

Research Article



Central perks? Class inequalities, opportunity hoarding and urban parks in Gothenburg

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‘Take a walk.’ ‘Go and get some fresh air.’ We’ve all heard it, right? Whether it’s something we say to ourselves when we need inspiration, to others to calm them down, or to our children in an attempt to tire them out, the outdoors has been an area which we have consistently seen as beneficial to our lives. Research across disciplines is ever increasingly backing up the ‘old wives’ tales’ or common-sense ways in which the outdoors is utilised within our everyday lives. It is not merely being outdoors nor undertaking some form of recreation that provides health benefits, but undertaking recreation in an outdoor green space garners benefits greater than the sum of its parts (Zwierzchowska et al., 2018). For urban dwellers, green spaces for recreational potential within a city most commonly take the form of parks. While there are multiple uses of the word ‘park,’ I define urban parks as formalised public patches of recreational land in cities that incorporate nature, including at least some vegetation, alongside a diversity of other facilities, including equipment for recreation, areas for socialisation, and sporting arenas. The City of Gothenburg distinguishes between three different types of parks, depending on their size and the distance one should be travelling to reach them (City of Gothenburg, 2022a). Moreover, parks are clearly differentiated from large nature recreation areas, which possess distinctive natural character and are rich in plant and animal life.

There has been great interest in the inequalities in park distribution in relation to social class, with a mounting body of research finding that parks are unevenly distributed across European cities, unsurprisingly, with a tendency to be more accessible in affluent neighbourhoods. For example, in Stockholm, Sweden, people with higher incomes have greater access to nearby green and blue areas within walking distance of their homes (Goldenberg et al., 2018). Two-thirds (67%) of children who belong to the working class in Lodz, Poland, have very low visible greenery coverage along their walks from home to school (Laszkiewicz & Sikorska, 2020). The mean distance to green space increases with neighbourhood deprivation in Porto, Portugal (Hoffman et al., 2017). In the Netherlands, the availability of green space within 250m of your residence is lower in neighbourhoods housing the working class (de Vries et al., 2020). The middle-class residential areas of Debrecen, Hungary, are rich in high-quality (private) green spaces, with other working-class neighbourhoods suffering from poor-quality green spaces (Csomós et al., 2020). Therefore, it is easy to surmise that people belonging to the working class are likely to live in vegetation- and park-poor neighbourhoods (Byrne & Wolch, 2009). However, when Gothenburg is explored as a case study, only half of this assumption stands up. In an attempt to unpack why the City of Gothenburg is not immune to unequal distribution of parks, despite its reputation as a green (City of Gothenburg 2022a) and equal (City of Gothenburg 2022b) city I will use Charles Tilly’s (1998) opportunity hoarding. Opportunity hoarding refers to the process through which the middle and upper classes control access to resources, such as property and jobs (land and education). As such, the upper and middle classes hoard the opportunities for those in the lower classes to improve their positions within society.

Gothenburg is Sweden’s second-largest city, situated on its West Coast. The City of

Gothenburg, as an administrative centre, is home to almost 588,000 people (City of Gothenburg, 2022b). Gothenburg is a traditional manufacturing economy based around the docks, with a dominant working-class population. Over time, this working-class population has been increasingly deprived of opportunity in the economy and the labour market, as well as urban planning, due to an inner-city focus on development:

“...Gothenburg has become sharply divided into wealthy inner-city districts, including exclusive residential and business areas, as well as university campuses, and impoverished outskirts dominated by run-down rental housing areas.”

Thörn & Holgersson, 2016: 672

Despite this, one of the key objectives of the City of Gothenburg is to become an ‘equal city’ through a process which involves reducing disparities in living conditions in Gothenburg and ensuring that the city develops in a socially sustainable way (City of Gothenburg, 2022c). Whilst the City asserts that, for most people, Gothenburg is a good city to grow up and live in, the differences in quality of life between different groups and different areas are widening. For example, the average income has risen in most areas yet has fallen in those areas that had the lowest average income from the outset. In certain areas of the city, 60% of the households are under financial strain. In other areas, that is as low as 2% (see Figure 1).

This article draws on Erik Olin Wright’s (2015) definition of class. Wright positions opportunity hoarding mechanisms as the central means that differentiates the middle class from the broader working class, namely through the access to jobs and the financial and property accumulation this allows for. Moreover, Wright also distinguishes between a relatively stable working class and a poor and precarious segment of the working class, characterised by low income, insecure employment, and minimal access to welfare or protection from the state. Within this article, income levels are used as an indicator of class. Whilst crude, the most important indicators of class are income and wealth. Referring back to the context of Gothenburg (Figure 1), the city’s ‘North-East’ is an informal conglomerate of physically detached city districts north-east of Gothenburg (Angered, Östra Göteborg and Norra Hisingen) which share similar characteristics with regards to migrant population numbers, educational attainment, unemployment, health, and crime – is classified as a vulnerable area – and thus can be characterised as an area of the precarious working-class.

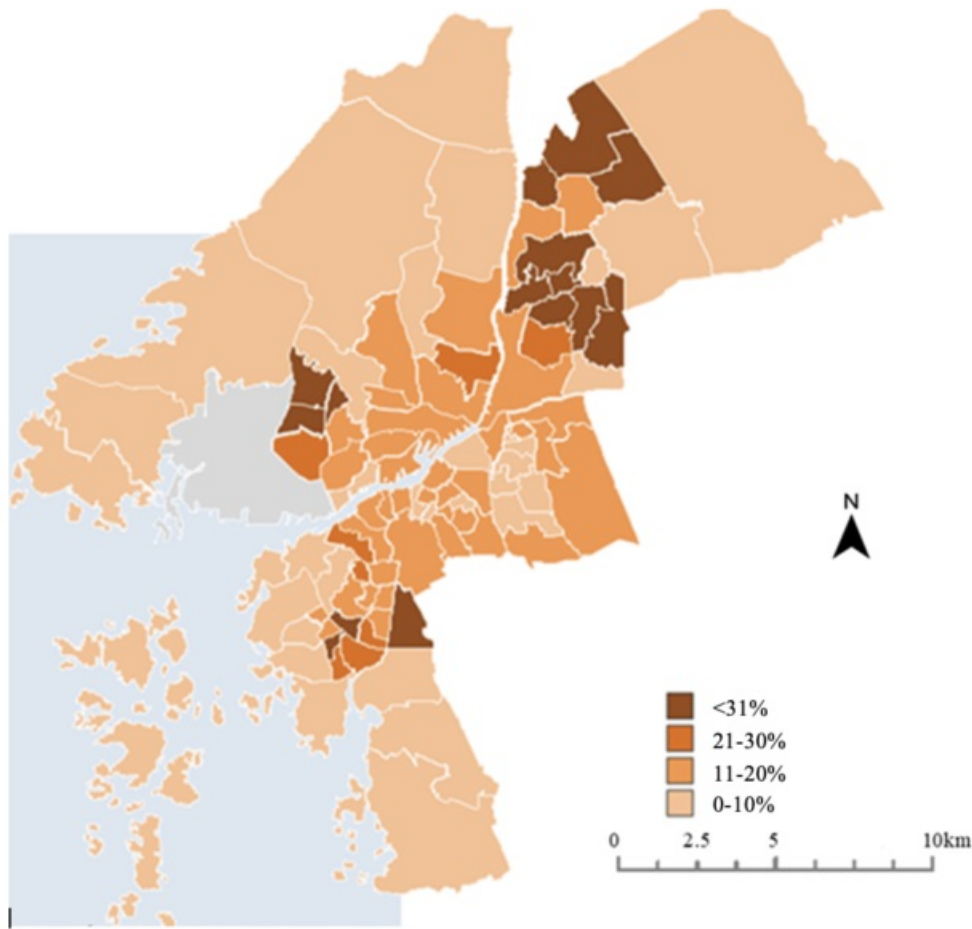


Figure 1 – Percentage (%) of the population living under the low economic standard (2022) (provided by Stadsledningskontoret, Göteborg Stad)

As Figure 1 shows, the precarious working class are predominantly situated within the housing estates on the fringes of the city, particularly in its North-East. Gothenburg's Northeast is a Million Homes Programme area, now heavily associated with discussions surrounding vulnerable areas and residential segregation. It should also be noted that the housing estates planned and built in the city's northeast were part of a comprehensive expansion plan for the establishment of a satellite city. However, due to a lower-than-expected urban population growth, these areas were only partially built and therefore feature an urban design and lack of services, workplaces and amenities (including parks) unintended by the programme at that time and which have proven difficult to compensate (Johansson, 2000). Indeed, the coincidence of lower-than-expected population growth in these areas and an institutional shift enabling the better established (Swedish) middle- and working-class to move to other housing types at affordable costs were instrumental in generating the vacancies and lack of continued urban development forming the basis for today's distressed position of these neighbourhoods.

Government policies and projects, both current and historical, have resulted in parks being distributed unequally across cities. Local governments find it ever increasingly difficult to make space for parks in their planning (quite literally) in the wake of

development pressures. Governments often create an illusion of cooperation with working-class communities to conceal an agenda of power over the urban landscape in order to promote their cities for capital investment from the corporate elites (McInroy, 2000). Gothenburg is no exception to this rhetoric. As shown in Figure 2, the majority of parks are situated within the city centre, away from the working-class communities of the North-East. The unequal and uneven distribution of urban parks in Gothenburg, which disadvantages the working class, can be explained through opportunity hoarding (Tilly, 1998), one of the four mechanisms that are central to the formation and maintenance of durable inequality (the others being exploitation, emulation, and adaptation).

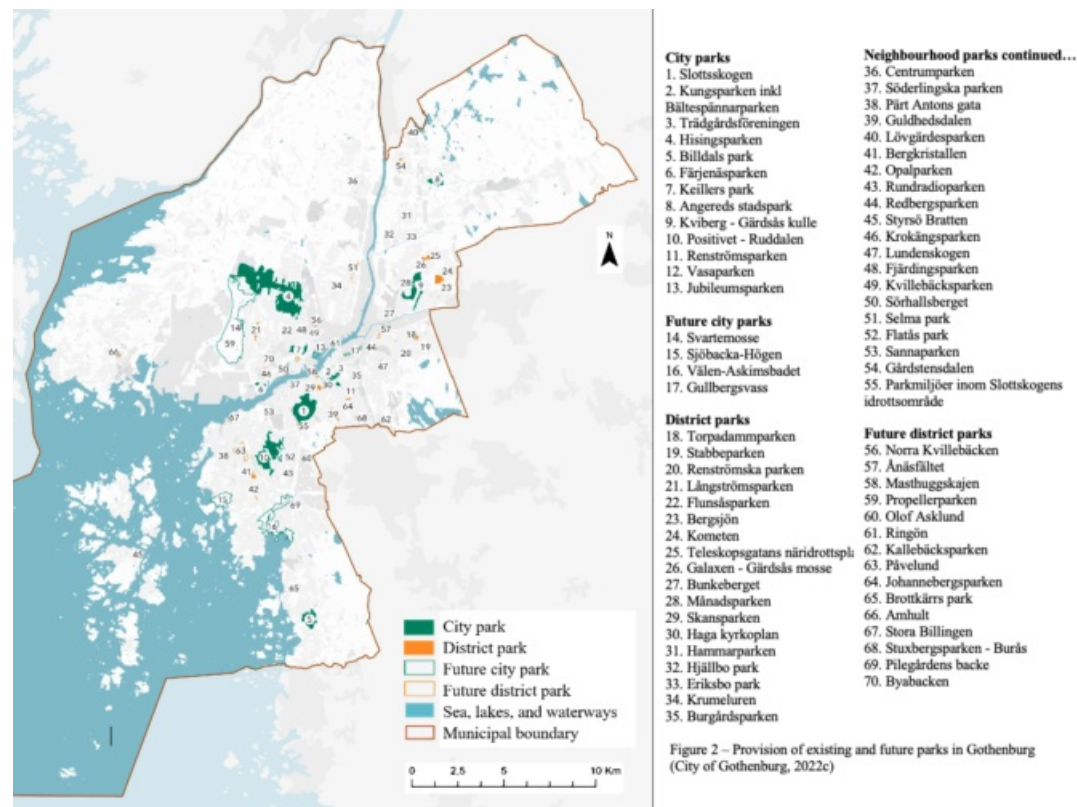


Figure 2 – Provision of existing and future parks in Gothenburg (City of Gothenburg, 2022c)

According to Tilly, opportunity hoarding is a mechanism which promotes categorical inequality, the theory through which categories (such as gender, race, ethnicity or education levels) intersect and overlap to shape the distribution of resources such as money, knowledge, status, skills, or power across individuals. Whilst opportunity hoarding is a complement to exploitation, it is normally performed by members of the middle class. As members from a categorical bounded network get access to resources that are not (yet) exploited by the upper class, they hoard their access to these and create beliefs and practices that sustain their control over them. This process, therefore, differs in the sense that the hoarders are not controlling the resources through ownership, as the exploiters do, but merely prevent access by other means. According to Tilly (1998), opportunity hoarding can also be transformed into exploitation and, therefore, is a way of creating durable inequality. One common example of opportunity hoarding through access rather than ownership is the creation of school districts or catchment areas around ‘good

schools', which means that only those residing within a zone can send their children to a local school. Therefore, children from neighbouring working-class communities are prevented from accessing the 'good school' and a better standard of education, whilst their parents are prevented from moving into the good school district due to their lack of financial capital.

As per Tilly's definition, opportunity hoarding involves an element of ownership. Here, I want to differentiate between legal ownership and ownership through access and proximity. On the part of the users, society, ownership is manifested through, for example, through planning, usage, and management. From the side of the state, in this case, the City of Gothenburg's ownership is literal – the City owns the land and, therefore, the resource. As ownership can be interpreted on the parts of both the state and society, opportunity hoarding can also be enacted by both parties. The processes of opportunity hoarding in both instances will be alluded to in the following sections and thus offer a class-based perspective as to why park distribution remains unequal.

The parks of the city centre, which are multifunctional spaces with social spaces, organised sports, playgrounds, outdoor gyms, lawns, and flowering borders, stand in stark contrast to the green areas, mainly laid to lawn, found between the residential blocks of Million Homes Programme developments. Whilst these green spaces are associated with somewhat nostalgic reminiscences of children playing and families picnicking, they are perhaps more so now characterised as monotonous, sterile, and boring, as areas which do not invite creative play and as social settings that could act as gathering places for friends or family (Mack, 2021; Ignatieva et al., 2017). This is due to the spatial disparities in the ways in which Gothenburg City generates funding for the (re)development of parks through the sale of land for residential and business development.

Political agendas are often preoccupied with the ongoing need to save money and attract new investment, and both objectives have a great influence on local government decision-making. In Gothenburg, the funding for the (re)development of parks is achieved through the sale of state-owned land for development. Perhaps rather unusually in the European context, the City of Gothenburg owns a great deal of land in the city after strategically buying up land from the private market – a policy which is now, quite literally, paying off. The funding for the (re)development of parks in Gothenburg is solely derived from the sale or redevelopment of lands and not from taxpayers' money. This would seem to be a pragmatic and profitable strategy, particularly as the City's vision is to densify the city centre and sell off land to the highest bidder. However, there are numerous issues with this strategy that contribute to the unequal distribution and quality of parks.

One, the most attractive and profitable lands for business and residential investments are in the city centre. That means that the only newly planned parks (as seen in Figure 2) and indeed any future park redevelopment is taking place in the city centre. Secondly, if

residential buildings are constructed, they are unaffordable to the working class. Thirdly, there is no mandated amount or percentage of the sale or redevelopment value that is to be set aside for the construction of a park; rather, a 'reasonable' cost is asked from the developer. Finally, there is no money set aside for the ongoing management and maintenance of parks once they are constructed.

The unequal distribution of urban parks fits Valeria Monno and Abdul Khakee's (2012) assertion that *"tensions over the interests to be served by public planning have intensified as the welfare state values have been eroded by the ever-increasing power of the private developers."* In this case, it is not through the building of infrastructure directly but the funding it provides the state to do so. On the flip side, it is the middle class that possesses the power to influence planning processes and service delivery, including the provision and maintenance of parks in their surrounding areas (Omer & Or, 2005; Pincetl & Gearin, 2005). Through the processes of power of decision-making, the planning of urban parks can be interpreted as opportunity hoarding. On the side of local government, the hoarding of parks in the city centre produces an environment which is more appealing to both investment and residential migration, which in turn drives up income generation and property prices.

Whilst the city centre sees an increase in investment and residents, and the tax perks they bring with them, working-class areas on the periphery of Gothenburg do not generate the same levels of income for the City coffers due to their less appealing land generating lesser interest from investors. In very basic monetary terms, they are often then brutally characterised as drains on tax payer's monies rather than contributors. In the Gothenburg funding model, it is the taxpayer's money that funds the maintenance of parks and not the investment monies. As with any city, the 'tax monies' in Gothenburg are stretched each year, funding more facilities for an ever-increasing urban population. Parks are no different. And whilst the number of parks increases thanks to the explosion of inner-city developments, the maintenance and management budgets do not expand at the same rate. This means that fewer maintenance activities can take place throughout the city, with the parks in working-class areas (if there are any) missing out (Cranz & Boland, 2004). A lack of maintenance means that people use parks less (McCormack et al., 2009). To the City, a lack of use signals a lack of need, and therefore, parks are left until they are lost.

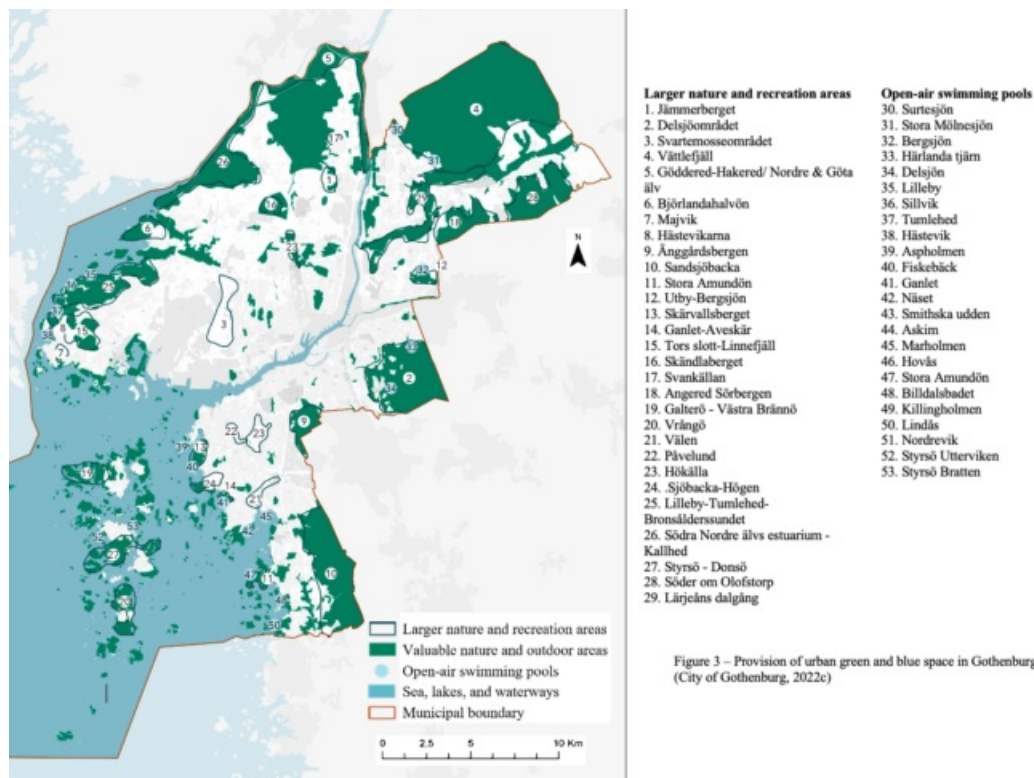


Figure 3 – Provision of urban green and blue space in Gothenburg (City of Gothenburg, 2022c)

Park usage, however, is not only determined by maintenance but also by class. A counterargument as to why the northeast of Gothenburg has fewer numbers of urban parks is that there is no ‘need’ due to the abundance of natural green areas that surround the area (Figure 3). However, I would critique this argument, suggesting that natural green forested areas are not comparable to parks, particularly when explored through the lens of working-class users. When class is used as a measure to determine park usage (and non-usage), the middle class are able to visit parks more due to their levels of disposable income and private transport (Mowen et al., 2005) and also greater proximity to their residence. But whilst it is the middle class that is able to use parks more, it is the working class that predominantly uses parks (Crosby & Rose, 2008;). Moreover, several studies have found that well-educated people (read middle-class) prefer more active activities, compared to the working class, who prefer more passive activities (Payne et al., 2002; Tierney et al., 2001). Therefore, the argument stands that parks and naturally green areas for recreation cannot be substituted for one another when considering the needs of the working class.

Transport is a key component in determining park usage. Parks should be within 5-15 minutes’ walk from home, with people preferring to walk less than 10 minutes to reach them (Alves et al., 2008; Sanesi & Chiarello, 2006). This need for parks that are proximate to people’s residences is exacerbated for the working class in Gothenburg. Not only is physical park accessibility limited by the lack of private transport ownership and lower levels of disposable income to fund trips via public transport into inner city areas where parks are situated, for the reasons outlined previously, but also the working class is

afforded lesser time for recreation, due to their unfavourable working conditions, including longer and unsociable hours.

In the context of Gothenburg, this means that the working class are excluded, both spatially and temporally, from the city's parks. The majority of parks are hoarded within the city centre (Figure 2), meaning that the working class would require a car or the time and money to use public transport to access them – both conditions are missing for the working class residing in the city's periphery (Figure 1). Therefore, the parks can be interpreted as a common good or resource that is hoarded by the middle class.

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