

Research Article



Narrating anti-racism: Activists' role in the creation of Möllevången as a space for resistance

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Radical left-wing activists play a central role in the creation of a neighbourhood called Möllevången in Malmö: An important site of activism in Sweden and a place for imagining a world where anti-racism, feminism and equality thrive. By appropriating Möllevången through demonstrations, festivals, cafés, bookfairs, political posters, graffiti, as well as through socialisation in their everyday lives and the stories they tell and re-tell about the place, activists have constructed a powerful activist scene, political narrative, and collective identity as left-wing anti-racists in the city. The research I conducted as a doctoral student, which this article is based on, showed how activists produced spaces that allowed for the emergence of more collaborative models of social relations and distribution. It shows how Möllevången is a place for commoning (Hansen 2019).

However, the construction of the place as “anti-racist” may cover up the racist structures found there, and at the same time support the city leadership’s aim of gentrifying the neighbourhood into “little Berlin”. Möllevången is also a place that carries associations of social problems such as crime, poverty and drug dealing, and has thus been a focus area of multiple municipal upgrading efforts. Activists’ anti-racist narrative of Möllevången and their creative activities in the area are therefore welcomed and embraced by the city leadership and private property investors and owners, as these activities enhance the attractiveness of the neighbourhood and thus raise real estate values in the area. Local authorities seek to promote a positive image of the city in order to attract certain kinds of inhabitants, such as activists, with the aim of reconfiguring the class composition of the city along the lines of neoliberal urban policy. Hence, Möllevången is an example of the process described by Hollander and Einwohner (2004): While resisting power, activists may simultaneously support the structures of domination that make resistance necessary in the first place. Anti-racist activism in Möllevången thus simultaneously constitutes resistance and compliance to power, a frustrating contradiction to activists who want to live and act in Möllevången.

The activists are aware of this contradiction, but they are also aware of the significance of sharing a common place for creating political narratives to enhance and encourage local activism (Martin 2003). Möllevången as a shared space and narrative enables powerful emotions that affect the success of collective actions and the mobilisation of supporters. Möllevången can be said to constitute an oasis in these terms compared to other urban areas in the city and in Sweden. During my fieldwork, I met activists in Sweden that compared Möllevången to Nørrebro in Copenhagen, Kreuzberg in Berlin, and even Exarchia in Athens – iconic neighbourhoods characterised by a central location in their respective cities, affordable housing, ethnically diverse populations consisting largely of low-income households, the presence of anti-racist and pro-asylum activism, and a high percentage of leftist voters in local and national elections.

The activists’ strength in Malmö lies in their complex networks of interaction not only across different activist groups, but also with non-activists in art, film, and journalistic collectives and with actors in social life as well as in (party) politics, which is decisive for campaigns to be successful. Irrespective of their group belonging, they share a common narrative of action – “we are all anti-racists” – that is enabled in particular through their strong emotional and ideological attachment to a place: Möllevången. Möllevången

(popularly called “Möllan”) as the activists’ point of departure in terms of place is succinctly formulated by the activist Lukas, 29 years old:

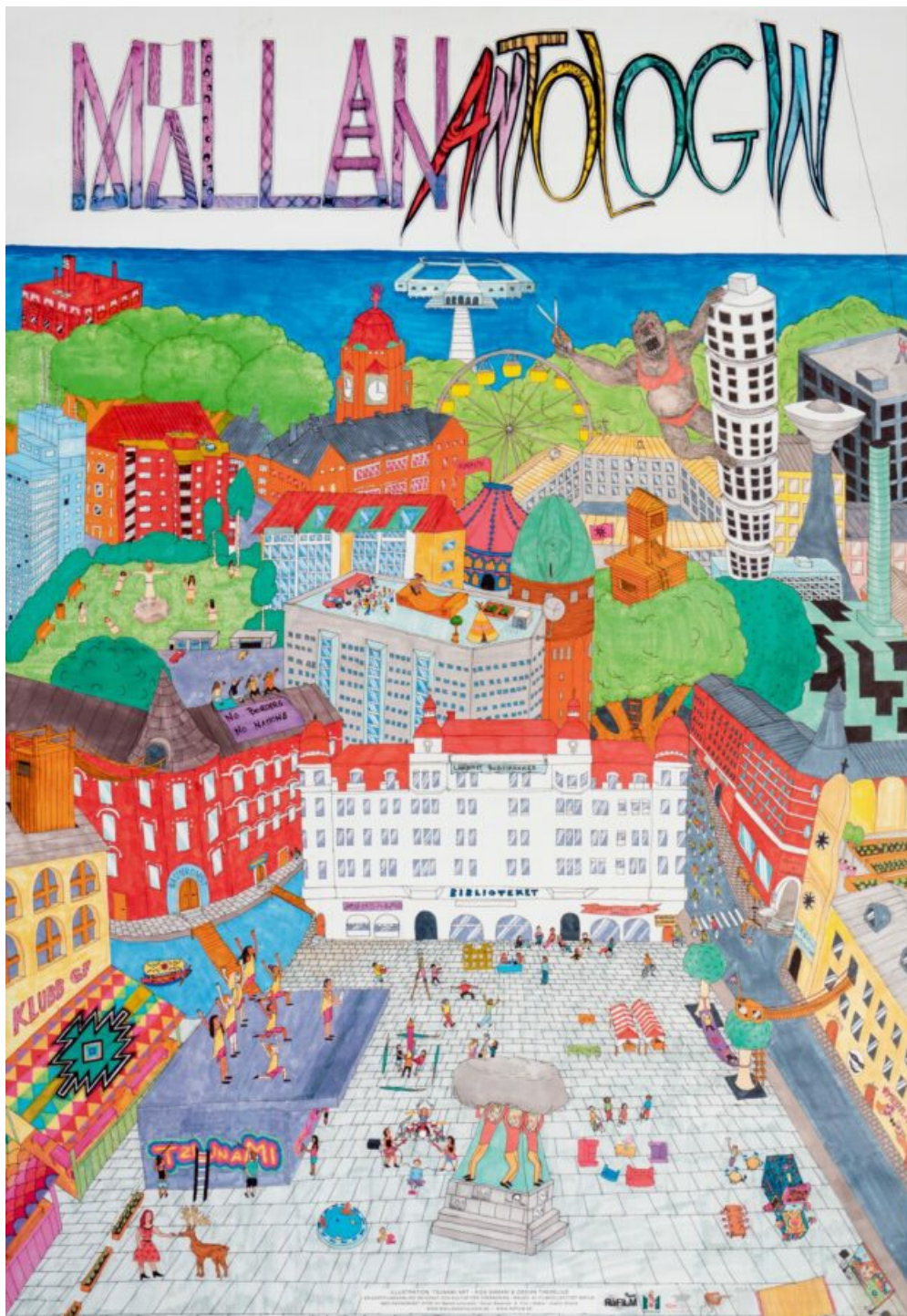
“You are in Möllan, or you are not in Möllan. You reside in Möllan, or you do not reside in Möllan.”

The same activist said he perceived Möllevången as:

“Both a concept and a physical place, an identity and a subculture”.

Möllevången is thus not only a neighbourhood in the sense of a delineated place on a map, but also a network of social relations and friends in the city who identify with the idea of Möllevången as a better place in the world.

Möllevången is such a “relational incubator” (Nicholls 2008) where activist groups are closely interconnected and able to create cross-activist relations and collectivise their resources. An eloquent example and illustration of this cross-interaction described above is the image *The Möllan Anthology* (*Möllanantologin*), which was originally used as the poster announcing a collection of eleven short films about cultural expression in Malmö released in 2012 by the activist film collective RåFILM. This project brought together activists, artists, filmmakers, scientists, residents, journalists, students among others.



By TZUNAMI – Aida Samani and Ossian Theselius

The poster depicts a utopian Möllevången where the neighbourhood takes the lead at the front, showing the way for the rest of the city, which rises behind. This image portrays activists' experiential knowledge of the city as radiating from this particular neighbourhood. On top of the large Art Nouveau residential rental premises that stands along one side of the square – the white house as it is popularly called – a sign reads “Flat to be donated” (*Lägenhet bortskänkes*). On the ground floor, there is a library (instead of the restaurants found there today), and on its right-hand side, a sign reads “Free childcare” (*Barn lämnas gratis här*). On the opposite side of the road, we find a community kitchen. On one of the rooftops, pro-asylum activists with raised fists are sitting on a “No Borders No Nations” banner in the queer colour purple. Below them, along the road that has been converted into a Venetian canal, there is the Office of Basic Income. On the

square, people of all colours are socialising, playing instruments, and dancing while seniors with walking frames are chitchatting and toddlers play in an inflatable pool.

The only contentious part of the illustration is a female King Kong climbing the Turning Torso skyscraper with a pair of scissors, which I interpret as symbolising a furious feminist sieging the city by cutting down new Malmö's capitalist phallus that has been placed at the heart of the city's neoliberal urban restructuring project in the Western Harbour. For activists, the Turning Torso is a symbol of the tearing apart of the city in socio-spatial terms. Ever since the Turning Torso was being built in 2004–2005, activists have criticized it for being an expensive prestige project at the expense of much needed affordable housing in other parts of the city. In 2009, activists arranged a Reclaim the streets right outside Turning Torso to shed light on the residential segregation in Malmö.

The poster, and film collection that the poster represents, illustrate how the neighbourhood of Möllevången through activities and narratives about the place, contributes to the identity formation of the people who are drawn to this place to make something meaningful in their lives by, for example, creating alternatives to the neoliberal socio-spatial organisation of society. Activists wish to create social relations that are horizontal instead of vertical, that are inclusive instead of exclusive, and that promote political agency instead of enforcing and promoting exploitation, oppression, displacement, and competition (De Angelis 2003, 14). They want resources to be equally distributed among everyone who makes up the social fabric of the place, including those in precarious legal conditions such as the undocumented and Roma migrants, and they attempt to achieve this through commoning. "Commoning" here means practices (e.g., storytelling, demonstrations, festivals) of building common spaces, interests, and experiences (Dawney 2013). It is the unique constellation of trajectories that produces particular places and spaces, and, as I suggest here, the activists' presence in Möllevången plays a central role in this neighbourhood's particularity today.

Stories of struggle

From a historical perspective, we see how Möllevången's cultural meaning has changed dramatically over the past 100 years. From its heyday as the city's political centre for the labour movement in the 1920–1940, to its complete decay in 1950–1980, to its resurrection as the city's activist neighbourhood as it is known in the present. In the beginning of the 20th Century, it was the centre for the labour movement's mobilisations. This historical significance can be found through the materiality of the place, such as the monument The Glory of Labour (from 1931) on the square Möllevångstorget seen at the bottom of the image above as well as in the photograph below. The monument is an important symbol of the labour movement's strong influence on the history of Malmö and particularly of Möllevången. It represents women and men lifting the city up with their bare hands. The city, Malmö in the 1920s, is proudly presented as an industrial city with its skyline of factories. History is indeed important for a better understanding of the kind of urban place that Möllevången is today. The place's history of workers' mobilisations and working-class identity gives today's activists strength and motivation to maintain that and

to continue this tradition, although transformed into present day extra-parliamentarian and anti-racist activism.



Activists protesting their own deportation, standing by the monument the Glory of Labour on Möllevångstorget, 11 February 2014. Photograph by Christina Hansen.

However, only a few decades later, Möllevången was considered insignificant in the grander socio-cultural narratives of that time. An example of this, as observed by Högdahl (2003, 57), is a photo book of Malmö published in 1950 by the municipality that lacks a single reference to Möllevången. The neighbourhood was rendered invisible at the time. Half a century later, we see the opposite occurring, where Möllevången has turned into the city's multicultural poster child. Since the 1990s, leftists and liberals have celebrated Möllevången as *the* representative place of the “new” Malmö, namely in its role as a symbol of successful integration (Högdahl 2003). Officials, politicians, and tourist guides proudly present Malmö as a city that is home to people from nearly 200 countries and who speak 150 languages, and Möllevången is commonly the face of this diversity.

More recently, media coverage has focused on stories of regeneration and gentrification and on Möllevången as a trendy, artsy, subcultural place, even referred to as Malmö's SoHo or little Berlin. The hip urban redevelopment of Möllevången has helped Malmö to rebrand itself as “multicultural”, “exciting”, and “alternative” to attract investment, tourism, and more affluent consumers and residents.

Möllevången's most recent story concerns its political character: Möllevången as anti-racist. When media articles address Möllevången, its diversity in ethnic terms is referred to less while more attention is paid to its *political* character (see, e.g., Shakrah 2014). In September 2018, I found a flat advert on www.hemnet.se – a site where all private property objects that are for sale can be found – that referred to Möllevången's strong political past and present as a selling point for a flat in the neighbourhood. This is a perfect example of how the hegemonic process functions over time. Activists redefine the

place but then their achievements are co-opted, made marketable, and reprocessed to increase property values.

As gentrification progresses, activist scenes become increasingly fragile as activists are pushed out of gentrifying neighbourhoods by evictions and rising rents (Creasap 2016). For Möllevången to remain politically salient, activists need to remain present in the neighbourhood and resist price hikes, privatisation, enclosure, and surveillance.

Clearly, places never stand still but are always changing and people's sense of a place also changes over time. Möllevången, as with any other place, is a work-in-progress. The characteristics, demographics, and economic values related to its urban location are always potentially subject to change, as we see has been the case with Möllevången in the past hundred years.

An important way to recreate the identity of places is through stories. The ways stories are told represent the actual process of producing the place (de Certeau 1984, 81). For example, by repeatedly designating a place as "fantastic", "dangerous", or "anti-racist", these will eventually become part of people's perception and reproduction of the place. The claims on its present character depend on "particular, rival, interpretations of its past" (Massey 1995, 185). Two historical interpretations of Möllevången are competing: One understands the neighbourhood to be a slum, dangerous and thus horrible. Just recently, a series of articles in the local newspaper have revealed the existence of various impoverished housing owned by so called slumlords. The other interpretation perceives Möllevången as wonderful and fantastic, always inclusive.

Resisting racist stories of Malmö

The context matters in terms of how effective stories are (Polletta and Gardner 2015). In order to understand activists' narratives of Möllevången, and sometimes the whole of Malmö, as anti-racist it is necessary to look at them in relation to the stigmas facing Malmö in general and Möllevången in particular. Contested places are frequently associated with both strongly negative and strongly positive conceptions, as I already described above with the conflicting narratives of Möllevången as fantastic and horrible. Malmö is indeed a contested place. To regenerate in the context of intensifying inter-urban competition, Malmö authorities have created a migrant-friendly discourse to counteract the story of a dirty deindustrialised city. This "migrant-friendly" city is located amidst a very migrant-hostile part of Sweden: Scania County. This county is associated with racism and anti-immigrant sentiments in the national context and has Sweden's highest percentage of Sweden Democrat voters: The far-right, anti-immigrant party in the Swedish parliament.

Activists' narratives of the city as anti-racist, I suggest, are efforts to counteract racist stories of Malmö as 'burdened by immigration', which are often discursively related in reference to crime in the city. The Sweden Democrats, mentioned above, continuously use Malmö as Sweden's prime example of failed integration. Online, far-right news channels such as *Samhällsnytt* (previously *Avpixlat*) have used Malmö in their anti-immigrant

rhetoric for a long time, especially in terms of Muslim immigration. This, in turn, has been reproduced by the international media. The activists' positive narrative of the city, and in particular of Möllevången, as an anti-racist place works as a counter-narrative to the far-right's racist stories of the city.

What we see is that the construction of Möllevången as anti-racist can be potentially subversive in relation to "race"/ethnicity as a conflict line in society and simultaneously potentially complicit in relation to economic imperatives (Schclarek Mulinari 2017) as it contributes positively, from the city leadership's point of view, to the way capital accumulates in the city. Activists' contribution to gentrification is an unintentional consequence of their place-making.

What we also see is that, in certain milieus such as Möllevången, activists can be considered key agents in the production and maintenance of meaning for residents, antagonists, and bystanders or observers (Benford and Snow 2000). Along with the media, the local government and the state, activists are deeply involved in what has been referred to as "the politics of signification" (Hall 1982, 64). The very existence of activist groups in Malmö indicates differences within a society in regard to the meaning of some aspects of reality. In simple terms, activists are important storytellers and also strategic users of stories. "We are all anti-racists" is an efficient story in relation to the specific context of Malmö as outlined above.

Narratives also have real, material consequences for people. The construction of Möllevången as anti-racist attracts not only activists and leftist-oriented people in general to the neighbourhood, and the city in general, but also asylum seekers, especially if their application has been rejected and they travel to Möllevången to seek support from pro-asylum activists. Also, Roma migrants who hold citizenship in another EU (predominantly Eastern European) country are attracted to beg here for a living due to its favourable conditions, including the presence of amiable people who defend them if attacked by passers-by.

The narratives I identified in my research suggest that activists construct the neighbourhood as a place for commoning and shared political identity. Narrating Möllevången as anti-racist is a way of creating a space that is shared by a diverse set of people who are characteristic of the place. In the narratives, it is as if Möllevången were a utopian neighbourhood in which one could experience what a different (future and ideal) world might look, sound, and feel like. Möllevången thus offers activists a place for imagining an alternative future but also a place to live an exciting and rewarding political life.

Contradictions and challenges

Beyond activists' successful redefinition of the place and how this has contributed to the local authorities' plans for upgrading the inner-city, the narrative of Möllevången as anti-racist potentially ignores pressing concerns, such as racism, labour abuse, and segregation within the neighbourhood. The anti-racist narrative risks covering up the very

real structures of racism experienced by many people in Möllevången. Such racism increasingly manifests itself not only through verbal attacks against racialised migrants in the streets, but even more so through the racist structures of workers' abuse in many businesses, such as bars, restaurants, and groceries, in the area.

The unregulated labour that occurs in the area and the racist stratum of abuse related to it, as revealed in several newspaper articles, is a subject of concern for activists. These complex conditions in Möllevången are in no way easy for activists to address. Activists approach them ambivalently: They want to support migrant businesses (rather than, for example, chain stores) to prevent their displacement, while, at the same time, they do not want to support the abuse of the employees that has been revealed at some of the local businesses. Activists do not want to welcome fancy restaurants that only the new middle-class residents can afford while, simultaneously, they are supportive of the better working conditions that employees at such restaurants may have. An ambivalence is also found in the awareness among activists of how a salary, in whatever form it may take, regulated or unregulated, is crucial for many migrants with a precarious legal status. To work against labour abuse may indirectly work against these migrants' direct wishes and needs (to have an income, for example).

The multiple problems found in the neighbourhood are part of the explanation of why this space incubates resistance. I suggest that the social problems found in Möllevången (drug abuse, crime, poverty, labour abuse) are conducive to activism as they provoke shared grievances in everyday urban life. Activists conceive of the social problems as a public problem rather than a private issue of the dispossessed. Activists want a safe and socially just neighbourhood and living side by side with poverty inclines activists to act. Möllevången thus offers a common ground on which to disrupt and disturb such established, unequal orders that are seen and experienced in that very neighbourhood.

Still, labour abuse is very difficult to organise against. It is difficult for activists to reach out to the precarious workers and offer them their support. If they succeed, it further risks creating paternalistic relations between the abused workers and the activists where activists may find themselves in a position of speaking "on behalf of" those precarious workers, which goes against their Marxist autonomist ideal of horizontalism and "politics of the first person" (Geronimo 2012, 173). These very real challenges of political mobilisations help us see the importance of maintaining and strengthening the place's identity as anti-racist while simultaneously working for the amelioration of workers' conditions at the many workplaces in the neighbourhood.

Notwithstanding the specificities of Möllevången, the conflicts and contradiction of activism in Möllevången that I have examined here, reach far beyond the place itself and its perceived boundaries and indeed the city of Malmö itself. These conflicts and contradictions are indicative of what is happening in many parts of Europe.

A space for resistance

To summarise, the activists' storytelling plays an important role in the making and

remaking of Möllevången. The anti-racist narrative embedded in Möllevången has contributed to the creation of a wide network of social relations of activists and allies, which is a particular strength of the activist scene in Sweden. The cultural meaning that Möllevången has acquired today is the work of activists and their allies. These meanings can be seen as contentious in relation to the racist discourse that paints Malmö as “burdened by immigration”, often discursively related to crime in the city. But from an urban restructuring perspective, these stances seem less contentious, even complicit. The activists redefine the place but then their achievements are co-opted, made marketable, and reprocessed to increase property values; this is how a hegemonic process functions over time. Despite this inevitable contradiction, the activists’ presence through festivals, direct actions, and inscriptions on walls and lampposts in the public space offers Malmö residents another vision of the future, different than the one offered by the hegemonic discourse.

As I write this last paragraph, an article in the local newspaper *Sydsvenskan* was published on 13 June 2021 with the following headline: “Crime and slumlords to be removed – now the security guards are coming to Möllan”. The patrolling security guards in the neighbourhood is an initiative made by the public-private collaborative effort BID Malmö (Business Improvement District Malmö) with the aim to fight slum housing, drug dealing and the informal labour market in Möllevången, and to contribute to “the transformation of Möllan” and for “Möllan to rise at last” (Thomasson, Lovén, and Gillberg 2021). Local activists are critical about the implementation of increased surveillance, stating in social media that it will not solve the problems but only push them elsewhere while gentrifying Möllevången.

Möllevången’s strength as a relational and political incubator was formidable at the time of my fieldwork in 2013 to 2016, but this may not be the case anymore. As gentrification proceeds, what will happen to Malmö’s activist scene? Will gentrification indeed proceed? Will activists keep Möllevången as a narrative of a better place despite it being further gentrified?

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