelas and South Africa’s precarious townships.

In contrast to earlier organisations with their background in post–World War II migration to Sweden, depoliticised through ethicising funding strategies by the state (Schierup, 1991), Megafonen built its impact on self-directed politics of solidarity traversing ethno-cultural and confessional divides. This evokes memories of the legendary Rainbow Coalition in Chicago of the late 1960s, which continues to stand out as exemplary today (Williams, 2013). It entails a transversal solidarity, embodying the intersectionality of race, gender and generation, respecting variable identities while focusing on shared burdens of social dispossession and racism as collective unifiers. The strategy of Megafonen included, what is more, dialogue and collaboration with established CSOs, sympathetic to their cause, as for example, in the case of Movement Lawyering, mentioned above. Other examples are civil dialogue and collaboration with PRO (The National Organisation of Pensioners), the National Tenants Organisation, Save the Children and the Red Cross. However, while this illustrates the importance of being able to manoeuvre flexibly between invited and invented spaces, it also raises the issue of relations of power in urban political struggles, local governance and consequently the question of institutionalisation. This became particularly evident as local struggles for a citizen-driven community centre came, from 2016, to converge on the ‘reinvention’ of the old working class common of the ‘People’s House’.

**Soliciting a Renaissance of ’The People’s House’**

In its first years, Megafonen benefitted from free meeting premises, available in local quarters. In the 2010s, after the rise to power of a coalition to the political right in the city of Stockholm such free common spaces were, however, increasingly choked by an enclosure movement pushed by creed in lean, market-driven, New Public Management. This came also to affect formerly inclusive practices of certain large national and international NGOs operating in the capital.

The chief meeting place of Megafonen was originally *Husby Träff*, harbouring a generous free of charge assembly hall, belonging to the public housing company Svenska Bostäder. It was managed by the Red Cross until 2012, when citizens were informed by the local administration that this popular meeting place should be replaced by smaller premises of a former pub, and with significant fees charged for using them. This led to protests in the area and the occupation of Husby Träff, a campaign that could rely on a remarkable community solidarity. Megafonen, a driving force in the occupation, could for instance count on support from the local branch of the PRO, the Swedish pensioners’ association, however, without lasting result. The Red Cross withdrew from Husby Träff, and the district administration took over the management of the new smaller premises. Following a process of continued community mobilisation, in which Megafonen played a major part in conflicts over the constitution of the new meeting place, a non-profit association named Folkets Husby (Husby of the People) was finally constituted in 2015. The new meeting place was
formally opened in 2016 as a ‘People’s House’ with its focus on culture, education and community engagement.

A prime national actor in the process was Folkets Hus och Parker, FHP (The People’s Houses and Parks). It had been founded in 2000 as a non-partisan central organisation with more than 500 local member associations – that is People’s Houses – across Sweden. This followed upon a long period of depoliticisation of the People’s House, as an institution (Ståhl, 2005). However, the involvement of FHP in initiating Folkets Husby did indeed look as part of a new beginning. It came to be as an integrated part of a wider project targeted at revitalising the social engagement of FHP through the establishment of People’s Houses as new genuine ‘citizens-driven meeting places’ in twelve of Sweden’s most precarious urban areas. The head of the FHP, Calle Nathanson (in Léon Rosales, 2019: 2), branded the purpose of this ambitious reinvention of the People’s House as an inclusive and socially engaging institution, building ‘platforms for the people in disadvantaged urban areas so that they can raise their voice in the democratic society’; spaces out of which they can ‘create greater opportunities to influence their own lives and the development of the wider society’. It is ‘basically about empowerment’, he summed up.

In his commissioned report to FHP Léon Rosales (2019), emphasises that, alongside the necessity of securing stable financing of these reinvigorated People’s Houses, it is essential to develop shared visions that facilitate transversal collaboration across age, confessional and ethnic divisions. These would be intercultural spaces for communal creativity, facilitating inclusive meetings and activities in diverse local communities. Individuals anchored in the community and enjoying trust among a heterogenous array of socio-cultural groups would, according to the report, ideally be key bridgebuilders between local and national CSOs.

In conformance with this, three experienced local community organisers, with a background in Megafonen and as activists in the area, were engaged in 2018. They were entrusted by the boards of the People’s Houses in Husby, and in the nearby community of Rinkeby, with the task of investigating needs and conditions, and to elaborate a vision, for developing innovative and sustainable citizens-driven meeting places. In the resulting report Al-Khamisi et al. (2019) assess in detail how People’s Houses in the two local communities could be developed into vital Oases for Organisation’. This is seen to include, among other, independent media production to challenge a stigmatising public political discourse and involve a broad engagement in critical education and research in collaboration with universities and other centres of learning. It is envisaged to involve the consolidation of platforms for citizens’ influence on education and the labour market. Moreover, networking between People’s Houses across urban local communities would boost community power to influence strategic decision-makers. Consolidating a local space for meetings, traversing gender, age and confession, would follow in the footsteps of the community’s past record for solidarity and commonality, the authors argue: that is the development of ‘collective power uniting people in demonstrations, manifestations and protests’, contending welfare cuts, the selling out of public housing, the closure of institutions and the role of the media (Al-Khamisi et al., 2019: 26).

In the case of Folkets Husby a range of activities, discussed in the report, are indeed taking place in some form. Nevertheless, a vision of ‘oases for organisation’, in line with the community of Husby’s record for contending activism, scarcely corresponds to the actual emplacement of its new People’s House.

**Ambiguous Emplacement**

We use the idea of ambiguous emplacement to capture the enigma experienced by contestative activism in building spaces of solidarity, subjected to the conditionality of post-political urban governance. It is a perspective related to the Gramscian (Gramsci, 1971) perception of ‘civil
society’ in an ambiguous position between hegemonic consensus building and ‘war of position’, that is the predicament of contestative civic struggles, which are at the same time subordinated to and challenging the post-political hegemony. As we shall discuss in the following, the development of Folkets Husby brings to light this double bind of civil society. It poses the problem of an unequal positionality of established NGOs and a contestative activism.

**Partnership for ‘Trust’**

Folkets Husby has (2020) around fifty member associations, local ones, as well as organisations based in greater Stockholm, and some of national extent. Its board and staff are residents of, or persons with connections to the community, which motivates the house’s self-presentation as a citizens-driven community centre. It invites meetings of organisations, cultural events and educational pursuits, and collaboration with the wider civil society, the municipality, business and academia. A principal vision, laid down in its statutes, is to develop Folkets Husby as a vital node in development of the community, with the participation of inhabitants of all ages in public and political life seen as a driving force regarding issues pertinent for the area. However, a sizeable rent demanded by the owner of the location, the public housing company, Svenska Bostäder, has made the house charge its member organisations considerable fees for use of the premises to cover operational costs.

Among locals there is a generally positive image of Folkets Husby as well as critical views. It is seen as a place that enhances a feeling of safety in the community in its function as a centre for socialising and the exchange of experience across ethno-cultural and confessional divides and due to engaged support and counselling. There is a widespread trust in staff and board. Critics argue, however, that obligations towards major funders and dominance of large NGOs hamper use of the centre’s premises on equal terms. Related to this, the substantial charge for use of the house’s premises is seen to discourage the organisation of meetings and activities on burning political issues by impecunious member organisations.

Consequently, the reality of Folkets Husby as a node for citizens engagement needs to be assessed in the light of conditions stipulated in major funding agreements with the city administration and state agencies, which finance a major part of its activities.

A major longer term grant to Folkets Husby from the local administration was obtained in 2018 through an IOP agreement (Rinkeby-Kista_Stadsdelsförvaltning, 2018) for the establishment of a so-called Idea Driven Public Partnership (*Idéburit offentligt partnerskap*). The IOP is monitored by a common steering group and bipartisan working groups (including Folkets Husby and the local city administration) with the purpose of ‘building a strong city district with a meeting place open for all, and to increase trust between public administration, the idea-driven voluntary sector and the citizens’. The activities covered by the agreement are: (1) The Parental Group (*Föräldrargrup Folkets Husby*), including a range of activities aiming at ‘strengthening parents in their parental role’; (2) The Women Centre (*Kvinnocenter Folkets Husby*) aiming at empowering women in a community marked by perceived ‘male dominated meeting places’; (3) Development of Local Democracy and Participation (*Lokal Demokratiutveckling och Delaktighet*) aiming at ‘taking advantage of the engagement of the inhabitants and to increase the trust in the public sector’.

Other financing has been granted by the National Board of Housing, Building and Planning (*Boverket*), focused on supporting premises for youth activities, and from the Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society (*MUCF*), in support of projects for enhancing voting and democratic participation and building links between youth and established civil society. Other pursuits oriented towards youth involve a media study, in which film, music and pod programmes are produced through collaboration with ABF (the Workers Educational Association), Sweden’s largest
voluntary organisation for popular education. A major project on mental health conditions among youth is supported directly from the Stockholm County Administrative Board (myNewsdesk, 2019). A contractor engaged for the purpose is the voluntary association Unity and Cultivation, organising regular sessions on mental health with youth from the area in the project Trygg ('Safe'). The issue of ‘safety’ is, as well, the subject of a survey (2020) in collaboration with Stockholm University, inspired by Black Lives Matter, recording local youth’ experience of discrimination and racism, with a focus on encounters with the police.

**Conformity versus Contestation**

As described above, most activities in Folkets Husby are dominated by the conditionality of overarching city and state funding agreements. This dovetails with a substantial influence of large NGOs. After the 2013 uprising large established NGOs entered the community, welcomed by local and national political bodies, with unrest in the community as a spur for setting up projects. This represented, argues Kellecioglu (2017), a potential ‘window of opportunity’, which could, however, turn into a stranglehold on local activism.

The most influential NGO in the context became Fryshuset, an organisation with a focus on youth, education and entrepreneurship, and the rehabilitation of delinquent youth. It enjoys important public-political and economic support. Fryshuset was, by local decision-makers, given permission to open premises in what subsequently became Folkets Husby, intended to be driven by entrepreneurship. However, due to conflicts and negotiation the premises were eventually, as described in the preceding, taken into the custody of the People’s Houses and Parks (PHP). Competition between Fryshuset and PHP initiated a wider coalition-building vying for influence in the local community (Kellecioglu, 2017). Fryshuset, which has remained an important actor locally, and PHP created separate alliances, helping to bring in resources, financially but also from an organisational perspective. Fryshuset gathered forces together with Initiative of Change, a UNESCO-funded organisation, and with Rotary, and was licensed by the municipality, to open a school, which provides classes from preschool to high school in competition with public schools in the area. Folkets Husby, under the national umbrella of PHP, has developed collaboration with the Workers Educational Association (ABF), Save the Children and the Swedish Tenants Association. Eventually a certain collaboration between the two community centres, Fryshuset and Folkets Husby, has ensued.

This engagement of major NGOs has influenced the activism that the community of Husby has long been known for. The local civil society has become potentially strengthened, financially and organisationally through the location of two stabilised meeting places, both centrally located: Fryshuset and Folkets Husby. However, financial dependency comes with conditions. It is about requirements for pursuing specific activities, related to ‘integration’ of perceived ‘outsider’ categories of the population, problematised in mainstream media and political discourse.

But what happens to organisations aiming to raise a collectivist spirit by advancing awareness of structural problems affecting the area?

The example of the Social Centre (member of Folkets Husby), which engages activists, professionals and a range of critical CSOs, anchored locally and active nationally and internationally, illustrates this issue. The centre operates a ramifying transversal solidarity network, based on a coalition of three organisations that, within the frame of Folkets Husby, offer free of charge legal advocacy and organise workshops on housing, judicial, labour and welfare issues. Folkrörelsejuristerna (The People’s Movement Lawyers) offers counselling on migration law, labour law and family law and can draw support from a wider network of socially engaged lawyers. SAC Syndikalisterna, an old leftist labour union that has engaged in many labour disputes, offers support on issues of work
under substandard conditions. It can draw on experienced activists, seasoned through the organisation of demonstrations and campaigns. Ort till Ort, member of the European Action Coalition of housing activists, aids households exposed by evictions and inflated rents connected with sham renovations. The organisation links activists in solidarity networks across precarious communities. In collaboration with Hyresgästföreningen (the national tenants association), the Norra Järva Stadsdelsråd and Väljärslliansen (the Welfare Alliance), Ort till Ort organised a start-up meeting in Folkets Husby in February 2020, prospected to initiate mobilisation for an all-out national protest rally against a pending law proposal on market-driven rent setting. Yet, general restrictions in the footsteps of the Covid-19 crisis thwarted these plans.

With reference to particularly SAC, a warning was, as it were, forwarded from the local city administration to Folkets Husby, that the Social Centre should not cross the line between counselling and political activism. The activities of the Social Centre appear thus to be under surveillance, at the same time as the centre depends on Folkets Husby for access to premises for its meetings. Consequently, the centre chooses to participate in demonstrations or other activist campaigns indirectly through its three member organisations, properly outside the frame of Folkets Husby.

Will an Unlost Heritage Take Possession of Itself?

Visions for energising the 21st century’s reinvention of the People’s House as a critical community driven meeting place of and for Sweden’s most disadvantaged appeared to echo the initially quoted memo addressed to the nation’s workers by the social democratic leader, Hjalmar Branting, in the twilight of the 19th century: ‘The People’s House’ represented as their “castle”. . . from where they should ‘with the arms of spirit and power undertake new achievements’. We have in the introduction posed the question of whether the reinvention of the People’s House, loaded with hopes of building citizens-driven ‘oases for organisation’, could indeed take possession of the legendary heritage of Sweden’s incipient labour movement? Yet, in light of our examination of the experience exemplified by Folkets Husby we need to pose the counter-question of whether a convoluted history of the People’s House movement in the 20th century will not, in reality, come to repeat itself in the 21st?

The first People’s Houses were built, crowdfunded and managed co-operatively by the workers themselves (Ståhl, 2005: 21). Developing their assemblies, independent of external funding, was seen to precondition democratisation. The political radicalism associated with this worker driven institution was, however, understood as a threat by the political right, which attempted to block the availability of meeting places. After World War II, funding of The People’s Houses was eventually transferred to state and municipalities, with their activities supposed to be politically neutral. This was a development adjacent to the consensualist disciplining of social movements in the post–World War II period (Peterson et al., 2017). It dovetailed the building of Sweden’s ramifying welfare edifice with Social Democracy as vanguard, yet dependent on a compact between capital and labour as well as a political ‘cow deal’ with the centre-right (Schierup and Scarpa, 2017).

Will then, by analogy, our times’ reinvented People’s House, come to fare similarly, subject to refurbished consensual politics in the post-political guise of the ‘extreme centre’? This question needs to be posed at a pointed conjuncture of crisis and exacerbated precarity of labour, livelihoods, and citizenship.

Branting’s memo to the incipient labour movement was formulated as the 19th century drew to its close, in the cruel aftermath of the great famine striking Sweden’s poor, 1867–1869. We have concluded this essay (2020) at the onset of another deep social crisis: that triggered by Covid-19. It is prospected by the World Food Programme (WFP, 2020) to lead to ‘hunger of biblical dimensions’, a threat, in particular, to precarious populations in the Global South, but overthrowing
livelihoods of the most disadvantaged in the North as well. Even in Sweden many children in disadvantaged urban communities have been forced to go hungry under the impact of Covid-19, and charity programmes for distribution of food to poor families have mushroomed (Perkins, 2020). It is about an exacerbated precarity directly related to the widespread vulnerability of livelihoods of many in these communities and the burden of a vasty unequal share of the rising unemployment, triggered by Covid-19. In this context, moreover, illicit apartment rents related to predatory take overs by transnational venture capital have become extraordinarily taxing for poor families.

However, Covid-19 is only exacerbating the impact of already existing structural disjunctions. These can be projected to persist or to be further sharpened after the pandemia; at least if no critical transformation of the post-political hegemony and the contingent urban governance regime is accomplished. For instance, the precarious situation for tenants in poor communities will likely be exacerbated by pending legislation (2020) on apartment housing, stipulating market-driven rent setting. In Järvašältet, and similar spaces of precarity, this dovetails with projected urban development schemes, likely to cause a wave of gentrification and, by implication, eviction of poor families and further housing congestion. It comes together with other pending legislation, targeted at loosening regulations on employment security, coupled with a pending legislative proposal to substantially reduce the right to strike.

Consequently, these and other concerns that originally mobilised Sweden’s urban justice movement remain as topical as ever. They are, truly, inciting a new surge of contestation. But the question remains, whether a People’s House, as far as it is conditioned by the very hegemony that stands behind the current austerity politics, could be a catalysator in this pursuit?

The community of Husby does indeed keep up its historical trajectory of contentious activism. For example, the issue of urban planning and housing conditions was in 2018 in focus for a campaign against the housing company, Hembla, owned by the transnationals Blackstone and Vonovia, due to illicit rent increases and severely neglected maintenance of their housing stock. This forced the company to remedy deficiencies. There are several other recent examples of successful activist mobilisation in the community directed at urban planning and degradation of the local environment (e.g., environmentally destructive road building).

Yet, Folkets Husby is hardly following in the footsteps of the community’s trajectory of contesting activist solidarity. Seasoned activists in the area observe that there is limited space for critical discussion in Folkets Husby, compared to earlier activist fora in the community. Then, with straightforward access to free of charge meeting places, it was easier to mobilise the community, across generation, gender and ethnic background, against evictions, to organise demonstrations and to maintain critical study circles on topical political issues. The subsequent dominance of established NGOs after the 2013 riots favours development of a profile resting on conditioned financial support through partnership with the city administration and other public funders as discussed above. The house’s activities become in need of relating to specific topics. This includes an obligation to focus attention on certain target groups, seen as ‘problems’ in political and media discourse: potentially delinquent youth, dysfunctional families and women oppressed by cultural traditionalism and patriarchal family relations. In focus is, like this, the individual ‘empowerment’ of deficient Others through therapeutic responsibilisation and training for democratic participation subject to prescribed norms, but with truncated space for the mobilisation of contestative action and politics of transversal solidarity based on dialogue on equal terms.

This does not, in conclusion, preclude a crafty ‘war of position’ within conditioned frames, as we have exemplified through the transversal solidarity grounding The Social Centre. Several organic intellectuals with roots in Megafonen and other local activism are, in different positions, active in Folkets Husby, as board members and process leaders for ongoing projects, and some have gained positions of influence across an array of established CSOs and public agencies. They
share an understanding of the institutional and structural conditions generating the individual and social problems of precarious groups and stigmatised local communities. It implicates a residual potential for critical thinking and training, but the predicament remains that Folkets Husby appears to have, overall, become an ‘invited space’ principled on fostering ‘active’, rather than organising ‘activist’, citizens.

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Notes
1. Svalten by Västerbro (2018).
2. Idiom coined by the Swedish minister of foreign affairs, Margot Wallström, in 2015.
3. Referring to Agamben (2005).
4. Later renamed ‘particularly exposed areas’ (särskilt utsatta områden).
5. ‘Organic intellectuals’ is a term devised by Gramsci (1971) to signify socially engaged practical intellectuals emanating from and articulating imaginaries and strategies of civil society.
6. Renamed ‘The Liberals’ (Liberalerna) in 2015.
7. In Gramsci (1971).
8. Latest accessed, January 2014. No longer available.
9. The report was financed by DELMOS, the Delegation Against Segregation.
10. A citizens’ district council for ‘voice and power’ to inhabitants and activists in Husby and the neighbouring communities of Akalla and Kista. Link: https://www.facebook.com/norrajarvastadsdelsradet/.
11. A collaborative network for tenants’ organisations and several labour unions.

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