

Swedish cities now belong to the most segregated in Europe

Abstract

This article presents our research on contemporary urban developments in major Swedish cities. First, we present an analysis of new forms of urban governance in major cities, particularly focusing on inner city developments. Second, we present research on the transformation of housing policies and the so-called Million Program. Third, we highlight new conflicts that have emerged as consequences of these developments, including urban collective action.

Keywords: segregation, entrepreneurialism, urban movements

IN AN URBAN context, the transformation of the Swedish welfare state has involved a roll-back of the urban and housing policies that constituted cornerstones in the construction of the post-war welfare state. This process can perhaps best be defined as a neoliberal re-engineering of the welfare state, in which de-regulation of urban policies has been combined with re-regulation to support market mechanisms (Thörn and Larsson, 2012). This article brings out two defining logics of this re-engineering: marketization, that combines principles of de-regulation and re-regulation to support privatization of land and housing; and entrepreneurialism, new forms of public and private partnerships that govern urban development (Franzén, Hertting and Thörn 2016). Further, we highlight the consequences of these changes in the shape of deepened spatialized social inequalities in Swedish cities; and recent collective action that have emerged as a response to these developments.

The shift to entrepreneurial governance in Swedish cities

During the past decades major cities in Sweden have been transformed through entrepreneurial governance, introduced as an answer to the crisis of Fordism and the decline of the industrial city (Franzén, Hertting and Thörn 2016). As a strategy to transform and adjust the urban landscape to the demands of global capitalism entrepreneurialism is recurrent around the world, with context-specific variations. Therefore, entrepreneurialism plays out differently in former industrial cities such as Gothenburg than it does in Stockholm or Umeå. Here however, we focus on a few characteristics common to the Swedish articulation or entrepreneurial governance.

Entrepreneurial governance is a strategy launched in the context of global competition between cities, in order to make the city economically attractive to investors, tourists and new, wealthy inhabitants. It is focused on creating a sellable image of the city; therefore enhancing the brand of the city becomes essential, with investments in high-profile events, icon buildings and consumption districts. Further, entrepreneurialism takes the shape of private-public partnerships that combines public and political power with private and economic power. A distinctive feature for these partnerships is the creation of municipal development companies that can take a leading role in initiating, designing and executing urban renewal programs in close cooperation with real-estate owners. Working outside of the formal planning structures the companies have the capacity of speeding up the planning process and give the private investors a high degree of influence at the cost of public transparency. Further, these partnerships tend to foster a consensual vision of urban development that tones down political differences and conflicts. In contrast to former co-operation between the political and economic elite in Sweden, entrepreneurial governance shifts the priorities of local politics – from provision of general welfare to more proactive development strategies to encourage economic growth. Therefore these new partnerships form the basis for a form of neoliberal engineering where the local state facilitates the private exploitation and gentrification of urban land (Thörn & Holgersson 2016). As an embedded strategy of entrepreneurialism, gentrification feeds an uneven development where some urban areas are viewed as financial assets and others are left to decline. What we see today in several Swedish cities is therefore a highly selective re-making of parts of the city for upper and middle class consumption (in housing as well as upgraded shopping areas) and displacement of poor people that increases social segregation in cities.

The transformation of the Million Program

With the abolishment of the Ministry of Housing in 1991, a fundamental roll-back of the welfare era's urban reforms was initiated, accompanied by re-regulations supporting privatization and marketization of the public housing sector. Supported by new legislation, a significant share of the previously non-profit municipal housing companies have been privatized; and the housing stock remaining in public ownership is longer allowed to be non-profit (Hedin et al 2012). This has resulted in an increase in the number of evictions from municipal housing; and of the number of homeless (Sernhede et al 2016). Partly as a result of the abolishment of subsidies to investment in rental housing, a decline in production has led to overcrowded housing and a serious housing shortage. These developments have struck particularly hard on the inhabitants of the so-called Million Program – an affordable housing scheme created between 1965 and 1975. In addition, partly as an effect of systematic disinvestment, the Million Program has become in urgent need of renovation, which has come with "upgrades" and rent increases of up to 80 percent, something which has laid the ground for the most recent phase of gentrification through "renoviction". In addition, these areas are the ones most severely hit by cutbacks in the public sector. For example, a combination of cutbacks and a

free-school reform has contributed to school segregation along class- and racialized lines; and to Swedish pupils' school performance dropping from the top to the bottom of OECD ranking. In many of these suburbs, fewer than 50 percent make it to upper secondary school (Sernhede et al 2016). Taken together, re-regulated housing policies and other neoliberal reforms have caused deepening spatialized social inequalities in Swedish big cities; they today belong to the most segregated in Europe. For example, more than 40 percent of young people between 20 and 25 in the poor suburbs neither study nor work; more than 50 percent of children in the poorest neighborhoods in the Metropolitan districts grow up in poverty.

Urban conflict and collective action

The contradictions and tensions produced by the developments recounted for above have in some cases developed into conflict, protest and collective action. During the past decade, the Swedish population has become familiar with media images of burning cars, illustrating clashes between police and youth that have more or less regularly occurred in Swedish poor suburbs. In May 2013, such images were disseminated across the world as international news channels reported live from the poor suburb Husby in Stockholm where protest against a fatal police shooting of a man of immigrant background developed into a major urban uprising, spreading to other poor Stockholm suburbs and to eight smaller cities (Sernhede et al 2016). Beyond such spontaneous clashes, organized collective action in the shape of a new urban social movement has recently emerged, primarily based in the poor suburbs, basically with two major demands on its agenda: a restoration of the poor suburbs in light of roll-back of public services, and the systematic disinvestments in housing (Sernhede, Thörn and Thörn 2016); and demands for affordable housing in light of privatization and renovation with dramatic rent increases. In connection with this, demands have also been made on municipal housing companies to facilitate cohousing and cooperative self-government as a new form of affordable housing (Scheller and Thörn, forthcoming).

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